PROMINENT THEMES IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH 2007-2012

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Abstract

This paper presents a small section of the findings from a Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) commissioned report aimed at identifying the areas of research 'concentration' and the 'gaps' specifically in the Australian Higher Education (HE) literature. This project was conducted during the period 1 April 2012 to 15 July 2012 with the overall goal of contributing to the enhancement of scholarship, research and practice relating to Australian tertiary education learning and teaching. This was achieved by undertaking a comprehensive review of what has been learnt in the last five years to better enable knowledge sharing opportunities to discuss the results and explore future directions. An analysis of 225 publications between 2007 and 2012—in three distinguished Australian journals—with an 'Australia-based first-author' were assembled. Of the 16 'research' themes common to those 225 works, the most prevalent and covering over half the total number, were Student Experience - Perceptions, Learning and Teaching, and Research into Higher Education. Conversely, relatively little attention was given to Critical Thinking, Disadvantage, and Transition and Retention.

Keywords: higher education, Australia, research themes, HERDSA

Introduction

This research sought to investigate the nature and impact of Australian HE research between 2007-2012 by reviewing publications generated from scholarship related to Australian tertiary education learning and teaching (Palmer, 2012, p. 1 & 3; Velliaris et al., 2012, pp. xvii-xviii). This project examined three leading Australian HE journals, namely: (1) *Higher Education Research and Development* - HERD; (2) *Studies in Continuing Education* - SCE; and (3) *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* - JUTLP. The primary research question was:

- *What knowledge and learning has been achieved to date in relation to Australian tertiary education and learning research and scholarship?*

The overarching aim of this project was to examine and capture dominant knowledge in Australian HE learning and teaching scholarship and research, with five broad objectives to achieve this goal:

- to *review* the focus and learnings that have been generated from recent scholarship, research and related publications concerning Australian tertiary education learning and teaching;

- to *examine* the research and scholastic approaches that have been employed over the last five years, with suggestions as to ways these could be enhanced in the future;

- to *provide* a detailed report of the knowledge that has been achieved to date in relation to tertiary education learning and teaching research and scholarship;

- to *offer* some broad insights related to ongoing or new tertiary education learning and teaching issues or themes that would warrant further investigation; and

- to *develop* and *encourage* appropriate avenues for the sector to explore and build on those results through scholastic exchange (Velliaris, et al., 2012, pp. xvii-xviii).

Original articles published over the last five years that had an Australia-based first-author were considered. Following this criterion, a total of 225 articles were identified and this paper is specifically focused on the 16 HE themes derived by the primary researcher and the prevalence/absence of each of those themes as found in those 225 works.

Background

The literature review involved investigation of the frequency of Australian HE research over approximately five years; 2007-2012. All articles published in the three stipulated journals and that had an Australia-based first-author were recorded to an Endnote library for database management. With reference to Table 1, the volumes and issues reviewed are listed, but it must be noted that only 'original' articles were surveyed and not editorials, editorial boards, introductions, overviews, invited contributions, invited commentaries, book reviews, points for debate, points of departure and/or other miscellany. While there were researchers from other countries who collaborated with Australian researchers, only the first-author was discerned to enable consistency across the data collected. In addition, 2012 volumes were limited due to the end date of the project period (31 May 2012).

Table 1. Volumes and issues of journals reviewed
(Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 1)

HERD	SCE	JUTLP
2007 = Vol.26 (1-4)	2007 = Vol.29 (1-3)	2007 = Vol.4 (1-2)
2008 = Vol.27 (1-4)	2008 = Vol.30 (1-3)	2008 = Vol.5 (1-2)
2009 = Vol.28 (1-6)	2009 = Vol.31 (1-3)	2009 = Vol.6 (1-2)
2010 = Vol.29 (1-6)	2010 = Vol.32 (1-3)	2010 = Vol.7 (1-2)
2011 = Vol.30 (1-6)	2011 = Vol.33 (1-3)	2011 = Vol.8 (1-3)
2012 = Vol.31 (1-2)	2012 = Vol.34 (1)	2012 = Vol.9 (1)

Table 2. Number of Australia-based first-author articles published annually
(Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 2)

YEAR	HERD	SCE	JUTLP	TOTAL
2007	19	7	8	34
2008	15	5	10	30
2009	26	4	10	40
2010	38	4	14	56
2011	28	7	14	49
2012	11	1	4	16
TOTAL	137	28	60	225

During the research period, HERD published 28 issues and 221 articles; 137 Australian (62%) and 84 international (38%). SCE published 16 issues and 86 articles; 28 Australian (33%) and 58 international (67%). JUTLP published 12 issues and 76 articles; 60 Australian (79%) and 16 international (21%). A total of 23 different countries/regions contributed at least once to the three journals during the research period. That is, from the grand total of 383 journal articles, 158 (41%) were from an international origin. Overall, the largest contributors were: (1) the United Kingdom; (2) New Zealand; (3) the United States; and in equal fourth (4) Canada and Sweden. Table 2 summarises 'only' the number of Australia-based first-authored articles across all three journals on an annual basis.

Literature review

'Australian' articles were systematically analysed to uncover issues pertaining to, for example: (a) common themes; (b) discipline-specific areas; (c) university demographics; and (d) research methodologies, to name but a few (Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 1). It was envisaged that analysing the data in this way would help provide an overview of the prevalence and/or absence of particular foci and approaches in Australian HE research. Interestingly, an Australia-based first-author did not guarantee that the research context was 'Australia'. Moreover, themes not well addressed in the literature did not imply that they received little or no attention in Australia over the past five years. In another section of the final report—but beyond the scope of this paper—analysis of journals catering to one specialised discipline area e.g., *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* (AJET), may have revealed a different story.

A total of 800+ keywords were collated from the 225 works. There were many articles that did not list keywords, but this was not associated with any specific journal edition(s) and/or year(s) of publication. Keywords that were distinguishable only by: (a) singular and plural forms; (b) capitalisation; and (c) hyphens were considered equal. All other words and/or expressions were recorded independently, though they may have had essentially the same meaning (refer to Table 3). This enabled an overview of the number and extent of variations among articles.

The vast majority of keywords did not appear to sufficiently represent an article to the extent that it could be could be deemed a theme and/or subtheme. A great many keywords appeared too obvious and/or vague to be noteworthy. For example: 'university'; 'teaching'; 'learning'; 'importance'; 'improvement'; 'knowledge'; and 'satisfaction'. It became clear that the research themes would need to go beyond the use of keyword frequency counts. The more articles that were read, the more familiarity increased, and the task of recognising common themes became simpler. The hermeneutic back-and-forth checking was constant within, between and among readings. Analysis involved the progressive refinement of themes that emerged, and these were subject to continual scrutiny until they could accommodate all perspectives indicated within the articles.

Early in the research period, the articles were classified by 16 dominant themes (refer to Table 4) identified by the primary researcher, and discussed and supported by the research team. During the 'initial' stages of this project, the 16 main themes were found to encompass the full range of articles surveyed. Each journal article featured one prominent theme, but often possessed two and no more than three themes in combination. It is important to note that the entire literature review and recording of themes was conducted by one researcher and great care was taken to ensure consistency of classification across researchers and time. The three most prevalent themes were: *Student Experience – Perceptions; Learning and Teaching;* and *Research into Higher Education.* These three themes covered over half of all publications in the five year analysis period. Conversely, themes such as: *Critical Thinking; Disadvantage;* and *Transition and Retention* achieved limited attention.

Table 3. Keywords with highest frequency in HERD journal 2007-2012
(Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 10)

KEYWORD 'ACADEMIC'	KEYWORD 'STUDENT'
academia	student administration
academic and non-academic teamwork	student assessment
academic and social experiences	student diversity
academic capital	student engagement
academic development	student evaluation
academic health	student experience
academic integrity	student feedback
academic language and learning	student learning experience
academic learning	student perceptions
academic literacy	student ratings
academic misconduct	student readiness
academic outcomes	student satisfaction
academic performance	student voice
academic requirements	student work placements
academic service learning	student-centred learning
academic standards	student-focused approach to learning
academic work	students' approaches to learning and teaching
academic writing	student-teacher expectations

Table 4. Summary of research themes (alphabetical order) identified in the literature
(Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 10)

1. Academic Language and Learning	9. Internationalisation
2. Assessment and Feedback	10. Leadership and Professional Development
3. Critical Thinking	11. Learning and Teaching
4. Disadvantage	12. Research into Higher Education
5. Educational Technology	13. Student Experience - Perceptions
6. Graduate Attributes	14. Student Experience - Social
7. Health and Wellbeing	15. Transition and Retention
8. Higher Degrees by Research	16. Work-Integrated Learning

Research findings

With reference to Table 5, all 16 themes were represented in HERD. A total of approximately 227 themes or an average of (almost) two themes per article were recorded for the 137 HERD articles in this study. The most prevalent theme was *Student Experience - Perceptions* (n=47), which often accompanied:

- *Student Experience - Perceptions*   +   *Internationalisation;*

- *Student Experience - Perceptions*   +   *Learning and Teaching;* and

- *Student Experience - Perceptions*   +   *Work-Integrated Learning.*

The validity of university practices were confirmed through solicitation of student feedback, predominantly via surveys, questionnaires and/or evaluations and/or focus groups/interviews.

The second highest placed theme in HERD was *Research in Higher Education* (n=38), which did not always feature data collection, but rather discussion/debate-type articles and/or university document appraisal and policy reviews. The third highest placed theme was *Learning and Teaching* (n=32); a notable number of studies captured data in relation to the pedagogical practices of academic staff and were most often coupled with students' conceptions of teaching and their own learning.

Table 5. Prevalence of research theme in all three journals
(Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 13)

RESEARCH THEMES	HERD	SCE	JUTLP	TOTAL
Student Experience - Perceptions	47 (1st)	13 (1st)	30 (2nd)	90
Learning and Teaching	32 (3rd)	6	35 (1st)	73
Research into Higher Education	38 (2nd)	5	5	48
Work-Integrated Learning	16	10 (2nd)	1	27
Internationalisation	20	-	3	23
Academic Language and Learning	17	-	4	21
Assessment and Feedback	3	1	13 (3rd)	17
Health and Wellbeing	11	-	3	14
Higher Degrees by Research	6	7 (3rd)	1	14
Leadership and Professional Development	6	2	5	13
Student Experience - Social	4	-	9	13
Graduate Attributes	9	1	2	12
Education Technology	4	-	7	11
Critical Thinking	7	-	1	8
Disadvantage	3	3	2	8
Transition and Retention	4	-	3	7

In the SCE journal, a total of approximately 48 themes or an average of (almost) two themes per article were recorded for the 28 articles reviewed. The most prevalent theme was *Student Experience - Perceptions* (n=13), which often accompanied the second highest placed theme, *Work-Integrated Learning*. In third place was *Higher Degrees by Research*, which also frequently coupled *Student Experience - Perceptions*.

In JUTLP, all 16 themes were present. A total of approximately 124 themes, or an average of over two themes per article, were recorded for the 60 articles reviewed from this journal. The highest placed theme was *Learning and Teaching* (n=35) which, as stated above, involved a collection of studies capturing plentiful data about the teaching practices of academic staff and was frequently coupled with *Student Experience – Perceptions;* conceptions of knowledge, teaching and their own learning, which featured second highest (n=30). In third place, with a presence of less than half, was *Assessment and Feedback* (n=13).

Table 6. Themes and examples of associated keywords
(Velliaris, et al., 2012, pp. 20-47)

RESEARCH THEME	• KEYWORDS
Academic Language and Learning	•acculturation, collusion, EAP/ESP, generic skills, integrity, literacy, misconduct, plagiarism, writing centres
Assessment and Feedback	•accreditation, achievement, bench-marking, bias, criteria, examinations, guidance, performance, testing, validation
Critical Thinking	•analysis, beliefs, bias, critique, inference, inquiry, objective, problem-solving, questioning, reasoning, subjective
Disadvantage	•access, disability, distance, engagement, flexibility, gender, illiteracy, isolated, rural, socio-economic, unemployed
Educational Technology	•blogging, digital futures, discussion boards, e-learning, gamification, multimedia, offshore studies, online, simulations
Graduate Attributes	•career, employability, expectations, generic skills, lifelong learning, outcomes, preparedness, transferability
Health and Wellbeing	•counselling, depression, dyslexia, impairment, mental health, motivation, procrastination, resilience, stress, support services
Higher Degrees by Research	•completion, conferment, doctoral, emerging scholars, research, self-directed, supervision, thesis, time management, training
Internationalisation	•adjustment, cross-cultural, diversity, exchange, globalisation, intercultural, migration, multicultural, multilingual, refugees
Leadership and Professional Development	•academic board, governing bodies, innovation, management, mentoring, peer-coaching, tenure, trustees, university council
Learning and Teaching	•course design, cross-disciplinary, curriculum, discourse, mapping, pedagogy, performance, quality, student engagement
Research into Higher Education	•competitive grants, funding policies, global ranking, marketing, massification, research capacity, self-governance
Student Experience - Perceptions	•attitudes, engagement, evaluations, expectations, feedback, first-year, focus-groups, interview narratives, satisfaction
Student Experience - Social	•clubs/societies, extra-curricular, informal learning spaces, orientation week, social networking, volunteerism
Transition and Retention	•at-risk, attendance, attrition, failure rates, first-year experience, institutional effectiveness, preparedness, time management
Work-Integrated Learning	•client projects, clinical fieldwork, community service, internship, life experience, placements, practicum, vocation

Summary

Table 6 on the previous page, lists all 16 research themes and example keywords to better articulate the underlying contents. This listing enabled consistency across the literature review process. Overall, the three most prominent themes across all three journals combined were: *Student Experience - Perceptions* (n=90), which featured dominantly in each journal; *Learning and Teaching* (n=73), which featured dominantly in two of the three journals; and *Research into Higher Education* (n=48), which had a strong presence in HERD.

Future recommendations

The major challenge of this research project was to identify the common and focal overarching themes found in the Australian literature. Originally the themes were interpreted broadly and were evolving entities. Although the initial number of themes equalled 15, 16 were later identified, and an additional theme is hereby recommended as decided at the end of the literature review process. For example, it was found that *'Staff' Experience - Perceptions* was indeed a main theme and distinct from *Student Experience - Perceptions*. Often, staff and student experience data via surveys and/or interviews were collected and then compared in relation to perceived differences among key HE groupings. Moreover, there were numerous articles based on academic staff autobiographical accounts that could not be placed amongst articles pertaining to 'Student Experience'. Using the same thematic heading seemed ever more inappropriate and associated data had nowhere to be placed. It appeared that *Staff Experience - Perceptions* needed to be included as an independent and seventeenth (17th) theme with its own standing and pertinence in Australian HE research (Velliaris, et al., 2012, p. 54).

Conclusion

Overall, there were signs of strength across the Australian HE sector in all forms of dissemination and academic thought. This HERDSA commissioned report provided a solid bedrock on which insight into future directions—for Australian researchers and international scholars interested in publishing their work in Australia—were able to be identified. It is hoped that this report has/is encouraging appropriate avenues for the sector to explore and build on through scholastic exchange.

Acknowledgements

Biography

Dr Donna Velliaris is Academic Advisor at the *Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology* (EIBT). EIBT is a specialist pre-university institution where international students work towards the goal of Australian tertiary entrance. Donna holds a Graduate Diploma in (Secondary) Education, and three Master of Education in: (1) Educational Sociology; (2) Studies of Asia; and (3) Special Education. She graduated with a PhD in Education in 2010. Her research interests and expertise include: academic literacies; transnational students/Third Culture Kids (TCKs); and schools as cultural systems. Donna is first-author of more than 10 book chapters to be published in 2014-2015.

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