A Qualitative Meta-synthesis of the Assessment Agenda in Higher Education

Across the national and international post-secondary landscape, the trend towards collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data is evident (Black, 2010; Bresciani, 2006; Gotteil & Smith, 2011; Hollowell, Middaugh, & Sibolski, 2006; Laidler, 2005; Middaugh, 2010; Steele, 2010). This trend has emerged within the broader context of internationalization and globalization across post-secondary institutions (Trilokekar, Shanahan, Axelrod, & Wellen, 2013). There is increasing scrutiny and emphasis on accountability from internal and external stakeholders, including governments, agencies, and the general public; the stakeholders expect evidence to demonstrate improved graduation and retention rates, and enhanced student success including career transition (Bresciani, 2006; Hollowell et al., 2006; Schuh, 2009). Kuk, Banning and Amey (2010) argued that this trend will continue. “As accountability and metrics assume a greater role in institutional decision making, emphasis on being able to measure and to justify the effectiveness of existing organizations, and their programs and services, will increase” (Kuk et al., 2010, p. 204). This emphasis on data is especially important in an environment of increasing competition for scarce resources (Kuk et al., 2010) and the increasing pressure to ensure that higher education institutions are engaging in an internationalization agenda and, therefore, competing on an international scale (Austin & Jones, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative meta-synthesis (Finlayson & Dixon, 2008; Zimmer, 2006) is to examine the assessment imperative to which universities across the globe must respond. The researcher will use a critical lens to examine the current state of the assessment agenda in higher education institutions. First, this paper outlines, from national and international
perspectives, the types of assessment that institutions are expected to engage in, and the purposes of the types of assessment. Second, the nature of the global dialogue regarding comparative institutional data will be examined critically. Third, the researcher highlights how particular assessment projects can be leveraged to inform decision making as individual institutions and across institutions. Lastly, the research proposes how understanding the assessment landscape in the post-secondary environment can assist institutions in preparing for emerging global trends, for meeting external and internal stakeholders’ calls for accountability and transparency, and for responding to emergent issues.

This focused and critical discussion is especially important in meeting the demands of multiple stakeholders who have different agendas. Hollowell et al., (2006) contended that the “escalating emphasis on accountability is related, in part, to perceptions that colleges and universities do not plan carefully or assess their effectiveness” (p. 3). Middaugh (2010) pointed out that this type of assessment is “different from scholarly research, more akin to action research. The primary objective of institutional assessment is to produce information that can be used in decision making and institutional improvement” (p. 124). In addition to measuring student performance, the data can be used to improve instructional practices, to gather feedback on program outcomes, and to enhance the student experience. Not only must data about the current state of the institution be collected and analyzed, but it must be used to inform subsequent planning and action. Hollowell et al., (2006) asserted: “Quantitative and qualitative information about all facets of a college or university’s operations—and how they relate to the institutional mission—is absolutely essential to good planning” (p. 69). Given this context of increasing pressure to measure and report on progress, financial sustainability, student outcomes, and education and research outputs, universities need to develop a thoughtful, strategic approach to meeting these demands. The paper explores the multiple assessment demands through a critical lens in order to address the question of how universities develop an assessment agenda that will meet the most compelling data demands in a globally competitive environment.

Method

The purpose of the study is to examine the assessment imperative to which universities must respond. Specifically, the researcher explores the types and purposes of the assessment initiatives, the internal and external pressures mandating those types of assessment, and the implications for institutions in developing an assessment agenda. The study is a qualitative meta-synthesis (Zimmer, 2006) consisting of an interpretive analysis of data gathered through an extensive examination of the topic; the data includes theoretical and critical perspectives regarding assessment in higher education institutions, including national and international contexts. Current literature, information gleaned from scholarly journals, and print and social media, will be critically analyzed to determine key assessment and accountability themes and subthemes. In qualitative meta-synthesis, the parameters of the study are informed by the primary objectives and the framing of a research question that suggests preliminary search criteria (Finlayson & Dixon, 2008). The topic under study is the assessment environment on campuses internationally. Therefore, a number of specific search terms will be used to identify these sources, including “higher education”, “assessment”, “Key performance indicators”, “rankings”, “accountability”, and “evidence-based decision making”. The data will then be analyzed using a method of coding described by Saldaña (2013). Some of the categories will be subdivided and patterns and interrelationships among the data will be determined. After coding the data, the researcher will engage in a process of interpretation and reflection in the process of meaning-making (Saldaña, 2013). Qualitative meta-synthesis as an approach allows researchers to examine what has been discovered in order to construct new insights that have the potential to inform practice, theory, and policy (Gewurtz, Stergiou-Kita, Shaw, Kirsh, & Rappolt, 2008). A primary goal of metasynthesis is “to render what exists within a body of evidence-based qualitative studies into a coherent and synthesized product” (Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, & Sandelowski, 2004, p. 1343) that can then be utilized to inform practice and policy. This meta-synthesis, in keeping with the approach, provides the basis for critical dialogue on the nature of assessment in universities, including stakeholder demands, institutional demands, and global pressures for demonstrating quality education and research. The paper opens spaces for discussion and a community of inquiry around the nature of data in post-secondary institutions and around institutional responses to the assessment demands.

Expected Outcomes

The pressure for institutions to measure outcomes as defined by governments, to promote rankings based on performance indicators, and to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders underscores the increased need for higher education institutions to engage in thoughtful, strategic measurement of activity and outcomes. First, this paper outlines, from national and international perspectives, the types of assessment that institutions are expected to engage in, and the purposes of the types of assessment. Second, the nature of the global dialogue regarding comparative institutional data will be examined critically. Third, the researcher highlights how particular assessment projects can be leveraged to inform decision making as individual institutions and across institutions. Lastly, the research proposes how understanding the assessment landscape in the post-secondary environment can assist institutions in preparing for emerging global trends, for meeting external and internal stakeholders’ calls for accountability and transparency, and for responding to emergent issues. The researcher proposes that institutions undertake critical analysis of what types of data are helpful in strategic planning and priority setting, as well as what data is merely “number noise” to appease particular stakeholder groups such as local and national governments. The implications for institutional practice include establishing a robust institutional research and assessment
unit tasked with supporting the institutional assessment needs that are focused on gathering and analyzing data aligned with performance indicators, program and institutional effectiveness. More opportunities for post-secondary dialogue on the role of key performance indicators and key assessment practices should be established; for example, the success of program prioritization efforts using key metrics should be debated at an international level. The researcher notes that further research is required regarding the effectiveness and validity of key assessment practices such as the construction and measurement of learning outcomes as indicators of student success and measuring research outputs.

References


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