Higher education as a relatively autonomous field: the impact of massification

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Overview

This paper uses the concept of ‘field’ to examine how successive waves of HE expansion have been structured by existing forms; how the field in turn has in turn been affected by these waves; and the implications for social justice.

Contradictions in the ‘Massification’ of HE

- Movement from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ and ‘universal’ forms (Trow, 1974)

- Differentiation accompanying massification ensures the survival of elite forms (Bowles & Gintis, 1979; Brint & Karabel, 1986; Trow, 2003) and thus of inequality

- Differentiation has been accompanied by countervailing tendencies towards a convergence of institutions on traditional lines (Meek et al., 1996).
International critique of massification problematises the identity of students in marginal institutions:

- Working-class and minority students... ambivalent about higher education... tend to view academic success as requiring them to take on the culture of an alien group and to repudiate (and be repudiated by) their family and peers (Dougherty, 1994, p. 89).

- Less appropriate to adult, p-t students

- From essentialised notions of student identity to a ‘bridge between agency and structure’ (Ecclestone, 2006)
Theorising ‘HE choice’ and differentiation

The main emphasis of research into student choice has been on the disposition of disadvantaged applicants to select institutions whose awards are less highly valued, thus contributing to reproduction

- Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a fish in water: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127)

- Habitus has dominated empirical research into student pathways (Reay, 2004)

- But makes no sense without an understanding of a differentiated field
The focus on working-class students risks accusations of securing the position of theory by reinforcing the domination of the disadvantaged (see e.g. Ranciere, [1984] 2004). By moving from a focus on the individual student/applicant, the possibility arises of challenging existing forms of domination.

- Bourdieu describes HE as a field ‘relatively autonomous’ from the fields of economic and political power that dominate society in which agents are hierarchically structured according to their capital(s) – e.g. scholastic and academic (i.e. institutional) capital.

- ‘Higher education is hierarchically structured not only into haves and ‘have nots’ but also by competing ideas of what should count as ‘having’ ... agents attempt to both increase their volume of capital and make the form of capital underpinning their position the dominant measure of achievement within the field. (Maton 2005, p.690)
Processes of massification can also be problematised in terms of the field. Maton (2005) compares the creation of ‘new’ universities in the early ‘60s in England, shaped entirely by the sector, to the recent marketisation of HE. Provides background to new institutions abandoning their earlier missions to provide substantial diversity from traditional curricula and practices (Neave 1976; Van Vught 1996). This may be seen as reflecting conscious decisions to acquire forms of capital then dominant in the field.
Professionalism in teaching is measured through observation in the form of the Ofsted inspection. ... In higher education, an academic becomes the creator of research and is expected to generate new knowledge (Child 2009: 333).

External recognition is a common feature of the publication of books, chapters, articles, papers... Other forms of activity, for example reading associated with a subject or field of study... may suggest passive engagement (unpublished QAA ‘Scholarship note’ 2011).

Closer engagement with local communities (cultural and economic) could provide the basis for new patterns of knowledge production and dissemination very different from the scientific and scholarly paradigms that still hold sway in even the most progressive universities (Scott 2009: 417).
Marketisation raises questions about the continuing validity of an autonomous field. Maton (2005) compares a weakened ‘relational autonomy’ in which institutions are no longer able to create and transmit knowledge as ends in themselves, but serve desirable outcomes for the knowledge economy.

Conversely, the ‘positional autonomy’ of HE remains relatively strong. Key figures draw on institutional capital and strongly resist change, e.g. over admissions policies.

Further challenges under coalition government suggest a diminution of autonomy, although there is little evidence that this will benefit disadvantaged applicants.
References – for full paper contact esmondb@chesterfield.ac.uk