Quality appraisal of higher education research: an action-oriented, process-based alternative to performance indicators

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QUALITY APPRAISAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH:
AN ACTION-ORIENTED, PROCESS-BASED ALTERNATIVE TO
PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

from

The University of Wollongong

by


Centre for Research Policy
1996
Table of Contents

ABBREVIATIONS............................................................................................................xiii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.................................................................................................xiv
ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................xvi
FOREWORD ....................................................................................................................xvii

CHAPTER 1 .........................................................................................................................1
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW ...............................................................................1
The Quality Dilemma - Where the Sum of the Parts is Less Than the Whole .................7
Higher Education Research Quality - The Problem to be Addressed .........................9
Higher Education Research Quality - the Horns of a Dilemma .................................13
Finding a Common Ground for Resolving the Quality Appraisal Dilemma ..............16
Bringing the Invisible Product into Focus - Quality Appraisal of the Research ‘Whole’ ...19
Metalearning - The Tacit Dimension of the Quality ‘Whole’ ..................................22
Researchers Assuring the ‘Whole’ of Quality Research by Fulfilling their Obligations as Key Stakeholders ..................................................................................24
Quality Research Environment Profiles - Greater than the Sum of the Parts .............26

CHAPTER 2 .........................................................................................................................28
THE DAWKINS ERA - TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION STRUCTURES ............28
The Government’s Theory of Action for Higher Education Research .........................28
Transforming the Fabric of Higher Education ..................................................................34
Drafting the Pattern for Legitimation and Reward of Higher Education Research ........37
Flaws in the New Fabric for Higher Education Research ...........................................45
Spotlight on the New Design Structures for Research .................................................48
Funding Mechanisms for Research Infrastructure - Undercutting the Seams ...........50
Testing the ‘Fit’ of the New Legitimation and Reward Structures ...............................52
The Suitability of New ‘Utility’ Design for Legitimating and Rewarding Quality Research ........................................................................................................57
CHAPTER 3
THE INSTITUTIONS RESPOND - AN EMERGING COALITION OF INTERESTS IN REWARD AND LEGITIMATION STRUCTURES
Strategic Action in the Interests of Government
New Reward Structures and the Seduction of Institutions
Strategic Action in the Interests of Institutions
Seeds of Discontent in the Coalition of Interests
New Structures of Relevance for Researchers - The Cost of the Coalition

CHAPTER 4
THE DECADE OF QUALITY - A NEW IMAGE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY
Quality in Diversity, and Equity in Selectivity - The Challenge for Institutions
The Gathering Forces of the 'Quality' Wave
In the Interests of Efficacy - Matching Quality Appraisal Options to Purposes Served
Quality - the Rhetoric and the Reality
What Counts is What can be Counted
Performance-Oriented Quality Appraisal - The Power of the Quantitative Option
Strategic Action and Technical Control - Give a Person a Hammer
A Surfeit of Stakeholders and a Confusion of Purposes

CHAPTER 5
CLAIMS, CONCERNS AND ISSUES IN FRAMING THE INQUIRY QUESTION
Preliminary Reconnaissance Activities
A Language to Describe what is Valued in Higher Education Research
The Activities that are Valued in Higher Education Research
The Patterns of Social Relations Shaping what is Valued in Higher Education Research
Patterns of Significance Guiding Selection of Host Institution
Reconnaissance Activities Host Institution
Patterns of Significance - Participant Inclusion Dimensions
Framing the Inquiry for Initial Dialogue Purposes - First Iteration
Framing the Inquiry - Second Iteration
Framing the Inquiry - Third Iteration
CHAPTER 6

AN INTRODUCTION TO ACTION THEORY AS A METATHEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INQUIRY

Mapping the Territory of an Action Theoretic Framework for Quality Appraisal ................................................................. 155
The Importance of the Hermeneutic Dimension ................................................................. 158
Types of Reflection and Purposes Served in Evaluative Activity ................................. 164
A Framework for Understanding the Reasons Behind the Action ............................. 167
Locating the Inquiry Framework in Broader Research Programmes ......................... 170

CHAPTER 7

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACTION THEORY FRAMEWORK FOR THIS INQUIRY

The Meaning and Value of Action in Two Different Spheres of Values ............. 172
Purposive-Rational Action and the Seductive Power of the System’s Imperatives ................................................................. 174
Locating Validity Claims in their Respective ‘Worlds’ of Human Experience ............................ 179
The Nature of Crises Situations in the Relations of Knowledge ....................... 183
From Metatheory to Practical Action for the Present Study ............................... 186
Reframing ‘Colonisation’ as a Property of Dialectical Breakdown Between Lifeworld and System Values Spheres ................................. 188
The Need for a Balance ........................................................................ 194

CHAPTER 8

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY

The Paradigm of Choice for Practical Action ................................................................. 196
Communicative Action and the Choice of a Reflective Self-Inquiry Practices ................................................................. 198
Organisational Learning - A Rationale for Grounding Legitimation Criteria in Theories-In-Use ................................................................. 200
An Alternative Paradigm for Enhancing Communicative Rationality ......... 209
Personal Construct Theory - A Framework for Mapping the Meaning and Value in Individual Action ................................................................. 212
Soft Systems Methodology - Mapping Meaning and Value in Action Systems ................................................................. 225
Effective Action for Research - The Dynamic Quality Alternative ............ 230
CHAPTER 9........................................................................................................... 231
UNFOLDING THE EMERGENT DESIGN...................................................................... 231
Retrospective Overview of Hermeneutic Inquiry - A Four Phase Process........................................... 231
Phase 1 - Practical Reflection for Participants.................................................................................. 232
Phase 2 - Practical Reflection for Author....................................................................................... 234
Phase 3 - Critical Reflection on Research Practice........................................................................... 237
Phase 4 - Critical Reflection on the Inquiry Process Itself................................................................. 241
DETAILED PROCESS STEPS OF EMERGENT DESIGN...................................................... 246
PHASE 1 - PRACTICAL REFLECTION................................................................................... 246
PHASE 2 - HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS.................................................................................. 249
PHASE 3 - CRITICAL REFLECTION ON RESEARCH PRACTICE................................. 254
PHASE 4 - CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE INQUIRY PROCESS................................. 262

CHAPTER 10................................................................................................................. 276
INQUIRY OUTCOMES, PHASES 1 & 2
THE MEANING OF ACTION FOR RESEARCH AS A FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY APPRAISAL............................... 276
An Action-Oriented Framework for Quality Appraisal of Research Practice.............................................. 277
Patterns of Significance for Respective Research Groups ..................................................................... 279
GROUP 1 - HUMANITIES................................................................................................. 281
GROUP 2 - INFORMATION, COMPUTER AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND GENERAL ENGINEERING................................................................. 288
GROUP 3 - SOCIAL AND MEDICAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES........................................ 295
GROUP 4 - BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES.................................................................................. 301
GROUP 5 - HUMANITIES (APPLIED RESEARCH)............................................................ 308
RESEARCH MANAGEMENT UNIT.................................................................................... 313
Methodological Implications of Case Report for Development of a Framework for Quality Appraisal of Research Practice .................................................................................. 316

CHAPTER 11..................................................................................................................... 319
INQUIRY OUTCOMES PHASE 3 - AN APPRAISAL TOOL BASED ON THE VALUE OF ACTION FOR RESEARCH................................. 319
Phase 3 Project Feedback Summaries - Action Profiles for Effective Research Practice............................... 319
Profile of Standards for Effective Research Practice in the Organisational and Managerial Domain of Action for Participant-researcher #1, Group 2 ........................................... 321
Project Feedback Summary - Introduction to Individual-Group
Comparison Profile.................................................................................. 333
Profile of Standards for Effective Research Practice in the Social and
Communicative Domain of Action for Participant-researcher #1, Group 2... 335
Government Policy and Negative Impact in the Field of General
Engineering Advanced Technologies...................................................... 342
Government Policy and Positive Synergies in the Field of Biological
Sciences.................................................................................................... 344
Group Profile of Aggregate Weightings for Constraint, Facilitation and
Tension in the Organisational and Managerial Domain of Action.......... 358
Across-Groups Profile of the Meaning and Value of Action For Research... 360
Across-Groups Feedback Summary......................................................... 362
Further Refinements in the Use of the Quality Appraisal Tool.............. 371
Implications of Action-oriented Standards for Quality Appraisal of Higher
Education Research................................................................................. 372

CHAPTER 12.............................................................................................. 375
PHASE 4 - THE EFFICACY OF THE TOOL FOR QUALITY APPRAISAL OF
RESEARCH PRACTICE............................................................................. 375
Methodological Insights and Implications for use of Appraisal Tool........ 376
The Efficacy of the Tool for Eliciting Tacit Knowledge about the Nature of
Effective Action for Research ................................................................. 379
Insights and Caveats in the use of the Reflective Appraisal Tool .......... 381
Use of the Appraisal Tool in Developing a Language for Critical Reflective
Practice..................................................................................................... 384
The Value of the Tool for Eliciting Critical Reflective Analyses .......... 386
Value of the Tool for Eliciting Tacit Knowledge about the Locus of
Problematic Action................................................................. 387
Participant Feedback on the Efficacy of the Tool for Quality Appraisal of
Research Practice ................................................................. 389
The Efficacy of Tensions as a Central Design Feature ......................... 400
Implications of the Tensions for Grid Analysis..................................... 403
Implications of Different Types of Tension.......................................... 404
Implications for the Use of Tensions as an Analytical Tool................. 407
Use of the Tool for Feedback in Organisational Learning Processes...... 408
Conclusion......................................................................................... 413
Implications for Quality Appraisal of Higher Education Research....... 418

APPENDICES ......................................................................................... 420

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................... 469
## List of Charts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chart</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chart 2.1**
The New-Look Fabric for Higher Education in Australia

**Chart 4.1**
Correlates of Quality in Higher Education Research
Policy, 1984 - 1992

**Chart 6.1**
Types of Action

**Chart 7.1**
Habermas' ‘three worlds’ framework for communicating validity claims

**Chart 8.1**
Contrasting Conventional and Constructivist Belief

**Chart 9.1**
Phase 1 - Practical Reflection for Participants

**Chart 9.2**
Phase 2 - Practical Reflection for The Author

**Chart 9.3**
Phase 3 - Critical Reflection for Participants

**Chart 9.4**
Phase 4 - Critical Reflection for Author and Participants

**Chart 9.5**
Project Feedback Booklet Cover

**Chart 10.1**
Action-Oriented Framework for Quality Appraisal of Research Practice in the Organisational and Managerial Domain of Action

**Chart 10.2**
Action-Oriented Framework for Quality Appraisal of Research Practice in the Conceptual and Theoretical Domain of Action

**Chart 10.3**
Action-Oriented Framework for Quality Appraisal of Research Practice in the Social and Communicative Domain of Action
# List of Figures

| Figure 6.1 | The Impact of Legitimation and Reward Practices on The Relations of Knowledge | Page 169 |
| Figure 8.1 | Single-loop and Double-loop Learning | Page 203 |
| Figure 8.2 | Example of construct hierarchy | Page 216 |
| Figure 9.1 | Author's Conceptual Map of Research Space | Page 233 |
| Figure 9.2 | ‘Web’ of Action in the Organisational & Managerial Domain of Research Practice | Page 235 |
| Figure 9.3 | Successive Levels of Aggregation in the Quality Appraisal Tool | Page 244 |
| Figure 9.4 | Aggregate Sector Weighting for Constraint in the Organisational Domain of Action | Page 264 |
| Figure 9.5 | Aggregate Sector Weighting for Facilitation in the Organisational Domain of Action | Page 264 |
| Figure 9.6 | Aggregate Sector Weighting for Tension in the Organisational Domain of Action | Page 264 |
| Figure 9.7 | Sample of Project Feedback Evaluative Summary | Page 267 |
| Figure 9.8 | Individual - Group Profiles Comparison | Page 268 |
| Figure 9.9 | Group Profile of Aggregate Weightings for Constraint, Facilitation and Tension in the Organisational and Managerial Domain of Action | Page 269 |
| Figure 9.10 | Across Group Aggregate Weightings for Levels of Constraint, Facilitation and Tension in the Organisational Domain | Page 270 |
| Figure 9.11 | Contested Centre-Fleeing Group Dynamics | Page 270 |
| Figure 9.12 | Cohesive Centre-Seeking Group Dynamics | Page 271 |
| Figure 9.13 | Across Groups Weighting Profile for Facilitation of Research in the Organisational and Managerial Domain of Action | Page 271 |
| Figure 10.1 | Group 1 Research Space From the Perspective of Research Program Leader | Page 285 |
| Figure 10.2 | Group 1 Research Space From the Perspective of Senior Researcher | Page 286 |
| Figure 10.3 | Group 1 Research Space From the Perspective of Research Assistant | Page 287 |
List of Figures cont.

Figure 10.4  Group 2 Research Space From the Perspective of Senior Researcher in Established Program ........................................ 293
Figure 10.5  Group 2 Research Space From the Perspective of New Researcher ................................................................. 294
Figure 10.6  Group 2 Research Space From the Perspective of PhD Researcher ................................................................. 295
Figure 10.7  Group 3 Research Space From the Perspective of Senior Researcher ................................................................. 301
Figure 10.8  Group 4 Research Space From the Perspective of Senior Researcher ................................................................. 307

Figure 11.1  Organisational and Managerial Domain, Constraining Action for Research Group 2, Participant-Researcher #1 .......... 325
Figure 11.2  Organisational and Managerial Domain, Facilitating Action for Research Group 2, Participant-Researcher #1 .......... 325
Figure 11.3  Organisational and Managerial Domain, Tensions in Action for Research Group 2, Participant-Researcher #1 .......... 326
Figure 11.4  Social and Communicative Domain, Constraining Action for Research Group 2, Participant-Researcher #1 .......... 336
Figure 11.5  Social and Communicative Domain, Facilitating Action for Research Group 2, Participant-researcher #1 .......... 337
Figure 11.6  Social and Communicative Domain, Tensions in Action for Research Group 2, Participant-Researcher #1 .......... 338

Figure 11.7  Organisational and Managerial Domain, Constraining Action for Research Group 4, Participant-Researcher #2 .......... 345
Figure 11.8  Organisational and Managerial Domain, Facilitating Action for Research Group 4, Participant-Researcher #2 .......... 345
Figure 11.9  Organisational and Managerial Domain, Tension in Action for Research Group 4, Participant-Researcher #2 .......... 346

Figure 11.10 Conceptual and Theoretical Domain, Facilitating Action for Research Group 4, Participant-Researcher #2 .......... 351

Figure 11.11 Social and Communicative Domain, Facilitating Action for Research Group 4, Participant-Researcher #2 .......... 353
List of Figures cont.

Figure 11.12  Group Domain Aggregate Weightings Profiles for Constraint, Facilitation and Tension - Group 4 .................. 359
Figure 11.13  Across-Groups Profile of Levels of Facilitation in the Organisational and Managerial Domain ......................... 361
Figure 11.14  Across-Groups Profile of Levels of Constraint in the Organisational and Managerial Domain .......................... 361
Figure 11.15  Across-Groups Domain Aggregate Weightings Profile for Levels of Constraint, Facilitation and Tension in the Organisational and Managerial Domain .......................... 371
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Value of Action For Research Weighting Grid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Value of Action in Research Practice Weighting Grid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Value of Action For Research Practice Weighting Grid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Value of Action For Research Practice Weighting Grid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Quality Research Environment Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Quality Research Environment Profile, Group 2, Participant-researcher #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>Organisational &amp; Managerial Domain, Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practices Sector Participant Researcher #1, Group 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>Organisational &amp; Managerial Domain, Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&amp; Policies Sector Participant Researcher #2, Group 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>Social and Communicative Domain, Spheres of Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sector Participant Researcher #1, Group 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>Value of Action for Research Practice Grid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>Tensions With a Positive Bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>Tension with Equal Levels of Constraint and Facilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>Tensions with a Negative Bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>Tensions with Equal Levels of Constraint and Facilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>Tension from Inferentially Incompatible Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sub-Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.10</td>
<td>Tensions with Equal Levels of Constraint and Facilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.11</td>
<td>Potential as a Resource for Further PCP Analyses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>Value of Action for Research Practice Grid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices

Appendix 1 Journal entry #2, Inquiry Focus at Commencement of Study ................................................................. 420
Appendix 2 Journal entry #3, Inquiry Focus Prior to Commencement of Fieldwork ......................................................... 421
Appendix 3 Researcher's Conceptual Map of Area of Thematic Concern ......................................................................... 422
Appendix 4 Journal entry #4, Claims, Concerns and Issues at the Level of The Institution ............................................. 423
Appendix 5 A Matrix For the Analysis of Research Environments as Learning Communities .............................................. 425
Appendix 6 Journal entry #5, Claims, Concerns and Issues at the Level of The System .................................................... 426
Appendix 7 Reconnaissance Discussions, Host Institution .................................................................................................. 428
Appendix 8 Preliminary Framing of the Inquiry Question ................................................................................................ 431
Appendix 9 Participant Inclusion Dimensions ................................................................................................................ 432
Appendix 10 Project Information Booklet as Basis For Negotiating Inquiry Focus ................................................................ 433
Appendix 11 Letter of Recommendation From DVC Research, Host Institution ............................................................. 436
Appendix 12 Rationale for Framing Inquiry in Terms of Quality Research Environments ................................................. 437
Appendix 13 Conceptual Map of Research Space by Function and Social Relations ........................................................... 438
Appendix 14 Inquiry Design, First Iteration ..................................................................................................................... 439
Appendix 15 Participant Involvement in Key Activities of the Emergent Design .................................................................... 440
Appendix 16 Open-ended focus questions .................................................................................................................... 441
Appendix 17 First Feedback Cycle - Sample Letter ........................................................................................................ 442
Appendix 18 The Use of Graphs for Analysis and Feedback in Qualitative Research .......................................................... 443
Appendix 19 Project Feedback Questionnaire ................................................................................................................ 445
Appendix 20 Cause -Effect Diagram Worksheet ................................................................................................................ 454
Appendix 21 Analysis and Planning Worksheet ............................................................................................................. 455
Appendix 22 Successive Drafts of Generic Categories for Action-Oriented Framework .................................................... 456
Appendix 23 Table of Participants to Whom Project Feedback Summary Booklets Were Returned .................................... 467
Appendix 24 Conceptual and Theoretical Domain, Constraining Action For Research, Group 2, Participant Researcher #1 .... 468
ABBREVIATIONS

ABS  Australian Bureau of Statistics
ALR  Australian Left Review
ANU  Australian National University
ARC  Australian Research Council
ASTEC Australian Science and Technology Council
CASMAC Core Australian Specification for Management and Administrative Computing System
CCGI Commonwealth Competitive Grants Index
CRC Co-operative Research Centre
CSIRO Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CTEC Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission
DEET Department of Employment, Education and Training
DITAC Department of Industry Trade and Commerce
DVC Deputy Vice Chancellor
EIP Evaluations and Investigations Program
HES Higher Education Supplement
NBEET National Board of Employment, Education and Training
NCGI National Competitive Grants Index
NH&MRC National Health & Medical Research Council
NUDist Non-numerical Unstructured Data indexing, searching and theorising
OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCT Personal Construct Theory
PDCA Plan, Do, Think, Act
PhD Doctor of Philosophy
PI Performance Indicators
PVC Pro-Vice Chancellor
R&D Research and Development
RFM Relative Funding Model
RGC Research Grants Committee
RMU Research Management Unit
SSM Soft Systems Methodology
STEP Science Technology and Economic Policy
TQM Total Quality Management
UNS Unified National System
VC Vice Chancellor
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks must go first of all to those who participated in the study because their contributions made the inquiry possible. Their willingness to examine their own research practices and to share their understanding about the value of action for research, was the foundation of the study. It was a privilege to share with these people their personal experiences in their commitment to the pursuit of quality research practices.

The study was supported by a postgraduate research scholarship awarded by the Centre for Research Policy at the University of Wollongong. The Centre provided an exceptionally well-resourced environment for research and direct access to an extensive network of information sources at all levels of higher education policy. My thanks go to my supervisor Stephen Hill, who gave me the freedom and the determination both to tackle the challenges that the research presented and to pursue the answers to questions that emerged in the process of the inquiry. Colleagues at the Centre for Research Policy provided me with support and encouragement and for this I am very grateful, especially Tim Turpin who took over supervision responsibilities at the eleventh hour. In particular I would like to thank my best friend and steadfast supporter in all matters academic, Heather Spence. With the multiplicity of software that I used in the inquiry processes, technical support and creative application were always needed and always available from Dave Shaw. Dave’s willingness to contribute his time and expertise to the development requirements for the appraisal tool has been invaluable, as has his assistance, right to the end, in formatting the thesis document. My thanks also go to my colleagues in the Personal Construct Psychology group at the University of Wollongong. Chris Stevens’ insights helped me to find the elusive missing link in the design of the tool. Sue Nagy was a constant support at all levels, as friend, advocate and academic advisor.

The Centre for Research Policy's involvement in a national Doctoral Program in Science, Technology and Economic Progress (STEP), afforded me access to a wide range of expertise and support that would otherwise have been well-beyond my academic experience. The University of Wollongong administration too, provided funding for national and international conference presentations. These experiences were invaluable both in developing contacts and in broadening the horizons of my understanding about the inquiry in which I was engaged. I am particularly indebted to the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association for their inspirational conferences and informative literature.
ABSTRACT

The policy themes currently steering Australian higher education research practice, have given rise to an output-oriented, performance-based, quality appraisal framework that is oriented towards narrowly conceived accountability purposes. Because it is so narrowly conceived, this framework is both inadequate for quality appraisal purposes and insufficient for legitimating and rewarding research practice. The thesis argues that with this appraisal framework, both the physical and cognitive infrastructures that sustain research activity are being put at risk. This is because performance-based measures cannot recognise or reward the processes that secure, sustain and renew flexibility and responsiveness in research pursuits.

The thesis proposes that process-oriented indicators based on effective action for research, could provide an alternative but complementary appraisal option for legitimation and reward of the full range of activities involved in quality research practice. However, a quality appraisal tool that could accommodate the full range of activity for research would necessarily have to incorporate processes for making explicit what it is that researchers experience as effective action for research. In developing such a tool, this thesis contributes towards the provision of an alternative theoretical and methodological framework for quality appraisal practices that are congruent with, and grounded in, effective action for research.
This PhD study has been undertaken in the context of a broader research program. The broader program is one that is driven by the researcher’s long-standing interest in action that facilitates learning, and hence identity-formation. It is this interest that also motivates the present inquiry.

Human understanding and identity-formation are made possible by the action involved in attributing meaning and value to experience. In questions of value, and the attribution of merit and worth to everyday activities, it is human understanding as ‘mechanism’, that is of interest to the present study. The infinite adaptability of this ‘mechanism’ has led inquirers in the naturalistic paradigms of social inquiry, to speak in terms of human-as-instrument. While human-as-instrument is a powerful mechanism for enhancing reason and action, it can function just as effectively as a means of controlling action through the institutionalisation of ways of knowing and acting. As Berger and Luckman note, ‘ . . . man, is capable paradoxically of producing a reality that denies him’. The potential for institutionalisation of action in the form of systems of legitimation and reward, to deny the intended meaning in everyday practice, is the focus of the first strand of the present study.

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study. The sustainability of spheres of social life can be undermined if the values inherent in broader, institutionalised systems of legitimation and reward are privileged over those that facilitate everyday practice. It is the inadequacy of institutionalised action, for the coordination of social systems,\(^8\) in the form of system-level, legitimation and reward of higher education research, therefore, that is a primary concern which motivates the present study.

Legitimation and reward systems can affirm the value of action for everyday practice, and in so doing, facilitate the formation of personal identity within a sphere of social life\(^9\) such as research. However, if they fail to affirm important aspects of a sphere of social life that are necessary for its sustainability and renewal, legitimation and reward systems can also serve to deny the value of action and undermine identity formation.

Spheres of social life are maintained through the intentional action of individuals, who structure their lives from the perspective of a particular life view, or values framework.\(^10\) The meaning and value of individual social action is, therefore, to a large extent, also predetermined by its historical context and the institutionalised structures of previous social action which serve sustainability and renewal.\(^11\) Institutionalisation of spheres of social life\(^12\) can be seen in particular and recognisable forms of language, activities and social relations.\(^13\) Language becomes institutionalised as it takes on specific forms for everyday purposes in specific contexts. Activities are institutionalised in accepted daily practice. Patterns of social relations are institutionalised in the form of organisations.

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10 Ibid., p.142.
Research, by its nature, has institutionalised contestation of accepted ways of understanding and acting which are embedded in existing forms of knowledge, institutions and social practices. If contestation is absent, there can be no dialectical shaping of the meaning and value of action as circumstances change. In this sense, contestation is essential to research as a sphere of social life. Without contestation of established knowledge, the flexibility, and therefore sustainability, of meaning-making structures could be put at risk.

The contradiction between institutionalisation and contestation is the mechanism by which continued interaction between old and emerging, more effective new ways of understanding and valuing action, are sustained. Whatever the sphere of social life, the dialectical interaction between contestation and institutionalisation is the process by which growth in knowledge about the value of action for intended purposes and sustainability of the meaning of social roles in everyday practice, are possible. Kemmis and McTaggart use the metaphor of the ocean shore to explain the nature of this dialectical interaction.

... contestation and institutionalisation are opposed in interaction like the wave motion and the movement of the tides that shapes a shoreline; contestation is the wave action, institutionalisation the changing land form, bearing the history of the sea's action and shaping the possibilities for future action. They are mutually constitutive aspects of the historical processes of social formation.

At a substantive level, the present study focuses on activities which shape the value of action for research, as a form of social life. The focus for exploring this shaping process is the action that facilitates or constrains higher education research practice. This focus has been selected because it serves to contrast the type of action which sustains and renews research as a sphere of social life, with that which constrains or undermines research practice, by legitimising and rewarding ineffective action. In the present study,

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14 Ibid., p.82.
the building of a framework and methodological tool based on enhancing continually, understanding about facilitative action for research, serves to demonstrate what is missing from institutionalised, system-level, legitimation and reward systems for research in higher education. In the process, the study both develops and refines an alternative legitimation and reward option for valuing higher education research, that has the potential to sustain a healthy dialectic between contestation and institutionalisation of action in knowledge-generating communities.