

## Exploring the relevance of qualitative research synthesis to higher education research and practice

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This paper proposes the importance of qualitative research synthesis to the field of higher education. It examines seven key texts that undertake synthesis in this field and compares essential features and elements across studies. The authors indicate strengths of the approaches and highlight ways forward for using qualitative research synthesis in the field of higher education.

**Keywords:** synthesis; qualitative research synthesis; higher education

### Introduction

A number of factors have contributed to a recent drive to approach qualitative research differently in the field of higher education, and research synthesis is becoming an increasingly important tool. Countless existing research reports, for example, have led to a kind of information overload that requires new ways of managing and making sense of findings. Research is costly, and lean financial resources have made it imperative to make the most and best use of findings. Stakeholder groups want to know which new practices and programs are effective. Calls for evidence-based practice and policy also have been on the rise, bringing current research practices into question. The underlying notion for such calls is that research should be brought closer to those who are in decision-making roles. In short, stakeholders want transparent processes, clear synthesised findings, and solid recommendations for research, policy, and practice as a result of these findings (Major and Savin-Baden 2010; Suri and Clarke 2009). For those who accept the argument that it is legitimate for qualitative researchers to address issues of policy and practice and who believe that cumulative evidence from existing qualitative studies has value, synthesis can be an important tool.

As a result of these forces, some qualitative researchers in the field of higher education, as in other fields, have begun to seek ways to make the most of existing studies through various processes of qualitative research synthesis (Major and Savin-Baden 2010; Suri and Clarke 2009). In this paper, we argue the importance of qualitative research synthesis to the field of higher education – so far. In so doing, we highlight the essential features and elements of the various syntheses that have been conducted in higher education, and we demonstrate what these syntheses have added to the field. Further, we articulate ways forward by documenting the challenges common to such an approach. Finally, we argue for continued development and refinement of approaches to synthesising qualitative studies in the field of higher education.

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## Background

Over time, the traditional literature review has been criticised for a number of reasons. Among them are imprecision, lack of methodological rigor, and lack of appropriate evaluation of source material (see Fink 2010). Furthermore, they have widely been seen as unsuitable for basing policy and practice decisions (Major and Savin-Baden 2010). The result has been a growing effort at improving the scientific and scholarly rigor of such reviews. The responses demonstrate that research reviews can be legitimate studies in their own right (rather than for simply setting the stages for a new study) have appeared in forms such as the critical research review and the systematic research review (Gough and Elbourne 2002).

Critical research reviews examine a broad body of literature to determine what can be gleaned that contributes to the knowledge base and extract information in a way that demonstrates the meaning and relevance of existing studies (see Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005). Systematic literature reviews have provided an overarching structure and methodology to research reviews (see for example reports of the Campbell Collaboration, Cochrane Collaboration, and EPPI-Centre). However, both of these kinds of reviews have also been criticised, the former for example for lack of precision and for viewing all studies as of equal weight (see Fink 2010) and the latter for being narrow, involving a particular epistemology, and for not making use of the wide range of study types available (see Major and Savin-Baden 2010).

New methods have evolved over the past decade in an attempt to address some of the criticisms, including approaches that adopt qualitative methods for the purpose of synthesis. Noblit and Hare's classic text, for example, *Meta-ethnography* (1988), describes the generalisability and interpretation of multiple ethnographic studies. Noblit and Hare state that their meta-ethnographic approach:

... enables a rigorous procedure for deriving substantive interpretations about any set of ethnographic or interpretive studies. Like quantitative counterparts of meta-analysis (Glass et al. 1981; Hunter et al. 1982) and the integrative research review (Cooper 1984), a meta-ethnography can be considered a complete study in itself. It compares and analyzes texts, creating new interpretations in the process. It is much more than what we usually mean by a literature review. (1988, 9)

This text, with its interpretive approach to combining evidence from interpretive research, has become influential in the development of qualitative research synthesis. Noblit and Hare's (1988) original work has been followed by other texts in a number of different fields that over time developed various approaches for integrating qualitative evidence (see Major and Savin-Baden 2010; Paterson et al. 2001; Pope, Mays, and Popay 2007; Sandelowski and Barroso 2007). These authors have used a variety of terms, including meta-ethnography, meta-study, meta-synthesis, qualitative meta-analysis, and a host of others, to describe the processes involved in integrating qualitative evidence. They frequently acknowledge the influence of Noblit and Hare and often cite the imprecision of the term 'meta-ethnography' since not all interpretive studies are ethnographic.

We use the term qualitative research synthesis to imply a broad methodology comprising a variety of methods to synthesising qualitative evidence, including meta-ethnography, qualitative meta-analysis, qualitative meta-synthesis, critical interpretive synthesis, and qualitative systematic review (Major and Savin-Baden 2010). We differentiate this more integrative and interpretive approach from other forms of synthesis of qualitative studies, such as deconstructive or participatory synthesis (see Suri and Clarke 2009, for an overview of types of synthesis). At its most fundamental level, then, qualitative research synthesis as we define it is a method used to integrate findings from existing qualitative research. Such a synthesis involves identifying and deconstructing findings, aggregating them into a new whole, and reinterpreting the findings to reach greater meaning. Through its focus on induction and

interpretation, the approach is similar to that which was used in the studies being synthesised (Major and Savin-Baden 2010).

### **Review of published qualitative research syntheses in the field of higher education**

While processes of qualitative research synthesis have been examined more fully in health care (see Barnett-Page and Thomas 2009; Dixon-Woods et al. 2006a, 2006b; Paterson et al. 2001; Pope, Mays, and Popay 2007; Sandelowski and Barroso 2007), such examination has not been as widespread in other fields, such as higher education. Higher education, however, much like health care, relies on scholarly research for making evidence-based decisions for policy and practice. Thus several researchers have begun to make use of approaches such as synthesis, including synthesis of qualitative information. What is needed is an examination of how syntheses of qualitative research are being carried out in this field. This paper marks an initial undertaking of this important task.

#### **Search process**

To develop an understanding of the approaches adopted for synthesising qualitative evidence in the field of higher education, we gathered published articles that employed a range of approaches broadly positioned within the parameters of qualitative research synthesis. We chose not to include grey literature, such as conference proposals or unpublished studies, as we wanted published exemplars which had been subjected to some form of peer review. We chose to conduct our first round of searching online through Academic Elite, with databases including ERIC, Professional Development Collection, Vocational and Career Collection, and Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. We acknowledge a 'file drawer' bias that attends the selection of databases; however, while we cast a wide net with our first round of searching, our primary purpose was to uncover syntheses in the field of higher education, and these databases were the most relevant for our search.

The terms we searched included the following: 'qualitative synthesis', 'qualitative meta-analysis', 'qualitative research synthesis', 'meta-synthesis', 'meta-ethnography', and 'systematic review' (specifying 'systematic review' of 'qualitative studies'). While it is possible that these terms did not uncover all relevant studies, they are the key terms used in the field, and thus had the greatest chance to uncover the highest number of relevant articles initially. We initially uncovered 177 articles (a full bibliography is available upon request) that were written by authors in a number of fields, including health care, education, computing, social policy, and management.

Only six of these 177 articles, however, were from the field of higher education: Bair and Haworth (2005), Kasworm (2000), Major (2010), Pielstick (1998), Savin-Baden and Major (2007), Savin-Baden, Macfarlane, and Savin-Baden (2008). We conducted a hand search of the bibliographies of these articles in an ancestry approach to uncovering additional studies; we did not find any. While a minority of the overall set, these articles represent important work that has been done and published in higher education and thus are worthy of scholarly attention.

#### **Review and analysis of studies**

To begin our study of these works, we conducted an initial review of studies to ensure that they met our inclusion criteria (qualitative approach to review of qualitative evidence, published articles, in the field of higher education). We also evaluated the quality of these studies using a quality evaluation form that we adapted from Joanna Briggs (see Major and Savin-Baden for the

form). We then extracted and summarised information from the studies using a standard form to document our progress; to help ensure plausibility of our analysis, we present brief summaries of this effort in the next section. We next compared the most commonly reported features of the studies, the results of which we present in the 'cross-case comparison' section of this paper; the tables we include in that section help to document the accuracy of our analysis. Finally, we evaluated the articles for contributions to the field of higher education and challenges of the approach, which we present as our informed opinions which appear in the discussion section of this article.

### Article summaries

In this section, we summarise and describe the six articles that have employed qualitative research synthesis to investigate issues of importance to the field of higher education.

#### ***Bair and Haworth (2005)***

Bair and Haworth's meta-synthesis intended to examine the reasons for persistence, or lack thereof, among students who begin work in selective colleges and universities. They examined 118 qualitative and quantitative research studies from 1970–1998. Source materials included published articles, books, dissertations, papers presented at national conferences, reports, theses, and unpublished studies, which they uncovered through searching electronic databases and an 'ancestry approach' of following bibliographies back to original sources. The authors excluded studies that were published before 1970, had findings that were not understandable, did not separate doctoral students from a broader category of graduate students (which could include masters students), attempted to understand persistence or retention from students currently enrolled, or if a full copy of the study could not be obtained. Data examined were findings from original studies, qualitative (quotes) and quantitative (summaries). Their synthesis involved the following steps:

- Characteristics of original studies were summarised on a form (e.g., methods, instruments, findings).
- Quotations were noted on the back of the form.
- Studies were examined for how they related, using a second summary sheet that contained a matrix of information. Studies were translated into each other, making comparisons of categories of information across studies, and results were integrated.
- Translations were synthesised and findings were compared to see categories of information in relation to each other. To ensure trustworthiness/plausibility, the authors used of matrices, involved an external auditor, and examined multiple accounts over time. The authors found 10 primary themes (p. 491), as follows:
  - (1) field of study influences attrition and persistence rates;
  - (2) departmental culture influences persistence (including positive relationship for factors of relation to advisor, student involvement, student satisfaction, and financial support and negative relationship for difficulties with the dissertation);
  - (3) academic achievement indicators (except for Graduate Record Examination, GRE, Scores) are not effective predictors of attrition or persistence;
  - (4) findings are mixed with respect to employment and financial factors;
  - (5) personal and psychological variables represent a new direction of study and some of these variables are related to persistence;
  - (6) demographic variables do not conclusively distinguish persisters from non-persisters;
  - (7) retention rates vary depending upon institution;

- (8) completion of all requirements save the dissertation, also known as the All But Dissertation (ABD) stage, is not the stage where the greatest proportion of doctoral students necessarily depart;
- (9) time to degree is related to attrition;
- (10) doctoral programs that admit smaller cohorts have consistently lower time to degree and consistently higher completion rates than programs with larger entering cohorts.

They presented their findings through narrative and tables.

### **Kasworm (2000)**

In this article, Kasworm described results of an examination of key themes related to the status of adult undergraduates in higher education. She synthesised findings from 96 quantitative and qualitative studies ranging in date from 1940–1986. The source materials she included were articles, chapters, reports, books, unpublished papers. The search process involved searches of ERIC, Higher Education Abstracts, and Psychology Abstracts. It also involved hand searches of leading journals ( $n = 8$ ) that published articles in this area. Hand review ‘branching’ of the bibliographic references and collateral reading. Inclusion and exclusion criteria specified that studies must have been on topic of adult learners (25+ years enrolled in credit program), must have used a substantive research process (systematic, structured, purposeful, and generalisable; presented sufficient background to identify conceptual framework, research design, methodology, and sample), and must have taken place in American higher education (credit experiences on-campus classroom enrolment in two year or four year). The study expressly did not consider the quality of the original studies, although it is worth noting that some appraisal was built into inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data examined were descriptive and inductive themes and units of meaning. Kasworm’s description of the synthesis process was fairly brief, but she provided a reference to an earlier conference presentation for further details (Kasworm 1989), which no longer appears to be available. Kasworm stated that she initially described inductive themes and units of meaning and then used for analysis techniques of ‘Constant discovery and constant comparison’ (347). She further indicated that the final goal of the ‘inductive comparative analysis’ was development of conceptual categories and subcategories (348). She noted that she used an ‘elaborate coding and category structure of analysis’ (348). Kasworm made the following efforts toward trustworthiness/plausibility: researcher bias acknowledged as well as the effort to establish and test categories developed through coding. She identified the following five themes:

- (1) image of implied deficiency;
- (2) image of student entry and adaptation;
- (3) image of description and characterisation;
- (4) image of psychosocial development;
- (5) and image of equity and outcome.

Her presentation of the findings involved use of narrative and tables.

### **Major (2010)**

The purpose of Major’s research was to employ a rigorous and systematic approach to make meaning of individual studies that investigated staff experiences of teaching online by considering the studies in aggregate. Her study drew upon qualitative synthesis methods to investigate the following question: how do staff experience online teaching? In particular, the study used meta-ethnography to synthesise findings from nine qualitative studies. All source materials were peer reviewed published articles. Major noted that these nine studies comprise 23 authors from

five countries and 117 staff. The search process involved searching online database searching (ERIC, Academic Elite), hand searching table of contents, and hand searching bibliographies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria included the following criteria: content and scope, timeframe, report type, educational level, research methodology, and contribution to the study. Major appraised the quality of articles through application of a question set to examine congruence of research question to design; methods of data collection, handling, analysis in the original studies; as well as an indication of researcher positionality of the original authors. She used findings from qualitative studies as data. The processes of synthesis were common to meta-ethnography, including reciprocal translation analysis (translating themes into each other), refutations synthesis (attempting to explain variations and contradictions), and lines-of-argument analysis (building a general interpretation from findings of separate studies through reliance on qualitative analysis such as constant comparison). Interpretations were guided by use of a theoretical framework. The author employed several strategies to establish trustworthiness/plausibility including the following: acknowledgement of researcher bias, triangulation, peer review, multiple coders, and member checks with original authors. Major found that staff members believe that teaching online changes the following: the way that they present themselves as teachers, their feelings about the creativity involved teaching, the way they structure courses, the ways that they view their job-related responsibilities, their views of time, and their perceptions of how they construct their relationships with students. Presentation of findings was accomplished through narrative, figures, and tables.

### ***Pielstick (1998)***

This meta-ethnography focused on answering the following question: what are the characteristics of transformative leaders? Pielstick specified that the investigation was of a body of qualitative work that focused on such leaders but did not specify the type of materials used, the number of studies included in the synthesis, information about the type of studies synthesised. Pielstick's search processes involved identifying specific authors (Burns, Bass, Kouzes, and Posner; Bennis and Nanus, Sashkin) and identifying additional sources (other transformational leadership studies; transformational leadership in community colleges and other educational organisations; related leadership literature; gender and multi-cultural diversity effects on leadership). The search process, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and quality appraisal criteria were not defined. Data used for the synthesis included 'Passages in the research literature'. This author detailed the process of analysis. Ethnograph software was used. Separate files were created for various leadership groups. The first step was open coding. Segments were then sorted and retrieved by code words, including Boolean logic. The study used constant comparative technique. Codes were 'stabilised' and then 'five additional iterations of pattern analysis (axial and etic coding) were completed'. For trustworthiness, triangulation was used, through using multiple studies, multiple sources, and a review of the findings by two experts in leadership training. Pielstick identifies seven overarching themes: creating a shared vision, building relationships, developing a supporting organisational culture, guiding implementation, exhibiting character, achieving results. The presentation of findings was accomplished through narrative.

### ***Savin-Baden and Major (2007)***

This meta-ethnography involved an examination of the following question: How does changing from a traditional to a problem-based approach influence staff? The six studies included in the synthesis were published 1998 or later, and were peer reviewed, published articles. The search process included online database searching (ERIC, Academic elite), hand searching table of

contents, hand searching bibliographies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows: topic, research question, study date, research design, data included in the original study. Application of criteria for determining that 'honesties' had been attended to in the original studies by the primary researcher(s) for quality appraisal of the articles. Data included were findings from published qualitative studies. Synthesis involved interpretive comparison and inductive analysis that began with the themes of the original studies and moved from first and second order analysis to third order interpretations. Efforts toward trustworthiness/plausibility included application of the concept of 'honesties' indicated by the authors:

- Situating themselves in relation to participants.
- Voicing mistakes.
- Situating themselves in relation to the data.
- Taking a critical stance towards research.

Savin-Baden and Major identified four overarching themes: changes in role perception, changed perspectives about the nature of authority and control, shifts in views about the nature of disciplinary knowledge, and changes in perception about the nature of teaching and learning. Presentation of findings involved use of narrative and tables.

### **Savin-Baden et al. (2008)**

Savin-Baden et al. examined key themes related to influencing thinking and practices about teaching and learning in higher education, with the intent to clarify the ways in which knowledge transfer can and does take place and the conditions under which it is most likely to occur. The meta-ethnography also examined the nature and extent of engagement with these ideas in the literature intended for three 'stakeholder' groups: academic teaching staff (practitioners), institutional policy-makers and educational developers. Research questions were as follows:

- (1) What does the literature indicate about teaching and learning thinking and practices in higher education?
- (2) What are the tensions and differences across practices and communities, for example e-learning communities or problem-based learning communities?
- (3) What is the relationship between theories of teaching and learning and actual practices?
- (4) What is the relationship between theories of teaching and learning and actual practices?

The source materials used were 83 published articles. The search process involved several steps: online database searching (ERIC, Academic Elite), hand searching table of contents, hand searching bibliographies, reviewing listservs and other mailing lists, searching the Cochrane networks. Inclusion and exclusion criteria included topic, methodology, date, design, and inclusion of qualitative data. No criteria of appraisal of quality were indicated. Data included findings from the original studies. The process of synthesis included the following:

- Locating themes through different levels of analysis.
- Analysing data across studies.
- Developing second-order themes.
- Synthesising data across studies.
- Interpreting data.
- Developing third-order themes.

There was no indication of efforts toward trustworthiness/plausibility. Presentation of findings involved use of narrative and tables. The primary themes the authors found were as follows:

pedagogical stance, disjunction, learning spaces, agency, notions of improvement, communities of interest.

### Cross-study comparisons

Each synthesis is interesting in and of itself for the ways in which the various authors approached the task of synthesis within the field of higher education. We examined the articles for similarities in structure that crossed studies, which provided the basis for comparison. First, the sampling approach of each set of authors is noteworthy. We highlight the approaches in the following table.

These authors ranged in the number of articles selected for synthesis, from six to 118. The timeframes they set ranged from a decade to four decades. They either synthesised only qualitative or included quantitative articles in their analyses as well. They used interview segments as the primary data form, but also looked at statistical data as well.

Second, these six articles shared many common features, as we indicate in the following table.

All six articles contained a *bounded research question* that was expressly stated. Most of the authors indicated a description of the *delimitations* of the types of publications used as *source materials*, whether broad inclusion of many kinds of documents or narrow inclusion of only published articles that had met the bar of peer review. All contained some description of the *search for studies*, with most being fairly explicit about the strategies used, such as use of online databases, branching to hand-searching tables of contents of key journals, bibliographies of relevant articles, and then review of Listservs and other mailing lists to identify sources. Most of the authors attempted to reach an exhaustive, rather than developing a sampling of studies to include, although some topics yielded more relevant studies than others. Most contained clearly defined *inclusion and exclusion criteria*, such as requirements that the original studies contain qualitative data, specifically thick quotations rather than simply summaries of theme, are on a specific topic and answer a specific research question, and occur within a specific timeframe. Only two of the six studies contained criteria for *appraisal of the quality* of studies noted, such as considerations of the clarity of methods of data collection, handling, analysis in the original studies, as well as an indication of researcher positionality of the original authors. Most authors included a clear description of *included data*, whether the findings themselves served as the data, or whether data were broadly conceived to include study title to the discussion.

Most authors clearly described the *synthesis process*. These processes tended to involve identification of findings from the primary studies, deconstructing for the purposes of comparison, listing and organising these components, and then comparing and contrasting themes. Typically

Table 1. Comparison of the original articles used as data.

Authors	Number of original studies	Timeframe sampled	Original study methods	Data extracted from the original studies
Bair and Haworth	118	1970–1998	Qualitative/ quantitative	Statistics, summaries, interview segments
Kasworm	70	1940–1986	Qualitative/ quantitative	Statistics, summaries, interview segments
Major	9	1998–2009	Qualitative	Interview segments from findings
Pielstick	N/A	N/A	Qualitative	'Passages from the literature'
Savin-Baden and Major	6	1998–2007	Qualitative	Interview segments from findings
Savin-Baden et al.	83	1990–2008	Qualitative	Interview segments from findings



Table 2. Comparison of common features.

	Bair and Haworth	Kasworm	Major	Pielstick	Savin-Baden and Major	Savin-Baden et al.
Research question	Bounded	Bounded	Bounded	Bounded	Bounded	Bounded
Source materials	Yes, broad	Yes, broad	Yes, narrow	No	Yes, narrow	Yes, narrow
Search process	Yes, explicit	Yes, explicit	Yes, explicit	Mentioned but not explicit	Yes	Yes
Inclusion and exclusion criteria	Yes, explicit	Yes, explicit	Yes, explicit	No	Yes	Yes
Quality appraisal process	No	No	Yes	No	Yes, narrow	No
Data sources	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Synthesis process	Yes	Marginal description	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Plausibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Synthesis products	Yes, narrative and tables	Yes, narrative and tables	Yes, narrative and tables	Yes, narrative	Yes, narrative and tables	Yes, narrative and tables
Recommendations for	Research and policy	Research	Research and practice	No mention	No mention	Research

themes from studies were combined. Interpretation was done for purposes beyond mere comparison and aggregation of results from all of the studies. Just as within primary qualitative research, basic qualitative coding often was used. Most authors discussed their efforts at achieving plausibility, such as arguments about triangulation being ‘built in’ to the process to involving authors in member checking or peer analysis of data, or description of positionality. All of the authors presented the products of the synthesis clearly, most often including a combination of narrative and tables or figures to represent relationships among studies and concepts. Two authors did not make any recommendations, while the remaining four made recommendations for research; one of these made recommendations for practice and one made recommendations for policy.

## **Discussion**

What we gleaned from our review was information about the state of the art of synthesis of qualitative studies in the field of higher education. These articles have made important steps toward establishing what it means to synthesis qualitative research in this field. From our review of this important work, we can make several recommendations that we hope can help drive future efforts at qualitative research synthesis.

### ***Examine other topics central to the field of higher education***

These six syntheses covered a wide range of topics, specifically doctoral persistence, adult education, staff experiences with distance learning, characteristics of transformational leaders, staff experiences with problem-based learning, and teaching knowledge and practice. All of the authors contributed cogent research reports about these important topics. Yet, higher education appears to be lagging behind other fields in the adoption of this approach, particularly the health professions in which the approach has been widely adopted. Additional topics in our field appear rife for such an approach, including student access, student persistence, organisational change, etc. We have decades of research under our collective belt, and this method represents an opportunity to take stock of what we have before moving forward.

### ***Acknowledge the process as a form of research in its own right***

We recognise that it is tempting to argue that qualitative research synthesis is really just a variation of the traditional literature review. It has been categorised as a type of literature review by many who use it or similar approaches (see Pope et al. 2007). Indeed, some of the authors of the six syntheses we reviewed at times referred to their work as a ‘review’, even while arguing that it was not. Yet these articles described rigorous methodological and analytic approaches to combining evidence for managing complex information existing qualitative studies. These syntheses involved several distinctive steps, with processes from search and selection to development of third order interpretations laid out clearly. The approaches were systematic and analytic, while remaining reflexive and iterative as necessary in a qualitative approach. We hold with the views of Noblit and Hare that it is ‘much more than what we usually mean by a literature review’ (9).

### ***Work towards longitudinal research***

One criticism of qualitative research generally, levelled even from the field’s creators, is that studies developed under this paradigm have the propensity to remain isolated, ‘little islands’ unto themselves never to be revisited (Glaser and Strauss 1971, 181). These syntheses we

reviewed, however, demonstrated the propensity of qualitative research synthesis to mitigate this problem. These syntheses revisited studies and linked concepts across them, helping address the problem of knowledge fragmentation. They also linked studies across time, in some senses enabling longitudinal study. Further, while some argue that the variety that exists among qualitative methods can limit the usefulness of the approach (Rantala and Wellstrom 2001), these synthesists chose to include or exclude certain studies, very often on the basis of methodology; in many ways, the synthesists did a service by decoding the language, often shorthand, that the author of the original study has used to describe the methodology. These authors described a range of approaches for controlling for the variety amongst studies. The synthesis process, then, allowed for the development of cogent research reports that linked concepts across multiple studies over time.

### ***Work to ensure quality of studies to be included in the synthesis***

While these six syntheses have made important contributions to the field of higher education, they also demonstrate that it is important to work toward continuous improvement in this area. Researchers should strive to develop approaches that ensure the quality of the original studies to be included in the synthesis. This was the one area that was not as developed or at least documented across all studies. Qualitative research synthesis is dependent upon the quality of the primary studies included. Developing rigorous approaches to excluding studies that are fatally flawed can benefit the methodology of syntheses in general, which can help ensure the quality of synthesised information. Simultaneously it is important to improve clarity in reporting processes since the quality of qualitative research synthesis is dependent upon the transparency and reporting of the synthesis process and upon applying sound qualitative criteria for research and ensuring plausibility. While many of these studies were explicit and transparent in reporting their processes, others were not as clear. Page limitations of set journals have some influence over how much information the synthesist can and cannot include, but because the process is relatively new to our field, we believe that it is particularly important not to short-hand methodology sections.

### ***Make decisions visible***

While these studies made important linkages across studies and overtime, they were not all as effective at explaining which concepts were the most important and which were least and tended more toward treating everything of equal value, weight and worth. It is important to strive to find ways to demonstrate major and minor themes. Moreover, these authors did not all routinely discuss themes that were divergent or themes that were 'discarded' because they were not deemed representative of the set. We should work toward making these decisions more visible, as often what is left out is as telling as what has been included.

### ***Strive to provide important context***

Some scholars have argued that it is a challenge of syntheses of qualitative evidence that synthesists do not have access to primary data (Heaton 2004; Thorne 1994, 1998), and as such, important contextual information is missed or glossed over. These authors indicated that it is possible to conduct synthesis based upon the interpretations presented in the original studies. Moreover, some synthesists indicated that they found it an advantage to rely upon interpretations from the original researchers, and to talk with the researchers about these interpretations (e.g., Major). Rather than missing important context as would happen with secondary analysis, these scholars were able to make new meaning from made meaning. While the depth of context

provided varied, with syntheses based upon fewer original studies having more ability to provide such context, many synthesists expressly strove to retain important contextual information. They accomplished this by providing information about the original studies and in the narrative report of the findings. Some researchers often made efforts to retain the identities of the studies, either through direct citation or through other means of identification (see Bair and Haworth; Major; and Savin-Baden and Major).

### **Seek to develop theory**

Recommendations for research were included by a majority of the studies we reviewed. These recommendations were gleaned from these research reports that synthesised findings over time and over study type. It is in this way that a strong foundation of what we know already may be constructed. Due to this, these recommendations have great potential to drive the development of our field. We have a solid foundation upon which we can now build. We should, however, also be able to use these efforts to drive theory. While qualitative research synthesis has been lauded in the literature for its propensity to drive theory, these studies interestingly did not claim to have developed even mid-range theory, which some researchers suggest that qualitative research can do (see Estabrooks, Field, and Morse 1994). Yet the results of such studies could be the development of new theoretical models that have the propensity for both testing and for driving the field forward.

### **Seek to make recommendations for policy and practice directly from findings**

Only two of the authors in our set included recommendations for policy or practice; while some of the authors seemed to address researchers and others addressed policy makers and practitioners as their primary audiences, the results across the board could also have held wide appeal for policy makers, who would frequently prefer to make decisions based upon information from multiple sources than any one alone (Major and Savin-Baden 2009). However, in the context of the information explosion in social sciences, making recommendations for policy and practice is critical. In order to make synthesis directly relevant to policy makers and practitioners, we believe it essential to take deliberate steps for developing sound recommendations from findings.

### **Seek a range of dissemination outlets**

It is worth noting that these syntheses were published in high profile journals, most of which have been ranked in previous studies (see for example Bray and Major; Wellington and Torger-son) and most of which have high impact factors. These authors published their work in the following leading publications in the field of higher education:

- Bair and Haworth: *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*.
- Kasworm: *Review of Educational Research*.
- Major: *Teachers College Record*.
- Pielstick: *Community College Review*.
- Savin-Baden and Major: *Higher Education*.
- Savin-Baden et al: *London Review of Education*.

We applaud these authors for achieving such notable publications, as well as the journals themselves for being forward thinking. We note, however, that while these are all highly respected scholarly journals, there may be other outlets that are more effective at getting findings from research into the hands of practitioners and policy makers. Seeking publication of

findings in highly visibly and frequently read practitioner journals could help to increase the influence of these publications on practice. Likewise, publication of these findings in the form of policy briefs or white papers available online or through other accessible avenues could help make them more available to policy-makers.

## Conclusion

Whilst it is gaining a foothold in the literature bases of social science and professional fields in general, higher education researchers have only begun to experiment with synthesis of qualitative research. The question for higher education researchers is whether we are sufficiently advanced as a field, whose research body is growing in complexity from a content as well as methodological perspective, to undertake such an approach. We believe that as a field not only are we ready for it, but also that it is necessary at this point in our development to help us make sense of the existing body of higher education research and to point out future directions for our work.

Qualitative research synthesis, then, has the potential to become an important tool in the higher education scholar's toolkit. Qualitative research synthesis, however, is an approach that must be undertaken with care. It is not a simple or easy method. Indeed, Thorne et al. (2002) suggest that it is critical not to underestimate the complexity of synthesis approaches. In fact, they require analysis of theoretical, methodological, and contextual foundations that they state are 'not to be undertaken by the inexperienced or the faint of the heart' (449). When applied appropriately and carefully to a body of research, then, synthesis of qualitative information can provide valuable insights for researchers and practitioners alike. Otherwise, such approaches have the potential to do more harm than good, not only for the development of research but also for the development of policy and practice.

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