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Agenda setting and policy development

Definition: The capacity of an actor to define or influence issues on the public agenda by selecting issues seen as important or relevant; or by shaping the way these issues are framed, discussed and interpreted.

Synonyms: policy development, policy framing, policy process, policy cycle

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Introduction

Agenda setting is one of key concepts in the critical or interpretative approaches in the study of policy development. Developed in response to positivist paradigms, which saw policies as largely technical solutions to objectively existing problems, critical or interpretive analysis emphasises the constructed, contingent, and processual nature of policies, in particular the role of differently positioned actors in bringing specific issues to the fore (Fischer, 2003). In this sense, the use of agenda setting in the research on higher education policy is fundamentally related to the questions of political power and influence, and thus to the relationship between longer-term structural change and stability, on the one hand, and individual or collective agency, on the other.

In broad terms, agenda setting refers to the capacity of an actor (individual, group, organisation, institution) to define or influence issues on the public agenda. This occurs in two ways: on the one hand, selecting issues seen as important or relevant (thematization or problematization); on the other, shaping the way these issues are framed, discussed and interpreted (framing or interpretation). While policy processes normally involve elements of both, their analysis can be traced to two relatively distinct disciplinary traditions, one largely reliant on political science, and the other on communication and media studies. This article summarises the main elements of both traditions, and then delineates their convergences and implications for higher education policy research.

Agenda setting in political science

The political science tradition of agenda setting research addresses the mechanisms through which policy issues arise into the policy arena – for example, through actions of policy makers, NGOs, and the media. In this framework, agenda setting is usually focused on the first stage of the policy cycle,

followed by policy formulation, decision making, implementation and evaluation (Jann and Wegrich, 2007: 43).

In their seminal *Agendas and Instability in the American Politics*, Baumgartner and Jones frame the development of agendas in the context of the theory of punctuated equilibrium, where periods of relative stability are interlaced with moments of rapid and sudden change. The theory of punctuated equilibrium posits *policy monopolies*, “a monopoly on political understandings concerning the policy of interest, and an institutional arrangement that reinforces that understanding” (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 6). These institutionalised arrangements mediate and limit the access of outsiders to discussions concerning specific policies, reinforcing monopolies and resisting change. They are also supported by strong, easily communicable *ideas* that resonate with a wider public – such as progress, participation, or economic growth (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 6-7). *Policy venues* are institutions that make authoritative policy decisions, such as state and local authorities or professional associations. *Policy images* present the given policy issue from a specific perspective, but evolve, are discussed and contested over time by policy makers, interest groups, the media and wider public. Policy issues enter the policy agenda through political actors’ strategically-minded *venue shopping*, seeking venues where issues can be decided in a way favourable to them (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009; McLendon, 2003.)

Another influential contribution to agenda setting is Kingdon's (2014) theory of three streams of policy making. Kingdon drew on Cohen, March and Olsen's (1972) ‘garbage can’ model, seeking to explain the seeming lack of rationality that often accompanies policy making (cf. McLendon, 2003). The *problem stream* comprises issues that policy makers and other policy actors choose to pay attention to. *Actors* can be governmental, such as policy makers and government officials; or non-governmental, such as NGOs. Similarly, they can be visible, such as elected politicians; or invisible, such as officials or topic specialists. *Policy entrepreneurs* are actors who take an active role in advocating for certain ideas (Kingdon 2014; Yagci 2014; McLendon 2003). *Policy stream* comprises policy ideas and potential solutions developed by various policy communities to the identified problems. As there are typically more issues in the policy stream that can be accommodated, they compete for the attention of policy makers. Issues that offer solutions to the recognized problems achieve higher status on the agenda. Finally, the *political stream* includes political circumstances, such as the general mood in the country and its population, factors related to interest groups, and important administrative or legislative changes within the government. Policy change, in this view, depends on the “coupling” of three streams: if an issue is recognized as a problem, and a solution is

identified for it, and if political arena is receptive for change, agenda shift is likely to occur (Kingdon, 2003).

Both Baumgartner and Jones's and Kingdon's models reject incrementalism and rational choice theories in favour of unpredictable and sometimes rapid changes in how issues arise into the policy agenda. According to punctuated equilibrium theory, policy agenda change results from changing constellations of policy venues and images. This is not unlike the basic structure of the multiple stream framework, where change follows fortuitous coupling of the problem, solution and political situation. Similarly, both theories emphasize the role of policy entrepreneurs in pushing their projects.

Examples of the use of these theories in higher education research include the work of McLendon (2003) and Mills (2007) on higher education governance and funding; Yagci (2014) on the emergence of the social dimension in the Bologna process agenda; and Corbett (2011) on the competing European higher education agendas by the European Commission and the Bologna Process.

Agenda setting and media and communication studies

The agenda setting theory in communication studies focuses on the agenda setting function of media (including, more recently, social media), and their impact on public opinion. Agenda setting theory in this tradition was initially developed by Maxwell McCombs on the basis of the famous Chapel Hill study (McCombs and Shaw 1972), which demonstrated the link between space given to specific issue in the mass media, and the prominence of the issue for the surveyed public. Since then, research on agenda setting has evolved to encompass seven facets (or levels) of the agenda setting process. The first is basic agenda setting; the second is attribute agenda setting (what kinds of attributes salient issues have, from which perspective they are presented, and how they are framed); then, networked agenda setting (the role of media and public networks in issue salience) and the psychology of agenda setting (i.e. the effects and mechanisms of influence on different people). Separate facets address consequences of agenda setting for attitudes, opinions, and behaviour; origins of the media agenda (i.e. how issues achieve salience in the media) and, last but not least, *agendamelding*, which refers to effects that the relationship between issues in the media and reference communities, experiences and values on influencing people's worldviews (McCombs et al, 2014). The relevance of media and issue framing for agenda-setting and policy processes became particularly pronounced in controversies surrounding 'echo chambers', 'content bubbles', 'fake news' and other possible ways of distorting facts, primarily associated with the spread of social media (e.g. Flaxman et al, 2016).

In the context of higher education, these issues have relevance not only because of the ways media report (or not) on specific issues (for instance, tuition fees, strikes and student occupations, or immigration), but also because the relationship between media and universities becomes increasingly complex in the context in which academics are encouraged to use media as outlets for engaging with the public. In this sense, while universities and academics can use the impetus for public visibility to play a stronger and more pronounced role in agenda setting, this is not without pitfalls: a series of recent cases, in particular in the US, testifies to challenges raised by the delineation between ‘private’ and ‘public’ forms of engagement on social media (e.g. Bacevic, 2017). While it would be an overstatement to say that social media have ‘colonised’ the public sphere, in contemporary democracies it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a strict (analytical or political) boundary between elements of agenda setting that take place in ‘traditional’ political arenas – the Parliament, executive bodies, agencies – and those generated in and through the media.

Agenda setting, knowledge and epistemic communities

This issue connects to one of the domains in which political science- and media and communication-influenced theories converge: the question of the role of knowledge and epistemic communities in agenda setting (e.g. Dunlop, 2016). While epistemic communities are not uniquely restricted to networks of academic knowledge production, the role and status of knowledge (and expertise) play a significant role in the early stages of agenda setting, especially in defining the legitimacy of specific actors in putting forward authoritative statements concerning the definition and framing of a policy issue. The issues raised in this domain go beyond the uses of epistemic authority in specific instances of policymaking, and into questions of the social origin of knowledge, expertise, as well as the construction of facts.

Agenda setting, power and agency

While initially drawing on separate theoretical vocabularies and methodological toolboxes, different forms of research on agenda setting converge around a number of questions. The first is political power: what kind of agents are in the position to place issues on the agenda, as well as to push them through? The second is the question of process: how does this happen? Last, but not least, the question of impact: what are the effects of agenda setting, and how does it influence decision-making in the long run?

Understanding how specific actors use political power in bargaining and other processes of policy construction is central not only to agenda setting, but also to the broader understanding of the processes of political contestation and decision making. Sell and Prakash, for instance, argue that “because agenda setting involves both the provision of information and of normative frames, it crucially influences policy debates and ultimately, policy outcomes...Given that most policy debates feature competing agendas, it is important to examine whose agenda prevails. After all, politics is about who gets what and how” (2004: 145). This aspect rests on a realist notion of power, which locates it in tangible relations of domination, usually tied to different socio-economic capitals (e.g. Cronin, 1996). Post-structuralist notions of power, by contrast, have focused on its diffuse nature (Lukes, 2005; Foucault, 2000). From this point of view, power is everywhere: this means that the agenda cannot always be attributed to specific actors or moments in the policy process. This shifted the emphasis to discourse (see Smith, 2013; Wodak and Fairclough, 2010) and, in particular, the question of framing.

Framing refers to the question of who sets the tone of issues on the agenda, and what rhetorical and discursive strategies are employed. Frames are both normative and discursive in nature; however, as rhetorical devices, they are also agential, in the sense in which they have the power to incite (or justify) action. Benford and Snow wrote “collective action frames [are] action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (2000: 614). Sell and Prakash also emphasise the importance of framing in the process of agenda setting, and its relationship to knowledge: “One of the most important activities of any campaign is agenda setting – generating issues by disseminating information and providing a normative frame to interpret it. The agenda-setting process is shaped by how various perspectives are presented in relation to dominant policy concerns. Normative frames help to translate information into knowledge” (Sell and Prakash, 2004:157).

This type of analysis can be connected to the broader tradition of cultural political economy, which aspires to understand how cultural (discursive) constructions interact over time in order to produce relatively durable configurations of political power (e.g. Sum and Jessop, 2013). In this process, actors navigate the social world by reducing its complexity through meaning-making, that is, attributing forms of value to objects, forms, and relations. Meaning is cultural, and thus precedes specific forms of action (and thus, for instance, specific policy choices); equally, however, it is not completely independent of social structure – for instance, specific configurations of power. In this sense, the ‘success’ of a particular form of agenda-setting can be said to depend on two things: one

is the capacity of an actor to monopolise (or challenge) meaning or value of specific ideas, objects, or relations; the other is the 'fit' of that act or process of meaning-making (semiosis) with 'extra-semiotic' elements – social cohesion, inequality, etc. – of the context. For instance, a policy focusing on autonomy is not likely to gain traction in a policy environment where there is a high level of distrust towards institutional freedom; however, if a group of policy actors manages to re-signify it so as to apply to individual, rather than institutional powers, it may become more successful. Thus, while processes of agenda setting influence the course of events, they still conform to path dependencies, institutional logics, and other more durable effects (e.g. Hay, 2002).

A similar approach in the context of higher education is Nokkala and Bacevic's (2014) analysis of the role of European University Association (EUA), which shows how an organization uses the production of knowledge in the context of generating policy discourses in order to bolster its own position in the political landscape. Framing, in this context, is used not only to influence the agenda, but also to increase the power and relevance of a specific political actor. This extends agenda setting from the question of how actors influence agendas to the question of how agendas help create and position individual or institutional actors in the policymaking arena. In the analysis of the framing and positioning of different actors in the 'market' for higher education in the Global South, Robertson and Komljenovic (2016) address similar questions, grounding them more explicitly in the elaboration of the cultural political economic framework (Robertson and Dale (2015). In this sense, the emphasis is on the constitution of actors in higher education markets and market relations as part of the regime of international trade in goods and services.

Perspectives and challenges

Some higher education policy issues have gained traction as part of global political-economic trends. For example, the drive towards greater institutional autonomy can be seen as part of the processes of declining public funding of higher education, where autonomy is equated with institution's 'freedom' to compete in the market. Dissecting the role of different actors in this increasingly global context can be demanding, especially given the size and amorphousness of some international higher education policy actors, such as the European Commission. Agenda setting, especially in the form in which it combines the analysis of more and less explicit forms of political power, offers a number of interesting perspectives for understanding such policy processes. This is especially true in the growing domain of critical policy studies, which focus on the cultural as well as political and economic aspects of policymaking. On the other hand, these approaches are almost always constrained to explaining *how things came to be the way that*

they are; it is very difficult to use them in order to assess what *will* happen. This, however, is not necessarily a shortcoming of agenda setting theory as such; it is possible to conceive of agenda setting as an element of prospective analysis that would entail a minute analysis of day-to-day decision making.

Cross References:

- Advocacy coalition framework
- Higher education policy
- Rhetoric and discourse in higher education policy making
- Theories of policy cycle in higher education
- Policy process in higher education
- Politics, power and ideology in higher education

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