

**SRHE 2012**

**What is higher education for? Shared and contested ambitions**

**What is academic writing for?**

**Exploring resistance to research assessment**

**Rowena Murray**

**University of Strathclyde**

**[r.e.g.murray@strath.ac.uk](mailto:r.e.g.murray@strath.ac.uk)**

### **Background and context**

We are unsure of what aspects of work are valued and how to prioritize efforts. We become uncertain about the reasons for actions. Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? ... much of this reflexivity is internalized. These things become matters of self-doubt and personal anxiety rather than public debate (Ball 2003: 220).

In higher education there are specific demands on those who want to write. This creates tensions for anyone whose motivation is to make a difference, as much as to score high impact factors. These two types of impact are not mutually exclusive, but they can be experienced by academics – both emerging and eminent – as conflicting (Carnell *et al.* 2008).

This system provides no space to interrogate the value attached to some forms of writing. Negotiations surrounding the imperative to produce writing that counts are relatively unexamined, and the demands seem non-negotiable: ‘Staff are encouraged to engage in research not on their own terms, but in the terms created by the

department and by extension to the national funding and evaluation exercises' (Lucas 2009: 78).

## **Method**

Ten writers were each interviewed three times, ten years after they had been active members of a writing group as part of their transition into writing in higher education. The aim of the study was to explore the long-term impact of practices and relationships developed in the group.

## **Results and discussion**

Half of the participants were still writing for publication, but half were not. This paper explores the views of the latter. It brings to the debate about the value of writing in higher education the perspectives of academics who are excluded from research assessment. They questioned the value of writing for research assessment: 'writing is something we have to be seen to be doing. There is no intrinsic motivation' (0-4). They recognise that this system creates hierarchies, where some forms of writing, some academics and some teaching activities have more value than others:

The professor has tried to link it to strengths of people, linking it to what they value, trying to get what's valued in one field valued in another. The hierarchies are there with other issues – who people rate and don't – it's not just about writing. It even comes down to courses – teaching on certain courses has more status than teaching on other courses. It's just nonsense, but it's there (0-3).

This can lead to tensions, a clash of values and division:

It's been a cause of tension in the department – even down to 'what is an hour?': is sitting writing and thinking for one hour not as hard as one hour of teaching? This is an external factor that's forcing people to value one thing more than another, when we all know it's not straightforward. It's forcing folk to take sides (0-3).

There is cynicism about the positioning of some forms of academic work in the mainstream and others in the margins:

There's a dirtiness to the whole thing – having a brass neck and getting on to editorial boards and writing chapters for a book and then you get funding – It's about who knows who. People write and publish with their cronies. This affects my motivation to write. To be in the 'in crowd' ... you've got to have the self-esteem that maintains the motivation. Who might I feel that I could bare my soul with? I'm making it too personal – too self-interested in writing (0-4).

This is not to say that academics cannot tolerate competition, but its impact on motivation and self-esteem must be managed, which is impossible when competition is destructive:

I was invited to chair a research seminar ... Ended up in a very aggressive group. Everything I was saying was very threatening to what they stood for. That really shook me. It really shook my confidence. Particularly one person who pursued me, sending me articles as if I knew nothing.... You can experience some very damaging events. I just closed down. I cut off a lot of academic and research networks across the country. I refused to write a paper for a conference. I shut it all down (0-5).

While it may seem foolish to withdraw from an activity that is so highly valued, these academics chose to do writing – and other activities – that they valued more than 'research assessable' writing.

### **Conclusion and implications**

Is that not what academic freedom is for – academics choosing to do, some of the time, that which is *not* valued? Is that not what higher education is for – academics exercising this freedom? However, those who exercise academic freedom in this way

are likely to face barriers to career progression and constraints on their work and roles. The autonomy exercised by some in this study is available to a tiny minority.

The implications of this study are (a) that academics no longer have the authority to determine the value of their research and writing; and (b) that the intrinsic motivation required to write will be overwhelmed by the extrinsic motivation of research assessment. This may inhibit the writing of those who question research assessment, particularly if there is no forum regularly to debate the issues it raises.

## **References**

- Ball, S.J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy* 18(2): 215-228.
- Carnell, E., MacDonald, J., McCallum, B. and Scott, M. (2008) *Passion and politics: Academics reflect on writing for publication*. London: Institute of Education.
- Lucas, L. (2009) Research management and research cultures: power and productivity. In *Academic research and researchers*, Ed, A. Brew and L. Lucas. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press-McGraw-Hill.