

Background

The Finnish higher education system is based on the Nordic welfare ideology in which education is regarded as public good. However, over the last decade Finnish higher education has faced several reforms that have challenged the basic values of the welfare state (e.g. Rinne & Jauhiainen, 2012). These reforms are in line with the global trend aiming at enhancing the competitiveness of national higher education systems in the global market. Indeed, market-driven elements have gradually been implemented in Finnish higher education as well (Aarrevaara, Donson & Elander, 2009). One of the main reforms has been the introduction of the new Universities Act in 2010, according to which, among other things, universities were separated from state administration and civil-service employment relationships became contractual ones. Furthermore, there have been mergers of universities, which is hoped to further increase the competitiveness of Finnish higher education institutions. All in all, these reforms have not only changed the (legal) circumstances for academic work but have also blurred the understanding of academic identity (Nikunen, 2012). Hence, the purpose of our paper is to explore how academic identity is constructed and narrated in these processes of change at universities.

Drawing upon the narrative approach, we look at academic identity as narratively constructed and negotiated in social interaction in everyday practices (see Harré, 1983). Stories are seen as a fundamental form of human understanding through which individuals make sense of themselves and their lives (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Gergen, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives impart meaning to experiences by integrating them into a temporal and coherent whole with a specific plot structure. Narrative identity is not a fixed and static entity but reshaped and redefined in the changing contexts. However, although individuals are active agents and personal stories always have idiosyncratic features, identity building is deeply embedded in the collectively sustained cultural stock of narratives which offers cultural resources for making sense of what it is to be an academic, and what key values and moral commitments are associated with this identity. From another angle, dominant stories of a given culture have also normative power over individuals, requiring appropriation and adaption.

Previous studies show that reforms do impact on how academics construct their identities. Garcia and Hardy (2007) observed that the building blocks for academics in identity construction were narrated as describing a pressured and overworked academic. However, senior executives told narratives in which they saw themselves as active agents of change whereas academics tend to position themselves as victims. Generally, a common result has been that academics face conflicting pressures and expectations, experienced often as threats to their identity (Barry et al., 2006; Fanghanel, 2012; Henkel, 2000; Hakala, 2009). In particular, there seems to be a tension between traditional academic values and ideals (such as commitment to and gaining recognition in one's disciplinary field as well as autonomy in work), on the one hand, and more market-oriented values, on the other hand, stressing the virtues of attracting large amounts of funding, having good contacts with external stakeholders, strategic thinking in profiling, etc. (Ylijoki, 2005). It has also been argued that the current higher education context creates performative culture (e.g. Ball, 2003), involving an instrumental stance to work and oneself.

Aims and methods of the study

The purpose of our article is to analyse how academics construct their identities under these new and constantly changing circumstances. Do academics formulate new identity

constellations to survive in their everyday life? How are continuity and change interrelated in identity building? What is the relationship between the rhetoric and reality from the perspective of academics?

We base our article on data collected in the RAKE research project (2008-2009), in which we interviewed academics and administrators (N = 40) on their reactions to changes taking place in universities, especially in those under merger operations. The data were analysed by means of narrative inquiry, focusing on how the interviewees construct and narrate their experiences on changes in academic work (see, e.g. Ylijoki, 2005). We will also compare the narratives of academics and administrators.

Results/Conclusions

Based on our tentative analysis, it can be suggested that academic identities in the current higher education context are increasingly fragmented, both across different categories of staff (heads of departments, professors, short-term academics etc.) and within the same category of staff depending on whether or not the disciplinary field or subject domain the academic represents belongs to the focus areas of a given university. Although academic profession has never formed a unified and monolithic whole, it seems that the experiences and identities of academics at the present-day university are more and more divergent or even polarized.

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