Empty signifiers: the march to 'excellence in everything'

Smith Jan, *Durham University, UK*

Abstract

Much has been written on the competition for talent in the globalised knowledge economy, and this kind of discourse has seeped into higher education through the past few years. There are regular exhortations to attract 'only the very best' into UK HE thereby maximising the diversity of the student and staff body. Once in the UK HE system, however, there seems to be a tendency towards convergence via conformity to a narrow set of performance indicators. Arguably, just as we have the opportunity to attract and retain the most plural workforce we have ever had, increasing numbers of institutions are specifying more tightly developed and monitored surveillance metrics. The stress of this process frequently manifests itself for new academics on their teaching qualification courses where policy contexts and HE politics – and the paradoxes they contain – are discussed. The discomfort of some of these 'moments' are the subject of this paper. (150)

Outline

For a number of years, many commentators have pointed out how academics respond to changes in higher education by consistently doing more with less. The first RAE arguably put shape on the scope, quantity and quality of research undertaken in universities. Subsequent exercises have sought to drive up quantity and quality, with more detailed measures of judgment of both research and environments, including the numbers of doctoral students. The most recent round, the first REF, has gone further still, requiring evidence of impact. Not only has this had implications for already pressurised academics who have now to demonstrate the wider benefits of their research, it has even led to the employment of specialist 'case study' writers in a number of universities.

The academic probationary period has been a longstanding but under-researched practice in UK universities (Smith, 2010). One consequence of the changing policy context has been that universities have sought to change their probationary requirements. Where once it was opaque and perhaps not onerous, there is evidence of increasing requirements (Smith, 2011) and increasing pressure on staff (Smith, 2010). A newer development from a number of universities is the specification of detailed person specifications and performance indicators for probationary staff. One example, among many, is the statement outlining the 'Sheffield Academic' which clearly seeks to shape a specific approach to an academic career.

Part of the stress for the early-career academics (ECAs) reported by Smith (2010) derived from a lack of clarity surrounding probationary requirements. One could argue, therefore, that the production of schedules of expectations would go some way to demystifying the probationary period and reduce stress. There are at least two difficulties with this approach however. The first is that what is expressly valued sends very strong signals to the kinds of behaviour ECAs should demonstrate, many of which are at odds with current critiques of the neo-liberal approach adopted by UK universities (Clegg, 2008) and the values more experienced colleagues suggest are desirable (Skelton, 2012).

A further issue is that valuing – and rewarding – a more homogenised set of practices undermines a second strand of institutional rhetoric, that of embracing diversity. If diversity, plurality and inclusivity are aspirations for a university, it seems illogical to over-determine behaviour (Oswald, 2014). There is a parallel here with critiques of the REF itself, which points to 'impact' as a damaging notion for research, rewarding minimal risk and inhibiting creativity. A similar process may be at work with the greater specification of 'sanctioned' approaches to teaching transmitted through teaching qualifications mapped to the UKPSF (Loads, 2014).

Drawing on narrative data, this paper explores the lived experience of academic probation in one English institution. Particular attention is paid to structural and agentic elements (Archer, 2003) and whether recent policy initiatives such as REF impact encourage particular kinds of behaviours. These research imperatives are also linked to further requirements, instantiated in the UK over the last 20 years, for ECAs to acquire teaching qualifications. As the bar is heightened in terms of research productivity, probationary academics must also devote time to developing teaching practices. The current unrest at Kings College London reported by David Colquhoun shows, in very stark terms that research, teaching and importantly, sourcing funding are now strictly measurable and demonstrable criteria in service of continuing employment.

There is a sense in the UK that in the 'age of austerity' every public service must continually do more with less. It is timely to explore the implications of this for ECAs as they learn to navigate academic life in a very changed system to the one experienced by their more senior colleagues. There must surely come a time when it is no longer possible for individuals to honour their institutions' 'excellence in everything' mantra. As Land (2014) suggests, so much of the discourse that percolates within academia can now be read as 'empty signifiers'; there appears to be a widening gap between institutional management and the staff subject to its ever greater demands. The KCL example noted above shows the tension in a system with a shrinking research funding pot, for example, but a heightened expectation that all academics be successful in the grant-winning circus. This implies that, unless policy and funding regimes change, elements of the HE system may implode. It is not possible to continually do more with less and at some point, elements of such a dysfunctional system must give way. An interesting question thus arises, how do ECAs prioritise their time and tasks and which elements of an already fragile ecosystem are most at risk?

Using interview data from ECAs currently subject to the academic probationary period tells us where the biggest risks lay. Dominant discourses, as Davis and Petersen (2005) established, produce behaviours, but not always in desirable directions. It has already been established that ECAs do not have equitable access to mentoring (Smith, 2011): further exploration of the role of mentoring by those with no experience of meeting current probationary expectations is timely and it is suggested that even well-intentioned senior colleagues who do take an active mentoring role may have limited experience in helping newer academics develop their practice. With increasing research pressures, including funding and impact claims, stronger requirements in terms of teaching qualifications, module evaluation scores and student satisfaction imperatives, no area of academic life goes unnoticed. The logical conclusion of this discourse, and the policies that enact it, is that diversity is forgotten: only a particular academic self is welcomed into the academy. This paper explores the range of cultural and structural mechanisms that are at play in supporting less experienced staff to negotiate their very pressing prioritisation problems. (937)

References

Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal*, 34, (3), 329-345

Colquhoun, D. (2014). *Bad financial mismanagement at Kings College London means VC Rick Trainor is firing 120 scientists*. Available from http://www.dcscience.net/?p=6607&cpage=1 [last accessed 27 June 2014].

Davies, B. & Petersen, E.B. (2005). Neo-liberal discourse in the academy: the forestalling of (collective) resistance. *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences*, 2, (2), 77-98.

Land, R. (2014). *Toil and trouble: threshold concepts as a pedagogy of uncertainty*. Paper presented at 5th Threshold Concepts Conference, Durham, July.

Loads, D. (2014). *A matter of identity or accreditation? An exploration of two conflicting understandings of academic staff development*. Paper presented at 4th Academic Identities Conference, Durham, July.

Oswald, A. (2014). If you create a Soviet-style planning system, you will get tractors. *Times Higher Education*, pp30-31, 26 June 2014

Sheffield University (2010). *The Sheffield Academic*. Available from http://www.shef.ac.uk/hr/sheffieldacademic/statement [last accessed 27 June 2014].

Skelton, A. (2012). Value conflicts in higher education teaching, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17, (3), 257-268.

Smith, J. (2010). Forging identities: the experiences of probationary lecturers in the UK, *Studies in Higher Education,* 35, (5), 577-591.

Smith, J. (2011). Beyond evaluative studies: perceptions of teaching qualifications from probationary lecturers in the UK. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16, (1), 71-81.