

The Future of Research and Teaching in UK Universities?

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Abstract

Changing conditions of academic work and the idea of 'unbundling' of academic activities potentially raises questions as to the future of knowledge production within universities across the sector. The significance and benefits associated with the link between research and teaching, which has been argued for by a number of researchers both for academic work and the potential positive benefit on student learning is, therefore, perhaps being questioned as the conditions of undertaking research and teaching changes across the sector. This paper will draw on data across two qualitative research projects, which were based on interviews with academic staff across a range of UK universities and also a quantitative analysis of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to look at the question of academic work in relation to research and teaching and how this might be currently changing within the UK higher education sector.

Context and Background

The main focus and interest of this paper is in the socio-cultural and political contexts of university environments and the conditions within which research and teaching are undertaken. It can be argued that higher education policy in the UK and elsewhere has worked to undermine the relationship between research and teaching since the proposal for 'teaching only' universities in the Dearing Report (1997). Increased marketization of universities in the UK and the move towards larger numbers of private providers seems to potentially push further towards the idea of what has been called the 'unbundling' of activities within universities by commercial commentators (Barber et al, 2013). The continued separation of funding and evaluation of research and teaching activities potentially further enhances the separation of these activities. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) now Research Excellence Framework (REF) has ensured that a large percentage of government research funding is distributed to an increasingly smaller number of UK universities. The significance and benefits associated with the link between research and teaching, which has been argued for by a number of researchers (Brew, 2006), both for academic work and the potential positive benefit on student learning is, therefore, perhaps being questioned as the conditions of undertaking research and teaching changes across the sector.

The whole idea of exploring the positioning of the student as an active participant in producing knowledge and being co-constructors of their own learning environments has been central to the idea of 'inquiry-based learning' (Levy and Petruilis, 2012) and the 'student as producer' (Neary, 2010), which are two initiatives that have been prominent in the UK. An HEA funded project which I led highlighted a positive valuing of integrating research and teaching by academics in their work and also the various ways in which they attempted to include students as participants within the research process (Lucas et al, 2008). This research also emphasised, however, the importance of institutional context (across different disciplines and different types of institutions, mainly pre and post 1992) for determining the experiences of academics in making connections between their research and teaching and also including students in various forms of 'inquiry-based' learning. Changing conditions of academic work, however, and the idea of 'unbundling' of academic activities and the rise of what Macfarlane (2011) calls para-academics potentially raises questions as to the future of knowledge production within universities across the sector. The potential increase in divisions of roles for research and teaching and in particular the increasing casualisation of academic work and the use of part-time, casual teachers to carry out

teaching (and research) work within university departments (Ryan et al, 2013) in terms of what this might mean for academic work and identity and the student experience.

Research Approach

This paper will draw on data across two qualitative research projects, which were based on interviews with academic staff across a range of UK universities and also a quantitative analysis of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to look at the question of academic work in relation to research and teaching and how this might be currently changing within the UK higher education sector. In the HEA funded research study (Lucas, et al, 2008) academics reported the increasing difficulties of maintaining a successful research and teaching career and pressures for some resulted in them focusing more on either research or teaching. This increasing division of teaching and research roles and the implications of this for academic work and identity has also been explored in a current study that I am involved in comparing Australian and UK academics and their career development and identity (Brew, Boud, Lucas & Crawford, 2013). Evidence from these two studies alongside the analysis of HESA data on academic roles within universities as 'research and teaching' or 'teaching only' or 'research only' will be discussed in order to ascertain whether there is an increasing differentiation or 'unbundling' of academic activities and the potential implications that this might have for academic work and identity as well as the student experience and their potential involvement in the research process.

Outcomes

This paper will bring together data from a range of data sources and in relation to the teaching and research nexus will look at the institutional foundations and in particular the conditions of academic work, which may enhance and support it or instead serve to further divide these activities. Furthermore, the issue of increasing casualisation of academic staff will be addressed. Current evidence of casualisation is slight though there is a recent report by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) and they are engaged in continued action to protest against casualisation in the university sector. The future of research and teaching activities in UK universities, therefore, is potentially undergoing dramatic change and the ways in which this might impact on the teaching and research nexus and the implications for academic work and identity as well as the student experience will be addressed.

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