

Collaborative governance and institutional reform (0347)

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Introduction

The UK HE policy push for innovative doctoral training collaborations - within, between and beyond universities - creates a set of governance dilemmas that reward close analytical attention. Previous research has shown how institutional collaborations have major costs, risks and unexpected outcomes, (Cummings and Keisler 2007). As well as potentially leading to 'stealthy reengineering' (Papatsiba 2013) of existing fields, research has shown how these initiatives provide funders and other research intermediaries (Kearnes and Wienroth 2010) with the opportunity to introduce new technologies and discourses of governing (Osborne 2010, Musselin 2008). This presentation explores these questions using the example of 21 ESRC Doctoral Training Centres set up in 2011, of which around a half involved collaborative 'consortia'.

Methods

Building on the authors' own existing published research in this area (Authors 2014), the paper draws on in-depth interviews with Directors of collaborative DTCs carried out over the course of 2012 and 2013. These interviews were supplemented with documentary analysis of policy texts and ethnographic reflections, and situated within a history of doctoral policy reforms initiated by the other research councils since 2000.

The analysis and presentation is developed through a series of extended qualitative case-studies of three such collaborative DTCs, situated within a comparative discussion of all the centres. The case-studies detail the creation, establishment and development of these collaborations, highlighting how they build upon and extend existing networks. The analysis highlights the detailed planning, the creation of new management and governance structures, and the challenges of negotiating and co-ordinating across a range of different types of institutions. Specific attention is paid to the elaborate thought that goes into the equitable allocation of, or competition for, ESRC studentships and the provision of joint training. In one case an innovative set of shared MSc courses were developed, which in turn created a range of quality assurance challenges.

Emerging findings and analysis

The case-studies highlight how universities are responding to the growing use of metrics and audits by the research councils in monitoring research training, and explores how these new technologies of governing can both promote experimentation but also potentially limit more democratic visions of inclusive and integrative collaborative governance (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh 2011)

Through a comparative analysis of the cases, we argue that Wieck's (1979) 'loosely coupled' universities are increasingly 'loosely bounded'. Collaboration and shared governance become interwoven as internal reforms and external 'partnerships' develop simultaneously. The growing influence of the research councils on doctoral pedagogies within UK universities is discussed, and the argument that their work as 'research intermediaries' is ever more visible across a range of institutional governance settings.

The research is intended to inform current debates in higher education policy, as bids for a new set of ESRC Doctoral Training Partnerships are in the course of being developed. It highlights the complex governance issues created by these training collaborations, and the new forms of leadership they require. It also points to the challenges of simultaneous collaboration and competition within the sector, and the speed of institutional reforms underway in an 'accelerated' academy (Carrigan 2015).

References

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