

Higher education research as an accidental career: the pathfinder and pathshaper generations (0173)

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### Abstract

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of research into the development of higher education (HE) as a research field. While the core themes of HE research have been identified through quantitative approaches focused on research and publication patterns (eg Calma and Davies, 2015; Tight, 2003; Horta and Jung, 2014), there has been little fine-grained, qualitative analysis based on autobiographical accounts. Drawing on an approach developed by Gumport (2002) this study provides an inter-generational analysis to HE studies in the UK through 24 interviews and biographical profiles with 'pathfinders', 'pathshapers' and 'pathtakers'. Preliminary findings focus on a smaller sample of pathfinders and pathshapers, who began their academic careers with a range of disciplinary affiliations in the 1960s and 70s. Preliminary themes emerging from analysis include HE research as an 'accidental' career path and the continuing importance of the discipline as a means of renewing knowledge creation in HE studies.

### Background, context and methodology

To date, there has been limited in-depth, qualitative analysis of the emergence of higher education (HE) as an intellectual field with previous studies mainly focused on the collation and analysis of quantitative data concerning publication patterns among HE scholars (eg Calma and Davies, 2015; Tight, 2003; Horta and Jung, 2014) or personal reflections (eg Alderman, 2010; Author, 2012). By contrast, this study will use a qualitative and more fine-grained understanding of HE as a field. It will draw on 24 semi-structured interviews and an analysis of academic CVs in analysing the career histories of three generations of scholars based on Gumport's (2002) conceptual framework. The date of their first HE relevant publication will be used to classify three generations: *pathfinders* before 1980; *pathshapers* between 1981 and 2000; and *pathtakers* after 2000. Aliases will preserve anonymity while the date of first publication will be a generational identifier.

### Preliminary analysis

The disciplinary roots of pathfinders and pathshapers include a range of humanities and social science subjects such as classics, sociology, philosophy and economics. Most have a humanities or social science background and continue to self-identify primarily with a distinctive discipline rather than 'HE' studies. According to Geoff (1988) 'sociology is my original field and I like to think that I never moved away from it'. For others, such as Robert (1973) disciplinary influences were more disparate and explained as 'a set of tributaries really'. Entry into HE research relates to both 'push' and 'pull' factors. Push factors included lack of interest in school-based

educational research, unsuccessful early careers elsewhere in the public sector, the quantitative direction of economics as a discipline, and a need to pragmatically research in the context in which one was working (ie HE).

I have seen it [ie academic economics] become more and more mathematical and that has never been what interests me (Susan, 1966)

with no money and no research grants and having to do research, you researched....'where you stood' (Dawn, 1992)

Pull factors identified included the funding opportunities (ESRC, Leverhulme, Manpower Services Commission, etc), the establishment of a new academic unit, involvement in European and international collaborations where HE research was already more established, and administrative and managerial roles working for universities and created by new (at that time) national bodies connected with HE and quality assurance (eg CNAAs).

It was an opportunity. So that was the thing that sort of drew me into the field. I mean I was interested in Education but I don't think especially higher education at the time....they had the funding to work on this project that they had, which was part of an international project. (Geoff, 1988)

I was actually pretty firmly identified with Education and I really didn't like very much school level educational research, partly because I didn't think I was equipped for it. And there was an awful lot of it around and I didn't really want to get into that and thought this is nice new field, and there's not much competition I suppose, I don't know how consciously but that was certainly part of it. And there always seemed to be things to do in higher education research.  
(James, 1971)

Here, particularly in James' explanation, there was a sense that HE research was an area that some simply drifted into as a kind of career 'accident' rather than as a matter of deliberate choice. His own self-assessment was that he drifted into HE research having 'floated around quite a lot intellectually' (James, 1971). Other interviewees, especially Susan, were more assertive about their sense of intellectual direction. A further pull factor for Eleanor (1980) and Dawn (1992) was the opportunity to carry out research in an area that connected theory and practice. Both of these interviewees had clear ideas about the way HE research could address issues of social change.

Q: What were you trying to achieve through your research, what was your overarching kind of goal?

A Erm...well I think it was always primarily a matter of trying to understand the interconnection between policy and practice  
(Eleanor, 1980)

I have always been interested in implementation of policy rather than purely the construction of models. (Susan, 1966)

Pathfinders spoke of the importance of key intellectual networks during their careers as a relatively small group of people coalesced in shaping a new sub-field of academic research. Organisations of note included the CHER, SRHE and other (now defunct) bodies such as the HE Foundation (HEF). Many interviewees also identified the influence and informal mentoring presence of figures who had helped to shape their early careers.

Pathfinders often stressed the way in which the disciplines are the life-blood of knowledge creation in HE studies and expressed concern that the creation of HE as a sub-field in its own right could act as a barrier to the development of new knowledge. One of the interviewees, Robert, spoke of a concern that the language of HE researchers was becoming harder to understand for a non-specialist leading to a closing off of communication to a wider community interested in the development of the university.

I think...it's [ie academic knowledge] become much less accessible even within the higher education business. You've got to recognise that it exists but there are little worlds going on with little world language going on,  
(Robert, 1973)

you can't do sociology without understanding social divisions, because that's societies are made up of  
(Dawn, 1992)

It [ie the field of higher education] is an important social enterprise that deserves research in the way that other social enterprises do...But I think the other side is that if you do institutionalise it, you know, then are you actually going to get people who have only studied higher education as opposed to a proper discipline  
(James, 1971)

These preliminary reflections on the interview data highlight the often 'accidental' nature of HE careers as well as the role of the discipline as both a self-identifier and a source of continued intellectual renewal in HE studies.

## References

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