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Academic careers: milestones and options on a critical path (0220)

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Paper proposal

Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Title

Academic careers: milestones and options on a critical path

Part 1 Abstract (max 150 words)

This paper explores the implications of a diversifying workforce for institutions and those individuals undertaking academic and associated roles. It reports on interviews with 69 respondents in eight case study universities across the UK, demonstrating key influences and milestones on the critical path of an academic career, in which informal opportunities and relationships appear to be as significant as formal structures and processes. It shows how individuals and institutions navigate tensions around, for instance, market imperatives and ideals of service, policy requirements and creative endeavour, and the competing demands of teaching, research and related activities. Finally, it considers the extent to which these developments may be eroding the sense of a collective profession or even disciplinary community, so that younger generations of staff may see academia more in terms of a job among others, in which life experience and networks may be as significant as knowledge itself.

Part 2 Outline (max 1,000 words, excluding references)

Background/context

The nature of academic and associated roles has changed significantly in the last decade, with an increasing disaggregation of teaching, research and other types of activity, and the growing involvement of external agencies such as professional bodies and community partners. Earlier work has shown that approaches to work and careers appear to be influenced as much by informal opportunities and relationships as by formal structures and processes, that individuals navigate the structures in which they find themselves, and that middle managers, such as heads of department, can have a significant

influence on individual career trajectories (Locke, Cummings and Fisher 2011; Locke, Whitchurch *et al* 2016; Whitchurch and Gordon 2017). At the same time, there is increasing mobility in and out of higher education during individuals' working lives. On the one hand, institutions have responded by introducing greater instrumentality in approaches to teaching and research, for instance, the former via the application of workload models and the latter via targets for grant funding and publications. Nevertheless, despite institutional initiatives to raise the status of teaching, achievements in research tend to be seen as having more value. Workload allocation models aiming at achieving equity between teaching and research tend to be undermined by a perception that they do not reflect the reality of day-to-day activity, and formal training programmes are sometimes seen as less helpful than mentors and peer support groups (Locke, Whitchurch *et al* 2016). On the other hand, institutions are also trying to create the possibility of more imaginative forms of recognition and career development (Whitchurch and Gordon 2017). Individuals are both actively managing their careers and influencing policy through practical initiatives which are supplemented by informal arrangements at local level, for instance through dialogue with departmental heads and line managers.

Methodology

The research design includes three main components: evidence of general trends in employment conditions from national datasets such as those of HESA and UCEA; narratives from 69 qualitative interviews in eight different UK universities; and online surveys of all staff undertaking academic work in those institutions. The interviews include staff at different stages of their careers as well as members of senior management teams. The initial interviews have taken place (Autumn 2017 / early 2018), and it is also planned to re-interview respondents after a period of two years so as to begin to provide a longitudinal account of changing career paths. The selection of institutions covers the four nations of the UK and all types of institution, including pre- and post-1992 universities and post-2004 universities.

A grounded theory perspective is being adopted in relation to the qualitative narratives, and analysis of the data is being undertaken at three levels, the descriptive (eg to identify institutional contexts), the interpretive (eg to understand the gap between formal statements and local understandings) and the conceptual (eg to review ways in which individuals have become increasingly active agents in their own careers). This process has followed authors such as Creswell (1998) and Miles and Huberman (1994), enabling "semantic" (explicit, overt) and "latent" (underlying, implicit) themes to be identified (Braun and Clark 2013). This allows the researchers to explore individual career histories in relation to, for instance, institution, subject area,

previous career trajectory inside or outside higher education, and career aspirations.

Findings/conceptual argument

Narratives from the interviews point to ever-increasing competition to obtain a first post, and pressure to demonstrate impact as well as an academic track record. Even after a permanent post has been obtained, management tasks such as leading a module or programme, or overseeing student admissions, are used early on in a career as additions to the CV and a lever to secure an individual's position and future progress. Once in a career, there is significant evidence of satisficing behaviour whereby individuals take a pragmatic approach to the task in hand, complying for the purposes of meeting formal obligations and professional development plans, yet at the same time working to develop both disciplinary and external interests, often in their own time. This is theorised via concepts of structure and agency (Giddens 1991) and of individual "splitting" (Bhabha in Mitchell 1995), whereby individuals 'play the game' in relation to formal institutional requirements, whilst at the same time pursuing their own interests as far as they can. It is also clear that individuals can lose their way mid-career as a result of factors such as funding difficulties, changes of personnel and disciplinary focus. They are therefore liable to hedge their bets as they go along, leading to an ongoing cost benefit analysis of options, the impact of which will be discussed.

The paper addresses these developments in the light of changing institutional structures and processes; how individuals navigate the structures in which they find themselves; and ways in which institutions are responding. It also considers factors that facilitate constructive dialogue between staff on the ground, middle managers in faculties, schools, and departments, and representatives of senior management teams, including variables affecting individual perceptions of the challenges and opportunities of an academic career. These include structural factors such as type of institution and discipline, as well as individual factors such as line managers, local colleagues, mentors and professional networks.

Implications

This longitudinal multi-methods research project is developing a more nuanced picture of academic career paths than can be obtained from national databases alone. The latter can be used to describe trends in terms and conditions but not, for instance, individual motivations or intentions. There are also problems of definition and nomenclature, and in some cases structural problems in these datasets. The findings will therefore inform the work of national agencies, institutions, and individuals in practical ways, particularly in relation to adopting a flexible approach to individual circumstances and providing bespoke support

for career directions. It will also be of value to senior and middle managers who are likely to be responsible for tailoring local arrangements, and offer examples of good practice in developing constructive dialogue at all levels, so that policy is informed by practice as well as vice versa.

References

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