

## **R2 Beaumaris 1 Friday 7 December 9.00-9.30**

### ***Navigating disciplinary identity in the field of Higher Education studies: a reflexive enquiry (0569)***

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The last decade has seen a proliferation of postgraduate programs in the relatively new specialisation of 'Higher Education'. This interest is undoubtedly the result of an increased recognition of the cultural, economic and political significance of higher education more generally, and has led to a rapidly expanding field of research and programs. However, there is some debate about the 'disciplinarity' of Higher Education studies resulting from its highly contextual practices, the absence of a centralised methodology, the lack of an agreed canon of literature, and the diversity of its academic community which is drawn from many disciplines other than education (for instance, sociology, political science, management, psychology, cultural studies, economics).

This presentation reports the findings of a research study that investigated the perspective of a range of stakeholders in the higher education studies community. The project started by addressed the following question: if Higher Education is an 'inter-discipline', with ambiguous borders and a loosely-coupled community, what does this mean for the disciplinary and personal identity formation of the growing numbers of students and staff who are choosing to study, teach or research in this emerging field? The insider research project elicited narrative identity-trajectories of stakeholders via semi-structured interviews with a selection of UK and Australian distinguished scholars (experts), academic staff (mid-careers), professional staff ('third space;'), and postgraduate students (novices) who currently research, teach or study in the field of Higher Education studies.

A second research focus emerged during the course of the study that related to the perception of the selected stakeholders of the various masters' programs in the field Higher Education studies – which they were either undertaking as students, teaching as academic staff, or contributing to as eminent scholars and researchers populating reading lists or as guest speakers and supervisors. The participants were selected based on their recent activities in higher education studies events in the UK and Australia, such as conferences, student-led symposia or publications. Overall, seven universities were represented by participants in the project and included stakeholders from elite research institutions, mid-range universities focusing on research and teaching, as well as teaching focused universities with online programs in higher education studies.

As the researcher was undertaking a Masters coursework program while on sabbatical, the project drew on insider research methods. It was already understood that these masters programs sit in a somewhat ill-defined space between undergraduate and doctoral education. The learning experience at this level should be challenging for students as they move from consuming academic information to becoming producers of new knowledge (Kneale, 2015), and as they develop greater independence and confidence in their research, professional and workplace expertise. As Masters coursework programs are expanding across the higher education sector, they are also attracting the attention of policy makers who note expectations for higher levels of student engagement in their learning experiences: "Masters students should be drivers, not passengers" (The Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, 2013, p.5.). There has been a growing interest in developing frameworks for undergraduate student engagement as 'partners' within a community of practice (Wenger et al, 2002), as well as increasing recognition of the 'pleasurable aspect' arising from doctoral students' development of a collective identity and contributions to the academic community (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009, pp.122-123). However, there is as yet relatively little research on how Masters students might become more fully-fledged agents in their learning communities.

This study argues that Masters programs that focus on the field of Higher Education studies can be seen as enacting the larger tensions in Higher Education studies, which itself is arguably a microcosm of the broader higher education sector. Exploring the perspective of early career or novice researchers – the

postgraduate students engaged in Higher Education studies programs, offered a valuable counterpoint to the more senior and eminent scholars who were interviewed during the course of this study, and reflected back on their career trajectory and their contribution to an emerging field. The perspective of mid-career academic teachers and researchers provided an insight into the current challenges and opportunities afforded in the sector and by constraints in the delivery and management of these programs. In summary, the study provides a valuable snapshot of the state of play of the 'discipline' of Higher Education studies, and the challenges faced by members of this particular community as they negotiate and construct their academic identities.

## References

- Kneale, P (Ed.), 2015, *Masters Level Teaching, Learning and Assessment: Issues in Delivery and Design*, London: Palgrave Teaching and Learning.
- McAlpine, L, & Amundsen, C (2009). Identity and agency: pleasures and collegiality among the challenges of the doctoral journey, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 31:2, 109-125
- Wenger, E (1998) *Communities of practice*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.