

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Andrea Cameron

Thu 12 Dec 2019

09:00 - 09:30

Development of Doctoral Students as Academic Teachers in an Era of Precarity

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

Abstract:

With increased pressures of the performativity culture within teaching, higher education institutions (HEIs) are obliged to create a more individualised student learning experience. To this end, doctoral students are increasingly being engaged in teaching roles to negotiate the shortfall in teaching staff and/or to release the permanent staff from teaching pressures to do research. Whilst there is evidence of doctoral students being engaged in teaching roles, there appears to be limited literature highlighting the support offered to them in undertaking these roles. This paper draws on data from a small-scale study undertaken in two UK HEIs to explore the doctoral students' experiences of becoming a teacher in a neoliberal culture of performativity and the support mechanisms available and challenges faced in undertaking this role. The paper seeks to highlight the structural inequalities faced by these marginalised emerging professionals in accessing support for their teaching roles and in developing their teacher identity.

Paper:

Introduction

The rise in tuition fees, the rhetoric of students as customers and increasing requirements to adhere to legal frameworks reflect the neoliberalisation of higher education (Williams, 2013) which has in turn led to increase in the number of precariats in academia (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015). For example, academic staff are faced with casualisation, to the point of just-in-time research and teaching as well as the need to meet performance criteria linked to teaching and researching metrics. Set within this context, the new and emerging academics, the doctoral students, are beginning to navigate the precarity mire, either consciously or unconsciously. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are responding to performativity culture of increasing staff-student ratio metric in undergraduate courses by recruiting doctoral students to teach (often referred to as graduate

teaching assistants, GTAs) alongside associate lecturers /contractual workers (Chadha, 2013). Most universities offer some type of teacher training to their GTAs, whether it is a formal teaching qualification that leads to a teaching accreditation such as Fellowship Status of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) in the UK or a series of non-credit bearing workshops. This paper explores the perceptions of GTAs on how these teacher training supports them in achieving their future career goals within a system of precarity.

Methods

The study adopted a case study methodology to capture the teaching and teaching training experiences of eight doctoral students across two universities in England from a range of disciplines (a post-1992 university with recent research degree awarding powers and a pre-92 plate glass university with a well established doctoral programme). The expectation is that established doctoral schools may be better placed in offering some structured guidance to doctoral students undertaking the contractual teaching roles than newer universities with a limited number of doctoral students.

Ethical approval was sought and care was taken that none of the doctoral students who were being supervised by the researchers were approached for participation. An exploratory inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2013) to identify codes that were supported by illustrative interview extracts, these were later grouped into the content-driven emergent themes.

Findings and Preliminary Analysis

The doctoral students interviewed in the two institutions clearly recognised the value offered by a structured teacher training programme in developing their confidence in their teaching roles and recognised its value in making them employable. The interviews highlighted that while the structures within which the GTAs operated are neo-liberalised, the participants themselves viewed their work and teaching development more holistically as part of their academic development and growth.

Your PhD thesis and your publications are definitely important, but you generally get your first job in academia based on your teaching experience. ... I thought that it is a good opportunity for myself to improve my [teaching]skills... . [Participant, plate glass university]

The interviewees indicated the value placed on peer group support that often came from interacting with other doctoral students on the structured teaching programmes. They recognised the importance of the peer group support for not only their teaching roles, but also for otherwise very isolated PhD journeys.

...I mean, I think the best thing I took out of those [teaching and learning course]sessions would be

discussing with people from other disciplines, their experiences, and discussing, you know, 'Oh, you have this method in science or maths or history.' [Participant, new university]

Those doctoral students who did not have the opportunity to access structured teaching programmes to gain support for their teaching roles often relied on their supervisors for both teaching and research advice. However, in such students the precarious nature of the support often reflected in their lower levels of confidence/nervousness related to their teaching roles. Further the interviews revealed that the nature of support required by doctoral students in their teaching roles is not homogenous and would vary depending on their individual contexts – their disciplines, whether they are international students, etc. Nonetheless all students valued some kind of formal and/or informal support in developing their teacher identity.

Concluding thoughts

As more doctoral students are recruited to teach, a careful consideration for the development of doctoral students as competent teachers in addition to being capable researchers is needed. This may require aligning doctoral roles (possibly the vitae research development scheme indicators) to academic roles- creating a doctoral role profile that maps on to the role profile of future academics in teaching and research positions. Further, for undergraduates we increasingly consider employability as an important benchmark, in the same vein we cannot ignore our responsibility towards the holistic development of doctoral students as teachers and researchers to enhance their employability. Whilst the employability of the doctoral students is not a performance metric, as a sector we may for pragmatic and moral reasons proactively consider ways of supporting the teaching training of the doctoral students to make them employable for a career in academia. The sector appears to be falling short in this responsibility towards the professional growth of doctoral student often due to the short-term nature of their teaching engagement. If indeed the purpose of engaging doctoral students in teaching is to enhance the learning experience of students they teach, it is important we consider how we support these doctoral students in developing their teaching practice. By offering temporary, insecure and/or instrumental support, there is a risk that the sector is producing a new generation of academics who internalise precarity as a new normality in academic life. We need to be mindful as a sector that in trying to meet the learning needs of the undergraduate students the sector, we need to make sure we are not in danger of marginalising the developmental needs of another student body, the doctoral students.

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