

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0238

Conwy 1

Wed 11 Dec 2019

15:45 - 16:15

E4 | Conwy 1

Wed 11 Dec 2019

15:45 - 16:15

Imagining the future in the present - Student career dreams and academic identity as a contested space?

[Laura C. Felby](#)¹, [Søren S. Bengtsen](#)¹, [Sarah Robinson](#)¹

¹*Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark*

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

Abstract: In the current educational climate, the tensions from discourses about employability, relevance, creative and collaborative skills impact upon the student experience of higher education in a range of ways. Our research interests in doctoral supervision, career intentions and dreams and the entrepreneurial university coincide in this paper in the notion of the development of academic identity. This paper focuses on how the development of an academic identity is shaped through the discourses associated with humanities graduate employability, educational relevance and a requirement for more creative and collaborative citizens in the future. The paper draws on interviews with a variety of stakeholders within a Danish higher education institution; career support officers, supervisors, and master's and doctoral students. Initial data analysis show that the development of an academic identity is in tension from conflicting agendas that stem from the notion of 'career' which itself fragments and troubles students.

Paper: Introduction

When entering higher education, students have their own agendas for what they want to achieve. Some may already have a career path clearly laid out, others may be unsure of what they want to do in the future and choose a discipline area out of interest and yet others make choices influenced by their friends or family (Akosah-Twumasi P. et al. 2018). In these personal journeys into and through higher education, the student will be influenced by external discourses that are political, societal, cultural and educational. Currently, in Denmark and internationally, there are political discourses that critique the aim and outcome of higher education for its contribution to society and the social economy. How does higher education prepare students for the workforce and what skills and competences do students develop through a higher education curriculum?

Current claims in the literature

Research into career and career learning has increasingly become of interest. While current research into career opportunities and career development shows that career is a fluid concept, the everyday conceptualization of 'career' remains fixed through metaphors such as the ladder or even a competitive race (Hooley & Barham, 2016). What is evident from these metaphors is that career is regarded as a hierarchical progression. However, from a research standpoint career is both lifelong and lifewide and includes several entangled, but not always educationally aligned and socio-politically calibrated, identity strands including intellectual, institutional, societal and cultural strands (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016). In today's higher education, and including the PhD level as well, the term 'career' covers a multiplicity of meaning spanning from core disciplinary domains, over institutional and educational domains, and even extending into existential and private lifeworld domains. In a fast changing and unpredictable world (Barnett, 2004), and in a job market domain that is changing rapidly due to economic change and technological changes (Hooley & Barham, 2016), employability, relevance and a set of skills are linked to a notion of career learning. We draw from theories that describe universities and institutions for higher education (Mode 1) as having developed from dealing mainly with knowledge creation and higher education in terms of transfer in seclusion from the surrounding societal and cultural arenas. The development has shifted to navigating primarily in relation to instrumental governmental policy and job market demands (Mode 2), to a Mode 3- university understanding its own role, purpose, and aims as being a part of, and co-responsible for, societal and cultural growth (Barnett, 2004). In the 'ecological university' (Barnett, 2018), the boundaries between higher education institutions and wider societal domains are permeable, and student identities and careers are inextricably linked and embedded within, but not reduced to and dependent on, wider professional and cultural domains. Here, 'career' is not seen in the narrow socio-economic sense, but is understood as individual agency and empowerment combined with societal and cultural imaginaries (Shumar & Robinson, 2018).

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative data from i) semi-structured focus interviews with master's and doctoral students in the humanities, ii) individual interviews and focus group interviews with career support staff iii) and with supervisors who are finding ways to develop a connection between higher education practices within the university and professional practices in society. The interviews have been systematically listened through, and selected parts have been transcribed (through pre-coding, Saldana, 2016). In analysing the data, firstly through qualitative thematic coding and categorising (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Saldana, 2016) we have applied the theories on career, identity-trajectories, and ecological identity construction mentioned above. We have triangulated and synthesised our analysis (Stake, 1995) by having all three members from the research team analysing the data separately, and afterwards comparing, discussing, and combining our results.

Findings

Preliminary findings show that humanities students enter higher education with preconceived ideas about what higher education can do for them. It is often a given that higher education will lead to lucrative job opportunities, more job choices and a 'good' life-style. Students typically assume that

certain educational choices will provide more opportunities than others. Their choices are influenced not only by friends and family but more often by the instrumental discourses about what education is 'useful' in the future. As these discourses are shifting and often conflicting this results in students becoming confused about what kind of academic identity they want to develop. Further, the student's understandings of 'career' is not well aligned with, or even made aware to, the supervisors who prefer not to speak too much into the career agenda and discourse. Especially on the PhD level, we find a hesitation, uncertainty, and even confusion about the meaning of 'career' and how it is, and whether it should be, related to doctoral education at all. There is a visible gap between the disciplinary-anchored view of careers and the institutional and students views on careers. There seems to be a lack of discipline-related role models for students to navigate from as the supervisory task, and especially on the PhD level, is not being related to career outside academia.

Discussion

The preliminary findings show that the gap between the disciplinary-anchored and institutional view on careers is widened as different educational actors express diverse opinions on whether or not 'career' as an educational theme should be embedded within the disciplinary curriculum, or if it should be an extra-curricular activity. In other words, whether or not 'career' should be a task for the university as an *institution* or for the *individual* student. When embedded within the curriculum, we argue that career learning can help students develop agency and empower them to be critically constructive towards their own academic identity. This may provide opportunities for the institution to contribute in broader ways to societal development.

References

- Akosah-Twumasi P, Emeto TI, Lindsay D, Tsey K and Malau-Aduli BS (2018) A Systematic Review of Factors That Influence Youths Career Choices—the Role of Culture. *Front. Educ.* 3:58. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2018.00058
- Barnett, R. (2004). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23:3, 247-260
- Barnett, R. (2018). *The Ecological University. A Feasible Utopia*. London & Routledge: New York
- Brinkman, S. & Kvale, S. (2014), *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publications
- Hooley, T & Barham, L. (2016). *Career Development Policy Practice: The Tony Watts Reader*. Surrey: NICEC Ltd
- McAlpine, L. & Amundsen, C. (2016). *Post-PhD Career Trajectories. Intentions, Decision-making, and Life Aspirations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage Publications
- Shumar, W. & Robinson, S. (2018) 'Universities as Societal Drivers: Entrepreneurial Interventions for a Better Future', in Bengtson, S. & Barnett, R. (Eds.). *The Thinking University. A Philosophical Examination of Thought and Higher Education*. Cham: Springer Publishing.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The Art of Case-Study Research*. London: Sage Publications