

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Academic Career Breaks in the Neoliberal Academy: Postdoctoral Researchers as Neoliberal Subjects, Identity Work and Existential Angst

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Abstract: Postdoctoral appointments are highly competitive since they promise to increase the chances of an academic career, but they often involve periods of temporary employment, punctuated by career breaks (Cantwell 2011, van der Weijden *et al* 2016).

This study drew on exceptionally significant, international data-set on ‘academic career breaks’, gathered via an online mixed method survey. Secondary analysis of a sub-set of data on 950 postdoctoral researchers, 447 of whom had experienced a career break, explored their perceptions, experiences and implications of postdoctoral career breaks.

The findings show how identity formation and maintenance is lived out in the neoliberal university, with most post doctorates wedded into a distinctly neoliberal subject position, labouring as the ideal academic worker. Synergies are drawn between the neoliberal university and the ideal academic subject, in terms of what is valued as internal and external career capital (Floyd and Dimmock 2011).

Paper: Introduction

The National Postdoctoral Association (2017) defines a postdoctoral scholar as ‘an individual holding a doctoral degree who is engaged in a temporary period of mentored research and/or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of his or her choosing’ (online). Viewed as ‘holding bays,’ postdoctoral appointments promise to integrate researchers into academia, develop knowledge and skills, increase human capital (Yang and Webber, 2015), and the chances of an academic career (Lin and Chiu, 2016). As appointments are short-term in nature, postdoctoral career trajectories are often punctuated by career breaks.

Within the context of the neoliberal university and new managerialism, as the organisational arm of neoliberalism, universities have become powerful consumer orientated, corporatized, and commercialised entities with performativity-led modes of governance. Neoliberalism, along with the new managerialism in higher education has created new modes of academic production and the

commodification of intellectual knowledge (Boden et al., 2004; Fletcher et al., 2007). This relies on the utilisation of postdoctoral researchers (Cantwell, 2011). who are an increasingly essential and expanding group within academia (Van der Weijden et al., 2016, Camacho and Rhoads, 2015).

Literature review

There has been international concern in the extant literature about postdoctoral experiences and prospects since the 1990s (Bryson, 1999; Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 1998; Allen-Collinson, 2000). Criticism has been made of the lack of policy and data on postdoctorates and a constellation of issues has been reported, most stemming from dissatisfaction among postdoctoral researchers experiences of intense competition, insecure prospects, low pay, long hours, role ambiguity, ad-hoc training and lack of support, coupled with the extended duration of the postdoctorate career phase (Åkerlind, 2005).

Notwithstanding the contribution of prior research, contemporary postdoctoral experiences remain poorly understood (Cantwell, 2011; Cantwell and Lee, 2010), understanding postdoctoral experiences is important for the sustainability of the sector. This study seeks to move towards a firmer understanding of this important group of fledgling academics in relation to theory, practice and future research.

The study

The study utilised a sub-set of data of a major online global survey into academic career breaks, conducted in partnership between Piiirus.ac.uk, Jobs.ac.uk and Research Media, and made available through the online platform SurveyMonkey between February and March 2016. 5035 academics from around the world took part, making it the largest independent study of its kind.

Postdoctorates were the largest group in the sample, consequently this sub-set of data was identified as worthy of further examination. In 2017, the University of Reading responded to a call made by Piiirus.ac.uk for support with the secondary analyses of sub-sets of data. This was made possible with funding from the University of Reading Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP).

The mixed method survey that produced quantitative and qualitative data. Secondary analysis of a sub-set of data on 950 postdoctoral researchers, 447 of whom had experienced a career break, explored the perceptions, motivations, experiences and implications of postdoctoral career breaks. The sample represents postdoctoral researchers living in the UK (70.3%), Europe (19.1%), Africa, Australasia, Middle East, North America, the Caribbean and South America (10.6%).

Two stages of analysis were undertaken:

- 1) perceptions of career breaks among 950 postdoctorates reveals the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas.
- 2) analysis of 447 postdoctorates who had experienced a career break.

Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS (version 26) using descriptive and multivariate statistics. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, and the results were triangulated.

Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed variation among genders, disciplines and age groups in key areas relating to the length of career breaks and career planning. Support provided by employers was mixed and most commonly a result of the working relationship between the postdoctorate and their manager, rather than institution-wide support. Human Resources was perceived as designed for staff with regular hours and workstyles, not postdoctoral researchers. This is indicative of a need to change the systemic culture, such that employers are proactive supporting post-doctoral researchers.

The findings show how identity formation and maintenance is lived out in the neoliberal university, with most post doctorates wedded into a distinctly neoliberal subject position, labouring as the ideal academic worker. Synergies are drawn between the neoliberal university and the ideal academic subject, in terms of what is valued as internal and external career capital (Floyd and Dimmock 2011).

Conclusions

The findings raise implications for institutional effectiveness, institutional research and faculty productivity, and indicate there is a need for greater support for post-doctoral researchers. Future research is recommended, especially longitudinal research, to understand postdoctoral career trajectories.

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