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Mobility as rediscovery: The Journey of Deans and Directors of UK Graduate Schools to Rediscover the Purpose and Ideals of Doctoral Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Deans and Directors of UK Graduate Schools in implementing change. Specifically, we seek to develop an understanding of how leadership in graduate schools has sought to implement recent policy and institutional discourse on well-being and inclusion in the context of neo-liberal policy drivers which prioritise an efficient system of doctoral production. More generally, it will contribute to an understanding of the 'missing meso-level' (Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham, 2005: 435) of leadership in higher education and specifically the contemporary barriers to effective implementation of people-centred policy and practice in higher education institutions.

Full paper

The structure, language and ambitions of UK graduate schools have evolved significantly since their original establishment in many UK universities in the nineties. This is evidenced in a series of reports published by the UK Council for Graduate Education from 1995 to date. These reports which are based on national survey data have highlighted a shift over time from an initial preoccupation in strategic

objectives with monitoring, regulating and ensuring 'standards' through timely progression towards a greater emphasis on culture, student experience and most recently access and participation of under-represented groups. Smith McGloin and Wynne (2022) note that the top priority for Graduate Schools changed from improving research progression and completion rates in 2015 to health and wellbeing of doctoral candidates in 2021; with progression and completion rates having dropped out of the top five priorities in the most recent survey. Similarly quality assurance on research provision, which was a key strategic priority in surveys in the nineties and early noughties (UKCGE, 1995; 1998; Woodward, D. & Denicolo, P., 2004), starts to lose priority status with the implementation of Doctoral Colleges (Smith McGloin and Wynne, 2015) and disappears by the same point.

This can be summarised as a journey away from a predominant strategic focus on the implementation of quality codes, frameworks such as the Joint Skills Statement (UK GRAD and UK Research Councils, 2001) and latterly the Researcher Development Framework (Vitae, 2010), and normalised progression timelines and towards language which acknowledges the importance of a more people-centred, community-orientated approach to supporting postgraduate researchers. This journey is also apparent in sector discourses in the context of a wider concern for research culture amongst research funders, learned societies, and latterly the UK government's research and development People and Culture Strategy (BEIS, 2021). It links to concerns relating to student wellbeing and protection that arose from the Office for Students. The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) New Deal for PGR consultation document (UKRI, 2022) is a key example of how concerns over research culture and student wellbeing have overlapped in graduate school remits.

At institutional level, the new language of well-being and inclusion in strategic priorities that is articulated in responses to the most recent UKCGE surveys sits in tension with unchanging neo-liberal policy drivers that require universities to produce doctoral graduates, trained to be competitive, productive, highly employable and able to

contribute to economic growth. Internal metrics used to assess success in doctoral provision (submission and completion rates), new measures related to diversifying admissions and external reporting requirements recently introduced by the Office for Student on 'value for money' in postgraduate research programmes reflect the same agenda.

Deans and Directors of graduate schools (DDoGS), as middle-level managers, professionals and leaders of institutional structures in which neo-liberal policies and practices are embedded, are at the heart of the contradictions and tensions between the emerging language of inclusive communities of practice, well-being and healthy research cultures and the foundational purposes and ongoing requirements of graduate schools to ensure an efficient system of doctoral production.

In the course of a series of semi-structured interviews with six deans and directors of graduate schools we use the gap between rhetoric and reality in higher education middle management (Jane Creaton and Karen Heard-Laureote, 2021) to explore how members of this group find ways to navigate the tension between neoliberal drivers and the new language of social justice.   We apply the Durkheimian notion of 'anomie' - particularly as normlessness in the context of too many norms – and see how it has manifest in the doctoral context and how leaders in graduate schools have set about rebuilding (or see the potential to build future) social solidarity and cohesion through creating enclaves of social resistance and solidarity. We explore how DDoGS implement people-centred policy and practice and see how it might be better enacted in a managerial paradigm which still engages strongly with marketisation, financialisation and surveillance.

This paper will offer an insight into an under-researched area, that is, the role of leaders in UK Graduate Schools. It will reveal aspects of their sense of purpose and ideals related to doctoral education and

their navigation of conflicting drivers and ways of working in the wider university. More generally, it will contribute to our understanding of the 'missing meso-level' (Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham, 2005: 435) of leadership in higher education and specifically the contemporary barriers to effective implementation of people-centred policy and practice in higher education institutions.

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