

Imagining and emerging career patterns: Perceptions of doctoral students and research staff (0158)

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Context and purpose

For social sciences PhD graduates, contingent research staff positions are increasingly the reality today than lecturer posts leading to permanence (Nerad et al, 2006; Akerlind, 2005). Within this context, we have studied the experiences of social science doctoral students and research staff, early career academics (ECAs), in three UK research universities. This paper reports how they imagine their careers in today's academic workplace.

Previous research has tended to study doctoral students and research staff separately. This longitudinal study examined shifts in how futures were imagined over time as individuals completed their degrees and moved on to research posts. The study draws on the notion of academic identity-trajectory (McAlpine et al, in press) which incorporates a biographical stance. Personally distinct *past* experiences influence *present* intentions and engagement in academic work as well as *future* imagined possibilities. Essential is the interweaving of personal values, intentions and responsibilities in how work is approached and experienced. By exercising agency (Archer, 2000) within social and physical constraints (Billett, 2009), individuals have some ability to decide how they will engage in the practices they encounter. Yet unexpected constraints (as well as serendipity) may lead elsewhere.

Method:

Our approach draws on a tradition in research on teaching of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Participant narratives describing how they constitute their identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) at different points in time form the basis for researcher-constructed case summaries. These summaries of individual identity-trajectories: make connections between events; represent the passage of time; and show the intentions of individuals (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

For up to 12 months, over 30 social sciences ECAs provided accounts of their experiences through demographic questionnaires, weekly activity logs completed once a month, and an interview. From these data, individual summaries were created. In order to better understand how these individuals imagined their futures at different points in time, we created a representative subset of 14 and reviewed all their data. The group consisted of seven researchers, seven doctoral students, a mix of male and female (though predominantly female), and UK and international. Individuals varied in their trajectories from early 2nd year doctoral work (early PhD) to completing the degree and entering a first post-graduation post (PhD-1st post) to second or third research post after graduation (multiple posts); contracts were often less than two years or individuals held two posts simultaneously with different end points.

What they imagine as their futures

Understanding ECA imagined futures involves understanding their past intentions. Half were doing or had done the PhD principally to pursue intellectual interests and to increase their own knowledge, the other half because the degree was needed to work in or advance in their chosen

field (whether academic or professional). In this latter group two wanted to become powerful actors in their fields, and a third felt the PhD was the only option to continue in the field. This variation in intention was representative of the group as a whole, rather than particular to a particular point in their individual trajectories, and reminds us that individuals come to doctoral work for a range of reasons from intrinsic, through instrumental through strategic.

As to their imagined futures, across the roles, ten imagined remaining in academia, however, often with provisos; these ranged from balancing personal intellectual interests with family responsibilities or creating a family, to a concern that remaining in academia might not lead to the kinds of social change they desired to make. While one might have assumed that research staff imagined academic futures, this was not necessarily the case. Overall, what was crucial in understanding past and present motives was interweaving personal intellectual desires (and intentions in undertaking the PhD) with personal investments in present and past (often personal) relationships and networks (e.g., child care, partner); these sometimes opened up and sometimes constrained the imagined futures.

The difference that emerged as regards imagined futures was that early-PhDs wanting academic posts imagined them in the abstract, so imagined posts that incorporated what they valued and enjoyed; they appeared unaware that these were likely not achievable, e.g., working in both an NGO and academia. They seemed unaware of the realities of the job market, and did not mention job seeking concerns or strategies. This contrasted with the imagined futures of the more experienced groups which were more concrete, embedded in an awareness of the realities of finding academic posts. Thus, the PhD-1st post group was increasingly active in the job search. “Looking ahead to life after the DPhil” emerged while still writing the thesis. While these individuals wanted some features of academia, they were more specific about expectations and constraints; for instance, obtaining an academic job with a ‘good salary’; finding a position where the individual’s partner could also work. And, to avoid “a long gap between ‘handing in’ and starting work”, several began short-term research posts during the final months of their doctorate. This added to their workload but meant that after submitting they had an income while they continued job searching. Their job seeking behaviours and awareness of academic realities paralleled and foreshadowed how those in multiple posts dealt with their futures. This group was relatively constantly aware of the end of their contracts. Additionally, they had a concern that those in the PhD-1st post group did not: ensuring time for writing and publication “on the side”, essential to their intellectual profiles and their career attractiveness; this created tension with the reality of meeting the objectives of the research they were being paid to do.

Conclusion

Overall, individuals reported some sense of agency in constructing their imagined futures, though those more experienced were increasingly constrained by the realities of lack of posts and personal responsibilities. Given the increasing fragmentation of academic work (Krause, 2009), the results point in two directions. Efforts to support ECAs could benefit from greater attention to the varied intentions and personal responsibilities that individuals bring with them to academia. Further, doctoral pedagogies should be more attentive to career development, including the realities of academic posts today.

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