

Academic workplace(s) and the shaping of academic work (0159)

Malcolm Janice¹, ¹University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

'The workplace does not produce work; rather, purposive academic work itself creates the workplace in a way which evades the spatial and temporal discipline of the academic institution and of the educational policy structures which drive it.' (Malcolm and Zukas, 2009, p500)

'No, actually, we do work for universities. They pay our salaries.' (Academic manager, 2009)

The responses of universities to policy demands for an improved economic contribution, value for money, and sectoral manageability and efficiency increasingly take the form of human resource interventions. In policy terms, the HE sector as a whole is conceived as a set of employing organisations – or 'workplaces' – in need of better performance management (HEFCE, 2010). The overall ethos is summarised thus: 'As a knowledge-based sector, the *performance* of the people who *work in HE* is crucial. They represent the biggest *cost* and the most significant *asset*. The actions we have set out to support the continuous improvement of *leadership, governance and management* should also support the *development of people and organisational culture*.' (HEFCE, 2009, emphasis added). Policy-level initiatives impose consistencies of purpose and practice upon universities – e.g. through institutional audits, job evaluation schemes, professional teaching standards, etc. Within universities, these external pressures and demands shape compliance-oriented activity and strategy, depending upon each institution's reliance upon direct state funding. For most universities, this dependence is a major factor in driving activity.

Yet whilst the 'knowledge-based sector' of academe is being exhorted to respond collectively to national and sectoral needs, the funding structures of universities have forced them into fierce competition with each other for money and students. Universities vie with each other for improved branding, reputation and prestige, and compete for top rankings in a proliferating collection of 'necessary' league tables (Mroz, 2010). League tables, quality mechanisms and funding structures combine to fragment the 'sector' and reinforce the tendency for universities to model their behaviour on private sector businesses operating in competitive market conditions (HEFCE 2010, pp72-3). And like private sector businesses, universities increasingly demand organisational commitment and loyalty from their staff, a phenomenon which implies that the university as an organisation is understood – by university managers, at least – as the workplace.

Several national and international policy studies have been conducted in recent years which attempt to chart and/or predict the changing broad shape of the academic profession (e.g. UUK, 2010). One early finding of the most wide-ranging of these studies, the international project on the Changing Academic Profession (Locke, 2008) is that UK academics have a strong tendency to see their discipline as by far the most important affiliation in terms of their academic work, with departmental and, in particular, institutional affiliation seen as considerably less important (p108). This accords with qualitative work undertaken by others including myself, and is not in itself a surprising finding to anyone who actually does academic work. Yet the initiatives relating to academic work *which actually inform and underpin national and institutional practice* often ignore the existence of discipline altogether, other than to note the peculiarities of particular disciplinary career patterns, e.g. in relation to the age profiles of academics in

Medicine (HEFCE, 2010, p24), or the difficulty of recruiting staff to particular subjects. Instead, initiatives focus on the ways in which a generic conceptualisation of academic work can be better measured, managed and distributed, in ways which clearly construct the individual academic worker as an organisational rather than a disciplinary actor. To the extent that these initiatives draw upon research at all, they often borrow heavily from the literature of organisational psychology and HRM (e.g. Barrett and Barrett, 2008; Smeenk et al, 2006).

At faculty and department level, translations and 'fabrications' (Ball, 2003) are used to wrestle ongoing disciplinary work into a set of consistent and auditable policies and practices in accordance with the demands made upon, and by, the university. This process of fabrication effectively dislocates many university HRM initiatives from the everyday enactments of actual academic work. At the level of the individual academic's experience this produces inevitable dissonance and, in some cases, cynical or despairing attitudes towards the university as an institution (e.g. Watson, 2010) – the very opposite of the organisational loyalty and commitment which the university seeks from its employees. It is possible to argue, as Tight (2010) does, that the crisis discourse in higher education is more or less constant in the postwar period, and that academics are all too prone to hark back to a (historical or mythical) 'golden age' of academic work. My argument here is more specific: it is that HRM practices in particular threaten academics' own conceptions of their work, and the relationship between the university and its academic staff.

Research on academic work over many years provides a rich array of alternative understandings locating it within, for example, historical, ethical, educational and sociological frameworks (e.g. Kuhn, 1962; Halsey, 1995; Morley and Lugg, 2009; Fuller, 2009). Fuller in particular makes a robust argument for the incorporation of a reflexive historical consciousness into disciplinary training (2009), an approach which I have referred to elsewhere as 'mindful disciplinarity'. Without an understanding of the discipline as a historical, social and philosophical entity, and an explicit imagining of possible trajectories into the future, it is difficult to produce a meaningful account of academic work as having any purpose beyond its immediate institutional context. The relative obscurity and lack of future orientation of such inquiry in many disciplinary areas leaves a vacuum in which university HRM policies increasingly shape academic futures. In the longer term, the construction of academics as, first and foremost, institutional employees in a 'knowledge-based sector' is destructive of disciplinary futures, and endangers the academy as a site of (non-market-driven) knowledge production and dissemination. Research *into* higher education has the potential to signpost, analyse and warn against these dangers, but in order to do this credibly, it needs to become part of the wisdom of disciplinary practice. Discipline-based research on the real academic 'workplace' is an essential defence against its destruction by HRM.

References

Academic manager (2009). Anonymous public comment in response to one of this paper's arguments.

Ball, S.J. (2003) 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity' *Journal of Education Policy*, 18, 2: 215-28.

- Barrett, L and Barrett, P (2008) *The management of academic workloads: full report*, London: The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education
- Fuller, S.W. (2009) *The Sociology of Intellectual Life: The Career of the Mind in and Around the Academy*, London: Sage
- Halsey, A.H. (1995) *Decline of Donnish Dominion: the British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- HEFCE (2009) 'HEFCE Strategic Plan 2006-11: updated June 2009' HEFCE 2009/21, London: Higher Education Funding Council for England
- HEFCE (2010) *The higher education workforce framework 2010: Main report*, Issues paper February 2010/05a, London: Higher Education Funding Council for England
- Kogan, M. and Teichler, U. (eds.) (2007) *Key Challenges to the Academic Profession*, UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge, Kassel: INCHER (Werkstattberichte 65)
- Kuhn, T.S. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Malcolm, J. and Zukas M. (2009) 'Making a mess of academic work: experience, purpose and identity' *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14, 5, 495-506
- Morley, L. and Lugg, R. (2009) 'Mapping meritocracy: intersecting gender, poverty and higher educational opportunity structures', *Higher Education Policy*, 22, (37–60)
- Mroz, A. (2010) 'Leader: Some very necessary measures' *Times Higher Education*, 8 July 2010
- Smeenk, S.G.A., Eisinga, R.N., Teelken, J.C. and Doorewaard, J.A.C.M. (2006) 'The effects of HRM practices and antecedents on organizational commitment among university employees', *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 17, 12, 2035-2054
- Tight, M. (2010) 'The golden age of academe: myth or memory?' *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58, 1, 105-116
- UCU (2009) 'Universities and colleges cutting education jobs in a recession' (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=4087>, accessed July 2010), University and College Union
- UUK (2010) *The Changing Academic Profession in the UK and Beyond*, Research Report, London: Universities UK
- Watson, C. (2010) 'Accountability, transparency, redundancy: academic identities in an era of "research excellence"', paper presented at Academic Identities for the 21st Century, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 16-18 June