

Proposal for SRHE 2010

Symposium Title

Academic working life: exploring meaning, identities and transformation

Paper Title

Life as a lecturer: the nature and evolution of academic professional identities in the Institute of Technology sector of the Irish higher education system **(0211)**

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Paper

Contextualisation

Set against the backdrop of existing research on academic working lives and identities in the UK (*inter alia* Henkel, 2000, 2005; Becher and Trowler, 2001; Harris, 2005; Clegg, 2008; Archer, 2008) and elsewhere (*inter alia*. Walker, 1998; Tight, 2000; Enders, 2001; Churchman, 2006), this paper reports on a study that examined the nature and evolution of academic professional identities in the technological sector of the Irish higher education system. The technological sector, which consists of Institutes of Technology (IoTs) initially established as regional technical colleges in the 1970s to provide sub-degree level applied vocational education, and still subject to significant external controls, makes up one side of Ireland's binary system, while the university sector, which is made up of seven autonomous universities, lies on the other side of the binary divide.

The overall objective was to explore the professional identities formed by academics working in the highly-structured and highly-regulated context of the technological sector. The study aimed to understand what it meant to be an academic in an IoT and to examine how both macro (i.e. national) and meso (i.e institutional) level structures, policies and pressures influenced the professional identities formed by individuals operating in this particular setting. It further sought to establish whether and to what extent such identities had evolved or been transformed over the lifetime of the sector.

Methodological and theoretical perspectives

With a sample of sixteen academics from one IoT the study used life history methodology (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Four lecturers each were drawn from the four longest established academic schools: business, engineering, humanities and science. Eight had joined the institution prior to the enactment of legislation for the technological sector in 1992, while the remaining eight were appointed in the post-1992 period.

Data collection involved individual biographical interviews with the academics as well as contextualisation interviews with members of institutional management team and documentary analysis. The stories gathered at the biographical interviews were set against the backdrop constructed from the contextualisation interviews and the documentary analysis and ultimately interpreted using the conceptual tools provided by Archer's work on the interplay of structure and agency (Archer, 1995, 2000) and the reflexive formation of personal and social identities (Archer, 2000, 2003, 2007).

Findings and implications

Overall, the research suggested that significant changes had occurred between 1970 and the first decade of the 21st century, both in terms of what academics in the technological sector do and of their sense of what it means to be an academic. Participants whose careers began prior to the 1992 RTC Act were characterised by a predominantly teaching-focused professional identity and by ‘concerns’ (Archer, 2000, p.313) with student and staff wellbeing, with connectivity between the academy and the ‘real world’ of industry and with impact at institutional level. Participants who came to academic life post-1992, by contrast, developed more complex and multi-layered professional identities built around a combination of roles in teaching, research and administration, dominated by concerns which were largely individually, rather than institutionally, focussed.

Archer’s work suggests that the structures in which individuals operate possess the potential to either constrain or enable the different ‘projects’ (Archer, 2007, p.7) that these individuals chose as part of the process of forming personal and social identities. This was borne out by the data, which indicated that the participants found themselves constrained and /or enabled in a variety of ways by structures and policies as they attempted to pursue the various ‘projects’ - from teaching, research and administration, to liaison with industry, external consultancy, pastoral care and others, that are generally pursued (see for example Kyvik, 2000) by those seeking to establish professional identities as academics.

Also clear from the data, however, was that, despite working in the same highly-structured and highly-regulated environment, participants were affected differently by the structures in which they operated. Some managed, often through considered and deliberate action or inaction, to avoid activating both constraints and enablements. Others chose to pursue particular projects despite the constraints or enablements these projects triggered, and then responded in different ways to the obstacles set in their paths. This reflected Archer’s assertion that the extent to which structures actually impinge upon individuals depends on the ‘stances’ (Archer, 2003, p.342) adopted by those individuals in the face of the constraints or enablements activated by their projects.

Archer suggests that three different fundamental stances towards constraints and enablements are possible, namely evasive, subversive and strategic stances, each of which has consequences at both the micro level of the individual and the macro level of institutions, systems and societies. All three stances were found in my data, with particular stances predominating among particular subgroups of participants and reflecting the institutional and national contexts experienced by these participants in the early years of their academic careers. The evasive stance, which leads to social immobility at the micro level and social stasis at the macro level, was strongly in evidence among the early pre-1992 academics. The subversive stance, which results in lateral mobility for the individual, but may lead to transformation at the level of society, was prevalent among the later pre-1992 lecturers. The strategic stance linked to upward mobility at the micro level and social morphogenesis at the macro level predominated among the post-1992 academics.

The value of the study lies in the insights it provides into the interaction of structure and agency in the professional lives and the formation of professional identities in a context which, while particular to Ireland, is characterised by features (significant external controls and regulation, limited autonomy, high levels of accountability etc) that are increasingly becoming common in other higher education systems internationally as neoliberal agendas become more firmly entrenched. The study also highlights the potential of Archer’s conceptual framework. Its potential is as a tool for researching academic identities and experiences and for understanding both the potential impact of structural and other changes

on individual academics and the potential effectiveness of proposed changes, given that their impact may be mediated by the stances adopted by those individuals.

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