

### Issues in researching academic identity in different countries (0198)

There are many official accounts of what constitutes academic work. The balance between different activities is represented, for example, in selection criteria, workload planning and promotion criteria. These accounts act to define a particular kind of academic. Indeed, numerous accounts separate out different academic practices, e.g. teaching, research and service, and do not consider the complex balancing of activities, which many academics do on a daily basis. We have been engaging in a program of research designed to explore how academics make decisions regarding teaching and research and how they develop researcher and teacher identities. It is an international comparative study of Australia and the UK/England. This paper explores the issues that have arisen in carrying out the first stage of this comparative work. It uses a framework of multi-national research to explore the implications for expanding the research to other countries.

#### The research

Research has not yet explained why some new academics, having completed a doctorate, do not develop as researchers as expected (Lee & Boud, 2003); why many academics focus on teaching and ignore incentives to engage in research; nor why some academics focus on developing a research track record and seek to engage minimally in teaching. Our research is an exploratory study focused on understanding academic work and identity in relation to decision-making around research and teaching activities. A secondary aim is to inform the debates around teaching and learning programmes and mentoring and how best to support academic staff.

At the heart of our research program is the fact that there is no agreed training process for academics and yet there has been surprisingly little research published that critically examines the formation of academics as researchers and as teachers. So we are engaged in an international collaborative program of research designed to address a significant gap in current empirical and theoretical understandings of how academics form as researchers and teachers. The following questions provide the focus for the study:

1. How do academics in different disciplines and different research-intensive university environments in Australia and the UK think about and act upon the perceived constraints and opportunities for development in their context?
2. How do these academics come to position themselves in relation to research and teaching? What has influenced this positioning?

The project is conceptually based on Archer's (2000) view that social situations are ambiguous and present a complex variety of conflicting opportunities for growth and development and for the pursuit of various personal objectives and that it is individuals' reflexive awareness, expressed in the form of 'internal conversations' (Archer 2007, p. 2), that links the person and society.

[Authors] began to explore these questions in a study of Australian academics in 6

universities (Authors, 2011). This research is beginning to illuminate how academics in different university contexts and with different career orientations, interpret and position themselves in relation to those contexts and what is made possible through policies and development strategies. The Australian survey has suggested that the doctorate is not effective in developing independent researchers (Authors, 2009) and that the provision of development opportunities and the extent to which these are taken up by academics is not enough to explain the extent to which people are prepared for academic careers.

Therefore, we are now working on a UK/English comparison, which focuses on surveying UK academics in 6 UK universities and interviewing academics in both countries. In the present study comparative data in the UK has been achieved by conducting the Australian survey with amendments in 6 English universities across the same broad disciplinary groups. In this paper we consider important issues around concepts/language/meaning etc. that had to be negotiated and overcome in order to implement the research in a different country.

### **International research collaboration**

In working across different continents a number of issues present themselves. These are a particular focus of this paper. To explore these issues we utilize a framework mapping different types of multi-national research collaborations that has been developed by Ramber (2009) on the basis of her research into how US academics have engaged in such collaborations. Ramber describes five types of multi-national research collaborations arrayed along a trajectory of increasing academic risk, decreasing stability, increasing human factors with compounding interaction costs, and increasing time to research outputs. Each category differs in the number of interfaces that must be negotiated by institutions and individuals, with each 'asymmetrical' interface multiplying the potential for human factors to create interpersonal and programmatic tensions. Large scale multi-national collaborative projects such as, for example, the *Changing Academic Profession* international comparative study across 20 countries carried out by Universities UK (Locke & Benion, 2010) is characterized by what Ramber calls "data sharing" where partners come from many nations to answer broad-brush questions.

Our research is on a smaller scale and is characterized by more fine-grained complexity. We discuss the work we have done to prepare for surveying UK academics and interviewing academics in both the UK and Australia and present preliminary comparative findings. The paper explores issues associated with international comparative work in terms of comparing different systems and getting accurate appropriate terminology, language, meaning, categories etc. In preparing the survey for use in a different context a number of challenges presented themselves. These included issues of communication, of attempts to find funding for the research, dealing with various ethics committees, gaining approval to survey academics in different institutions and preparing lists of academics to be surveyed. Ramber's framework suggests that it is the complexity of the institutional interfaces rather than the complexity of the research per se that increases interaction costs, often in ways that are unseen by the researchers (Ramber 2009, p.84). We argue that this is true of our research despite the UK and Australian higher education systems sharing many commonalities including a common language. It is envisaged that this project will contribute to developing subsequent research involving a larger UK and Australian sample and potentially other countries.

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