

In search of lost freedoms?: examining academics' positionings towards the neoliberal stance in universities (0222)

SRHE Long Abstract

This presentation is based on research carried out over a period of several years which is the subject a book (Fanghanel, 2011), in which I examined the responses of academics to the managerialist frameworks that regulate academic practice in today's higher education (Deem 2003; Naidoo 2005; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Deem, Hillyard et al. 2007). In total, a set of fifty in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out amongst academics representing twenty institutions and five different countries.

This paper will first briefly discuss the model of management in operation in today's universities - broadly termed 'managerialism'. This approach to the management of practice has emerged from the neoliberal modes of governance that have been deployed in the public sector from the eighties onwards (known in the UK as the 'rolling back' of the state). These 'reforms' have triggered a re-appraisal of the relation between the state, public organisations, and the nation, signalling in particular the beginning of a questioning of the welfare state (Tapper, 2007; Deem *et al.*, 2007), and the introduction of market principles in sectors that had until then been virtually entirely dependent on the state for their funding. Broadly, neoliberal policies in higher education have sought to promote an unproblematised conception of the direct relation of higher education to the economy; the release of market forces within the academy; and the application of market principles to the academic endeavor. The neoliberal model has emerged in Europe against the backdrop of the massification drift in the sixties and of the social and political crisis of the seventies. In practice, this has translated into managerialist practices that seek to regulate, monitor, evaluate, and display academic performance. This has resulted in academics getting a strong sense of 'being managed', or even 'deprofessionalised' (Trow, 2002), with significant implications for academic practice and career trajectories (Locke and Bennion 2010).

The present financial crisis that is affecting much of the western world, and in which the public sector has been identified as an important target for realizing savings, has further exacerbated the discourse of 'efficiency' inherent in managerialism and has further sharpened the focus on the 'performative' (Lyotard 1984) dimension of the academic role. In

this context, I examine the positioning of academics towards an environment that deploys an array of measures to measure and display performance, and to steer approaches to teaching and research. I do this with reference to the degree of agency academics can mobilize within this structural framing of their practice.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study includes an approach to examining structure and agency that is related to Archer's (2000), and a theorizing of educational ideology (Fanghanel, 2011). Archer proposes a view of agency which encompasses the natural, the practical and the social domains of reality (Archer 2000), and is therefore multi-dimensional. In order to capture academics' agentic stance, I will discuss in this presentation the way they respond to managerialist practices with reference to their own beliefs, and perceptions of their role as educators, using the framework of 'educational ideologies' (Becker, 1993; Newman, 1852; Saunders and Machell, 2000; Schultz, 1963; Trowler, 1998). I identified three forms of positioning. *Production* ideologies refer to understandings of higher education related to a human capital theory of higher education, i.e. with a focus on the direct link between higher education and the world of work. *Reproduction* ideologies convey traditional (Humboldtian or Newmanite) conceptions of the virtue of education for its own sake, with an emphasis on transmitting the arcane of a discipline in order to reproduce the next generation of discipline experts. *Transformation* ideologies focus on social, personal or human transformation. I argue that the prevailing model (production) is contested – albeit marginally – by reproduction and transformative ideologies in the academy.

This research examined positioning from within several dimensions of the academic role, including new lecturers' preparation; the teaching dimension; the relation to students and learning; the discipline dimension; the research role; and academics' global engagement. In each of these aspects, the relation to academics' own ideological positioning was explored, highlighting the main tensions. I will suggest that this agentic movement within the academy is illustrative of the complexity of the academic endeavor. The positioning of academics towards the neoliberal agenda is not of one piece. Positioning is informed by academics' own histories, trajectories and ideologies, which provide material to adopt, adapt or resist in different ways. Academics' responses to their structural environment often included a mix of adoption and resistance. I have found, for example – with some cautionary reservations regarding the issue of 'authenticity' (Ball, 2003) – that some academics were able to appropriate the neoliberal agenda, and adapt it to suit their own transformative educational aspirations. Underpinning these tensions in the academic space, lies a questioning about the most appropriate forms of knowledge that should be mobilized to reclaim some authenticity in the research space, and to best prepare students towards an informed engagement with the world. I discuss these complexities and suggest that the potential of transformation

ideologies can be harnessed to devise more dialogic teaching spaces, to humanize and democratize research spaces, and to foster within the academy a form of empowerment, translated into the curriculum, to deal with uncertainty and complexity.

References

- Alain (1916). *Éléments de philosophie*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Archer, M.S. (1995) *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M.S. (2000) *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Ball, S. J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2): 215-228.
- Becker, J. (1993) *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 3rd edition.
- Deem, R. (2003). Managing to Exclude? Manager-Academic and Staff Communities in Contemporary UK Universities. In M. Tight *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research: Access and Inclusion*. Amsterdam and London, Elsevier Science JAL: 103-125.
- Deem, R., S. Hillyard, et al. (2007). *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Fanghanel, J. (2011). *Being an Academic*. London and New York, Routledge.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Locke, W. and A. Bennion (2010). *Supplementary Report to the HEFCE Higher Education Workforce Framework*. Centre_for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI). London: The Open University.
- Naidoo, R. (2005). Universities in the Marketplace: The Distortion of Teaching and Research. In R. Barnett *Reshaping the University: New Relationships between Research, Scholarship and Teaching*. Maidenhead, Open University Press and McGraw-Hill Education: 27-47.
- Naidoo, R. and I. Jamieson (2005). *Knowledge in the marketplace: the global commodification of teaching and learning in higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Neave, G. (1998) The Evaluative State Reconsidered. *European Journal of Education* 33(3): 265-283.
- Newman, J. H. (1852) *The Idea of a University*. Available online <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/>. Accessed 12 February 2011.

Saunders, M. and Machell, J. (2000) Understanding emerging trends in higher education curricula and work connections. *Higher Education Policy* 13: 287 - 302.

Schultz, T. (1963) *The Economic Value of Education*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tapper, T. (2007) *The Governance of British Higher Education: The Struggle for Policy Control*. Dordrecht: Springer

Trow, M. (2002) Some consequences of the New Information and Communication Technologies for Higher Education. In K. Robins and F. Webster (eds) *The Virtual University?: Knowledge, Markets, and Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 301-317.

Trowler, P. (1998) *Academics Responding to Change: New Higher Education Frameworks and Academic Cultures*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.