

Positioning ourselves for research and teaching: a cross-country analysis of academic formation

Abstract

This paper presents early findings emerging from an international collaborative research project that addresses the key question of the nature of academic work, how academics make decisions regarding teaching and research and how they develop their academic identities. Drawing on survey data and pilot interviews administered in Australian and English Universities, the paper considers emerging evidence in relation to factors that contribute to success in research as well as contextual factors that discourage it. The paper begins to illuminate how academics in different countries, university contexts and with different career orientations, interpret and position themselves in relation to those contexts and how structural and agential factors may influence the formation of academic identity. The findings emerging from this research will provide new in-depth understandings about how institutions might most effectively support, develop and encourage world-class teaching, and the capacity for high quality research.

Introduction

Changes in higher education in recent years have brought with them a complex set of challenges for academics, changing the nature of academic work, challenging academics' expectations of their involvement in teaching, research and administration, and raising questions about how they balance these activities. This paper directly addresses the overall conference theme through an exploration of the formation of academics. It uses early findings emerging from an international comparative research project to focus on questions of the nature of academic work, how academics make decisions regarding teaching and research and how they develop their academic identities. Accounts of what constitutes academic work act to define a particular kind of academic and particular institutional priorities. 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 are required to do on a daily basis. However, these need to be tested against the actual trajectories of the formation of academics. Is the emphasis in the institutional accounts reflected in what has shaped academics? Are there differences in these influences across two apparently similar national academic cultures of Australia and the UK?

The research project

The investigation explores the extent to which institutional accreditation and other processes like the doctorate and graduate certificates in teaching are effective in producing the researchers and teachers that universities need. Research has not yet explained why some new academics, having completed a doctorate, do not develop as researchers (Lee and 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. With surprisingly little research published that critically examines the formation of academics as researchers and as teachers, this paper illuminates how academics in different countries, 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 research builds on studies that have examined how academics experience and understand the nature of research (Brew, 2001; Åkerlind, 2008), and studies of academics' responses to research selectivity exercises (Lucas, 2006; McNay, 2003). Such work indicates that how universities position individuals (e.g. as research-active), influences how academics see themselves and how they act. The current research explores in detail how participants interpret this context and how far such contexts influence the formation of their identities as academics. 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 link the person and society.

Specific questions addressed are:

1. How do academics in different disciplines and different research-intensive university environments 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?
3. Are there differences between England and Australia in this positioning and, if so, how might these differences be accounted for?

Methods

The data collection for this mixed methods research project is being undertaken in two stages; the first stage, and initial piloting of the second stage, form the basis of this paper. The first stage involved a quantitative approach that has built on the work of Brew and Boud who began to explore these questions in a study of Australian academics in six universities (Brew, Boud and Namgung, 2010). With some contextual adjustments, the same survey has been administered in six English universities (two 'ancient', two 'redbrick' and two 'new') across the same broad disciplinary groups; thus providing comparative data.

The second, qualitative stage of the research uses purposive sampling to select academics with 5-10 years' experience, beyond their doctorate/first appointment, in three broad disciplines from two English and two Australian universities. The same semi-structured interview is being administered and resulting data is being analysed firstly in terms of Archer's (2000) four modes of reflexivity, then in terms of key themes and variations that emerge in the disciplinary areas. Currently the data collection instrument has been designed and piloted; findings from the pilot work will be incorporated into this paper.

Discussion

The paper discusses early findings concerning academic formation, identity and the views that academics have about their role in higher education. Analysis of the Australian part of the survey has already suggested that the doctorate is not effective in developing independent researchers (Brew and Boud, 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. Resistance to engaging in teaching and research development underlies the findings of the Australian study (Brew, Boud and Namgung, 2011); such issues are not necessarily resolved by mandating courses.

This paper considers evidence from the current study in relation to factors that contribute to success in research, i.e. the influence of, for example: departmental climate, academic discipline, age and gender of researcher, self-perception of research confidence, workload, and time spent (see, for example, Caroyol and Matt, 2006; Fox, 2005), as well as contextual factors that discourage it. Some institutional policies and strategies have been found to limit the capacity of academics to combine their research and their teaching (Colbeck 1998; Lucas *et al*, 2008), raising questions about how these factors influence the formation of academic identity.

Conclusion

The project is beginning to provide an in-depth and non-judgmental understanding that may inform decision-making in institutions about which development activities are most likely to support and encourage effective teaching, and high quality research. The paper raises questions about the interaction between institutional policies and the experiences of academics and queries the conventional rhetoric that accompanies present debates.

995 Words (excluding reference list and abstract)

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