

Introduction

This paper reports on a research project the purpose of which was to explore the experiences and career trajectories of a set of newer researchers in higher education (NRHEs), each of whom was a former recipient of the Society for Research in Higher Education's 'Prize for Newer Researchers'.

Higher education research can be described as a field, or as a second-level discipline positioned under the parent discipline of education, although there are long-standing debates as to whether education itself is actually a discipline or a field of practice (Seckinger, 1964; Richardson, 2006). Importantly, HE is perceived as a fragmented field, being both interdisciplinary, with researchers coming from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (Teichler, 2005) but also with a strong migratory element among researchers exploring and publishing in the area (Manathunga, 2009). As Tight notes (2008) 'few tribes or individuals appear to live full-time within the territory' (p.596). Indeed, the introduction of formal development for those teaching in UK HE and use of portfolio assessments means that many newer academics now carry out small-scale research for academic development, with no intention of becoming a researcher into HE. Its fragmented nature has a number of consequences - both positive and negative - for those entering the research field.

Most obviously, it has implications for newer arrivals trying to identify routes to establishing a career due to a perceived lack of disciplinary cohesiveness. Access to traditional disciplinary hierarchies and the funding that such established structures and key academics attract provides a challenge to NRHEs attempting to locate and attach themselves to an institutional presence. On the contrary, however, the field of Higher Education research is an open field. Its borders are permeable and this provides space and encouragement for creative, cross-disciplinary thinking.

The Award

The Society for Research in Higher Education's annual Prize

for Newer Researchers supports small scale research projects and provides full access to the Society's resources to prizewinners for the period of the award (SRHE, 2012). In full, the award provides a small cash award, the support of a SRHE senior researcher as mentor (a significant addition in 2006), the opportunity to publish an output from the project in the Society's journal and present at the Society's Newer Researcher Conference. In terms of eligibility, a Newer Researcher is defined by SRHE as being within 6 years of the completion of their PhD or equivalent professional qualification with the usual flexibility for those who have taken career breaks. On acceptance of the award, the recipient is now required to submit a proposal to the Newer Researcher's Conference and complete a research paper as well as attending meetings of the Society's Research and Development committee, thus ensuring sustained engagement with the Society and its resources. Established in 1995 the award is now in its 17th year.

The Research

Following a review of the literature on newer researchers and confirmation of ethical approval, each of the former winners were contacted by staff at the SRHE and invited to participate in an on-line, semi-structured survey, using Qualtrics software. Accordingly, the survey was sent to 15 former awardees, of which 11 responded. The survey asked respondents about how receiving the award helped them develop their career, any challenges which they associated with it, and the benefits they gained from it. With the survey component of the project now complete, a number of the respondents are being invited for a follow up interview, at which they will be asked for more detailed accounts of their newer researcher experiences. It is expected that most interviews will be undertaken by 'phone or using Skype software and will be completed in advance of this conference.

Initial Findings

Having completed the survey element of the research, a number of key themes are emerging. Winning the award provided both an opportunity to carry out research but also a form of kudos and recognition that helped the NRHEs to

position themselves in the field. In terms of providing support, a more recent addition to the award has been inclusion of a mentor for the award winner. Those respondents who benefitted from engagement with a mentor found this important, and those who won the award prior to this addition noted that a mentor would have been very helpful in supporting their career development. Reflecting the fragmented nature of the field, advice for NRHEs from the award winners highlighted a need to identify career pathways and options early on, given the dispersed nature of opportunities due to limited number of research centres for HE and the diverse areas in which HE research takes place.

The interview stage of the research will examine these and additional areas related to career support and pathways in more depth and will be reported on in the conference presentation, along with conclusions and recommendations.

References:

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