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Austerity and the academy in England and internationally: market discipline and the restructuring of the academic workforce. (0041)

Programme number: C2

Research Domain: Management, Leadership, Governance and Quality

Abstract (150 words)

The impact of the current economic crisis varies between countries, parts of higher education (HE) systems and individual universities and colleges. However, there are common pressures leading to fewer resources, including less funding per student, less – or more selective – investment in research, and overall reductions in staffing and salaries, facilities and capital investment. These appear to be encouraging greater cost consciousness, an acceleration in the growth of managerial power within HE institutions and a restructuring of the academic workforce. The further introduction of market mechanisms to the HE system in England may be exacerbating these developments, accelerating existing divisions and closing off some opportunities for reform. This paper explores the emerging trends in the academic workforce in England during the last few years and makes some international comparisons. It is based on observations from discussions with key HE figures, analysis of current HESA data and evidence from recent international studies.

Outline (1,000 words, not including references)

The financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing economic downturn has impacted on most countries across the globe. Yet the effect on public expenditure on HE varies between countries, parts of national higher education (HE) systems and individual universities and colleges. National HE systems start from different places, with differences between traditions, historical patterns of investment, financial circumstances and national and local governments' responses to the economic situation. In Europe, for example, the EUA Public Funding Observatory (EUA, 2012) found widely divergent trends in public funding for HE since 2008, with some countries increasing expenditure from a high base, others reducing it from a low base, and yet others maintaining it at a stable level.

The academic profession in each national system is also differently shaped and structured according to these traditions and patterns. Again, in Europe, the EUROAC study (Teichler & Höhle (eds) 2013) found very few characteristics and themes about which one could speak of 'a European academic profession', despite a decade of efforts to create the European HE Area and the European Research Area. Even within national systems, the effects of shifts in public expenditure are also experienced differently by groups of academics, subject communities and individual academics, depending, for example, on their employment conditions and career stage and trajectory.

However, there are common pressures leading to fewer resources, including less funding per student, less – or more selective – investment in research, and overall reductions in

staffing and salaries, facilities and capital investment. Where the recession has hit hardest, there has tended to be:

- ◆ reduced funding per student;
- ◆ reduced facilities, e.g. library opening hours, student services;
- ◆ reduced infrastructure and capital investment (England, Ireland);
- ◆ reduction in staffing (recruitment freezes, not replacing outgoing staff, early retirement schemes, voluntary and compulsory redundancies) (Spain);
- ◆ rationalisation of the academic offer: low demand courses removed, high cost departments closed (Ireland, Spain);
- ◆ larger class sizes, rising staff:student ratios;
- ◆ salary freezes and cuts, reduced benefits (Croatia, Ireland and Portugal) increased workload of remaining staff (Spain).

These appear to be leading to greater cost consciousness, an acceleration in the growth of managerial power within HE institutions and the restructuring of the academic workforce. In England and, to a greater or lesser extent, throughout the UK, the following trends can be observed:

- ◆ Funding for teaching is largely being substituted by tuition fee loans and institutions are refocusing their institutional missions;
- ◆ The growing influence of the NSS and league tables and the Government priority of expanding the information available for prospective students (KIS/Unistats, information on academic staff teaching qualifications, more sophisticated indicators of quality (e.g. class size and student engagement), publication of students' evaluations of modules, etc.);
- ◆ Higher student expectations, with implications for students' satisfaction with their experiences, and the support and facilities available;
- ◆ At institutional level, greater fluctuation in student numbers and, therefore, tuition fee income, which may lead to wider variation in the financial circumstances of individual HEIs;
- ◆ The rationalisation of the curriculum offer: fewer courses and fewer optional modules;
- ◆ Merging departments, schools, etc. into larger faculties and divisions;
- ◆ Frontline support staff being required to be more 'customer-focused';
- ◆ Rising pension costs and long-term uncertainties about contributions (including increased employee contributions), benefits and the retirement age. Significant changes to the shape and size of the sector, including the number of HEIs, with implications for the size of the workforce, will have implications for pension schemes (e.g. reduced contributions, increased payout);
- ◆ Other cost pressures (e.g. the pay bill rising due to increments, which are locally managed).

The trend since 2003-04 was for a steady increase in staff numbers, particularly academic staff, and it is interesting to note the slow-down in academic recruitment coupled with an actual decrease in numbers of professional and support staff. 2010-11 was the first year (since 2003-04) that there was a net decrease in staff numbers across the sector. Features of these trends include:

- ◆ Redundancies (compulsory and voluntary) and severances (voluntary)
- ◆ Changes to reward packages and terms and conditions in order to increase flexibility and manage expenditure on staff, including:
 - salary sacrifice schemes
 - reviewing senior staff pay arrangements
 - reviewing contribution and merit-based pay systems
 - changes to overtime arrangements

The further introduction of market mechanisms to the HE system in England may be exacerbating these features. Aligning the academic and professional and support staff workforce with a more market-orientated, student-as-customer-focused environment, increasingly appears to be driving the following developments:

- ◆ The devising of new methods of calculating course costs and tools for estimating the surplus from tuition fees and funding;
- ◆ Improving students:staff ratios: without increasing expenditure on additional staff; this can mean constraints on recruiting students, but there are contrary pressures in England to compete for 'high grade' students or additional places from the 'margin';
- ◆ Reconsideration of the balance between permanent, temporary and hourly-paid staff; there is poorer student feedback on hourly-paid teachers; but having some temporary staff helps to address volatility in student numbers and future income;
- ◆ Workforce planning: developing student number-aligned academic workload models, and integrating course costing within this; increasingly, a direct link is being drawn between staff and student numbers;
- ◆ Process reviews in order to streamline student support functions, often accompanied by some form of professional and staff restructuring (through voluntary severance schemes and compulsory redundancy): the administrative function is being more closely aligned with student support and the student experience;
- ◆ Those HEIs that are more successful in the market, may cast around to attract high-performing teaching staff from other institutions.

These developments may be reinforcing existing divisions (e.g. between research active and predominantly teaching, academic and professional/support, permanent and temporary, full- and part-time, male and female staff) and closing off some opportunities for more constructive reform that would achieve greater equity, engage HE staff more effectively in strategic decision-making and stimulate more creative and constructive approach to reconfiguring academic work (Locke, 2012).

References

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