

Unveiling scholars' conceptions of academic risk taking: A phenomenographic study (0232)

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on the concept of risk in higher education, as epitomised by the introduction of risk-based regulation by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2000 and the emergence of what has become known as 'risk university' (Huber 2011). Despite these changes, the notion of risk in the higher education domain is still underdeveloped (HEFCE 2005). Moreover, there has been virtually no research into what university faculty understand academic risk taking to be and how they enact this understanding in their tasks. This is surprising, since a great deal of decision-making requires selecting between alternatives that vary in terms of expected outcomes and perceived probabilities of achieving these outcomes (Krueger and Dickson 1994). The aim of this paper is to contribute to the limited literature on risk in higher education by exploring scholars' conceptions of academic risk taking. In light of the increasing focus on measurement and accountability of academic activity, the study of the qualitatively different ways in which faculty construe academic risk taking and their intentions in engaging in risk behaviour appears to be particularly timely.

Related literature

There is nowadays considerable agreement over the role of academics' conceptions of teaching, along with factors such as the teaching environment (Prosser and Trigwell 1997), academic leadership (Ramsden et al. 2007) and emotions (Trigwell 2012), in shaping their approaches to teaching (Samuelowicz and Bain 1992; Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Åkerlind 2004). Similarly, a growing body of literature has uncovered a link between variations in university faculty's experiences of research and the different ways they approach both research (Brew 2001; Åkerlind 2008) and supervision (Bills 2004; Kiley and Mullins 2005). More recently, a few studies have also provided evidence suggesting that differences in academics' approaches to doctoral student supervision are partly explained by their qualitatively different understandings of what constitutes research supervision (Wright, Murray, and Geale 2007; Lee 2008; Franke and Arvidsson 2011). Although researchers have begun to acknowledge the importance of risk appetite for academics' behaviour (Zoller, Zimmerling, and Boutellier 2014), the literature is silent on whether faculty's conceptions of academic risk taking underpin their approaches to teaching, research and supervision. For this reason, our study sets out to unveil the qualitatively different meanings of academic risk taking that exist among scholars.

Methodology

In line with our research objectives, this paper was conducted from a phenomenographic perspective (Marton 1981). In an attempt to describe the qualitatively different ways in which university faculty perceive and understand academic risk taking, sample selection was driven by the need to ensure the greatest possible variation in conceptions (Marton 1995). A total of 20 academics on teaching and research appointments at a major UK university were chosen. These scholars represented a mix of genders, disciplines, research interests and academic positions. Specifically, 11 participants were male and 9 were female, while the average time spent in academia was about 16 years. To encourage an open and deep account of the

participant's lived experience (Booth 1997), data were collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Each interview was carried out in the participant's office and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. To capture both the referential (what) and structural (how) aspects of conceptions (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty 1993), scholars were asked to elaborate on what academic risk taking meant to them, how they enacted it in their practice and why they did things in a certain way. The interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed *verbatim*.

Results

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that faculty tend to understand academic risk taking in five qualitatively different ways, each of which characterised by a distinct focus. In the first category, risk taking in an academic sense is construed as 'experimenting with things'. The meanings embedded in the second category concern 'moving beyond your comfort zone', while the third category describes academic risk taking as 'doing what you believe is right'. In conceptualising academic risk taking as 'bending the rules', the fourth category places an emphasis on the link between ethical behaviour and reputational risk. The quotes in the fifth category stress the importance of knowledge production and refer to academic risk taking as 'pushing the boundaries of knowledge'. Broadly speaking, these conceptions vary along four major dimensions: (1) how participants explained the motivations behind their risk behaviour (*determinants*); (2) what they perceived the consequences of their actions to be (*outcomes*); (3) the extent to which the combination of determinants and anticipated outcomes was translated into risk management practices (*coping strategies*); and (4) how the interplay between determinants, outcomes and coping strategies – along with the underlying risk behaviour – was affectively experienced (*feelings*).

Discussion

Our initial findings suggest that, although scholars engage in relatively similar tasks, they may exhibit varying approaches to these tasks because of their qualitatively different understandings of what constitutes academic risk taking. Preliminary evidence shows that university faculty are continuously trying to reconcile their lived experience of academic risk taking with their professional roles as faculty members. A major source of tensions for academics lies in the interplay between teaching and research, as limited career progression due to excessive time spent on teaching rather than research was generally construed by the interviewees as a key example of academic risk. These results have implications for the literature on identity construction in higher education and the ongoing debate over how scholars experience the research-teaching nexus. Our hope is that the findings presented in this paper will contribute to a new research avenue into how the qualitatively different ways in which faculty conceive of academic risk taking relate to their approaches to teaching, research and supervision. We speculate that such a line of inquiry could also represent the starting point for a discussion on the link between scholars' understandings of academic risk taking and learning on the part of students.

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