The implications of a changing academic workforce for the university as a critical institution (0047)

William Locke, Celia Whitchurch
UCL Institute of Education, University College London, UK

Abstract

The paper will re-examine the findings of a study funded by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) on changing academic roles, careers and development needs, within a conceptual frame of the critical university. The study identified a number of gaps between the perceptions of individuals and institutional policies about, for instance, criteria for promotion and development opportunities. In this paper, it will be argued that sustaining a critical workspace is likely to involve, for instance, clarity about the basis for decision making around individual careers; judgements about the appropriate use of evidence such as student feedback; and a willingness to consider alternative options in relation to professional development. The paper will demonstrate ways in which institutional middle managers such as heads of department have a key role to play in creating and sustaining this space for criticality.

Part 2 Outline

Introduction

The nature of academic roles has changed significantly in the last decade, with an increasing disaggregation of teaching, research and other types of activity. At the same time there is pressure on individuals to attract research income, generate publications and teach a diversifying range of students. These pressures impact differently on academic, research and learning support staff, whose contracts of employment may differ significantly. The type of institution they work for and their discipline may also be important variables. Among other trends, some institutions' policies and practices are resulting in an increase in the number of UK academics on so-called 'teaching-only' contracts and, possibly, an even greater number in teaching-focused roles regardless of their formal contractual status (Anonymous reference). The traditional full-time, permanent academic role that enables an individual to teach and research appears to be rapidly becoming the privilege of a declining minority in the UK, as in North America (Cummings and Finkelstein 2012) and Australia (Probert, 2013). This is creating a need for more imaginative forms of reward, recognition and professional development for academic staff who may wish to move between research, teaching and other career progression routes.

This paper reports and reflects on the findings from a major Higher Education Academy (HEA) funded study of the changing nature academic work, roles and careers in UK higher education and the implications for staff development and support (£100k, 2015/16) (Anonymous reference).

The study suggests that academic staff in the UK can no longer be assumed to have a common trajectory within a homogeneous profession. Increasing numbers of people are moving into higher education from professional practice, and others are being recruited to 'teaching-only' or 'research-only' roles. Less than 50% of

academic staff in the UK now hold contracts that include both teaching and research, and individuals who adopt a pragmatic approach appear more likely to achieve career progression. These changes have, on the one hand, fostered greater instrumentality in approaches to teaching and research, the former via the application of workload models and the latter via targets for grant funding and publications, challenging the idea of the university as a critical space in which, for instance, teaching is informed by ongoing research and interdisciplinary synergies. On the other hand, such changes are creating the possibility of more imaginative forms of recognition, reward and career development. The paper will aim to develop an understanding of ways in which institutions, and more specifically middle managers, display criticality as they negotiate these changing conditions and seek constructive outcomes within them.

Methodology

The research design included two main components:

1.
An analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and other data to provide statistical information about changing academic career paths.

2.
Interviews and documentary evidence from 62 interviews in eight case study institutions with staff with teaching-only, research-only and teaching and research contracts, as well as members of senior management teams.

Analysis of the data took place at three levels, the descriptive (eg to identify institutional contexts), the interpretive (eg to understand the gap between formal statements and local understandings) and the conceptual (eg to review ways in which individuals have become increasingly active agents in their own careers). This process followed authors such as Creswell (1998) and Miles and Huberman (1994), enabling "semantic" (explicit, overt) and "latent" (underlying, implicit) themes to be identified (Braun and Clark 2013). This allowed individual career histories to be explored in relation to, for instance, institution, subject area, previous career trajectory inside or outside higher education, and career aspirations.

Findings

The study provided evidence of a number of gaps and dissonances between institutional policies and the perceptions of individuals. Thus, despite institutional initiatives to raise the status of teaching, achievements in research continued to be seen as having more value. Workload allocation models aiming at achieving equity between teaching and research tended to be undermined by a perception that they do not reflect the reality of day-to-day schedules, and formal training programmes were sometimes seen as less helpful than mentors, peer support groups and online networking.

A key finding was that middle managers, such as heads of department, programme leaders and research directors can play a key role in managing such dissonances to promote positive outcomes. They therefore have the potential to make a major contribution to the university as a critical space in which fair and balanced judgements are seen to be made, at the same time as playing to individual strengths. However, such managers are often under-recognised and under-prepared for the work they do in local contexts.

Implications

The paper reviews current trends associated with the academic workforce within the conceptual frame of institutional criticality, so as to explore how career progression and development might be addressed in ways that close the perceptual gap between institutional policy and the day-to-day realities of academic life. It will thereby be of value to institutions, senior and middle managers and also to individuals themselves.

The paper (and report) will inform the work of national agencies, institutions, and individuals in practical ways, for instance in relation to appropriate development initiatives, a flexible approach to workload models and support for middle managers.
By challenging default positions on the academic workforce – for instance, the concept of a homogeneous profession and linear career trajectories – the paper will raise awareness of new dimensions and possibilities, and inform policy-making agencies and institutions through examples of good practice drawn from the study.

 (902 words)

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