Freedom and control in teaching decisions within global higher education (0131)

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the paradoxes of planning and designing teaching where there is an espoused strategic intent that is not manifest in the daily practices of university teachers. It explores how teachers balance the freedom they have within the controls that strategic conditions place on them.

Semi-structured interviews with 27 mid-career academics in England and Australia provide evidence of contradictions between stated strategy and ambitions of institutions and how teaching allocation, planning and delivery is experienced by those who undertake it. This paper argues that this lack of overt alignment between strategic intent and teaching practice, can cause problems for academics. The argument is developed through three areas where teaching decisions are made: individual teacher level; departmental, programme or school level; and strategic, institutional level. As English institutions grapple with the implications of the TEF, this paper provides a timely analysis of teaching decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The changing environment for teaching in higher education appears to have accelerated in recent years; e.g. changing fee structures, concerns to engage students more fully, a fast moving digital landscape, and societal demands that students are prepared for employment. The status of academic work, including issues of tenure, casualization and teaching-only positions also challenge teaching practice and raise questions about appropriate forms of curriculum and pedagogy. Clearly in this context, more needs to be understood about how academics balance specific activities and institutional imperatives on a daily basis. In this paper we examine how individuals make teaching decisions utilising the freedom they experience within the institutional constraints as they perceive them.

BACKGROUND

The changing context of higher education has focused attention on the changing nature of academic work (see e.g. Ashwin, 2006; Gornall, et al, 2013; Fumisoli et al , 2015). There is now a greater differentiation of academic roles, although teaching and research academics still make up the majority of academic staff in universities (Locke, 2014; Coates et al 2009). Casualisation has become a major concern.

The literature is infused with concerns about academic professionalism and identity (see e.g., Välamaa, 1998; Davies, 2005; Henkel, 2002; Clegg, 2008). Further concerns have centred on pressure of work and time constraints (e.g. Ylioki, 2013).

Malcolm and Zukas (2009) highlight the messiness of academic work and argue that more needs to be understood about the academy as sites of social practice where there is interplay between the institution, the working lives of academics, what they do and what they think.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws upon research designed to understand how academics make sense of and respond to the competing pressures of teaching, research and administration. Data was collected from academics in a range of disciplines in six English and six Australian universities through a large-scale survey (respondents = 2163), and semi-structured interviews with 27 mid-career academics. This paper focusses on the analysis of interviews and qualitative survey questions. The data was analysed taking an interpretivist, thematic perspective.

A theoretical framework derived from the work of Archer (e.g. 2007, 2012), specifically her concepts of socio-cultural interaction, internal conversations and differing forms of personal reflexivity, has driven the research.

FINDINGS

This short paper introduces the issues that have emerged. Findings are organised at three levels, each of which impacts and influences the others: the individual teacher; departmental, programme or school; and the strategic, institutional level.

1. **Academics' experiences**

It is apparent that culture in the institution, at all levels, significantly impacts on and influences academics' perceptions and experiences. For many, this is experienced as a culture that values research considerably more than teaching. Teaching is experienced as being of a lower status.

Many interviewees articulate taking pride in their teaching and enjoying it. However, there is a sense that teaching carries heavy bureaucratic responsibilities. Academics responses

show how they exercise agency within what they see as, uncoordinated, ill-defined structural conditions that many do not understand the reasons for nor agree with.

The bureaucratic burden of teaching, compounds what many describe as excessively heavy teaching loads that constrain their ability to develop a wider academic role, e.g. research. The immediacy of teaching tasks and its non-negotiable deadlines demand precedence over administration and research work.

The data also reflects increasing awareness of expectations to provide evidence of meeting standards in in university teaching, e.g. through qualifications or formal recognition of teaching.

2. **Departmental teaching decisions and planning**
   At departmental level, the data highlights concerns regarding how teaching allocation decisions are made.

   Workload management models/tools are often used to try to achieve equity across a team of academics. Participants' experiences of these tools suggest variability in effectiveness. Wider aspects of curriculum planning, teaching delivery, and student support are often not included.

   For some, the allocation of teaching, is experienced as a highly structured, systematic, top-down, managerialist and poorly understood. For others the process feels random, haphazard, ill-defined and, at times, unfair. Often the process does not enable teaching allocation to be aligned to the academic's research, interests and expertise.

   In contrast, some departments operate very local, negotiated approaches, which allow flexibility to volunteer or to decline to teach certain modules. However, it is apparent that some, particularly new academics, may not feel in a position to negotiate in this way.

3. **Institutional strategic teaching decisions and planning**
   Strategic teaching ambitions and decisions are commonly taken by senior personnel in a vacuum, without agreed, well-developed, discourses or structures underpinning planning and often without reference to the literature on higher education pedagogy. The new English Teaching Excellence Framework may establish a more strategic structure, but the implications of this are yet to emerge.

Data reveal that many interviewees experience a haphazard culture for teaching, with people working without clarity, responding to strategic initiatives and decisions that sometimes do not make sense to them.

Tensions are apparent where critical decisions, with implications for curriculum are taken often by committees. These can affect the minutiae of classroom teaching, e.g. classrooms, furniture, etc. There is an impression that managers often attempt to implement new initiatives through the creation of forms that academics are required to fill without understanding the initiative and its rationale. The perception is that bureaucracy has been created without purpose.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Clearly further work is needed to substantiate the findings of this study. The data starkly demonstrate how teaching is experienced as taking place with little sense of holistic planning or strategic design, with excessive bureaucracy, time wasting and a lack of 'joined-up thinking' across the different levels. There is often a lack of explicit communication between stated strategy and ambitions of institutions and the reality of how the practice of teaching allocation, planning and delivery is experienced by those who undertake it. The implications of this research are clear. When institutions espouse particular intentions, such as having a student focus, or developing student-staff partnerships, better attention needs be paid to the approaches to developing, managing and allocating teaching work and how these are perceived by academics.

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