

Who pays the piper? Who calls the tune? Implications of policy for the future academic workforce. (0249)

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## **Who pays the piper? Who calls the tune? Implications of policy for the future academic workforce.**

UK Higher Education has experienced major changes in recent decades, based on contested ideas about the purposes of Higher Education. Successive policies evidence a trend towards external control '... *steering at a distance*.' (Brennan, Locke, Naidoo 2007:164) and scrutiny of universities' offer and performance in various forms: Key Information Sets, National Student Survey, QAA audit, REF, TEF. Increased fees have contributed to a problematic discourse of students as consumers. League tables chart universities' positioning and prestige. However, employment has become less secure, with growing numbers on fixed-term or part-time contracts. All these impact on academics' attitudes and experiences in a pressured and stratified workforce.

This paper draws on literature, national data and an institutional case study to consider the particular challenges for one group of would-be academics, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), and the implications for academic developers trying to prepare them for their current work and possible futures.

148 words.

### **Outline**

#### **Context**

Over the last fifty years universities have evolved in response to numerous policy initiatives, signalling significant shifts in (re-)defining the purposes of Higher Education and affecting staff, students and other 'stakeholders'. In the UK, these shifts have been influenced by reports from Robbins (1966) to Nurse (2014). Successive reports from e.g. funding and research councils, trades unions and government legislation further seek to influence access, purpose, and other questions: university funding, the nature of academic work, accountability. These factors directly and indirectly affect academics' work, which extends beyond Blaxter et al 's 1998 concept of the role as '*...one or more of five overlapping roles: the commonplace triumvirate of teaching, research and managing, plus writing and reviewing.*' (1998: 281) to include for example, entrepreneurship, research impact,

and – if students are thought of as consumers rather than scholars – deliverers of content to ensure customer satisfaction.

### **Challenges for current academics**

These considerations are particularly relevant at a time when, for both current and aspiring academics, the conditions of their work can change quite rapidly. Contractual variations, such as rise of fixed-term contracts, render employment prospects more precarious. As the financial stakes for students entering Higher Education increase, those students may be perceived or experienced as more anxious/exigent, requiring more academic and pastoral support. The demands of the academic role have become greater and more varied. These themes have been explored by, for example, Henkel (2000), Brennan et al (2007). While academics value many positive aspects of their work (e.g. Akerlind 2005), the effect of policy implementation on how they are doing that work causes stress and anxiety (Darabi et al 2016). In the UK, the University and College Union reports that of 12,000 respondents to a recent survey on workload, 83% stated that its pace and intensity had increased over the last three years; *'... two thirds of (HE) staff reported that their workload is unmanageable at least half of the time ... more than a quarter of respondents said that their workloads were unmanageable all or most of the time.'* (UCU 2016:2). The locus of control is perceived to have shifted from the individual academic, working flexibly and autonomously to build constructive working relationships with engaged students and colleagues, to exercises in external accountability. Where the gap between expectations and experience appears unfeasibly wide, this may spur leaving academia altogether (Coates et al 2009; Powers 2016; Ryan et al 2011).

This paper considers these issues from two perspectives: firstly, that of GTAs and secondly, academic developers whose responsibilities include professional career development, for example through taught provision such as a PGCert, and other forms of initial and continuing professional development.

### **Challenges for GTAs**

What does this context mean for would-be academics? What do they understand by the academic role? How congruent is that understanding with their actual experience?

*What do researchers want to do?* (VITAE 2012) notes that while only ca. 30% of postgraduate research students had a clear idea what they wanted to do in the future, 63% of them definitely intended to pursue careers related to research disciplines; nearly half aspired to an HE career. Similarly the 2015 PRES found that 60% of respondents *'envisage a career in academia.'* (HEA 2015), while Vitae's *'What do researchers do?'* (2011) suggests that in fact only 41% enter HE research or teaching and lecturing roles in the three years after graduation. It remains unclear how secure or permanent such posts are, or the scope for movement, for example starting as a researcher outside HE and later moving into an HE research role. This phenomenon will need separate investigation. Given this, the remainder of this paper considers what can best prepare GTAs for their current academic work, and possible futures within and beyond academia. It draws on data from an institutional

survey of part-time teachers, predominantly GTAs, about their experiences. It comprised an online poll commissioned by XXX UCU and conducted by XXXXs Centre for the Study of Higher Education in March – April 2016.

### **Challenges for academic developers**

Previous research (Authors 2013) highlighted the challenges of identifying appropriate professional development for part-time staff generally. We found that GTAs specifically have clear goals in relation to developing their teaching and research skills. However, issues which militate against their engagement towards those goals, include the time taken to attend relevant classes and workshops, and a perception that time spent on teacher development is time away from research. These are likely reasons for the erratic information flow in departments about teaching-related provision. One challenge for academic developers was to ensure that the provision went beyond 'how to teach', dovetailing with researcher development provision and complemented by discipline-specific sessions run in individual departments.

This combination of content enabled GTAs to develop an understanding of the policy context, how it affected their current and possible future HE practice and to consider how the skills they were developing throughout their PhD could be applied elsewhere. The provision is aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework, making it a portable qualification.

There is an institutional requirement for GTAs to be allocated teaching, and access to support to do that teaching. However the survey highlighted, firstly, major discrepancies in how **paid-for** 'teaching' was defined ie direct teaching (paid), compared to time to prepare and undertake marking (mostly unpaid). GTAs reported a widespread perception that the work carried out far exceeded the hours paid for, further exacerbated by frustration at the inconsistencies of access to the professional development described above.

### **Institutional implications**

There is a moral imperative to support staff in their work and a further responsibility to raise early career and would-be academics' awareness of the features of rapidly changing contexts. The pressure for institutions to report the numbers of staff qualified to teach and the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework may give this imperative practical impetus, ensuring that GTAs are prepared for whatever lies ahead.

975 words.

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