Out to grass or in the shed? How 'later career researchers' contribute to the research culture. (0285)

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Abstract

Beleaguered, called upon to 'move over' and let early career researchers flourish, 'later career researchers' who remain engaged with the research culture of their field, are an essential and often under-recognised part of universities' health and success. Some rightly prefer to retire on time or early, spending that time with grandchildren, private research and writing, consultancy or 'in the shed'. (10)However, this early research using semi-structured, open-ended interviews with self- and researcher-identified later career researchers in social sciences, sciences, arts and humanities reveals that others focus on research contributions as front-line researchers, principal investigators, team leaders, authors, and mentors. The cadre of later career researchers on which this research is focussed have often moved into a period of continued high quality research production, consistent output, focussed on topics of choice, and in many cases have adopted and maintained leadership and mentorship roles which help guide and sustain others' research efforts.

Literature review

Much research has focused on academic identities (Clegg, 2008; Henkel 2005) particularly career trajectories, risks and support for early career researchers setting off into volatile contexts of academic research jobs (Castello et al 2015). We know about the tenuousness of roles as adjunct teaching staff, young scientists and project researchers constantly uprooting and seeking the next postdoc role in international universities, and the increasingly intense pressure to publish while balancing research, teaching and administrative work. However, to date the only focus on later career researchers has been on those undertaking PhD's (Kiley, 2015) and attacks on later career academic staff suggesting their torpidity clogs the arteries of higher education (Thesis whisperer, 2014) or THE (2016) cases of research scientist (mostly older men) who maintain high levels of scientific productivity.

This new ongoing research explores the experiences and research related activities of those later career researchers (50+) whose academic identities and work are under-recognised and under-researched. Early research indicates that while some later career researchers have turned from research and now devote more time to family, travel, creative and other pursuits, or have retired, this is not the case for a vital and essential cadre of later career researchers on whose efforts universities and knowledge creation and exchange rely. There is a range of motivations or continuing research beyond the time when it can enhance the cv or support promotion, and this lies along a continuum of engagement with research activities within the university community, or outside it.

Methodology and methods

Research used semi-structured, open-ended interviews with self-identified and researcher- identified later career researchers in social sciences, sciences, arts and humanities (10) exploring motivation, researcher identity, engagement with research projects, conferences, publications, roles related to research both internal and external, for example whether active as an Emeritus, or consultant, and relationships inside or outside the university supporting and mentoring early career researchers.

Intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation are important. Some enjoy research for its own sake :

'I think it has its own intrinsic reward in that there is a certain sense of being accepted and recognised as somebody who has something to contribute and for me that is really important, just to not stop but to continue to enquire and contribute.'(A)

And others 'but for me the most important thing is the adventure of it, the opportunity to travel to see people in other cultures, the way they work the way they think and just to work with other like-minded colleagues. It's different from the isolated world of just pursing something on your own.'(B)

Several focus on mentoring early career researchers, contributing to supportng the writing and research of others, while others now feel the independence of making their own research decisions far away from the REF and impact case studies :

'Im not interested in mentoring people and enabling them to get on with it that's not what I want to do I want to get on with my own research.'

It is compared to cooking:

'Therefore like cooking for yourself so it's also the joy of creating, the joy of continuing to do things for their own sake because in themselves they're valuable and they stretch you.'(C)

And recognised a part of the ongoing academic identity;

'It's part of your identity'(B)

Early findings indicate a sense of freedom from constraints of full-time roles, and REF (UK), pressures or continued engagement with and contribution to such measures; intrinsic academic identity as a researcher, an enquiring attitude preceding and lasting beyond formal university appointment, and an appetite to motivate research practices and sharing of research outcomes including the joys of writing for publication but a more nuanced choice of where and what to publish. For many an interest in working with, writing with and supporting or mentoring the careers of early career researchers is an important role. In such cases for example, they contribute to mentoring programmes, publication insight sharing, co-publishing, co-researching. For many, now that supervisors normally supervise in teams, and the number of PhD students has grown worldwide, their involvement as the experienced supervisor in a relatively new team offers an essential support and development to others and to the university.

Conclusions

While for many academics exiting the stresses of academic research entirely is a long sought freedom, for some later career researchers the excitement of research engagement with knowledge

exploration and creation, and with the dialogue with others, is vital and their contribution to the health of the continuation of research and the university essential.

References

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