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Title Researching the development of an academic field: Conferences as a way in
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Abstract

This paper responds to Henderson's (2015) call for academic conferences to be explored as sites for critical and analytical higher education research. It grapples with the question of how the field of higher education research can understand itself as a knowledge-making endeavour. In this paper we pursue the argument that in-depth examination of academic conferences is a valuable way of coming to understand the development of a research field. The context of our study is an ongoing cultural history of the biennial International Academic Identities (IAI) Conference. We argue that a cultural history of such a conference can open up helpful insights about how such gatherings offer space for academic fellowship, and how the IAI conference may act as a window onto the research preoccupations of academic identity scholars across the globe as they wrestle with changes to, and the demands of, working in universities.

Paper

Over the past several years, debate about the purpose and problems associated with academic conferences has generated myriad blogposts (Henderson & Burford, 2017; Thomson, 2011), photoblogs (<http://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/>) and other forms of cultural production (Reynolds, 2017). Commentators have pointed out the prohibitive costs of conferences (especially for students, sessional staff and early career scholars) (Lundy, 2016), the abuse of Powerpoint (Thomson, 2011), the hackneyed panel format (Green, 2016), the lack of women keynotes and broader absences of diverse representation (Jaschik, 2012), all resulting in pleas to rethink the value of the conference, and in one case, a manifesto on conferences (Wampole, 2015). While there is clearly a significant amount of academic interest in debating the pleasures and pitfalls of conferences, many of these conversations have not yet surfaced in formal research projects.

This paper advances the proposition of this symposium – that the 'academic conference' is an *interesting* phenomenon that would benefit from greater exploration in the field of higher education. As Henderson (2015) has argued, despite the integral role they play in the development of academic lives and disciplines, conferences remain underconsidered across multiple dimensions: as an expression of pedagogical intention, a domain for

scholarly identity formation, and as a community of practice. This paper considers a particular question surrounding conference research and representation: how can the site of the academic conference resource the field of higher education to understand itself as a knowledge-making endeavour? It is our argument that in-depth historical examination of academic conferences offers a valuable way of tracing the development and impact of a research field.

Across disciplinary areas it is now commonplace to see histories of the emergence and subsequent development of a field of research. Within higher education studies there have been attempts to trace dominant methods and methodologies (Tight, 2013), to look at patterns of citation (Tight, 2014), to explore signature concepts (Kandlbinder, 2013), or to investigate influential scholars who laid the groundwork for the field (Macfarlane & Grant, 2012). Yet thus far there have been no studies that have sought to understand the field by looking at the gatherings where academics present their research and develop as higher education researchers.

Other historical accounts of research fields have tended to include mention of conferences where *that* discussion or *that* speaker contributed to a meaningful shift in the direction of the field. For example, a 1990 conference held at the University of California in Santa Cruz is often described as the origin point for queer theoretical work in the Anglophone academy (Stein, 2012). Despite offering valuable historical context, within such accounts the space of the conference tends to recede, functioning more as a backdrop for the incidents and protagonists in question. Another mode of analysing the role of the conference has focussed less on the impacts of particular conferences on the development of an academic field, and more on how particular fields could better ‘walk’ their own pedagogical ‘talk’ at academic gatherings. Contributions of this kind have emerged from critical race studies (Srivastava, 1997), disability studies (Hodge, 2014), feminist studies (Bell, 1987; Henderson, 2015; Saul, 1992) and learning science (Ravn, 2007), among others.

As we identified above, in the field of higher education, there has been no tradition of examining the role of conferences in the development of the field of higher education research (although Walford’s 2011 history of the Oxford Ethnography conference offers an interesting Education example). Our paper seeks to enter into this space, by attending to a specific scholarly conference – the International Academic Identities (IAI) Conference – and its intentions and pedagogies for supporting the progress of the research field of academic identity.

From its beginnings in 2008 at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK, through to its next conference (which is to be held at Hiroshima University, Japan in 2018) the time-span will mark 10 years and 6 conferences (3 in the UK, 2 in Australasia, 1 in Asia). Since the conference has no professional sponsor and no higher education association attached to it, 10 years is an achievement. The project this paper emerges out of acts as something of a celebration for a community of scholars who tend to its existence every two years. Yet more broadly, the project also offers a critical account of change and impact.

It is our argument that taking an explicit focus on IAI conferences can allow for greater understanding of a number of areas that are of interest when offering a history of an academic field. For example, by focusing our attention on the IAI conference we are able to trace the local and international higher education debates that have shaped the emergence and nature of the IAI conferences, as well as what kinds of scholarly (content) and pedagogical (experiences) interventions those involved have intended. Focusing on the IAI conference also allows us to consider the impact this gathering has had in progressing inquiry about academic identities and the ways in which the conference has supported participants' own scholarly formation, in terms of being (ontology), knowing (epistemology) and doing (practice).

The project draws upon four distinct data sources, including: individual semi-structured interviews with conference convenors, conference keynotes and delegates who have attended two or more conferences; text analysis of conference websites and conference programs; social media such as conference hashtags on twitter and storified twitter streams; and, publications resulting from the conference.

Drawing on a cultural history framework, data will be analysed by searching for traces of: key shifts to the organisation of academics' identities; key scholars and concepts being drawn on in academic identities' research; key discourses which structure how participants make meaning of their practice and environment; and, how the conference has been experienced, and has contributed to the academic formation of participants. Some preliminary thoughts from this process of analysis will be shared.

Ultimately, in this paper we hope to shed light on the insights that academic conferences might offer about our own fields of knowledge-making and educational practice.

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