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**Title** The implications of a diversifying workforce for higher education systems, institutions and individuals

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### **Paper proposal**

**Research Domain:** Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Title**

The implications of a diversifying workforce for higher education systems, institutions and individuals

### **Part 1 Abstract** (max 150 words)

In the context of significant changes in the employment contract for academic staff worldwide, the paper reports on a study of the developing implications of a diversifying higher education workforce for systems, institutions and individuals. It reviews official datasets in the light of interviews with a range of respondents in eight case study institutions, and finds that approaches to work and careers may be influenced as much by informal opportunities and relationships as by formal structures and processes. It offers findings from case studies to show how individuals navigate the structures in which they find themselves, the extent of policy adjustments at local level, and ways in which institutions can optimise bottom-up initiatives and dialogue. It explores how greater instrumentality as reflected in, for instance, workload models and an 'over-engineering' of 'teaching- or research-only' roles, is counterbalanced by accommodations between individuals and local managers that are not necessarily formally articulated.

### **Part 2 Outline** (max 1,000 words, excluding references)

#### **Background/context**

The nature of academic and associated roles has changed significantly in the last decade, with an increasing disaggregation of teaching, research and other types of activity in higher education institutions (Locke, 2012), and an increasing responsiveness to external agencies such as professional bodies and community partners. Less than 50% of academic staff in the UK now hold contracts that require them to both teach and research in the UK (Locke, Whitchurch *et al* 2016). This is also the case in North America (Cummings and Finkelstein 2012) and Australia (Probert, 2013). In practical terms this has meant an increase in the number of academic staff on so-called 'teaching- or research-only' contracts and other staff, although theoretically having 'teaching *and* research' contracts, may find that research is effectively squeezed out because of heavy teaching loads (Locke, Cummings and Fisher 2011; Finkelstein *et al.* 2016; Locke, Whitchurch *et al* 2016). There is also a growing

'penumbra' of individuals who are academically qualified but do not have academic contracts, working in areas such as learning support, student employability, widening participation, knowledge exchange and community engagement (Whitchurch 2013; Whitchurch and Gordon 2013). The study on which this paper is based develops earlier work to consider the implications of a diversifying workforce at national, institutional and individual levels, including issues of recognition, career drift, and the changing the expectations and aspirations of individuals.

## **Methodology**

The research design includes three main components: evidence of general trends in employment conditions from national datasets such as those of HESA and UCEA; narratives from 64 qualitative interviews in eight different UK case institutions; and an online survey of all staff in those institutions. The interviews will include staff at different stages of their careers as well as members of senior management teams with responsibility for staffing policy. It is also proposed to re-interview selected respondents after a period of two years so as to begin to provide a longitudinal account of changing career trajectories. The selection of institutions covers the four nations of the UK and all types of institution, including pre- and post-1992 universities and post-2004 universities.

A grounded theory perspective is being adopted in relation to the qualitative narratives, and analysis of the data is being undertaken at three levels, the descriptive (e.g. to identify institutional contexts), the interpretive (e.g. to understand the gap between formal statements and local understandings) and the conceptual (e.g. 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 allows 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/conceptual arguments**

The changes outlined above have, on the one hand, fostered greater instrumentality in approaches to teaching and research, for instance, the former via the application of workload models and the latter via targets for grant funding and publications. On the other hand, they are also creating the possibility for more imaginative forms of recognition and career development. Institutions are beginning to adjust formal employment structures and processes (Whitchurch and Gordon 2013), and individuals also increasingly influence policy through bottom-up initiatives which are supplemented by informal arrangements at local level, for instance through dialogue with departmental heads and line managers. The present study considers the iteration between individual aspirations and institutional structures and processes; how individuals navigate the structures in which they find themselves; and ways in which institutions are responding. It also considers factors that facilitate constructive dialogue between staff on the ground, middle managers in faculties, schools, and departments, and representatives of senior management teams.

The study is set in a theoretical context of a possible 'over-engineering' of the workforce through formal divisions of labour. For instance, despite institutional initiatives to raise the

status of teaching, achievements in research tend to be seen as having more value, workload allocation models aiming at achieving equity between teaching and research tend to be undermined by a perception that they do not reflect the reality of day-to-day schedules, and formal training programmes are sometimes seen as less helpful than mentors, peer support groups, online networking and other informal professional development activities. At the same time the study shines a lens on how individuals are navigating these conditions in ways that are not necessarily formally articulated. It also explores the blurring of boundaries between established categories of staff which, in some cases, leads to mis-recognition; and fixed assumptions or even reification of certain groups such as 'early career staff', who themselves are diverse in their motivations and intentions (Locke, Freeman and Rose, 2016). It also considers variables affecting individual perceptions of possibilities and potentials, particularly for those in the first half of their career. These are likely to include structural factors such as type of institution and discipline, as well as individual factors such as line managers, local colleagues, mentors and professional networks.

## **Implications**

The study demonstrates the difficulty of obtaining a clear picture of academic and associated career paths from national data sources alone. These can point up trends in terms and conditions but not, for instance, individual aspirations or intentions. There are also problems of definition and nomenclature, and in some cases structural problems in these datasets. The findings will therefore inform the work of national agencies, institutions and individuals in practical ways, particularly in relation to adopting a flexible approach to individual circumstances and providing bespoke support for career directions. It will also be of value to senior and middle managers who are likely to be responsible for tailoring local arrangements, and offer examples of good practice in developing constructive dialogue at all levels, so that policy is informed by practice as well as vice versa.

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