

G1.4 Beaumaris Lounge Thursday 6 December 9.00-11.00

***Precarity, Managerialism, and the Shifting of Academic Work
(0507)***

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Abstract

Introduction. This research examines how precarity and managerialism, resulting from neoliberalism in higher education, influences the work early career academics (ECAs) do and how they undertake that work.

Method. Constructivist grounded theory was used to collect and analyse data from 20 ECAs in Canada and Australia. ECAs were followed over a 5-7-month period, interviewed about their experiences in starting a new academic position.

Findings. ECAs consider the precarity of their disciplines and their own positions within academia. To reduce precarity, ECAs alter what work they undertake and how, engaging in work that is of value to free markets and ensuring that their work fits within the constraints of auditing procedures. As increasing managerialism overlays administrative components onto all aspects of academics' work, ECAs are required to take on more clerical tasks, which are increasingly shaped and controlled by technology in the form of university information systems.

Introduction

Modern universities employ neoliberal principles that treat universities as corporations, a practice that is a concern to many academics (e.g., Chomsky, 2015; Côté and Allahar, 2011; Giroux, 2007; Kimber and Ehrich, 2015). Neoliberalism often results in a decrease in government funding and an increase in workloads (e.g., through cutting professional staff positions and shifting administrative work to academics), casualisation (i.e., fewer permanent academic jobs and increasing casual and adjunct positions), and pressure for external income (such as grants and student tuition). The new pressures contribute to precariousness within higher education (Chomsky, 2015) and a renewed debate over the purpose of the university (e.g., Giroux, 2010). As higher education shifts toward "economic rationalism, commercialisation, managerialism, corporate governance" (Hil, 2012, p. 7), this changes the understanding of the mission of universities and what comprises academic life. The model of 'university as business' leads to an increase in the number of administrators and managers hired to handle the developing audit culture (Ginsberg, 2011), which increasingly scrutinises the work of academics in the name of accountability and transparency. Managerialism puts pressure on academics to change how they work (Willson, 2018). Managerialism can also have detrimental effects on academic work, resulting in academics finding ways to deal with increased bureaucratic obligations and

maintain their autonomy (Teelken, 2012). This paper will explore how neoliberalism – particularly precarity and managerialism – influences both the work ECAs do, as well as how they accomplish that work.

Methods

This paper reports on part of doctoral research into the experiences of individuals as they transition from doctoral students into ECAs. Participants for this qualitative study were 20 ECAs, 10 from Canada and 10 from Australia, in disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. For 12 participants, their positions were permanent; for 8 participants, their positions were on contracts varying in length from 1-3 years. This research employed constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) methodology to examine the ECAs as they transitioned into their first full-time, continuing academic position. Constructivist grounded theory provided both a framework for systematic data collection and analysis, as well as being the result of the data analysis – that is, the theory developed. Data collection took place over 5-7 months, beginning and ending with two in-depth interviews. Data analysis took place through inductive coding. Data were coded twice using initial line-by-line coding, followed by focused coding. Constant comparison was used to identify the major themes.

Findings and Discussion

Precarity and what academic work is done

I mean, you know it's an anxious, somewhat anxious times, I think to live in Alberta right now and to teach in the humanities. ... So in given that context, I'm thinking about developing courses in more applied kind of fields ...

-“Tom”, Canadian academic in the humanities, 3-year contract

Tom describes the challenges of living in a province that he believes does not value the humanities. He is experiencing the precarity within disciplines that are not seen as being of value to free markets (Giroux, 2002). Because he is conscious of the political climate and the decrease in funding for non-vocational disciplines, he seeks to reconcile his work with the value placed on practical fields by developing applied courses. Tom, in seeking to increase recognised value of his work – and, therefore, the stability of his position in academia – shifts his work from traditional academic work to applied work. While this is important for Tom in his current employment situation, this has implications for his long-term career trajectory, his discipline, and the academy more broadly.

Precarity and how academic work is done

[W]hen I do a piece of research trying to think what journal will it go into, and if it's a journal that isn't going to have any bearing on my ranking as research active, my categorisation as research active, then that's not good. I'm conscious of it. And because I've seen people lose their jobs because of the retrospective use of this policy, so I'm conscious that I need to do it, otherwise I don't have a job in 2 year's time.

-“Claire”, Australian academic in social sciences, 2-year contract

Claire describes how the Australian government's system for evaluating research, Excellence for Research Australia, has an impact on research dissemination practices. The requirement that she be categorised as “research active” within her institution influences where she publishes her research – because this will determine her employment status. This is a process of “[i]ncreasing control through ‘accountability’ devices such as quality audits that contribute to an audit culture” (Kimber and Ehrich, 2015, p. 85), which demonstrate responsiveness to markets rather than accountability. ECAs are aware, and often very critical, of university and external policies that have an impact on their work. However, many ECAs attempt to limit that impact by achieving “safety/protection through ‘playing the game’” (Archer, 2008, p. 276), as Claire has done.

Managerialism – what and how academic work is done

There was a central HR online programme, which was a real drag. ... [I]t was actually really annoying because it was time consuming and it was stuff that I knew. ... I was already doing other things and getting stuck into it, and so it just felt like, “I've got limited time here. I've got things I want to do. Why do I have to do this?”

-“Adam”, Australian academic in the social sciences, 2-year contract

With the rise of managerialism and an audit culture within universities (e.g., Kimber & Ehrich, 2015), clerical work gets overlaid onto many, if not all, aspects of academics' work. And it is not simply more work (e.g., taking HR online programmes), it also dictates the policies and procedures for how work is done (e.g., using the VLE to post grades). University information systems, which frequently replace professional staff, are used for much of this work and academics are expected to engage with these systems. The university's digital technologies “organize, rationalize and ultimately control the work of academics” (Selwyn, 2014, p. 65). Technologies, in addition to managerial procedures, influence what work academics undertake and the ways that work is accomplished.

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