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Early career researchers in Europe: a narrative of academic self-construction (0550)

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Context

European higher education (HE) systems have been undergoing significant academic, political and administrative changes. Faculties are following a ‘new responsibilities academic regime’ (Normand 2016) based on accountability, the search of excellence, efficiency and efficacy, at the expense of peer regulation and hierarchy and traditional community. Two main dynamics that currently shape the contemporary European HE space – the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy (Keeling 2006) – are designed within the paradigm of the new public management (Hood 1991), spread through Europe during the 20 years. The translation and implementation of this HE policy model was combined with existing national systems, so whilst the narrative of transformation in each country is different, the above changes have been appearing to some degree in all European nations.

These policy developments at the European level are happening within the context of HE’s globally increasing marketization and neoliberalisation (Nixon et al. 2001), massification, and the emphasis on performativity evident in increased pressures towards productivity and fast and useful knowledge (Bleiklie & Powell 2005), concurrent with decreased public investment in HE (Guena & Martin 2003). Whilst this is producing discursive resistance and critique from within the system and the more established academics populating it (Ball 2012; Cribb & Gewirtz 2013), some concern is expressed regarding the condition of early career researchers (ECRs), shaped by precariousness, casualisation, narrowly defined utility, and even exploitation (see Åckerlind 2005; Acker and Weber 2017).

Within these political and economic realities of knowledge production in contemporary European research space, this paper takes a narrative approach to investigating the construction and performance of professional and scholarly identities amongst a group of new European researchers. The focus is on the interplay of the above described EU policy developments and multiple aspects of these individuals’ academic experience: their mobility, employment and research funding opportunities, experience of collaboration, and research interests. The paper addresses a very broad research question: how do European early career researchers shape their academic selves? The ‘academic self’ is understood as an identity project, developed in everyday negotiation of opportunity and challenge (Bamberg et al. 2011), and we will explore it in reference to motivation, process of knowledge production, and supportive and obstructing mechanisms of research governance. Simultaneously, the concept of academic identity is understood to have moved from a relatively stable professional identity category formed by the ‘first mission’ of university in the era of academic ‘ivory tower’ (Barret 1998) towards a continuing construction of an academic self as a consequence of split HE missions and associated organisational paradigms (Evetts 2011).

Methodology

The study was conducted around semi-structured interviews that took a narrative form, with participants asked to relate their academic biography, what may be named a version of a life story interview (Atkinson 2012), or in this case academic life story, starting from their undergraduate degree and leading to the present day. This method allowed for a fairly free construction of the interview narrative, which had the purpose of allowing the most pertinent themes in the life story and the sequencing that helped interviewees' meaning-making (Squire 2013) to come to the fore. Interviewees were occasionally guided by prompts in the form of very open questions that reflected the study's concern with geographical and intellectual spaces of knowledge production, (f)actors of influence and support, as well as obstacles and challenges to building a professional academic self, but that still allowed for individually relevant narration of the answer. Interviewees were finally encouraged to relate their plans and hopes for the future. The researchers' own positionalities as early career academic working in the European space of higher education will be acknowledged within the 'objectification of the objectifying subject', allowing for the recognition and the discussion of the emic properties of this study.

Interviews were recorded and although not transcribed verbatim in their entirety, meticulous and close notes were made, including a frequent transcription to allow for direct quotations, as well as ensure the narrative proximity of main analytical codes. The initial codes were produced deductively, at the intersection of research questions and main themes found in the relevant literature. Coded interviews were then subjected to inductive thematic analysis, where themes within (and occasionally across) codes were first recorded and then aggregated into broader themes. Interview data were treated as narratives representative of the participants' reality, expressive and constitutive of their experience, and what they treated as transformation and change, an identity project (Giddens 1991).

Results

The individual paths that these researchers take represent, each in their own way, a complex interplay of environmental factors, some of which appeared in sharper focus than others in our analysis. These included, personal and wider financial circumstances, the linearity of the academic path, academic culture, importance of (lack) of supervision and mentorship, understanding of the difference between 'academic' as a profession and a vocation, and the perception and experience of academic and European mobility. Other factors that were not explicitly addressed but appeared as a significant theme, including regional differences within the Union with respect to gender expectations and cultural norms, or a sense of national responsibility v cosmopolitanism. Overall, however, all of the participants exhibited a significant sense of agency and knowing within the new regime of higher education governance, potentially due to being themselves shaped within it. And despite the appearance of common threads in their narratives, the latter are far from simplistic and reveal a complex picture formed by individual motivations, personal circumstances, and scholarly agendas. Whilst some patterns – such as precariousness, responsiveness to policy and funding agendas, and an uneasy relationship between personal and professional life – confirm the findings of the contemporary literature, and some new ones emerge, we argue that more context-rich, bottom-up research is needed to balance the oft-homogenous accounts of educational research and early career researchers in Europe today. We suggest that particular attention be paid to regional differences and the varied ways in which mobility and Europeanness are adopted and adapted as an inherent value, a strategy, or a necessity, in the construction of academic careers across Europe.

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