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Reacting to restriction in the neo-liberal University: Management and EU Staff Response to Brexit

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Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract: The decision to leave the European Union created tremendous uncertainty about the future rights of EU nationals living in the UK. Drawing on interviews in higher education – a sector reliant on EU labour - this paper examines how upper management and EU staff respond to a political environment that is hostile to migration. Interviews reveal how perceptions of professional and institutional mission, as well as economic demands, shape the response of university management and the experiences of EU employees. Professional service staff and academics from EU countries with less autonomous university sectors were generally more satisfied with their University's response to Brexit. EU academics who were most dissatisfied with the commercialization of higher education were also the most dissatisfied with management response to Brexit. At the institutional level, the highest prestige university was the most concerned and proactive in response to the Brexit vote, due to its more complete adoption of a neo-liberal employment model that relies on ready access to the EU to fulfil contingent labour contracts.

Paper:

Introduction

Non-UK EU nationals currently comprise one in five academics, and one in fifteen professional staff, in UK higher education. Recognizing the importance of EU nationals to the sector, this project asked a)

How do Universities plan to recruit and retain EU nationals in a policy environment that is both uncertain and hostile to immigration? b) Do these plans “fit” with the desires and expectations of EU nationals currently working in higher education in the UK?

Data and Methods

The research involved interviews with management and EU academic and non-academic staff at three research active universities in England. The universities varied in relation to their prestige, selectivity of student intake, and amount of research income.

Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and November 2018, with the bulk (32) between March and September. The interviewees included 16 academic staff, 12 professional staff, and 6 senior management (2 at each university).

Key Results from Employee Interviews

Positive overall environment

All EU employees interviewed were unhappy with the results of the Referendum vote. However, nearly all of them felt that the University provided a cosmopolitan and supportive environment which created a “bubble” protecting them from the hostile environment encountered on the news and in statements by policy makers:

“I have never felt... sort of as an outsider in the UK... because...I think it is a lot to do with the University because it's a bit like a bubble...”

Latvian mid-career professional staff

Symbolic Support

Most interviewees reported receiving supportive statements from University management via internal messages and emails. While these were appreciated, several employees, primarily

academics, wanted more outward facing statements of support. This was strongly linked to perceptions of university mission:

“So concerning to Brexit is a lack of spine. They are just spineless. It’s like any political statement, they are spineless. And I mean this also huge, a huge difference with the universities here [in Belgium], because they are run by Professors and they are truly independent institutions.”

Belgian early career academic

Practical Support

Expectations of practical support were also higher among academic rather than professional staff and related to perceptions of mission, which were often linked to country of origin:

“People from countries if they expect something back, maybe they are expecting more. If you interview Italians or Spaniards and so on, we don’t get anything at home anyway, so we don’t expect it...”

Italian, Senior Academic

Key Results from Employer Interviews

Interviews with management revealed a set of concerns about Brexit that overlapped with those of the staff members, but with different levels of emphasis, as well as substantial differences across the three institutions.

Symbolic Support

All management officials recognized the need to signal a welcoming environment for staff already present, and actions of symbolic support were put in place.

Perception of Staffing Problems

However human resource representatives at all three institutions reported that they had not seen a significant increase in staff leaving due to Brexit, nor had they observed a sharp drop in the number of EU nationals applying for academic positions. For instance, one VC stated:

“...on staffing we have seen in general no major impact on our ability to recruit non-UK EU staff or indeed international staff.”

This perception that mass exodus of existing EU employees was unlikely was also confirmed by employee interviews, where staff on permanent contracts, many mid-career with mortgages and children in school, reported feeling trapped and thus not particularly likely to leave:

“My wife quite often says like, ‘If they want to kick us all out of this country we just leave.’ We will find a job elsewhere, but the reality is that we are getting older, and older and older, and we are getting more expensive and we are not quite as hireable as we were 10 or 15 years ago..”

German, mid-career academic

Administrative Burden

The potential administrative burden of applying for and monitoring visas for EU staff members was one of the largest concerns. Management at all three universities mentioned the cost and bureaucratic complexity of the existing Tier 2 and Tier 4 visas, and the increase in resources that would be required if EU nationals came under the existing system:

“Will EU Nationals just fall into the current migration system? We hope not. That would be horrendous, that would be the worst thing that could possibly happen...”

HR Management

Access to Funding and Short Term Staff

Continued access to funding featured in all interviews with management, but was, unsurprisingly, foremost among interviews with the highest prestige university. When asked what the biggest challenge from the Referendum vote was, that Head of HR stated

“The uncertainty around EU funding is the biggest issue for us, because obviously, I mean, again, I think it’s 20 percent of our research income, or close to that, is from ERC and other EU grants and Fellowships, Marie Curie and the like.”

Concern about potential threats to staff recruitment and retention were related to concerns about research funding. Whereas permanent EU academics and professional staff were not perceived to be at risk under Brexit, access to the fixed-term staff needed for discrete research projects was a major risk. This impacted high prestige university most, with its higher research income and higher proportion of staff on research contracts

Conclusions

My research shows how employee perceptions and university response to Brexit are related to broader trends of the commercialization of higher education. Academics most comfortable with commercialization had a more favourable view of university responses. The institution with the greatest need for a flexible, highly contingent skilled labour force deriving from a reliance on short-term grant funding cycles, was the most responsive to the challenges of Brexit. The irony is that while many employees wanted a stronger voice and greater protection from the University in light of their more traditional model of University mission, it was the pressures set by the demand for a contingent workforce most dependent on competitive funding, in other words a response to specifically market demands, which resulted in a stronger response from university employers.