

SRHE

*Society for Research
into Higher Education*

**Knowledge creation in higher
education studies: an
intergenerational analysis**

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Executive summary

This is the final report relating to this SRHE research award which sought to analyse the development of higher education (HE) as a research field through the autobiographical accounts of three generations of HE scholars. While the core themes of HE research have previously been identified through quantitative approaches focused on research and publication patterns (eg Calma and Davies, 2015; Tight, 2003; Horta and Jung, 2014), there has been little fine-grained, qualitative analysis based on autobiographical accounts. Drawing on an approach developed by Gumport (2002) this study provides an inter-generational analysis of HE studies in the UK through interviews and CV analysis. The findings reveal that many who conduct research about HE retain a strong sense of disciplinary affiliation in addition to an identity as a 'HE researcher'. The continuing epistemological health of HE studies is seen as closely linked to maintaining its open borders with other disciplines while its growth and success as a field is regarded as a mixed blessing bringing with it challenges in respect to maintaining an accessible approach to scholarship and communication with public and policy audiences. Inter-generational differences are noted principally in respect to the impact of performative pressures associated with changes in academic life over the last 50 years.

Introduction

The emergence of studies in higher education (HE) took place after the Second World War although a number of US universities, including Chicago and Ohio State, offered taught programmes in the 1920s aimed at HE administrators (Fulton, 1992). Since the 1970s the growth of HE as a research field internationally has grown notably evidenced by the emergence of masters' and doctoral level programmes, dedicated research centres internationally, the growth of full professorial level appointments, and a burgeoning literature clustered around core areas, notably policy studies and learning and teaching (Tight, 2003; Horta and Jung, 2014). There has also been an exponential growth in the number of HE journals and growing analysis of their relative status linked to their impact and influence (Bray and Major, 2011). Interest in HE as a 'field' of academic study has begun to emerge as historical stock is taken of developments over the last 50 years or more (eg Macfarlane and Grant, 2012).

Yet, to date, there has been limited in-depth, qualitative analysis of the emergence of HE as an intellectual field. Previous studies have focused mainly on the collation and analysis of quantitative data concerning research and publication patterns among HE scholars (eg Calma and Davies, 2015; Tight, 2003; Horta and Jung, 2014) or more personal and idiosyncratic reflections and analyses (eg Alderman, 2010; Macfarlane, 2012). Quantitative studies have been valuable in identifying general patterns of scholarly publication and methodological approaches deployed. However, they have not offered fine-grained and in-depth accounts of HE as an academic sub-field in all its disciplinary, organisational and intellectual complexity.

This study sought to respond to the need for more qualitative analysis of the experiences and perceptions of HE researchers and how they have been shaped and re-shaped over time. In so doing it draws on conceptual distinctions between different generations of scholars made by Gumport (2002) in her exploration of the emergence

of feminist scholarship. Labelled ‘forerunners, pathfinders and pathtakers’, Gumport interviewed three generations of feminist scholars as a means of understanding how they established their intellectual careers in the context of organisational and institutional settings. Her framework is applicable in analysing the emergence of other ‘young’ academic sub-fields, such as HE studies, as it focuses on the struggles of the forerunners and pathfinders in establishing the legitimacy of the field and considers how the opportunities created by these two founding generations are then capitalised upon by the current generation, the pathtakers.

There are strong parallels between the emergence of feminist scholarship and HE studies given the marginalised status of education as a disciplinary field within the academy (Becher, 1989) and the connections between HE studies and academic development as a disesteemed area of academic activity and scholarly enquiry (Rowland, 2001). Conceptually, the study draws models relevant to understanding academic identity including the Biglan academic classification model (Stoecker, 1993). The relevance of this model relates to the extent to which scholars may define and identify with the HE field as rooted in one or more of various foundational disciplines of education such as history, philosophy, sociology and psychology.

Methodology

This study analyses accounts autobiographical accounts of HE scholars using semi-structured interviews with 24 informants. The interviews focus on understanding the experiences and perceptions of informants by reference to their career history, intellectual biography, and reflections on the development of HE studies. Prior to interview a copy of their CV, along with their publication record, was analysed. In interviews informants were asked to identify their route into HE scholarship; their goals and objectives and how these have developed over time; career-shaping events; principal intellectual networks within and without HE studies; the concepts and paradigms which have most influenced their work; and observations on changes within the field during their career.

Sampling for this study was based on a multi-stage, stratified approach. The population for the study was limited to UK-based academics conducting research into any aspect of HE. This population was then divided, on the basis of the date of their first HE-relevant publication, into three ‘generations’ of HE scholars. Adapting the terminology used by Gumport the following generational descriptors were used: ‘pathfinders’ (1963-1982), ‘pathshapers’ (1983-2002), and ‘pathtakers’ (2003 on). 1963 was chosen as the starting point for the three generations as the Robbins report, published that year recommended, among other things, greater research into HE with events subsequent to its publication leading to the founding of the SRHE in 1965 (Shattock, 2015). In sampling 8 persons from each generation (ie 24 persons in total) further stratification took place by reference to characteristics of the population as whole, notably sex and area of research specialism. The pathfinder generation were the most difficult group to identify given that nearly all have retired, are in many cases no longer academically active or no longer living. 5 of the 8 interviewees within this group were male and 3 were female a slight imbalance reflective of the considerable under-representation of female academics in UK HE as a whole during this period. Comparatively few female academics appear as authors of papers about HE during this era. In order to ensure that this did not result in over-representation of

male academics in the study as a whole, 5 of the 8 interviews with the pathtakers generation were conducted with female academics. A conscious attempt was also made to ensure that interviewees were drawn from all areas of HE research as defined by Tight (2003) and others, mainly interpreted as ensuring approximately equal numbers of interviewees from policy and learning and teaching areas of enquiry.

All the interviews were transcribed using a reliable and experienced professional transcriber. In parallel with interviews, CVs of all participants were analysed for comparative data and in order to provide stronger biographical profiling. The interview data was analysed inductively using the constant comparison method. This involved comparing the datum several times through coding and recoding in order to identify overarching common themes and patterns. The study was granted ethical approval by the University of Southampton. Participants were provided with an informed consent statement and assurances with respect to data security and storage. They also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time in line with standard protocol. A particular ethical consideration in this study, especially given the use of autobiographical data, was to protect the identity of leading, and hence well-known scholars in HE studies (mainly in the 'pathfinder' generation) in order that their contributions are not subsequently identifiable. Participants are identified in quotations via an anonymised name and the year of their first HE-relevant publication.

Field entry

It is generally accepted that HE is not a discrete academic discipline (Becher, 1994) but, rather, a field or sub-field of study connected with education and the social sciences. As such entrants to the HE field tend to be drawn from a wide variety of discipline-based backgrounds. Analysis of the CVs of the 24 participants revealed that they were mainly drawn from disciplines and subjects broadly within the humanities and social sciences. In terms of Biglan's (1973) classification of academic disciplines, most participants were drawn from 'soft pure' backgrounds such as Sociology (Geoff, 1988), Classics (eg James, 1971; Eleanor, 1978), English (Margaret, 1994; Tony, 1994; Brian, 1995; Felicity, 2008), History (Harry, 1970; Charlotte, 2015; Ava, 2017), Political Science (George, 2010), and Modern Languages (Terry, 1974; Jane, 2004). A large number of participants hold first degrees involving combinations from the humanities and social sciences, such as Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Susan, 1966), Geography and English (Robert, 1978), or Psychology and Sociology (Donald, 2008). It was far less common for field entrants to have studied 'hard-pure' subjects, such as Mathematics and Philosophy (Diana, 1974) or applied areas generally, such as Psychology and Management (Scott, 2016).

The *pathfinder generation*, with a first HE-relevant publication dating between 1963- and 1982 contained several pioneers of emerging areas of research in HE, such as student learning theory, the use of technology in teaching, and the economics of HE. Many pathfinders had discovered HE research via academic administration or other leadership positions in the sector. Analysis of their CVs revealed that their publication record, judged purely in terms of the quantity of outputs relative to the length of their academic career, was sometimes modest by contemporary standards and typically contained more books, book chapters and reports than journal papers. This perhaps reflects the expectations of the academic environment in the UK prior to the

institution of the research assessment exercise in the mid 1980s and its growing impact on re-shaping academic output. Most pathfinders had experienced relatively few institutional moves during their career.

The *pathshaper generation* (1983-2002) had often found their careers influenced or at least strongly shaped by increasing HE funding opportunities during the 1990s and early 2000s, such as HEFCE funding for teaching enhancement, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), European funding, and other prestigious funders such as the ESRC. Many pathshapers had helped to found a research centre and were associated with the leadership of such units or research-focused academic development units. However, most still maintained a strong affiliation to their first disciplines, such as sociology, often maintaining dual identities by publishing in both the HE research field and one other.

The *pathtaker generation* (2003 on) all possessed a PhD relevant to HE studies but had often experienced a high number of institutional moves in their career as a result of short-term academic contracts linked to funded projects. As a result, perhaps, they were quite pragmatic in their outlook finding that their publications had been shaped by the necessity of following funding opportunities, sometimes outside of HE research. Their publications were predominantly journal papers reflective of modern career patterns of publication in a more 'performative' era.

On the basis of their publication patterns, these generations may be further classified into three broad groups of HE researchers. For some participants, HE was the only academic field in which they had ever published. These *natives* are most likely to be found in the pathtakers generation almost all of whom possess a PhD related to HE studies. By contrast, 3 of the 8 pathfinders generation did not possess a doctoral level qualification. Other participants might be classified as *migrants* as they had immigrated to HE studies from other, often adjacent academic fields such as sociology in which they first published before migrating to HE studies. Most members of the pathshapers generation were migrants. Finally, quite a number of participants were *nomads* inasmuch that they had wandered in and out of the HE field during their academic publication career publishing in other disciplinary areas both before and after conducting HE research. These included leading HE researchers from the pathfinder generation.

This threefold classification – natives, migrants and nomads – helps to explain the different points of entry and sense of individual academic identity among HE researchers. As a divergent rather than convergent academic tribe (Becher, 1989) it means that several participants, including quite eminent contributors to the HE field, were not necessarily comfortable to self-identify as a 'higher education researcher'.

I certainly don't describe myself as a researcher in higher education (Fiona, 1974)

Reasons for field entry were explored at the beginning of each interview and a variety of 'push' and 'pull' factors were identified by participants. Push factors included lack of interest in school-based educational research, unsuccessful early careers elsewhere in the public sector, the quantitative direction of economics as a discipline, and a need to pragmatically research in the context in which they were working (ie HE).

with no money and no research grants and having to do research, you researched... 'where you stood' (Dawn, 1992)

Part of doing HE research 'where you stood' was picked up by other participants as stemming directly from an interest in improving their teaching practice a view expressed by Henry (1996), a member of the pathshaper generation in the following terms: 'the focus of what we would write and publish about was the substance of what we were teaching'. Henry (1996) specialised in researching and writing about business and management education in HE during his mid-career period, a nomad who now researches and publishes in the field of public history during an active retirement.

Pull factors identified included funding opportunities (eg ESRC, Leverhulme, Manpower Services Commission, etc), the establishment of a new academic unit, involvement in European and international collaborations where HE research was already more established, and administrative and managerial roles working for universities and created by new (at that time) national bodies connected with HE and quality assurance such as the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in the 1960s or the HEA during the 2000s. The growth in research in learning and teaching in the UK was facilitated by the founding of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, later re-launched as the HEA. The funding offered by the HEA is recognised as having had a real impact on academic development as a constituent part of the HE research community especially for members of the later pathshaper and pathtaker generations.

There's been a sort of, since 2000, there's been sort of moments of suddenly lots of funding for academic development, you know the Higher Education Academy started off with a huge budget (Andrew, 2003).

It was an opportunity. So that was the thing that sort of drew me into the field. I mean I was interested in Education but I don't think especially higher education at the time...they had the funding to work on this project that they had, which was part of an international project. (Geoff, 1988)

I was actually pretty firmly identified with Education and I really didn't like very much school level educational research, partly because I didn't think I was equipped for it. And there was an awful lot of it around and I didn't really want to get into that and thought this is nice new field, and there's not much competition I suppose, I don't know how consciously but that was certainly part of it. And there always seemed to be things to do in higher education research.

(James, 1971)

Here, particularly in James' explanation, there was a sense that HE research was an area that some simply drifted into as a kind of career 'accident' rather than as a matter of deliberate choice. His own self-assessment was that he drifted into HE research having 'floated around quite a lot intellectually' (James, 1971). Other interviewees though, especially Susan (1966), were more assertive about their sense of intellectual direction. A further pull factor for Eleanor (1980) and Dawn (1992) was the

opportunity to carry out research in an area that connected theory and practice. Both of these interviewees had clear ideas about the way HE research could address issues of social change.

Q: What were you trying to achieve through your research, what was your overarching kind of goal?

A Erm...well I think it was always primarily a matter of trying to understand the interconnection between policy and practice (Eleanor, 1980)

I have always been interested in implementation of policy rather than purely the construction of models. (Susan, 1966)

This desire to do research that might inform policy decisions was a motivation for several participants. Fiona (1974) explained her motivation, mid-career, in becoming a university pro vice chancellor in terms of the desire to have a direct impact on institutional policy at the expense of giving up research work.

Others described their influences more in terms of maintaining a connection with their first discipline. According to Geoff (1988), for example, 'sociology is my original field and I like to think that I never moved away from it' while Dawn (1992) expressed the sentiment that 'you can't do sociology without understanding social divisions, because that's what societies are made up of'. For others, such as Robert (1973), disciplinary influences were more disparate which he described as 'a set of tributaries really'.

Field status

The standing or status of education as a social science is a long running debate and the study of HE is subject to similar pressures (Kitwood, 1976). Researchers in HE, across all generations, expressed concerns about the extent to which HE research is yet accepted as a legitimate area of academic enquiry. One of the concerns is that the relatively low status of education within the university inevitably affects HE research too.

education is always a poor relation and therefore higher education is tarred with the same brush (Felicity, 2008)

the ESRC was quite skeptical about higher education research, and colleagues in sociology were polite but, you know it was all a bit, as I say, hand to mouth (James, 1971)

there's still an elitism within the sector. And that's probably, I don't know, motivated by the fact that it's [ie HE research] not always seen as a proper subject, and if it's not seen as a proper subject you're even more at pains to demonstrate your legitimacy (Charlotte, 2015)

Another tension connected with legitimacy and status of HE studies is the extent to which research is often conducted by individuals with a dual identity as a leader or manager of a project or institutionally-ordained initiative and as a HE researcher. Jane (2004) worked in an educational development role and reflected that, while she did

research, this part of her identity had not been recognised until she later moved into a school of education.

I felt that when I wasn't in a school they didn't expect you to do research anyway you know, so it was very difficult. That wasn't why you were employed. It wasn't your status really. (Jane, 2004)

Moreover, students who may also occupy a dual role as leader/manager and HE researcher, frequently undertake projects connected with masters' or doctoral degrees within their own institution.

you know people in management positions doing a bit of research on this or a bit of study on that, you know that almost there's a sense that 'well we don't really need higher education research, we can do it ourselves (Eleanor, 1980)

As Eleanor suggests the single institutional basis of much HE research means that it can be seen as an amateur undertaking that can be 'done' by anyone. This might be seen positively as making the field open to all-comers but less positively the perceptions that specialist skills and knowledge are not required also undermines its wider legitimacy. As Andrew (2003) argued, HE research still struggles to get taken seriously.

the big challenge for it still is how does it get taken seriously as a research field, because it still very easily gets dismissed. And I think the other element of it is, is around because it struggles to express a collected body of knowledge then you get an awful lot of reinventing the wheel (Andrew, 2003)

Field methodology

Linked to issues of the legitimacy of the HE field are questions regarding methodology. HE research is a more methodologically sophisticated field than it was 50 years ago. Early papers in *Studies in Higher Education* from the mid to late 1970s were often reflective pieces written by university teachers without recourse to empirical methods or an extensive review of the literature.

I remember Malcolm Tight writing 20 years ago and saying 'the majority of articles submitted to Studies have no methodological positioning at all'. That wouldn't be true now I think. (Tony, 1994)

There has also been an exponential growth in the number of academic journals in HE and a considerable expansion of the issues published per year. In 1976, *Studies in Higher Education* published just 24 papers in two issues. By 2014, it was publishing 126 papers in 10 issues. Moreover, just 3 of the papers published in the 1976 volume of *Studies in Higher Education* were multi-authored compared with 83 in 2014 (Macfarlane, 2015). Hence, multiple authorship, rare in the 1970s, is now the norm. This is a trend that HE research shares in common with many other social science fields.

The development of the HE field, both theoretically and empirically, may be regarded both as a strength in generating more robust data and conceptual frameworks to

inform the research design and analysis of the community of scholars in the field, and as a weakness in being excessively geared toward the generation of empirical data often on the basis of small-scale studies conducted in a single institution.

People often just interview a few colleagues in their own institutions.... institution studies that aren't very useful if they can't be generalised. (Felicity, 2008)

it's the level of focus or the frame of reference, it's always a bit small....Every dot has a meaning, and if I put all the dots together I come up with this picture. But in a true pointillist painting, the dots are just the medium through which you express something bigger. And we don't have many debates about where are the big, big holes in any of this. (Terry, 1974)

It is unsurprising, perhaps, that small-scale studies are commonplace in HE research. This may partly be explained by the relatively isolated situation that HE researchers can find themselves in unless they are members of a larger centre with funding for larger scale, international work such as the UCL/Institute of Education Centre for Global Higher Education funded by the ESRC. It is also a consequence of what some participants saw as an empirical turn in the nature of research that is published with less space available for what one participant described as 'scholarly research' (Charles, 1981) in reference to broader sociological and philosophical reflection on HE without an explicit social scientific 'methodology'.

Empirical research is very, very important but so is scholarly research. And there is no space now for scholarly research, it doesn't generate income, it doesn't generate huge bucks, it doesn't generate neat and easily producible impact statements, but its absolutely vital to the world if the university is still to be a space for criticality in the world (Charles, 1981)

This sense of frustration about the limited vision of small-scale studies was shared by a number of other participants who felt that this norm was holding the field back in understanding the 'bigger picture'.

one obvious change I think is it [ie HE research] has become more scholarly I think, and you can see that with the attention to methodology, you know I'm not speaking totally against methodology, one has to have an awareness of it, it's just if you don't go any further than that it gets dull (Tony, 1994)

A lot of it [ie papers submitted to HE journals] are incredibly poor quality... they haven't thought about audience, they haven't thought about originality, they haven't thought about the big messages that they're trying to get across, it feels very reproductive a lot of the time. (Margaret, 1994)

Yet, newer entrants to the field among the pathtaker generation rarely expressed criticisms of this nature and are impressed by the multi-disciplinary perspectives that are brought to HE research

You go to a higher education conference and you have people bringing in geography and sociology and philosophy and international studies and policy studies and various forms of pedagogy, and all of those kinds of things. And

what's nice is that as, I suppose, an interdisciplinary field, you can draw on all of those kind of things and learn from them, but at the same time it means that higher education research doesn't necessarily have an identity. (Scott, 2016)

Field accessibility

These methodological contentions link to broader concerns about the extent to which the HE research field, despite its growth, is accessible to wider audiences. The essence of this view is that HE is a social enterprise and research about it needs to be comprehensible to as many people as possible. This view was mainly expressed by members of the pathfinder and pathshaper generations who felt that the HE field had become steadily less accessible since its early days. Lack of accessibility was partly explained in terms of the use of specialist language associated with theory and methodology.

I think...it's [ie academic knowledge] become much less accessible even within the higher education business. You've got to recognise that it exists but there are little worlds going on with little world language going on (Robert, 1973)

This trend was seen as having a number of consequences

I have seen it [ie academic economics] become more and more mathematical and that has never been what interests me (Susan, 1966)

It [ie the field of higher education] is an important social enterprise that deserves research in the way that other social enterprises do...But I think the other side is that if you do institutionalise it, you know, then are you actually going to get people who have only studied higher education as opposed to a proper discipline (James, 1971)

I don't want higher education to become some sort of little specialism, some sort of little area of expertise, I want it to be big and generous and outgoing... (Brian, 1995)

The real task is communicating to the world...the work is becoming too parochial (Charles, 1981)

These comments iterate with a view expressed by Harland (2009:581) who comments that new lecturers and researchers in HE often find journal papers in HE studies 'hard to read and therefore to understand and critique.' However, at the same time, large numbers of new lecturers are encouraged to undertake research into learning and teaching in the context of their own practice with next to no training or support. This raises a key conundrum for HE as a field of study: it wishes to maintain quality at the same time as remaining open and accessible to new entrants.

Another worry is that HE research has become a victim of its own success in institutionalizing itself and training a new generation of researchers in its specialist

knowledge base, thereby narrowing the scope and vision of newer researchers in the process.

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Intra-field tensions

The participants in this study were deliberately reflective of research interests spanning ‘learning and teaching’ and ‘policy’, a division noted in previous quantitative studies (eg Tight, 2003; Horta and Jung, 2014). These are broad-brush characterisations of a more complex reality with HE researchers also clustered around a number of other specialist interests both in terms of research focus (eg widening participation, academic identity, equity and inclusion, graduate employability, leadership and management, etc) and methodology (eg case study, feminism, grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, etc). This diversity means that participants identified a range of intellectual networks and societies both broadly within the generic field of HE studies (eg SRHE, EAIR, CHER, and now defunct bodies such as HEF) as well as other specialist groupings such as the Association for Learning Technology and international organisations and affiliations (eg The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in HE [INQAAHE], World Universities Network, etc). However, some participants, such as Carrie (2003) and Ava (2017), saw the boundary crossing nature of their research as precluding an intimate relationship with any one network or grouping.

to be honest I’ve never felt part of a sort of network or a clique. And that’s probably virtue of the interdisciplinary nature of what I do. (Carrie, 2003)

I’m not a conventional strategy management scholar, nor am I a public policy scholar, nor am I a pure HE scholar, so I guess I find my home in the HE scholarship hard to find. (Ava, 2017)

Running through the HE field there appears to be a broader tension that reflects the concerns expressed in C. Wright Mills’ classic *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills argued that the extremes of abstract empiricism and grand theory need to be avoided by those undertaking sociological research. The proliferation of small-scale empirical studies in the learning and teaching area tended to be seen, especially from a policy perspective, as failing to connect to the broader context whereas, from a learning and teaching point of view, work in the policy studies area tended toward grand theory in claim-making without sufficient empirical data.

There’s too much ephemeral work about teaching and learning... writing about things that are going on in their own institution, and what you don’t see are large comparative studies. I think too many people are doing topics that are quite small and there are not enough people attacking large issues. (Harry, 1970)

if you do something on the policy side basically you can sound off about your prejudices and you don't really have to have any empirical evidence. (Terry, 1974)

HE research in the UK has become more internationally-oriented and also more focused on learning and teaching than when the SRHE was formed in 1965 in the wake of the Robbins report. Shattock's (2015) analysis of the development of the SRHE between its founding in the mid-1960s and the early 1990s notes a shifting emphasis of academic research in HE toward studies concerned with teaching, learning curriculum and the student experience and away from policy studies. It also notes that 'the gap between policy makers and researchers...has widened to a dangerous extent.' (Shattock, 2015:15). Whilst many HE researchers espouse a wish to connect their research with the policy arena the challenges in making this connection seem to be greater than ever. This may be because HE researchers do not write with policymakers in mind.

...whenever I go to higher education policy things within the higher education community, higher education research community, and they're calling it policy, I actually find there's very little policy there. So as a political scientist it's not what a politics department would call policy.... they're sort of talking about what's happened to them, or how policies affected their institution, making a brief reference to policy. (George, 2010)

However, for some HE researchers the policy and impact agenda threatens to undermine the diversity of research and the importance of small-scale work that is exploratory and seeks to open up critical questions rather than produce applied solutions.

If we keep going down that route why it's all about impact, is that going to privilege certain approaches to higher education research, which are probably not the kind of things that I have been engaged in because my projects have been small scale, relatively small scale, usually qualitative, often exploratory, don't have easy answers, you know that kind of thing. (Jane, 2004)

Inter-generational change

The changing nature of academic research – broadly away from curiosity-driven work and toward funded projects judged on evidence of impact – is reflected in the autobiographical profiles of the three generations. The pathfinder generation invariably list their publications without necessarily delineating separate sections related to different types of publication (eg journal papers, book chapters, etc) whereas the pathshaper and pathmaker generations were more likely to do this emphasising the primary importance of their journal papers. The later two generations were also much more likely to emphasise their success in attracting research grant income.

The purposes or goals of the pathfinders were largely self-defined and often grew from a mix of curiosity and opportunity. Although funding for research has always been important and a prestige indicator, historically, as Fulton (1992:1814) noted 'plenty of good research on higher education has been carried out without substantial

external funding'. This comparative luxury is no longer available to pathtaker generation who must be highly mobile and flexible in following funding opportunities attached to a series of junior positions in academe.

I've been shaped also by where the money is! Yeah, to keep going...my career's not all about my own curiosity driven ideas, it's about working for other people... I went back to do some other work in the School of Education, mainly to do with compulsory education actually to do with religious schools. That was not because that was what I was interested in, that's because what was paid. It had lots of money, it was because it was a grant and I was sort of around looking for work, so that's what I did. So I did something on religious schools, faith schools here in Britain. (George, 2010)

Q So what are your main goals and objectives as a HE researcher?

A Well the main goal is to get a permanent academic post...I want to be able to find a balance in doing academic research projects that are of interest to me and my particular pedagogical interests, my particular theoretical interests, but also having an awareness that I do need to get involved in things that perhaps aren't necessarily what I want to do but are strategically important for my career. (Charlotte, 2015)

Short-term contracts and dependence on research funding makes it difficult for pathtakers to establish their own academic agenda.

I've never really worked anywhere where they've taken me on because I'm a higher education researcher...The problem I had then is that when my job moves on it's hard to keep those research areas going. You know it's hard because I'm no longer in that position (Jane, 2004)

Modern generations of HE researchers are more productive in terms of publications and concerned with generating research income. However, perhaps as a result of such pressures, they appear to have less clarity about and control over their own intellectual mission as HE researchers.

Reflections and conclusions

HE research is, as one pathtaker commented, is 'a very diverse and porous field' (Scott, 2016) and its continuing epistemological health is reliant on maintaining strong connections with other disciplines. The vast majority of participants from all generations maintained a strong sense of disciplinary identity as well as an understanding of their place within the HE field. Coming into this field is often described as 'accidental' (James, 1971) leading, especially for many migrants and nomads, to a split loyalty and a desire to maintain a second identity rooted in an academic discipline. In many respects this is vital in ensuring that new ideas from key disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, management studies and psychology among others continue to permeate the HE field and renew its knowledge base. However, unlike 25 years ago when 'all of the present generation of leaders in higher education studies are 'immigrants' to the field' Fulton (1992:1821), the pathtaker generation are essentially home grown 'natives' likely to have a masters or PhD in HE. There is, thus, the attendant danger that knowledge creation in HE studies may ossify as a

result of its success in developing specialist masters and doctoral programmes focusing on HE studies with a diluted treatment of key HE concepts associated with social science disciplines. This concern is linked to the extent to which the field is permeable to new ideas and welcoming of new entrants with fresh disciplinary perspectives.

Such concerns are, of course, nothing new. In 1986, Silverman (1986:25) argued that the HE field needed to maintain ‘epistemological uncertainty and openness’ to enable it to develop in new directions and remain open to members from other fields of study. This study though has detected a deep-seated tension that despite the success and growth of HE research as an academic sub-field since the 1960s, it risks becoming a ‘small world’ increasingly inaccessible to wider public and policy audiences. The growth of HE research in terms of publication activity is linked to an empirical turn that has affected the social sciences more broadly and means that there is now a wealth of data about HE but, participants felt, a shorter supply of meta-analysis about the bigger picture both in the UK and internationally.

This small-scale study provides an insight into the development of HE as a research field in a UK context. There is clearly an opportunity to build further on this work by internationalising the study and deepening the analysis by reference to a larger sample from each of the three generations.

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