

Barbara Crossouard

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

4. Developing as a researcher: contradictions in policy and practice (0071)

Programme number: A1.3

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Recent UK and EU policy texts reflect concern that research be seen as a sustainable, attractive career option. This paper reports on a mixed-method study supported by an SRHE award into the career trajectories of newly qualified researchers. Despite policy claims to attend to diversity and equality, respondents' accounts suggest that a privileged identity remains that of the young, mobile, well-networked researcher, free of wider responsibilities and therefore able to absorb uncertainty and ill-defined workloads (c.f. Grummell et al, 2008). The research also illuminates the inadequacy of policy texts in understanding the identities and desires aroused within doctoral education, although this may paradoxically contribute to inequities and sustainability issues rather than the reverse.

Grummell, B., Devine, D. & Lynch, K. (2009) The care-less manager: gender, care and new managerialism in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 21(2), 191 - 208.

4. Developing as a researcher: contradictions in policy and practice

Paper

Global interest in doctoral education has burgeoned. Supporting the development of highly qualified researchers has become a priority in the UK as in Europe. EC (2005) is a clear policy statement calling for greater professional recognition of researchers at EU level, while The Concordat to Support the Development of Researchers recognizes similar issues in the UK context. They have also generated new differentiations in academic hierarchies. EC texts have spawned the concept of the 'Early-Stage Researcher', while the UK notion of 'early career researcher' (ECR) conflates doctoral and postdoctoral phases as a research training period spanning the first ten years of postgraduate research. While many critiques of these notions are possible, for this paper's purposes, both are significant for encompassing both doctoral and postdoctoral research phases and for their aspirations to address diversity and equality.

All the same, research data on newly qualified researchers' responses to such initiatives remain thin. This small-scale study was positioned in this gap. Supported by the 2008-09 SRHE Newer Researcher award, it explored the characteristics of postdoctoral career trajectories. The researcher was therefore an 'ECR' herself, engaged in research on doctoral education while this concept was emerging, making the researcher's identity a resource that was drawn upon and revisited through participant objectification. The study combined an online questionnaire that was distributed to doctoral graduates from all disciplines who had qualified over a three year period (2006-08) from an English

pre-1992 university, as well as newer researchers who now worked at this university (N=164, c. 30% of doctoral alumni). Many responses to open questions were critical of the uncertainties that surround the transition from the doctorate and early career conditions within HE. This data was then illuminated through semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen respondents selected to maximize diversity across aspects such as disciplinary affiliation, professional location, employment status, age, gender, and ethnicity. Illustrative quotations from interviews are reported using pseudonyms.

This paper focuses on two areas of concern from an equity perspective, arising firstly in the transition out of the doctorate, and secondly from higher education working conditions. These suggest considerable tensions between policy and practice.

The interview data illuminated the challenging nature of the doctorate. However at the end of this intensely challenging experience, respondents were often experiencing funding difficulties (54% reported external funding coming to an end before completion). Interview data confirmed the material stress around completion, allied with emotional or physical costs for the researcher and their wider diasporas. Respondents often described relying on family or friends to support them through completion, sometimes taking low-paid work to survive financially. After completion, some respondents had to take up non-professional work, or professional work they could have fulfilled without a doctorate. Equity issues were raised by respondents at several levels, firstly in how doctorates are represented to potential candidates, secondly over the wastage in public funds when research training was not built upon. Furthermore, factors contributing to gaining appropriate employment went well beyond having a good doctorate (e.g. networking, consultancy, publications, funding gained by wider research groups, but also *'blind chance and whether you fit'*). The notion of *'fit'* was specifically related to social class by another respondent. Equity issues clearly arise over assumptions that individuals are equally placed to ride out the uncertainties of this period.

Respondents working in HE were also critical of its employment conditions. Half of respondents were on fixed-term contracts, with the HE sector having the highest percentage. Different disciplinary cultures had different demographic characteristics and initial career pathways, but overall half of the respondents were aged 31-40, with one fifth 41 or over. This challenges the perception of the researcher as the young graduate, with little experience outside academia and with few wider responsibilities within society. Fixed term contract research was strongly critiqued by respondents. In one instance, fatherhood combined with lack of career progression in the projects he was running led Frederick to move to permanent private sector employment (*you can not live in limbo your life. If you are a freelance or you are a single person yes, but when you have a family, everything changes*). It seemed that employment structures in HE assumed ECRs to be mobile and carefree however.

However those in lecturing positions were also critical. For example, one questioned how the label 'researcher' applied to them, given their high teaching load. Many respondents felt teaching was under-scoped, accompanied by undue administration. Others highlighted academic contributions that

were unpaid (e.g. organising conferences, evaluating doctoral proposals, completing research reporting after contract expiry), but were accepted as 'good citizenship'. However, securing advantage from such activities requires disposable time. Another respondent with family responsibilities illuminated the inequities that the level of unpaid or under-scoped work produced. Although desiring a more interesting position, both intellectually and financially, she had 'self-excluded' from pursuing a lecturer position as she knew the teaching load was higher than advertised. Paradoxically, the attractiveness of working in HE seemed linked to the porosity of its work boundaries, i.e. not being a '9-5 job' and having some freedom and autonomy in one's research (even if this was '*challenged on all sides*' and other workload aspects were '*completely out of control*') generated acceptance of such working conditions, so producing a rather double-edged 'flexibility'.

In conclusion, this data confirm the importance of further research into the repositioning of doctoral education in society, as well as the inequities in HE structures, many of which have gendered dimensions (c.f. Grummell et al, 2008). It remains to be seen if policy shifts might produce more equitable and sustainable working practices, or responsabilise individual knowledge workers to accommodate uncertainties and porous, ill-defined work boundaries.

References

- Commission of the European Communities (2005) European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (Brussels, CEC).
- Grummell, B., Devine, D. & Lynch, K. (2009) The care-less manager: gender, care and new managerialism in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 21(2), 191 - 208.
- Research Councils UK (2008) *The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*. (RCUK: Swindon).