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Abstract

Universities are challenged by the need to redefine academic teaching and research roles often without empirical evidence of how academics themselves think about their work nor of how they address institutional requirements while meeting personal goals. This paper focuses on academics who, despite having PhDs, working in research intensive environments and given multiple opportunities to develop research, do not develop a research profile and who as a consequence tend to be considered deficient. An online survey of academics from research-intensive environments in Australian and English universities and interviews with 27 mid-career academics were conducted. A critical realist perspective was adopted to examine academics' priorities, hours worked and kind of work, conceptions of research, critical incidents and the modes of reflexivity employed. We argue that these academics make important contributions to institutional functioning as the university 'artisans' who work to ensure smooth functioning of both teaching and research activities.

Introduction

In university departments where there is a high level of research activity and substantial support for research, some academics do not engage in research, conform to the expected levels of research outputs nor respond to injunctions to do so. Some engage in research but find when research assessment occurs, either their research is not at the expected level, or it is not the right kind of research (Lucas 2006). Universities are challenged by the need to redefine academic teaching and research roles often without empirical evidence of how academics themselves think about their work nor evidence of how they create for themselves career trajectories that address institutional requirements while meeting their own personal goals.

How do university environments influence academics in their decisions to commit themselves to high-level research activities, to pursue particular kinds of research or to decide to engage in other academic activities such as teaching and/or administration? We have explored influences on the formation of academics, their views of research, experiences of their teaching role and the role of reflexivity in responding to university policy and initiatives (Brew & Boud, 2009; Brew, Boud & Namgung, 2011; Brew, Boud, Namgung, Crawford & Lucas, submitted for publication).

This paper focuses on academics who, despite having PhDs, working in research intensive environments and given multiple opportunities to develop research, do not develop a research profile. Academics not well published in research have been almost overlooked in discussions of researcher productivity and, within self-identified research-intensive institutions, they tend to be constructed as deficient. This group of people is characterized by Santos de Sousa's (2003) notion of the sociology of absences. He suggests that a group that appears not to exist, may in fact be socially constructed as not existing. This may also include ideas that the given group is lazy, unqualified or lacking the relevant skills. This paper therefore focuses on a particular and sizeable group of academics whose voices tend not to be heard within institutions who may be socially constructed as not existing.

In this paper we argue that these academics are the university artisans, working conscientiously to ensure smooth functioning of both teaching and research activities. Indeed our data suggest that without such academics, universities would be unable to function effectively.

Methods

An online survey of academics from research-intensive university environments in six Australian and six English universities was conducted. Levels of researcher productivity were determined from self reports of publication levels and research grant applications. For each discipline these were grouped as 'high research productive' consisting of respondents designated high on publications and high on grants, 'low research productive' group from respondents low on publications and on grants and a mixed group. In this paper we focus on the groups designated as 'low research productive'.

Semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven mid-career academics were also carried out and transcribed. Purposive sampling was used to select academics with 5-10 years' experience beyond their doctorate. Interview questions focused on how participants saw themselves as an academic, how they became the kind of academic they are, critical incidents in their career, perceived personal and structural influences in their current role, what constrains and what enables teaching and research decisions, and their future aspirations.

This mixed methods approach is consistent with the critical realist perspective adopted for the study. Archer (2000) argues that it is through reflexive awareness of their sense of self that humans develop personal and social identity. By critically reflecting and engaging in commentaries on their concerns through internal conversations, individuals respond to nature, to practice and to society in ways designed to meet their personal objectives. Social structures and institutional discourses are interpreted variously as constraining or as enabling (Archer, 2007). Internal conversations, for Archer, are synonymous with reflexivity. She distinguishes four modes of reflexivity: (communicative; autonomous; meta reflexivity; and fractured reflexivity). We researched the internal conversations that academics have about the university and its role in their formation as researchers and teachers and analysed the modes of reflexivity that each employed.

Findings

This paper focuses on what we call the 'artisans'; those people who have not developed a recognised or 'accepted' research profile for research assessment purposes. Drawing on the questionnaire data we paint a picture of those people in terms of what they prioritise, how much work they do and what kind of work. This suggests that such people have different conceptions of research to their research-productive colleagues. Drawing on the interview data we discuss interviewees' narratives of career development and relationships to their universities. Using Archer's notions of reflexivity we suggest that using certain modes of reflexivity means that academic artisans may take approaches to their work which lead them to be less successful when it comes to decisions that are based on research outputs.

Our data suggest that this group are by no means 'lazy, unqualified or lacking the necessary skills to succeed' (de Sousa, 2003). On the contrary. These academics are the artisans in the university atelier; working to ensure its smooth running. From our questionnaire data it is clear that such people are hard-working and focused on aspects of university work that oil the wheels of the university. We find that their actions facilitate research capacity by not taking part in it, but instead by taking a larger share of undergraduate teaching and administration including, for example, leading courses, heading departments, taking up positions of responsibility, taking a greater role in

advising students and making curriculum changes. They tend to be good corporate citizens who are committed to the collective, often caring about student engagement and wellbeing, about how colleagues work together and working to ensure efficient functioning of their workgroup.

The paper draws the implications of these findings for university functioning, specifically for how university policy needs to shift if people whose careers do not take them down a research productive path can be fully recognised as making important contributions to the overall academic enterprise of the university.

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