

The paradoxes and pressures of trying to maintain academic professionalism in Higher Education

Introduction

As UK higher education (HE) becomes more marketised, with students often constructed as consumers of a commodified educational service (Nixon et al. 2016; Bunce et al. 2016), less attention has been paid to conceptualisations of the role of academics in this rapidly changing environment (Gill 2009; Hatzinikolakis & Crossman 2010). If the student is a consumer (Bay and Daniel 2001), then is the teaching academic a service provider, whose overriding priority is ensuring customer satisfaction? If so, what does this mean for academics and how do they respond? Equally, how do tensions between notions of student satisfaction and academic integrity manifest?

This study focuses on the neglected voice of academics in contemporary HE (Alvesson et al. 2008) by looking in detail at the meaning of their lived experiences. This includes how they perceive, experience and negotiate their interactions with students; whether they narrate a change in these relationships over time and how they construct their professional identity.

Literature Review

Many HEIs' marketing departments draw on service marketing literature to inform strategy. This emphasises maintaining service quality through good relationships between 'service provider' and 'customer' (Groth et al. 2009). Whilst some authors embrace such marketisation (e.g. Guilbault 2018; Woodall et al. 2014), others identify negative consequences to pedagogy. These include: students feeling entitled to consultation over how they are taught; entertained and protected rather than challenged (Bay & Daniel 2001) and wanting high grades without the effort (Clayson & Haley 2005); feeling that they have already bought the qualification (Delucchi & Korgen 2002). Asking students for feedback in a manner akin to the customer satisfaction surveys widely used in the private service sector, helps embed a view of consumers as sovereign, sometimes leading staff to modify their teaching (*ibid* 2002).

Empirical research in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) reflects the importance of attending to students' affective needs as part of successful pedagogy (Thompson et al. 2011). Factors like 'approachability' are of key importance and as such the relationship may become personalised, akin to 'mentoring' (HEA 2011). This affective dimension feeds into notions of emotional labour deriving from Hochschild's (1979; 1983) ground-breaking work on emotion in organisations. In their investigation of academics, Ogbonna & Harris (2004) found that labouring emotionally was equated with being professional and that implications of its growing importance include a potentially open-ended commitment on staff to maintain successful relationships with students, many of whom increasingly desire intimacy (Nixon et al., 2016). Berry and Cassidy (2013) note that emotional labour can be associated with stress, particularly when staff have to express emotions they don't feel or hide those they do; thus being required to be positive and supportive and hide frustration (Bellas 1999).

How far then are academics expected to labour emotionally either by management or students (or both) in order to meet 'customer' demands? With regard to academics' identities, changes have been hypothesised in the light of neoliberal reforms to HE. In addition to academics' differing views of the merits of seeing themselves as 'service providers', extant literature has focused on increases to their workloads (Hall & Bowles 2016); increasing demands on senior academic-managers (Grummell et al. 2009) and on the rigours of academic research (Emerald & Carpenter 2015). However, there has been little on academics' interactions with students and how these are conceptualised (Hagenauer & Volet 2014) and inform academic identities.

Method

In order to obtain rich, in-depth data on academics' lived experiences, interpretivist phenomenological interviews, at least one hour long, were conducted with 47 (to-date) academics. Participants were recruited from the researchers' professional networks from a range of disciplines (e.g. humanities; STEM; health) from both pre- and post-92 HEIs; with varying lengths of service; demographics and academic roles. This was in order to gain diversity and to offer as full an account as possible of the meanings of academics' experiences. The interviews were conversational in style and three researchers, themselves teaching academics, conducted them between May 2017 and July 2018. Data analysis follows Thompson et al's (1989; 1990) two-stage phenomenological interpretation process: an idiographic analysis of each narrative; followed by establishing 'global themes' across interviews.

Early Findings

This is currently based on early analysis and initial development of themes.

Dominant in the data, particularly for those with many years' experience, was a sense of increasing student demands and expectations, including for a more individualised experience. This theme reflects the need by staff to establish and maintain boundaries with students, and at times the struggles to do so. Establishing boundaries was particularly challenging for staff fulfilling pastoral roles, who noted increasing student need for support, coupled with mental health issues. Managing relationships with students, and the need to negotiate each party's role, formed part of another theme: the sense of a strong professional identity, including regulating emotions. This professionalism was also used to justify extra responsibilities as a form of 'self-exploitation'; that is being complicit in their increased workloads through a sense of what they feel they must do in the role. Their professional identity is also being shaped by their experiences of the demands and expectations of their institution with an apparent increase in the audit culture driven by managerialism and measurement. A final theme was their frequent recalling of an idealised version of academic work linked to their motivation for becoming an academic. This seemed to offset some of the personal effects of a pressured environment and helped retain a sense of the meaningfulness of academic work.

Concluding Remarks

Whilst the data interpretation is ongoing, it is clear that staff/student encounters are experienced as changing. New market pressures are reshaping what it means to be an academic. Staff are having to face the many paradoxes inherent in their quest to maintain some semblance of academic professionalism in contemporary HE characterised by their everyday experiences of being squeezed from top-down managerialism and from the bottom by rising student expectations, resulting in some uncomfortable compromises and new forms of academic labour.

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