The study

The project arose from an SRHE Donald Bligh funded workshop series on newer researchers in higher education. We began by problematising the concept of a newer researcher, recognising that this might take many forms, from those investigating higher education in the context of a doctorate or research project straight from a masters/first degree, to those who had worked in a higher educational context for many years (in an academic, administrative or blended role) but had only recently started conducting higher education research. We were interested in whether newer researchers in higher education were acquiring a degree of engagement and articulation with higher education policy and an awareness of the importance of such policy to their future lives and careers.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Higher education policies, whether transnational (e.g Bologna) national, regional or institutional, have for some time promoted a marketised view of higher education related to the development of more restricted, instrumental views of research and education (Henkel, 2004; Bok 2006, Docherty 2011, Collini 2012, Teixera and Dill 2011). As the massification of higher education has developed, more managerialist approaches to running universities have emerged (Deem et al 2007) and fresh dilemmas for university leaders have joined existing ones (Deem 2012). All this has had some dramatic effects on the academic profession (Locke and Bennion 2010). Changes in research funding practices by funding bodies and increased emphasis on research selectivity and audit within and across national boundaries have caused many researchers to adapt their practices (Lucas 2006, Kehm & Lanzendorf, 2006). Changes to HE policies influence the lives of experienced as well as newer researchers (Enders, 2004, Leisyte 2008), but whilst established researchers can often adapt to new circumstances and even benefit from changes to the academic profession (Musselein 2009, Bleikie 2012), it can be more challenging for new researchers to adapt their practices. Teelken (2012) notes the range of responses researchers at different levels have to the existence and effects of managerialism, which she places on a continuum from continuum professional pragmatism, symbolic compliance and formal instrumentality to rational resignation, though we felt this might over-emphasise negative responses. Additionally, newer researchers in HE in general may not be fully aware of policy changes within HE (Archer, 2008) or alternatively, continue to hold more traditional views of research and education despite having some awareness of policy shifts (Crossouard, 2010). It is also becoming evident that the effect of policies is experienced differently in terms of the roles that newer researchers hold, e.g. whether as students, researchers or new lecturers (McAlpine & Turner, 2011). At the same time, internationally mobility is becoming a key feature of academic careers (Kenway 2008, Kim 2009, Kim 2010) which means that researchers may have familiarity with policies in more than one (national) context. In the paper we also draw conceptually on work in schools by Ball, Maguire et al (2010, 2011) on policy actors and policy subjects, as we analyse the different responses to HE policy taken by our respondents.

Methodology

Our rationale was that we wanted our participants to self-identify as newer researchers in higher education . In gathering our 42 strong sample, we made use of the SRHE webpage, various European email lists of HE researchers, colleagues in other countries who sent emails to individuals they knew and current students and alumni of a professional doctorate programme in higher education. Consequently we generated a very varied sample in terms of geographical location, educational background and career history. We then drafted a qualitative semi structured interview protocol, piloted it and made slight modifications. After gaining ethical approval of the project from the University of Oxford, we set about doing our interviews, mainly by Skype or phone. Finally we carried out a thematic analysis of our interview data, cross-checking our analyses with each other. Themes included examples of the impact of policy on their own experience & research; whether policy had shaped their careers to date; if they felt able now, or in the future, to influence policy, whether they discussed policy with friends and colleagues and how they defined HE policy.

Outcomes

We noted the differential impact of international, national and regional HE policy on the experiences and career trajectories of newer HE researchers from different countries. We discerned considerable variation in the relationships of our respondents to policy. Some see themselves as actively translating what they want to do in terms of the policy so that they can gain access to resources, support their careers and in time shape policy itself (policy actors). By contrast, other respondents either see themselves as largely passively shaped by policy (policy subjects), particularly those who are completely new to HE, or were not very aware of policy developments. There was also some disjuncture between how some participants saw their own experience of policy and how they defined HE policy itself in a distant, men-in-suits, top-down way and indications of naivety of some participants' views of how to influence policies (e.g., if we give knowledge/evidence to policy makers, things will change). Other participants saw policy differently in relation to their practice and research – in their practice felt they were responding to the conditions created by policy; in their research felt they could contribute to policy. Finally, we also observed differences in career patterns between researchers from different countries. Those in the UK tended to come in via practice, whilst those outside the UK tended to be rooted in theory of the social sciences.

Conclusions and implications

We found a richer, more complex representation of the researcher relationship to policy than we had imagined but given some naïvete about how policy is formed, recommend that learning about the influence of policy on new researchers' work-life should be part of doctoral training. We also noted a lack of social science background and international mobility on behalf of some UK researchers compared with those from countries, which might affect perceptions of being or becoming a policy actor rather than a policy subject.

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