Trying to do the 'right' thing: Academics navigating ambiguous institutional policy environments relating to reasonable adjustments and mitigating circumstances for doctoral assessment

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores situations where academics attempt to act in alignment with their values within institutional policy areas which are characterised by considerable ambiguity. While some institutional processes are clearly established and consistently enacted, others may be characterised by inadequacy, opacity or sheer absence. This paper explores academics actions in relation to navigating the grey area of institutional policy of reasonable adjustments and mitigating circumstances for doctoral students. This paper emerges from an institutional case study of a UK Russell Group institution, drawing on data generated with doctoral students, supervisors, and departmental and central university leaders. The paper argues that, in situations where institutional processes seem inadequate, academics often attempt to 'do the right thing'. This paper considers the ethical possibilities of such informal action, while also unearthing the unevenness and ambivalence this can bring within large organisations.

Full paper

Introduction and literature review

Where formal provisions for 'structural compassion' or 'structural care' (Armstrong & Byrom, 2023, p. 1230) are lacking at higher education institutions (HEIs), academics sometimes use informal processes to influence outcomes in accordance with social justice values. Guided by their beliefs (Kendall, 207; Sandoval et.al., 2020) and working around institutional structures, academics who take responsibility in this way can be praised for getting on as best they can. However, there are ethical quandaries that arise in contexts where academics focus on 'doing the right thing', including questions of their competencies to act, and institutional parity.

In the UK, HEIs have legal obligations to make 'reasonable adjustments' (RAs) where a student and/or staff member who is disabled would be at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to someone who is not disabled. Mitigating circumstances (MCs) relate to, yet remain distinct from, RAs. For the purposes

of this paper, MCs refer to responses put in place for students who encounter 'significant personal difficulties that have a negative impact on a student's ability to study for or complete academic assessments' (Warwick University Mitigating Circumstances Policy, S2.1]. Circumstances eligible for mitigation will usually be unforeseen (e.g., a bereavement, serious illness, accident).

At undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels, there are often clear policies that set out how adjustments are considered and what adjustments can be made. However, due to their dual positioning as learners and researchers (who may also be university staff), and specificities of their degree and assessment (e.g. length, funding arrangements, viva voce), doctoral researchers often remain unrecognised within institutional policies and processes drawn up with other study levels in mind. Limited guidance (e.g. for supervisors, and doctoral students themselves) surrounding RAs and mitigation provisions (Bakelants et al, 2023; Valentine & Woodthorpe, 2020) can mean that institutions, at a structural level, risk compromising the research culture that underpins wellbeing and accessibility (Watson & Turnpenny, 2020, DSUK & Quinn, 2023).

The study

This paper emerges from an institutional case study (Harrison et al., 2017), focused on the enactment of RA and MC policies for doctoral students at one Russell Group university in the United Kingdom. Ethical approval for the study was granted by an appropriate University committee. The institutional case study included a literature review, and a policy review of institutional policies and guidance and a comparative review of policies for doctoral students at a sample of English universities. The empirical study involved semi-structured interviews (N=12) with university leaders whose roles relate to the topic under study, and seven focus group discussions with doctoral students (N=12), departmental leaders/administrators (e.g. directors of doctoral programmes and senior tutors, N=9), and doctoral supervisors (N=6). In addition, a smaller number of narrative interviews were conducted with doctoral graduates about their experiences of negotiating their viva while requiring RAs, allowing us to better understand the informal actions of academics in considerable detail.

Findings

Narrative interviews revealed a range of academics acting in accordance with their principles within an ambiguous policy environment. Our study reveals a high level of 'subterranean' adjustment, for example where supervisors, the examiners, and a viva chair agree on adjustments for a viva without involving other members of the department or following any formal procedures. Further examples included others (e.g. line managers) intervening to assist doctoral students requiring RAs when their supervisor did not advocate for them. Our interviews with key informant interviews revealed more about why the policy setting was such a 'grey area', including how the division of governance of 'research' and 'education' can lead to ambiguity regarding who is responsible for developing policy and guidance where gaps arise. Focus groups revealed a range of actors were unsure whether formal

processes applied to doctoral students, and how to enact given policies in the context of doctoral assessments.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that in situations of institutional policy ambiguity, academics step in using their own judgement to try and do the 'right' thing for individual doctoral students who may require mitigation or RAs. These practices arose in a context where a range of actors lacked sufficient awareness of how formal processes ought to be enacted. In acting in accordance with their own values and beliefs, academics can play an important role in nudging their institutions toward compassion and achieving fairer outcomes for individual students. At the same time, manoeuvring around formal processes to achieve adjustment or mitigation for doctoral students can also introduce uneven outcomes for learners across large institutions.

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