

## Editorial

### **Academic practice ... how is it changing? What are the implications for preparing research students and research staff as future academics?**

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*This special issue grew out of a Government-funded initiative in the UK, the formation of a number of five-year Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. One of these, focused on Preparation for Academic Practice, is directed at better understanding and supporting the development of doctoral students and contract research staff for academic careers<sup>1</sup>. This Centre, located at the University of Oxford, held its first conference in April 2007, and this*

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<sup>1</sup> We are mindful that not every PhD student or postdoc desires an academic career and that those who do may not necessarily attain one. Nevertheless, we believe that attending to preparation for academic practice is not detrimental to other career options, and that such a focus is necessary if we are to sustain the growth of knowledge and meet societal demands for higher education participation.

*special issue consists of papers contributed by conference participants.*

The nature of academic practice, and thus preparation for academic practice, is a relatively under-theorised area of research. Until recently, research into the nature of academia or academic work was rare. However, the landmark studies of Burton Clark (1987) “The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds”, and Tony Becher (1989), “Academic Tribes and Territories”, marked the beginning of a surge in popularity of this field of study, spurred by widespread changes in the higher education system:

"This uncommon profession was once relatively simple. In its medieval form, 6 to 8 centuries ago, it embraced only a few fields and a small clientele. The growth in knowledge that began to accelerate markedly in the 19th century and the expansion in student numbers that has been the hallmark of recent decades have led to large institutions and huge national systems that require a complex professoriate..." (Clark, 1987, p. xxi).

One aspect of academic practice highlighted in both studies is its strong disciplinary nature, with different fields marked by different academic cultures and expectations. In line with this, discipline-based programs of development for new academics and academics-in-training have increasingly been suggested as desirable (Austin & McDaniels, 2006) – in addition to more centralized ones. In this special issue,

programs and development perspectives from the Arts and Humanities (Saunders), Physical Sciences (Pritchard et al), Geography (Solem) and the Social Sciences (Mills) are presented, as well as international perspectives from the UK (Saunders, Mills and Pritchard et al), North America (Solem and McAlpine et al) and Australia (Åkerlind).

Much of the existing research into the nature of academic practice has arisen in response to pressures for change acting upon academia and higher education (Halsey, 1992; Schuller, 1995; Trowler, 1998; Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999; Cooper et al, 2002; Kayrooz et al, 2007). The substantial growth in student numbers and institutions of higher education referred to by Clark was largely a product of the research focus inspired by World War II and a concern with equity and the social benefits of education. However, this was followed by a widespread economic downturn in the 1970s and increasing concern with the economic and vocational benefits of education. Systems of higher education came under increasing economic pressures and constraints that continue today. Although student participation has continued to rise, not just at undergraduate but also at postgraduate levels (especially since the 1990s), there has been a fall in staff-student ratios, a rise in the number of contract and casual staff employed as academics, increasingly uncertain employment prospects for postgraduate students and postdoctoral researchers, and pressures on university resources and research funding.

Not surprisingly, these changes have been accompanied by a change in the sorts of activities considered appropriate

for academics to engage in and for universities to direct their resources towards. For instance, there has been a change in perceptions of the kind of knowledge that should be generated and transmitted as part of higher education. Universities and academics are expected to show increasing entrepreneurship in generating and attracting funding, and there has been much greater emphasis on the vocational relevance of university study, particularly in publicly funded universities, e.g., the Roberts agenda in the UK (HM Treasury, 2000). This has occurred within a context of ongoing exponential knowledge growth and technological advancements, facilitating the globalisation of higher education, with growing international competition (Slaughter and Leslie, 1995; Marginson, 2000).

Related changes in societal and governmental expectations of universities have also occurred, as we are called upon to engage with and contribute different kinds of knowledge to society (Gibbons, 1999). Associated with the increasing economic constraints and concerns, there has been a growing focus on accountability and evaluation of universities and academic performance. Universities are under increasing pressure to follow the agendas of various stakeholder groups, other than the traditional disciplinary and collegial stakeholders, including government, employers, professional bodies and student-clients (Marginson, 1997; 2007). Higher education is more and more frequently being referred to as an industry in a competitive market place.

In this environment, the traditional expectation that doctoral students and

postdoctoral researchers will learn about academic practice from their supervisors and 'on-the-job' is no longer appropriate. Indeed, given the extent of changes, senior academics' past experiences may well be misleading in providing guidance on career development. Furthermore, the preparation of doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers is increasingly distributed across a range of individuals and units outside the department, such as academic developers and careers advisers, and directed by national policies or societal concerns.

For instance, in the UK, a 1996 Government White Paper emphasised the need for more effective career management of contract research staff (CRS). This led to a Research Careers 'Concordat' between higher education institutions and research funding bodies, designed to provide a career management framework for CRS. As noted above, this was followed in 2000 by the Government-initiated Roberts Report, which recommended additional training for doctoral students as well as postdoctoral researchers, including those intending an academic career. This report led to Government funding for the development of broader professional and personal skills for doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers being funded by the UK Research Councils. The Research Councils agreed on a joint skills training statement for the PhDs and postdoctoral researchers they fund (Research

Councils UK, 2001). This requires 10 days training per year in personal and professional skills for each student, and provides some £500 per trainee to fund such training activities.

Within Australia, a 1994 government funded study of the casualisation of research postgraduate employment showed that the proportion of contract researchers in universities had increased from around 28% in 1980-84 to 62% in 1991-93 (Collins, 1994). Challenges associated with career advancement for contract researchers were further highlighted by a 1996 study commissioned by the Australian Research Council (ARC) -- Australia's primary research funding body -- on their research fellowship schemes (Marceau and Preston, 1996). The study showed that surprisingly few fellows went on to academic positions. To improve future academic employment prospects, the ARC subsequently introduced postdoctoral fellowships with a teaching and research option -- offered on a 75% ARC funding and 25% host institution funding basis. Holders of these fellowships spend a quarter of their time teaching or undertaking other academic duties. The 1998 government-initiated West report extended concerns with broadening the skills training of researchers to include doctoral students. A majority of Australian universities now offer generic capabilities programs for their PhD students (Borthwick and Wissler, 2003), though these do not necessarily address the specialised set of capabilities and skills required for academia.

In North America, since there are no mechanisms for national higher educational policies, initiatives originate through other means. In Canada, these have largely been driven by research funding councils as well as initiatives of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies – an association of Deans of Graduate Studies. For example, a national study of postdoctoral fellows in 1998 showed that 70% of respondents felt that they had not received sufficient counselling for career planning (Helbing et al, 1998). Nevertheless, it appears that relatively large numbers of doctoral graduates are continuing on to postdoctoral positions. Gluszynski & Peters (2005) in a study of PhD graduates in 2003-04 note that 34% planned on taking a postdoctoral fellowship. Whether or not, these individuals can expect a more positive experience of counselling for career planning than the earlier cohort remains unknown.

In the USA, the need for better preparation of doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers as future academics has been evident in the "Preparing Future Faculty" (PFF) initiative (<http://www.preparing-faculty.org/>) and the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID – <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/programs/index.asp?key=29>). The PFF initiative is a national program of support for preparation programs for doctoral students intending an academic career. Launched in 1993, it provided 10 years of funding for the development of academic career preparation programs within individual institutions. Ongoing support since 2003 has been provided in the form of program design guidelines and publications emanating from the

first 10 years, plus administrative support for ongoing and new programs. In 2002, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate arose as a response to widespread concerns about poor preparation of doctoral students for subsequent employment, both in academia and elsewhere. The initiative, which recently ended, was a program of research and action aimed at improving doctoral education in American universities through work at the departmental level (Golde & Walker, 2006). It was premised on the idea of developing 'stewards of the discipline'. Nevertheless, a recent report based on a national survey of social science PhD graduates calls for better career preparation and better support for learning to manage careers (Nerad et al, 2006).

Changes such as these highlight the need for greater consideration of how best to prepare today's doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers for future careers – and to better understand their perspectives on what they are experiencing. This special issue contributes to addressing that need in terms of preparation for academic careers.

In this issue, we see four different ways in which disciplines can engage preparation for academic practice. The paper by Michael Solem describes a national program of professional development in graduate geography in the USA, and could be conceived as representing Austin & McDaniel's (2006) idea of *disciplinary organizations* playing an integral role. The paper by Pritchard et al describes an *institutionally-based* program for UK graduate students in the physical

sciences which arose out of the Robert's funding and UK Research Council's skills statement. The paper by Saunders is also situated within a discipline (Philosophy and Religious Studies), but in a unique UK structure – one of the Higher Education Academic Subject Centres – *national disciplinary units* created to provide support for teaching development. Saunders describes a program that enables doctoral students to develop cross-institutional networks. David Mills' paper is written from the perspective of *disciplinary doctoral students* in the social sciences who undertook their own development and illustrates the impact on doctoral training of UK Government and Research Council policy through the actions of the Economic and Social Science Research Council. These papers raise interesting questions about the extent to which development may be 'owned' and taken up by different disciplinary stakeholders – just as inter-disciplinarity is becoming a feature of canonical policy discourse and funding priorities!

The papers by Åkerlind and McAlpine et al are directed at documenting the perspectives of those engaged in preparing for academia. Drawing on a questionnaire survey and interviews with postdoctoral researchers in Australia, Åkerlind challenges a number of common assumptions about the nature of postdoctoral research positions as preparation for academic careers. Based on the analysis of Canadian doctoral students' reporting of a week's activities, McAlpine et al explores the activities that doctoral students describe as contributing to the feeling of being an academic or belonging to an academic community. Both papers raise issues about the nature of upcoming

academics' experiences of being prepared for academic practice (including developmental support).

As the international representation of contributions to this special issue illustrates, preparation of research students and postdoctoral researchers for academic (and other) careers is an international concern. Many of the papers arise out of a response to the national initiatives described earlier, reflecting a mixture of common as well as disparate cross-national concerns. A common response to the issue of career preparation for PhDs and postdocs has been to emphasize skills training, often in an unintegrated manner. However, we contend that preparation for academic practice is more than the accumulation of a set of skills. For instance, in separate studies we, the editors of this special issue, have highlighted the key role played by values and moral purpose in academic practice (McAlpine & Hopwood, 2006), and underlying intentions and purpose in growing and developing as an academic (Åkerlind, 2005). We contend that a focus on personal meaning and purpose acts to integrate different aspects of academic practice, providing a holistic perspective on academic work.

Lastly, we would like to highlight the complexity of academic practice. One thing that the papers in this special issue demonstrate is that academic work is highly diverse. We would thus argue that when considering preparation for academic practice we need to think carefully about the complexity of academic work, in order to ensure that such preparation flexibly embodies the range of possibilities.

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