How is sector change in UK universities impacting on the occupational stress levels and well-being of academics?

Bernadette Ryan

Working Paper

Abstract — *This essay is an exploration into feelings of stress, anxiety and powerlessness amongst professionals in Higher Educational Institutions. This paper draws on research that helps to define and identify what is meant by stress and anxiety. It then attempts to capture current issues within the higher education sector and offer some reasons as to why stress amongst academics is on the increase. The discussion then moves onto different interpretations of how academics respond to the transformational changes they are experiencing. Related to this, different paradigms are suggested for interpreting the phenomenon of New Public Management (NPM).*

Author: Ryan, B. Department HROB, University of Greenwich Business School, Park Row, Greenwich, London SE10 9LS, e-mail: rb18@greenwich.ac.uk, tel: +44 20 8331 9984

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1. Introduction

This essay will explore the causes and impacts of increased levels of stress in professional academics working within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Work intensification, loss of professional autonomy, erosion of terms and conditions of service and an uncertain internal and external environment have led to higher levels of stress and anxiety, worry and fear for employees within the university sector (Pop-Vasileva et al 2011). The literature will attempt to identify the triggers for stress and anxiety; how individuals respond to this and the long term impact on health, wellbeing and role identity.

This paper begins by defining what is meant by stress and anxiety followed by a discussion of organisational change in the current and emerging HE sector. Finally, the paper reviews the impact of transformational change on the professional within the sector.

2. Definitions of Stress and Anxiety

It is difficult to offer a definitive description of stress and anxiety because it is multifaceted and dependent on individual perceptions. Literature quite rightly differentiates between stress and anxiety. The Health and Safety Executive's formal definition of stress is 'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work.' It is recognized that stress is multifaceted and dependent on individual perceptions. The National Institution for Clinical Excellence (NICE) defines anxiety as 'excessive worry about a number of events associated with heightened tension.' Hans Seyle (1946) pioneered early studies of stress resulting in the General Adaptation Syndrome. Although this model failed to recognise the cognitive and individualistic aspect of stress the framework became a reference for further research.

Cherry (1978) makes the point that early studies of stress indicated that individuals who were more prone to anxiety would avoid work that placed them in stressful situations, so for example, compulsory enlistment placed people into employment that did not suit their personality type. The paper does not explore what happens when the personality is relatively consistent but the job changes radically as can be seen in many public sector jobs. Her longitudinal study established personality type and susceptibility to stress and anxiety before the subjects were exposed to working environments. The findings demonstrated that work stressors are additive to, and independent of, the susceptibility of the worker to anxiety. Differences in emotional resilience does not account for responses to demanding workloads. Cherry (1978:268) discusses high level jobs that 'are characterized by job tasks involving identifiable personal responsibility which lead, through fear of failure, sense of urgency, or some other psychological mechanism, to reported strain.'

Personality characteristics are widely acknowledged as a contributor to work based anxiety. Payne et al (1982) cite Spielberger (1975) who identified trait anxiety, which is fairly stable and state anxiety, which can be transitory and idiosyncratic to particular situations. Redfield & Stone (1979) in Payne et al (1982) suggested that stressful events may be rated in different ways by different individuals indicating that the properties of life-stress are both multidimensional and specific for individuals. Payne et al (1982) cite many triggers for feelings of stress at work including the physical conditions, role ambiguity and role conflict. They offer an interactionist approach to measuring anxiety at work, which looks at the person, the interaction involving the person, the situation, and the mode of response. Their model offers twenty situations that may trigger stress such as being disciplined, being off work for an official reason and attending meetings with superiors. They list eight responses felt such as emotions interfering with ability to do the job, feeling tense and wanting to get out of the situation.

Caplan and Jones (1975:714) investigated the effects of workload, role ambiguity, and type A personality on stress, anxiety, depression, and heart rate. 'Role ambiguity exists when a person does not know what is expected of him or her for adequate performance of a role or task demand.' They were interested in the interaction between job demands and personality type. Their paper distinguishes between objective and subjective work strain explaining that objective work strain can be measured independently and subjective work strain is based on self reports and self perception. They found that both objective and subjective increases in work demands both have an adverse effect on psychological well being (PWB). They looked at substantive workload increases and role ambiguity and the effect on PWB. 'Role ambiguity exists when a person does not know what is expected of him or her for adequate performance of a role or task demand.' (Caplan and Jones, 1975:714). They found that when

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a stressful event happens (in their research the shutdown of computer systems during a crucial exam period) three distressing feelings were experienced. Resentment was experienced even though there was no specific person to feel resentment towards. Anxiety was experienced in anticipation of a period of uncertainty and to a lesser degree depression was experienced although this is normally experienced following an event.

Doby and Caplan (1995) discussed peoples concern for their reputation and how any sense of reputational damage leads to low self-esteem and poor PWB. They cite Jackson & Dutton (1988) who suggest that employees are threatened by personal loss, negativity, threat to self-esteem, and control by powerful others. Doby and Caplan (1995:1120) identified anxiety triggers such as lack of feedback, role overload, role ambiguity and lack of control. Their conclusions were that 'organisational stressors that threaten employee reputation can have negative consequences for emotional well-being that extend beyond the workplace.'

3. Sector Change in The Higher Education context

New Public Management (NPM) is a term used to capture the plethora of attitudes and techniques imported from the private sector into the public sector in order to ensure efficiencies and cost savings (Pop-Vasileva et al 2011). This development in public policy reduces autonomy for the academic and gives considerable managerial control over what has been a powerful group of professionals (Farrell and Morris 2010). Commercialisation of public services, the introduction of market forces and an almost evangelical zest for running public services using private sector organisational and management techniques have placed conflicting and mutually incompatible demands on academics in UK universities (Bush, 2007). New funding regimes have devolved budgets to universities and along with that comes a vast armory of new targets, dashboards, key performance indicators (KPIs) and so

forth. The message is that failure to meet targets will eventually lead to restructuring and job losses as 'failing' departments close or merge. Devolved budgets do not by any means bestow autonomy (Farrell and Morris 2010 cite John and Hoyle 1998). Previously the management of academic staff has, broadly speaking, been light touch. The new regime warns of performance management that focuses predominantly on target setting and accountability.

Heckscher (1994) argues that the post bureaucratic university limits the use of intelligence by employees because it slots people into predefined roles and locates leadership, direction and strategy at the top of the organisation. This model of power and control was originally championed by Taylor (1911:37) 'The managers assume, for instance, the burden of gathering all the traditional knowledge, which in the past had belonged to the workmen, and then of classifying, tabulating and then of reducing this knowledge to rules, laws and formula.'

Simmons (2002) researched performance management in universities and is sympathetic to the view that academics should be performance managed because the sector is in receipt of public funds and must therefore be accountable. However, he suggests a stakeholder performance management system as opposed to current models that stifle innovation and creativity. The public sector has seen a strengthening of regulatory control and adherence to external audits and scrutiny. 'Conditions found to inhibit creativity include: working in an overly controlled environment governed by rigid procedures, low levels of individual autonomy and the use of surveillance' (Goodall,2012:431).

4. The impact of NPM and sector change on levels of stress amongst academics

Winefield (2000) in Gillespie et al (2001:54) found 'Research on stress among academic and general staff of universities from across the globe indicates that the phenomena of occupational stress in universities is alarmingly widespread and increasing.' Karasek (1979) in Winefield and Jarrett (2001) use a 'Demand-Control' theory of job stress to argue that traditionally universities have been low stress environments because although the jobs are demanding they offer high control. Tenure traditionally guaranteed academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Pop-Vasileva et al (2011:2) researched work attitudes amongst Australian academics where the HE environment is very similar to that of the UK and found that transformational change in academia had placed increased pressures on academics with growing concerns about the increased stress associated with academic work, decreases in job satisfaction, and an overall unfavourable outlook of academics towards their jobs. They cite Stiles (2004) who claims that a growing number of managers in HEIs have adopted a hegemonist style of management previously more suited to the corporate world. This managerialism is a direct threat to academic freedom. However, the concept of freedom of speech is in itself controversial and difficult to define. Menend (1996:3) defines academic freedom (different to academic freedom of speech) as 'socially engineered spaces in which parties engage in specified pursuits enjoy protection from parties who would otherwise naturally seek to interfere in those pursuits'. He argues that freedom is a social construction derived from coercion. The social construction of freedom means that the borders are constantly threatened by other parties who would like to restrict that freedom in order to enhance their own freedom. In times of stressful change academic freedom becomes more illusory as it locks heads with institutional practices. The academic as professional recoils from the idea of external

interference from governments and clings to self regulation and regulation from peers. Dworkin (1996) argues that freedom for academics is symbolic of a general freedom, loss of it leaves us exposed to market forces and state intervention but protecting it is elitist and morally questionable in an egalitarian society. Nixon (2001) suggests that for academics it is a ruse to protect self interests, is self referential and inward looking. He cites Rorty (1996) who argues that academics have been insulated from public opinion and politics. In a democracy freedom of speech is a right for all so what is special about academic freedom of speech?

Chandler et al (2002) examines the human cost of NPM. They cite Hood (1995) who identifies seven key areas of change in universities in England, greater disaggregation, enhanced competition, private sector management practices, stress on discipline, hands on management, explicit performance management standards and attempts to control pre-set output measures. Chandler et al (2002) trace this new managerialism to the Jarratt Report (1985) where universities are redefined as corporate enterprises and levels of stress amongst staff begins to increase. Their research found that academics and administrative staff found the harsh managerialism and competitive culture threatening. There is a pervasive covert threat of job losses and unemployment which are considerable stressors (Eyer and Sterling,1977 cited in Chandler et al, 2002). Employees accepted increases in their workloads to mitigate against the threat of unemployment. Work became more mechanistic with features of the assembly line and mass production rather than an academic institution. These new practices impacted particularly on women as it became more difficult to manage work and domestic responsibilities. NPM need not be implemented by macho management but even when it is done humanely it causes distress. Chandler et al (2002:1065) found examples of resistance to managerialism but resistance in itself becomes stressful and provokes anxiety.

Staff become 'engaged in emotional struggle, sometimes to control colleagues, sometimes to support them – in an attempt to preserve vestiges of collegiality in the face of pressure to change.'

Slaughter (1990) describes management by stress in her paper researching Japanese management techniques in factories based in California. Similarities with current and emerging practices in HEIs are quite striking with the erosion of terms and conditions of service and the rhetoric around competitiveness between HEIs and HEI departments. She argues that this is much more to do with shifting management/union relations in favour of management and controlling human beings than in actually increasing productivity. She describes a flashing light system of red, amber and green where a green light indicates performing well, amber a warning and red indicates non-performance. Management do not aspire to all green lights because that means the workforce are not being stretched. It is better to have amber lights flashing because then the workforce is under strain and stress. Her studies are based in the automobile industry but these are exactly the same sorts of measures we now see in academia. A dashboard with an attached system of KPIs showing red, amber and green lights has been introduced to HEIs. The system is used to highlight failing departments and to warn them of the dangers of not performing in a competitive environment. Increasingly meetings and school boards are used as opportunities to name and shame any department that does not show a green light.

5. Alternative paradigms to NPM and stress levels amongst academic staff
Ollin (2005) challenges the idea that educators are victims of hegemonic managerialism. Amongst other authors, she cites Ball (2001) as typical of a genre of thought that casts lecturers as passive and demoralised in the face of overwhelming bureaucratic power and

control. She acknowledges mass collective resistance but her interest is in covert resistance by individuals. Ollin (2005) contrasts two views of power hegemonic, which she associates with Gramsci (cited 1971) and organic which she associates with Foucault (cited 1997). Their similarity, argues Ollin, is that both interpretations of power allow for individual resistance. Subversive individual acts of resistance should not be dismissed as futile but should be recognised as part of an ideological struggle even if the resistor would not recognise it as such. This interpretation of individual resistance takes literature that judges individual resistance as anemic and transforms it into something much more significant.

Ollin (2005) views change in the education sector as complex and fluid. She argues it is aligned with the Foucauldian concept of power located in networks of relations (Foucault, 1997 cited in Ollin). She contrasts the traditional adversarial model of change management with what she calls a contemporary processual, cultural change model where conflict ensures all perspectives are encompassed and compromises are made. The processural model sees power more evenly distributed than in the traditional bi-polar models of strategic management. Worthman (2008) supports the view that dominant discourses in large organisations are rare. Worthman (2008:448) cites Brookfield (2001), 'Dominant discourses inevitably support existing power structures and are vital to them'. Brookfield continues that the dominant worldview must be held in common by all participants who must obey the rules of the dominant group. Jeremy Bentham's panoptican is a useful metaphor for the current sense amongst academics that they are monitored and observed. Any failure to meet a target or to see targets as insignificant is considered delinquent or inadequate. Worthman (2008) argues that absolute disciplinary power is very rare and cannot always dominate in the face of other discourses and other figured worlds. He cites Bakhtin (1963, 1975, 1979, 1986) who

claims that alternative discourses are essential for the development of identity and as a challenge to dominant discourses.

Brodkin (2011) explores how organisations negotiate top down imposed social policies in street level organisations. Tactics at street level are not defined as compliance or resistance but are the results of influences felt within the organisation and within the agent. They produce informal ways of working and implementing policy. Dawson (1994) also acknowledges different loci of power when implementing policy.

Lipsky (1980) proposed that government policy had unintended consequences when implemented at 'street level'. Public service workers have unrealistic demands placed upon them and therefore resort to ad hoc decisions in order to process impossible workloads. Systems and procedures more suited to manufacturing and mass production are imposed on public services and employees find coping strategies that frequently disadvantage the service user. Lipsky describes a clientele who are low income and non-voluntary so the similarity with universities fails on that point but parallels can be seen in the way governments impose policies, funding has reduced and institutional capacity is stretched. Thomas and Johnson (1991) tested Lipsky's work in their study of professional workers in a large urban hospital. Their findings differed in some areas such as professionals felt responsible for all aspects of their jobs rather than 'segments' as suggested by Lipsky. Employees also enjoyed the intrinsic work itself.

However, Thomas and Johnson (1991) reported that as jobs became more complex professionals found their values were in conflict with institutional policies and performance targets. Professionals also reported that they were under resourced and this prevented them

doing their job well. Even if resources increased, the demand for the service grew at an even faster pace. The professionals did not think they were valued by the public and they lacked pride in their jobs. Professional workers reported conflicting goals, oppressive workloads and 'an environment where pervasive rules limit employee influence over decisions. As their "reward," these professionals find neither their employer nor their own jobs accorded much respect in the communities where they live.' (Thomas and Johnson, 1991:10).

Obholzer and Roberts (1994) discuss managing social anxieties in organisations. They use a psychoanalytical paradigm to argue that institutions contain our anxieties about death and annihilation. Society deposits our fears about survival into large public services including the education system. Educational establishments can never meet these unrealistic expectations so there is an abundance of displacement activities. For example, Higher Education league tables measure key performance indicators, which in many ways are easier to manage than the more daunting challenge of giving students the skills to survive in life. It is paramount that all workers adhere to these organisational beliefs because deviancy unconsciously threatens the survival of the organisation in a very real life/death way. Obholzer and Roberts (1994) argue that this group phenomena is held in place because it allows us to deal with anxiety by ignoring it but if it could be addressed the workplace would become healthier and more productive.

Vigoda-Gadot and Meisier (2010) tackle the question of feelings and emotions in the public sector by drawing on the emotional intelligence literature. We are reminded that public administration is based on rationality, logic and systematic thinking. They make the case for the inclusion and acknowledgement of feelings and emotions in the workplace. They argue that bureaucratic organisations were constructed using a scientific approach to decision-

making but one actually finds that much of the activity in the bureaucracy is 'random, experienced-based, intuitive, improvised, or spontaneous' (Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler, 2010:72 cite Sharkansky and Zalmanovitch 2000). They claim that healthy emotional constructs add to job satisfaction and work performance. The central proposal of the research is that using emotions and feelings as part of the decision making process in organisational life, far from being counterproductive, actually improves the quality of public service. They suggest an holistic and human public domain.

Pop-Vasileva at al (2011) report that the literature to date supports the view that academics with perceived high levels of organisational support have higher levels of job satisfaction, lower stress levels and are more likely to stay in post. However, their research was limited to a comparison between the accounting and science disciplines where work attitudes differ between the disciplines.

6. Conclusions

The NPM literature widely agrees with the central premise that private sector organisational and management techniques have been grafted onto the public sector. The literature on anxiety, stress and PWB is agreed on the fact that anxiety and feelings of stress are unique to individual workers however, work stressors are also objective and measurable. There are clear commonalties in what triggers stress responses and much of the literature agrees on stressors such as role ambiguity, loss of control and fear of powerful others. The literature is divided on how academics are responding to NPM. Although there is consensus that academics are increasingly disillusioned and conflicted about their role in universities the meaning of their responses is conflicted. Authors such Farrell and Morris (2010), Heckscher

(1994) argue that committed educators are withdrawing from the dominate discourse. There is a strong sense of disempowerment and futility in the face of new government agendas and managerialism. The target culture is resented and gives rise to strong feelings of anxiety and persecution. Academics feel the environment is divisive and punitive and they have little sense of agency. There is a concern that meetings have become a waste of time as debate and the exchange of ideas is replaced by downward communication; target setting and directives from management. Academics that have been tasked with contributing to the REF feel under intense pressure and have become stressed and unhappy as they attempt to juggle teaching, administration, research and home life.

Others, such as Ollin (2005) suggest that resistance by academics is pervasive and is positively contributing to the debate on policy. Lipsky (1980) and Brodkin (2011) discuss the 'street level bureaucrat' who stealthily reclaims power from central government.

I would argue that whether educators are victims of powerful discourses and hegemonist managerialism or street level bureaucrats all scenarios create stress and anxiety amongst workers. The pressure to manage image at work, protect reputations and at a primary basic need, to keep our jobs has led to an underground swell of academics who suffer fear, stress and anxiety in silence.

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