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Erosion of temporal and spatial boundaries and the 21st century academic

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Summary:

In this paper, we reflect upon the ways in which academic lives have, and continue to be, stretched and blurred within and across temporal and spatial boundaries and the implications this has for academic working practices and academic identity. The emergent themes discussed are drawn from two longitudinal studies being conducted in the UK higher education sector. The first involves an in-depth ethnographic study of location-independent working practices (LIW), and the second a qualitative study exploring the experiences of part-time and full-time doctoral students. Preliminary findings suggest this has lead academics to adopt working practices aimed at ameliorating contradictory organisational, professional and temporal demands in an attempt to reconcile conflicting priorities and multiple identities.

Track: Identity

Word count: 1,506 (excluding references)

Context of the Research:

Set against the backdrop of an increasingly performance-led managerialist public sector landscape, academic working practices are examined through the lens of labour process theory (LPT). The emergent themes discussed are drawn from on-going longitudinal studies being conducted by the co-authors. Firstly an in-depth ethnographic study of location-independent-working (LIW) practices in a post 1992 UK university business school and secondly, a longitudinal qualitative study into the experiences of part time and full time doctoral students working and studying in university business schools across the UK. Our research explores how the practices and contexts of the case study universities and the wider higher education sector are affecting, and in turn being affected by, the experiences and working practices of academics. Furthermore, how, and in what ways, does this affect their working relationships and sense of academic identity?

The nature of academic work has always involved a certain level of spill-over from work to home and therefore, across spatial and temporal boundaries (Henkel 2005; Anderson 2006). However, this has been exacerbated by the relentless drive towards achievement of corporate performance targets (Parker and Jary 1995). For example: high-ranking publications; research impact; income generation; high quality teaching and learning; enhanced student experience and exceptional levels of student satisfaction (Ogbonna and Harris 2004; Anderson 2006; Winter 2009). It has been argued this has implications for the way in which academics manage and adapt their ways of working in order to "*carve out time and space in the managerial university*" Anderson (2006: 578). We suggest that tensions arising from conflicting time perspectives are exacerbated by the structural changes taking place in higher education and this has implications for the way in which the academic profession, and thus academic identity is evolving (Lee et al. 2014). Furthermore, conflict is caused as academics attempt to reconcile the corporate identity required by the institution, with their own sense of academic professional identity, which is often at odds with managerial expectations (Winter 2009).

Henkel (2005) argues that academic identities are developed and maintained as a result of shared values, shared meaning and sense making, which occur at both an individual and collective level. However, the growth in performance dependent institutions has lead to greater control over the academics within them, thus weakening individual sense of academic identity (Henkel 2005). According to Menzies and Newson (2007) one of the ways in which academics attempt to manage these conflicting priorities is an increasing use of technology. However, other writers suggest this has the potential to extend working time and connectivity even further (Wilson 2004; Lal and Dwivedi 2008; Leonardi et al 2010). Interviews carried out by Menzies and Newson (2007), revealed a paradox in that whilst technology allowed academics to feel more connected in a national and global sense, they felt more isolated at a local level. Furthermore, whilst they judged their productivity levels had increased, it was claimed this was at the expense of creativity. This example provides a useful illustration of the way in which the academic labour process is being played out in contemporary university settings.

Preliminary Findings

Both studies utilised a qualitative multiple-methods research design incorporating in-depth loosely structured interviews, participant diaries and monthly reflective accounts. In addition, the first author kept (and continues to keep) a detailed reflective research journal which enabled her to record and reflect upon her own, and others', observations of the practice of LIW and its consequences, as well as experiences of working within contemporary academe.

Findings from our preliminary studies reveal that academics are now more than ever knowingly, and to some extent willingly, prepared to endure excessive work and study pressures in order to survive and progress in this neoliberal corporate environment (Mills; Trehan and Stewart 2014). Nevertheless, instances of academic resistance and subversion have been observed as academics seek to protect, and possibly strengthen, their sense of academic identity (Lee et al. 2014). In comparison to those working in other occupations, academics do retain a certain level of freedom in terms of how, when, and where they choose to work. In the case of LIW academics this working pattern was seen as a way of taking control and legitimising the choice of where and when to work, even if this choice was not exercised, as one LIW participant commented "*I would say about 80% of my work takes place on the university site, it's more about I have the right to do things elsewhere, it just gives me flexibility even if I never use it.*" (Lee et al. 2014: 437).

Notwithstanding, the persistent drive towards corporate managerialism has resulted in conflicting priorities for academics as they attempt to reconcile multiple identities. (Hood 2000; Deem and Brehony 2005; Winter 2009). We suggest this has repercussions for the academic labour process and arguably has led to the removal of, or at least limited the opportunities for, academics to just take time out in order to think and reflect (Menzies & Newson, 2007). In turn, this can lead to the adoption of working practices, which, whilst chosen in an attempt to ameliorate contradictory organisational and temporal demands, may have a detrimental impact upon the quality of teaching, of research and thus the performance and careers of academics.

Concluding remarks

Set within the context of an increasingly managerialist, performance-led landscape of academe, academic lives are now, more than ever, stretched across temporal and spatial boundaries. As we have discussed, this has implications for academics as they attempt to reconcile contradictory, conflicting priorities and multiple identities. These are themes we would like to explore further with delegates at the conference and we are keen to share experiences with, and gain feedback from, others who work in this field. Our research offers a micro-level, in-depth exploration of what it is to be an academic in the 21st century and as such offers a valuable contribution to extant knowledge in this area. As an outcome of this research, both authors have published papers in peer reviewed journals and produced a book chapter focusing specifically on the experiences of academic employees undertaking part-time doctoral studies. Analysis of our empirical data continues and by the time of the conference we will be in a position to present more detailed findings.

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