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The governance and management of Higher Education in 'mature' Higher Education systems: the United King- dom

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United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

The UK academic profession is differentiated along a series of interlocking lines; key among them institutional type, job status (grade and full- or part-time), discipline, age, gender, ethnicity and nationality (Brennan, Locke & Naidoo, 2007). So the conditions and experience of a professor of science at a research-intensive university is quite different to that of a part-time humanities lecturer on a fixed-term, teaching-only contract at an ex-polytechnic (Post-1992 university) or college of higher education. But there have been transformations in governance and management of higher education in the last decade and a half that are common to all 169 institutions in the four nations of the UK, including: increased accountability and measurement of performance, management principles derived from the private sector, corporate-style governance arrangements, quasi-marketisation and internationalisation, the weakening of professional authority and the growth of administrative and management personnel. In this changing context, the CAP study throws light on the diverse impacts of these developments on an already differentiated profession. This brief paper highlights the areas where the UK departs significantly from the other countries represented in these symposia (both mature and emerging/expanding) and begins to explore patterns and possible explanations for these.

2. Findings from the initial analysis of UK survey data

Overall Satisfaction

From the data presented to the symposia, job satisfaction amongst UK academics appears to be low with only 44 percent of respondents describing their overall satisfaction with their current job as high or very high. Although the UK has the lowest rating among the countries considered here, 83 percent of UK academics rate their job satisfaction from medium to very high. 17 percent of participants rate their job satisfaction as low or very low, a figure which has actually decreased since 1992 by 10 percent. However, more respondents in 1992 rated their job satisfaction as high or very high (49%). Male academics appear more dissatisfied with their current position, with 24 percent rating their overall satisfaction as low or very low compared to only 11 percent of females. Academics in older, Pre-1992 universities seem to be more polarised than those in ex-polytechnics and colleges of higher education, with higher proportions of responses either side of the mid-point (Locke, 2008).

Responses to statements about the academic career support these findings, with academics from the UK more likely than those from other countries to agree with assertions that: 'This is a poor time for any young person to begin an academic career in my field', 'If I had to do it over again, I would not become an academic' and 'My job is a source of considerable personal strain'. There has also been an increase in the percentage of academics agreeing with these statements since 1992, most noticeably with regards to the second of these statements, 'If I had to do it over again, I would not become an academic', which increased by 15%. In line with the trend described above, male academics were more inclined to agree or strongly agree with these statements in 2007 as the table below illustrates. Respondents in Pre-1992 universities were less negative than those in other types of higher education institutions.

Figure 1. Attitudes to the academic career (2007)

	Male	Female
<i>This is a poor time for any young person to begin an academic career in my field</i>	55.6%	44.8%
<i>If I had to do it over again, I would not become an academic</i>	34.3%	21.1%
<i>My job is a source of considerable strain</i>	54.3%	51.5%

Interestingly, this pessimism amongst UK academics echoes the responses given to a number of other questions in the survey. These are discussed in the remaining sections.

Work Conditions and Activities

The percentage of academics perceiving conditions in higher education to have improved since they joined the profession is relatively low (16%) in the UK when compared to the other countries participating in these symposia. However, among *all* the CAP countries, there are several with similarly low or lower ratings, including Australia and Germany. 62 percent of UK academics perceive conditions to have deteriorated; 64% of male academics and 60% of female academics. Interestingly, despite these feelings of dissatisfaction, perceptions of particular facilities, resources and personnel have generally improved since 1992, except with regards to secretarial support. Respondents' evaluations suggest an overall decline in Pre-1992 universities, a general improvement in Post-1992 universities and a mixed picture in HE colleges and institutions that have more recently become universities. In addition, the average number of hours worked by UK academics is lower than all other countries participating in the study, with the exception of Brazil. This number has dropped since the study was conducted in 1992, from 42 hours to 39 hours. Whilst the number of hours spent on teaching appears reduced, those spent on activities described as *service* or *other academic activities* have increased.

From the data presented here, it appears that respondents' affiliation to their institution has declined dramatically, but this should be treated with some caution because of a difference in the way the answers were labelled in the UK survey. Certainly, academics appear less attached to their department and especially their institution than to their discipline, and this confirms previous findings. Moreover, this balance of affiliation is more pronounced in the 2007 survey than in 1992 and stronger in the UK than in other countries. However, careful analysis reveals these differences are not as pronounced as the raw data at first suggest. Also, in comparison with the ten other countries featured here, the UK has the highest percentage of academics who consider their interests to lie primarily in research (26%), and this has increased by 11% since 1992.

Governance and Management

After Japan (63.9%), the UK (43.9%) has the highest average percentage of academics who regard faculty (boards and individuals) as having primary influence over the range of decisions included in the survey. Generally, academics in the UK feel faculty influence has increased since 1992. However, when the relevant figures are disaggregated, it is clear that, apart from research and international linkages, the primary influence lies with faculty committees and boards rather than individuals. Areas where academics are not the prime influence include 'Determining the overall teaching load of faculty', where academic unit managers appear to have most say, and 'Selecting key administrators' and 'Determining budget priorities', where institutional managers hold sway. Indeed, academics perceive themselves as having little personal influence in helping

to shape key academic policies. Since 1992 there has been a considerable reduction in the percentage of UK respondents who feel they have personal influence at the department (27%), faculty (13%) or institutional level (3%). This is almost certainly related to their patterns of affiliation, described above.

Academics in the UK appear to be fairly critical of the management of their institution with only 23 percent of respondents agreeing that top-level administrators provide competent leadership. Only a third (33%) of UK respondents agreed that the administration supports academic freedom. This is by far the lowest percentage of all the countries participating in the study. Nevertheless, only a minority (36%) of participants regard lack of faculty involvement as a real problem and only 30 percent agree that students should have a stronger voice.

3. Discussion and conclusions

Overall, this segment of the UK survey paints a rather bleak picture of the country's academic profession, with relatively low levels of satisfaction in comparison with others in the study, and a decline since the 1992 survey. There may be a number of reasons for this, not least the fact that the earlier survey was undertaken on the eve of the abolition of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities and during a significant expansion in student intake, when hopes and aspirations for constructive change may have been high. In the interim, however, funding per student declined for most of the period, individual academic freedom has come under continued pressure from the assessment and closer management of teaching and research, and the further concentration of research funding in fewer, 'research-intensive', universities has forced the majority to diversify and contract with the state for small additional financial allocations in return for meeting the latter's particular policy goals. On the other hand, the 2007 survey was completed in the wake of a three-year pay settlement and an agreement on re-grading, resulting in salary increases of as much as 12%. The survey also suggests that the average number of hours worked has dropped and that perceptions of the facilities, resources or personnel needed to support individual work have improved.

So, the majority of individual UK academics appear to be in retreat: *away from* increased management pressure to perform and be accountable, the complexities of operating within expanding institutions, cumbersome bureaucracy and reduced individual influence at all levels; and *to* the attractions of their discipline, research which is still focused on personal interest, or service and other academic activities for those who are no longer defined as 'research active' – and, of course, criticism of those in charge of institutions. But, for the minority of those who attain senior and mid-tier positions within 'the managed academy', these developments may create new opportunities for professional renewal.

References

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