

## **Australian early career researchers negotiating the ‘culture change’ of higher education reform**

Eva Bendix Petersen  
School of Humanities, Communications and Social Sciences  
Monash University  
[eva.petersen@arts.monash.edu.au](mailto:eva.petersen@arts.monash.edu.au)

### **Abstract:**

Situated within the conceptual terrain of poststructuralist policy-sociology and drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews with early career researchers at a regional post-Dawkins university, this paper explores how ECRs are responding to the neoliberal ‘culture change’ embedded in recent higher education policy changes. The interviewed ECRs report a deep sense of frustration, which could be conceptualised as stemming from a contradiction in discourses about what constitutes and should constitute academic work. Their notions of academic work and identity are incessantly thwarted by what they consider inappropriate or irrelevant rationalities and practices. The frustration leads to serious consideration of various ‘exit options’ that will leave them time and space to undertake research.

### **Introduction**

At a recent conference organised by the National Tertiary Education Industry Union entitled ‘Universities and the New Research Environment’ invited speaker Professor Peter Høj, CEO of the Australian Research Council, repeatedly emphasised how a certain ‘culture change’ within the research community is needed. The ‘culture change’ he was talking about involves a much more widespread and assertive commercialisation of research across the board; a much stronger focus on ‘working with industry’ to secure research funding. The particular ‘culture change’ that Høj was advocating is, of course, inextricably linked to a sweep of higher education policy changes in the last twenty years and the current Federal government’s persistent and multifaceted efforts towards turning Australian universities into ‘corporate entities’ (Marginson and Considine 2000). Increased attention to the commercial potential of

any academic endeavour is merely an aspect of decreased public spending on higher education and a wider neoliberal agenda.

In this paper I investigate how the 'culture change', propelled by the neoliberal higher education policy reforms, is lived 'on the ground' – a growing field of interest (see for instance Davies and Petersen 2005b; Harris 2005; Middleton 2005). Rather than just looking at the push for further commercialisation, I explore more broadly how neoliberal discourses and practices impact upon work conditions and experiences of academics. Here I focus on the experiences of early career researchers (ECRs) working in what may be called a 'new' university, that is, a university established as a result of the Dawkins reforms in the late 1980s. Marginson (2000) argues that newer, in his terms, 'less prestigious' universities have changed the most over the last decade, moving further towards 'hyper-entrepreneurialism' than their older 'sandstone' counterparts. From a sociological perspective it is interesting and significant to explore precisely how various higher education policies and their changes manifest themselves in academics' everyday work life and how it affects levels of job satisfaction and career aspirations as well as notions of academic work and identity.

The particular experiences of ECRs remain unexplored in depth and detail, although they are identified by most individual Australian universities as well as the Australian Research Council as a special group with particular circumstances and needs, and hence are allocated earmarked resources and distinct support arrangements. From Winefield et al.'s (2002) study on occupational stress in Australian universities we know that academics as such are highly stressed relative to other occupational groups and to general staff working in the Academy. The group of academic staff that reported the highest levels of strain and lowest levels of job satisfaction were academics involved in teaching, or research and teaching, middle-ranked, that is, level B and C lecturers (Winefield et al. 2002: 11), which are the levels at which the majority of ECRs work. While Winefield et al.'s survey yields compelling statistical evidence of ECRs' levels of stress, it does not provide an in-depth understanding of precisely how and why this group reports the results that it does. As the Australian academic population is ageing (Hugo 2005), it is important to know how the future of the academic workforce is responding to recent policy developments and how, for example, their work experiences impinge on decisions about not only staying in Australian universities but in the academic workforce as such.

### **Conceptual terrain**

In this paper I draw on perspectives developed within what might be called poststructuralist policy-sociology (Ball 2006; Humes and Bryce 2003; Bacchi 2000). Within this tradition policy is conceptualised as discourse, that is, as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972: 49). Policy exercises power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ (Ball 2006). Policies circulate particular regimes of truth, they enable and constrain action, meaning-making, subjectivities and desires and as Bacchi (2000) reminds us, they constitute the reality of, rather than merely describe, problems and solutions. For example, the current Federal government, in its key policy on universities, *Backing Australia’s Future* (DEST 2003), states that one of the current ‘significant problems’ is that “the sector requires access to increased resources in the longer term, including from additional income streams” (DEST 2003: 9) and that current policies and practices “do not enable universities to easily generate increased revenue” (DEST 2003: 9). Both identified ‘problems’ – that universities are short on funds and need more – in the way they are formulated, imply a particular solution. Rather than increasing public spending, universities are to be made freer to pursue revenue-generating activities elsewhere. Given the policy’s overall emphasis on increasing industry-university partnerships, the ‘additional income stream’ implies commercial enterprise, which is a quintessential neo-liberal response (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005).

Central to poststructuralist policy-sociology is to “bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro level investigation, especially that which takes account of people’s perception and experiences” (Ozga cited in Ball 2006: 43). In this context this means that it becomes significant to analyse the ways in which neoliberal discourses and rationalities, as propelled by recent higher education ‘reforms’ and policies, are taken up, negotiated and resisted amongst academics; how they alter or sustain social practice; how they traverse bodies, desires and subjectivities and what effects these processes may have on notions of academic work and the university as a social institution. As Ball (2006: 48) writes: “We are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows [...]. In these terms we are spoken by policies, we take up the positions constructed for us within policies.”

## The study

This paper draws on pilot study data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with four ECRs working at Level B and Level C in a post-Dawkins regional university in Australia. Only academics from the social sciences and education responded to invitations circulated on the university's electronic message board. The interviewees were also asked to keep a detailed log of their work day for two weeks, and these were included in the pool of data. Defining the category of 'early career researcher' is fraught with difficulty (Bazeley 2003) but participation in this study was limited to those academics who were in a full-time position at level B or C and who obtained their doctorate less than five years ago. Using this definition, as it turned out, severely limited the number of eligible participants. A feature of the post-Dawkins university appears to be that many academics who work at level B, and even at times at level C, do not have doctoral qualifications and are either not pursuing a doctorate – mostly those who have been employed at the particular institution for many years – or work while enrolled in part-time doctoral programmes. In limiting the selection of participants to those with doctoral qualifications, the assumption was that these academics would be in a different situation to the other two groups of colleagues; they would most likely be research active and/or constitute themselves as 'researchers'. The selected group, it was assumed, would be facing particular expectations – both from themselves and others. It turned out that common to all the interviewees' narratives was a sense of frustration regarding expectations to 'do it all' and, most notably, to find time to be research active. Jane (all names are pseudonyms) here sums up a common type of frustration, bordering on panic, regarding a specific experience of the group:

It kills me... it just kills me, because I don't know how long I can sustain this without losing my mind... I didn't complete my doctoral study, I didn't get such specialised knowledge, I didn't get such specialised skills for this. This kills me... it kills me that I can't use what I know unless I go outside the university to be able to do that. It kills me that when I talk to my colleagues who I worked with and trained with in [overseas country], they're just disgusted by the working conditions under which we work within the university here, which again is not unique to Australia. I just think it is so frustrating. [...] I worry for my career that I have a window in which I can take advantage of what I know and what I've done, and that that window may close while I'm up to here

[gestures above head] in marking and answering students' emails.

Jane here talks about being worried about how long she can sustain the expertise and skills that she gained from her doctorate, and this was a common theme for these postdoctoral researcher-academics. The expectation and desire to stay research active comes from herself – and not being able to affects her deeply. Later in the interview she talks about 'falling behind' and becoming increasingly distant from her field of study, and also about feeling guilty in relation to her former supervisor for "having wasted his time".

All the ECRs interviewed state that the problem is that their teaching workloads are too large and that administrative commitments, organisational requirements ("getting the right ticks in the box"), and curriculum development fill whatever else time there is left. Research is something which is done, if it gets done at all, on the week-ends or in the evenings – a picture the work logs supported. As Diane said:

I regard teaching as... as a kind of sacred undertaking, but that is not all I do and even if I haven't produced an enormous amount of papers or anything, I am really struggling the whole time to be a researcher as well. It is an image of myself that is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

### **Negotiating contradictory discourses and desires**

As we get a sense of in the extracts above, the strongest theme emerging in all of the interviews is a deep sense of frustration. For some this sense of frustration is mixed with a sense of panic or guilt, for some it is mixed with anger, and others say that they are frustrated but resigned to accept that as a normal way to be. Neoliberal discourses and rationalities, like any others, enter into a terrain of already existing power-knowledge relations. Sometimes contextually new discourses are taken up readily; they are easily integrated and adopted within the field of discursive rationalities and practices, and contribute to the continuation of these. However, at other times contextually new discourses and modes of desiring will meet stronger resistance. As Ball puts it, "[d]iscourses of different sorts, with different histories, clash and grate against one another" (2006: 49). The deep sense of frustration that all the interviewees express is precisely as a manifestation of this situation. Diane talks about how academic work turned out to be something quite different from what she had expected:

Once upon a time when I was just doing postgraduate work part-time, I imagined that if one worked in a university one would be in a better situation for reading and writing, but I don't think that's true except in the way that you can mark out your time [...]. Nowadays going to the library is a thrilling experience! I had some expectations of what a university would be as a place, and I'm finding this place falls far short of expectations in terms of what we can do and the quality of what we do. [...] Much of the admin we do, it's just crap; any old clerk can do it. The managerial stuff makes me feel tired. Every time you turn around there's a form you've got to fill in; there's always another course, another set of hurdles, another set of criteria that you are not meeting that you know you must meet in fact, and, so yes, I mean there are all these dreadful things and it makes you just want to go away... everything is drowning in anti-intellectual crap.

Here Diane constitutes a clash between what she had come to expect it meant to be an academic and what it, to her, actually entails. Belonging to the category 'academic' is someone who reads and writes and goes to the library as a matter of course; someone who does high quality intellectual work. However, the quality of the work they do, she feels, is lower than she expected and there is too much inappropriate administrative work, as well as an array of 'hurdles', things that stand in the way of the real work. The work she desires to do and that she thought she was going to be doing is submerged by not only irrelevant activities ('any old clerk can do it'), but opposing ('anti-intellectual') ones. A similar clash in discourses can be found in Martine's narrative. About her work she says:

I suppose it's different to what I imagined. A lot. I suppose coming through the Honours degree and into the PhD where there was some time and it was a part of the process to muse over things and think deeply over things, and really engage with ideas and talk about them, and I feel that there isn't enough time for that, I feel that it's like 'get that grant application in and just do it and get those papers out there'. I suppose that one of the reasons why I haven't got that grant application in is because I'm not really sure about, well the whole idea and whether I'm interested – it's not that I'm not interested, but whether it's worthwhile – but then it's just 'don't worry about that, just get it in' you know, and not only 'is it worthwhile?', but 'is this the best it could be?'. These reflections are not supported; it's all about outcomes, getting runs on the board.

For Martine the clash in images of what it would mean to be an academic and what it for her has turned out to be revolves around notions of academic work as something

governed by a different notion of worthwhileness than merely ‘getting runs on the board’, that is, quantifiable outcomes. Her desire is to produce something that can be ‘the best it can be’, and that desire is continuously put under pressure by an output agenda.

The deep sense of frustration arising from not being able to do research, or from ‘everything drowning in anti-intellectual crap’, or from the experience of having one’s desires continuously negated by ‘the wrong game’ led three of the four interviewees to think seriously about what one of them called ‘exit options’. One was trying to find a way to retire early so that she could “actually get some work done”; one was looking into the viability of setting up a consultancy business to “find time for my research” and one considered the benefits and drawbacks of returning to the profession she had left to pursue an academic career, because she was unconvinced that “it’s worth all the stress and heartache”. The fourth one, although not planning to exit the Academy was working strategically, at the cost of his family, to get a position at what he called “a university where research is actually possible”.

### **Concluding remarks**

As I have only been able to hint at here, it seems that the ECRs interviewed for this study are finding very little pleasure in negotiating the contradictory discourses that constitute their working lives. The neoliberal higher education policies which have reduced public spending, have turned universities into user-pays institutions, and have made academics across the board rely on external funding to sustain research efforts, are all part of the ‘culture change’, constituted by Høj and the government policies as inevitable. A poststructuralist policy-sociology perspective enables us to see that these changes, rather than just concerning abstract questions of governance for instance, come with certain values and desires, and transform academics’ ‘conditions of possibility’, their social practices and identities. On the ground, for the ECRs working as full-time academics in new regional universities in the social sciences and humanities, this means massive teaching workloads, mountains of ‘administrivia’ and other hurdles ‘to meet requirements’, incessant pressure to get ‘runs on the board’ regardless of the quality and meaningfulness of the endeavour, and an everyday struggle to maintain an identity as a researcher, or in Martine’s terms, “scholar”. There is a strong sense that what matters to the interviewees, and the reasons why they chose an academic career, are continually being thwarted. Compared to

narratives told by experienced senior academics (Davies and Petersen 2005a) these ECRs do not have personal experience with working in universities prior to the neoliberal reforms. Their narratives are not centred on what the university was 'in the good old days'. Yet interestingly they still harbour strong notions that the university should be something different to what it, for them, is now. Besides bouts of anxiety and depression, this clash in expectations and discourses about what constitutes and should constitute academic work leads to serious consideration of leaving the profession, which they have spent many years and many resources preparing for.

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