Academic Performance Evaluation and the Organisation of Knowledge in the Research-Intensive University

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INTRODUCTION

Universities are widely acknowledged to play a key role in the development of advanced 'knowledge economies'[1] and, as such, it is unsurprising that their structures and practices are coming under increasing public scrutiny. In his address to the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) conference on 'Irish Universities: The Case for Reform' at University College Cork in November 2004, Michael Shattock, the rapporteur of the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland, argued that the system currently 'stands at a crossroads: unless reform is initiated now, higher education risks being marginalised by economic and knowledge-based drivers from the wider international society'. Of the recommendations listed in the OECD Review (2004), Shattock placed particular emphasis on the development of a research culture and internal institutional reform of Irish universities.

The OECD are not the first to argue for the need for reform (see, for example, Skilbeck, 2001), and the recently changed programmes at UCD, Trinity, UCC and NUIG illustrate the extent of the appetite for change within the Department of Education and amongst senior

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university administrators. In this paper, while we do not question the view that Irish universities may be urgently in need of reform, we do raise a number of concerns about the rationale underpinning key features of the change discourse and the substantive nature of some of the reforms being introduced. In particular, we focus on one aspect of these changes, namely the notion of academic performance evaluation. Drawing on a field study of the implementation of a new Senior Lecturer promotion system at UCD, we argue that while the system is, in many ways, a welcome alternative to that which preceded it, the rationale underpinning it is based on a dangerously superficial view of the nature of knowledge production in a university environment. As such, it risks indirectly promoting perverse forms of behaviour amongst academics seeking promotion. Consequently, we argue for the importance of taking recent epistemological shifts in management/organisation studies seriously (see also Kelly, 2005), by endeavouring to speak about 'knowledge' and its 'production' in more sophisticated ways. In short, we need to 'open up the black box' (Latour, 1999) of academic knowledge production to explore its complexity and diversity.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we draw on recent 'praxiological' perspectives on learning/knowing, and on Foucault's (1980) ideas on power/knowledge, to offer a brief critique of traditional, abstract and disembodied conceptions of knowledge and to argue that a diversity of different knowledge production practices co-exist in universities. We then move on, in sections 3 and 4, to describe an exploratory piece of interpretive field research on the introduction of a new academic performance evaluation system in UCD. Finally, we briefly discuss key elements of this case and their implications for the management and organisation of academic knowledge production.

KNOWLEDGE, PRACTICE AND POWER – A PRAXIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE RESEARCH-INTENSIVE UNIVERSITY

In recent years, the development of theories of situated practice/learning (c.f. Suchman, 1987; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Chaiklin and Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1998) have problematised the notion of knowledge as an abstract, disembodied entity. Instead,

writers in this tradition argue for a much more holistic, embodied and situated approach to understanding human learning that would reject dualisms between mind/body and theory/practice. From this perspective, all knowledge and learning is based on an active and ongoing participation in communal social practices, thus problematising the notion of explicit, objective, de-contextualised information/ knowledge. Writers in this tradition reject 'cognitivist'[2] conceptualisations of human learning, and argue for a much more holistic, embodied and situated or contingent approach to understanding this process (see the introductory chapter in Chaiklin and Lave, 1996). This generally entails shifting the focus from the 'acquisition' of abstract and disembodied knowledge (what Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001: 974) label the 'narrowly Cartesian' understanding of knowledge that has dominated the management literature) to an emphasis on individual processes of 'knowing' (see McDermott, 1999) and the forms of social life that shape and sustain them. In this sense, knowledge may be viewed as being both an individual and collective phenomenon (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001).

Following Polanyi (1966), a number of authors (see Brown and Duguid, 2001; Walsham, 2001; Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001: 974) have proposed that all knowledge inevitably relies on a personal 'tacit dimension' that must be acquired through a protracted, embodied engagement in specific kinds of social practices (thus imbuing it with an irreducibly social and collective dimension). Consequently, the extent to which people can develop a shared understanding depends upon the extent to which they have engaged in similar social practices (and so have developed similar kinds of tacit knowledge). Rather than talking about 'knowledge acquisition' (or research production) then, we might be better to place the emphasis on the active process of learning/education through which people become socialised into a particular way of knowing (c.f. Heidegger's 1978 concept of Dasein). Moreover, people who are not members of a specific epistemic community will inevitably be unable to appreciate the subtleties of its communal knowledge, or to discriminate between contributions of varying significance.

Michel Foucault's (1980) work on the relationship between power and knowledge(s) draws attention to the constitutive role of

knowledge in different kinds of practices and its role in the shaping of individual subjectivities (c.f. Knights and Willmott, 1989; Knights, 1990; Knights and Morgan, 1991). In the Foucauldian sense, a discourse is a body of knowledge, or a way of thinking, seeing and acting in the world. Discourses are, *inter alia*, instrumental in constituting, shaping and reinforcing our organisational cultures and institutional practices, and herein lies their significant power. As such, Foucault suggests that we cannot step outside of discourse. This linking of power and knowledge through discourse gives rise to what Foucault calls 'regimes of truth' (see Introna, 2003; Introna and Whittaker, 2004): an institutional infrastructure for the production and maintenance of 'truth claims'. Discourses, then, are associated with 'power effects', which are the consequences of assuming that a particular discourse is 'true'.

But what of universities, then? What discourses and regimes of truth pertain here? In his influential book on the problems and future of the social sciences, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that one of the greatest impediments to the development of a mature social science tradition has been the strength of the discourse of the natural sciences and its attendant regime of truth. He contends that if the social sciences are to develop then there needs to be a recognition of fundamental epistemological differences with the natural sciences (see also Giddens, 1984). What this suggests is that there are (at the very least) two very different modes of knowledge production, based on distinctive types of practice, which must co-exist within a university. It follows from this that different groups within the university will have qualitatively different relationships with each other and with the external world.[3] Unfortunately, the emergence of an 'audit culture' (Power, 1999) within society in general, and within universities in particular, may result in such important qualitative differences being overlooked, as simple, highly generalised and easily comparable measures of productivity are emphasised.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The collection of primary data was conducted in July and August 2004 and was focused on high level academic managers within UCD, namely Deans of two Faculties;[4] members of the University Committee on Academic Appointments, Tenure & Promotion (UCAATP); one of

the Vice Presidents; two senior members of the Personnel Department; and a senior academic involved with teaching development.

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour were conducted with each of these people. Interviews were not recorded on tape, though notes were taken during these meetings. Following the technique known as respondent validation or member validation, whereby research findings are submitted 'to the members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigator has correctly understood that social world' (Bryman, 2001), these notes were returned to the participant for their comments and to ensure clarity.

Anecdotal evidence was gathered informally through casual conversations with academic, administrative and technical colleagues and was mainly used to inform our understanding of the issues facing staff across the University and the sector. Notes or formal documentation relating to these conversations were not maintained, though some of the issues raised were used to inform the line of questioning when speaking to the official participants.

Secondary data sources included internal procedural documentation around the promotion systems in UCD. Current procedures are readily available from the Staff Manual on-line and we also had access to archived historical documentation, which enabled us to piece together the evolution of the promotion processes over the past number of years. We could also speak informally with staff of the Personnel Department in order to augment our understanding of the history of the development of promotions in UCD.

CASE ILLUSTRATION – THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A NEW ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SYSTEM AT UCD

Changing the promotion procedures for academic staff at UCD was motivated, *inter alia*, by widespread dissatisfaction with the existing system and the changing cultural context within UCD and the wider educational sector. Rewriting academic promotional systems allowed University management to shape and direct the internal reformation of the college.

> Rewards are not just for doing well, but also for ensuring the behaviours the University is looking for to achieve strategic

> goals are supported, encouraged and developed, i.e. changing behaviour patterns.
>
> *Personnel Manager I*

An extensive review of the promotion procedures was conducted between June 1999 and June 2000. This involved a comprehensive examination of the existing policies at home and abroad, and considering many invited submissions from various groups and committees within the University, as well as from the main trade unions that represent academic staff, IFUT and SIPTU.

> ... [T]he submissions ... highlighted the considerable amount of real anguish, pain and hurt that staff felt towards their potential for promotion and the lack of recognition and reward for their efforts over many years.
>
> *Member of the UCAATP I*

The Review Committee published their report in 2001 and the benchmarking system of performance appraisal was introduced for promotions to the grade of Senior Lecturer in UCD, as per their recommendations. The main differences between the new appraisal system and its predecessor were the removal of the competitive element of the promotion rounds and explicitly listing the activities and standards of performance required for promotion.

Removing the competitive element from promotional rounds meant that qualified staff no longer had to go up against their colleagues and friends when applying for promotion. In the past, this had led to considerable ill feeling within departments and faculties.

> This was invidious for the staff member, whether they were promoted over their colleagues, or one of their colleagues were promoted over them.
>
> *Dean of Faculty B*

These changes also allowed the UPB[5] to combat widely held perceptions of a 'rights-based' promotion system and 'who-you-know' culture.

> People were promoted in order of seniority, even though they did not seem to have earned it from their contributions.
>
> *Member of UCAATP II*

> The perception that 'who you knew, not what you knew' was the basis for promotion needed to be addressed.
>
> *Teaching Development*

The old system of promotion required staff to illustrate their performance under the three headings of Teaching, Research and Contribution, but there was no indication of what sort of activities or standards adequately demonstrated sufficient performance in these areas. This resulted in a highly ambiguous system, with widely varying criteria being applied across each faculty.

> Given the ... non-explicit heritage, eliminating ambiguity is very important.
>
> *Vice President*

In introducing the benchmarking system, it was intended to remove this ambiguity and to clearly establish an acceptable level of performance across the University. It was also seen as an opportunity to reduce the levels of subjectivity inherent in assessing applications for promotion.

> The benchmark-based procedures ... are a move toward a more systematised process that clearly, openly and transparently signals what the University is looking for from its staff.
>
> *Vice President*

While the idea of faculty-specific benchmarks was originally entertained by the UPB, it led to accusations of failure to address the issue of inconsistent standards of performance.

> We would end up with rich faculties rewarding low standards. There would be no need for them to change if they could design their own merits and awards.
>
> *Member of UCAATP II*

It was decided that faculty-specific benchmarks were not appropriate at the time, though there are still many who argue for moderation or modification of the benchmarks on a faculty-specific basis.

> [The UPB] shied away from faculty-specific benchmarks because of the danger of different standards, but what is required are not different standards, just different indicators.
>
> *Personnel Manager I*

In conjunction with the arguments around faculty-specific benchmarks, there is a lack of agreement about whether the benchmarks themselves have been set too high or too low. The legacy of the wide-ranging standards that had been applied in different faculties across the University meant that what was demanding to some was easily done by others and *vice versa*.

> One of the reasons the benchmarks are so low is to accommodate [certain faculties] and give them some hope of being promoted.
>
> *Member of UCAATP II*

> The benchmarks are high in Teaching for some people who haven't been in that environment before.
>
> *Teaching Development*

The perception that there is a bias towards the natural sciences inherent in the benchmarks is widespread, though those involved in their design vehemently deny this. This bias is seen, for example, in the ways research and research outputs are measured, the new-found emphasis on the production of PhDs and the perceived devaluation of minor thesis supervision.

Many see the issue of journal publications as a particular bone of contention. The levels of scholarship in evidence can vary widely from one publication to another and similarly, the standards of peer-review can vary considerably. There is also a fear that explicitly stating the acceptable quantity of publications required to be a considered a 'good academic' could lead to a decline in the quality of publications being produced.

> The Dean of Commerce has said that with the current procedures, there is the potential to encourage 'perverse' behaviours, for example publishing in third-rate journals.
>
> *Personnel Manager I*

Somewhat arbitrarily, one book is equated to three full-length international peer-reviewed journal articles based on original research: books and papers being treated as commodities, with quantity as the prime concern, above the quality of the publications.

In 2002, supervision of one PhD or two research Masters to completion, or their equivalent in minor theses, was deemed to be *Satisfactory* performance in the supervision of postgraduate research. In 2004, this minor thesis equivalence was removed from the Research benchmarks and became part of the benchmark for *Excellence* in Teaching Commitment. This seemingly simple adjustment raises two points for consideration: first, the apparent disparity in recognition afforded to two degrees, which are nominally at equal educational levels (i.e. Research Masters and Taught Masters), highlighting a serious bias in the promotional system; second, is the assumption that a PhD degree is, *de facto*, a requirement for success in every sphere.

> The Masters by Research degree is more highly valued than a Taught Masters degree.
>
> *Teaching Development*

Many staff, particularly those who worked in departments where there was no tradition of PhD production, were angered by this change, though there was little sympathy to be had from University management to the complaints raised.

> In departments without a strong postgraduate research tradition, the faculties and departments need to figure out for themselves how to support and develop a new tradition.
>
> *Vice President*

Many faculties are now moving towards a system of committee-based PhD supervision, which will give inexperienced academic

staff a supported environment in which to learn the art of supervising the research of others. Another view that is rapidly gaining credence is that newly qualified PhDs are the most suitable people to supervise new candidates as:

> ... [T]hey are closer to the process and more in tune with the requirements of completing a PhD than older members of a department.
>
> *Dean of Faculty A*

This view further illustrates and reinforces the argument that there are fundamental differences between the social and the natural sciences, in terms of what is required from candidates to earn a PhD degree. A commentator more accustomed to conducting research in the humanities or social sciences might attach more value and significance to experience in a particular area or technique than is in evidence here.

Increasing the number of PhD degrees awarded is seen as a way to promote research in the University and enhance UCD's standing in the wider research environment, as evidenced by the greater emphasis being placed on PhD supervision as a criterion for promotion to Senior Lecturer.

> PhD production is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, to enhance research productivity.
>
> *Vice President*

This means-end mentality governing the relationship between PhD production and increasing research productivity has effectively closed any meaningful dialogue on the relevance and value of PhD production in UCD. Indeed, there is a worrying interchangeability about the terms 'research activity' and 'academic activity', further strengthening the view of a bias towards the natural sciences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The UCD case study draws attention to the emergence of an important and influential discourse in the university around accountability, fairness and transparency. The Senior Lecturer promotion system

provides a good example of an attempt to institutionalise organisational practices in accordance with these values, and few would argue that the system is not an improvement on the more 'clientelistic' approach to academic promotions that it replaced. While accountability, fairness and transparency are very laudable values, however, we remain sceptical with regard to the extent to which to which they are realisable in this context. Indeed, the case recounted above illustrates some of the dangerous 'power effects' of such a regime of truth.

The assumption that the contribution of different academics may be made directly comparable through the use of one standardised instrument betrays an unwarrantedly simplistic and normative view of the nature of knowledge production at universities. In particular, it ignores the extent to which the university is necessarily home to very heterogeneous forms of knowledge practices underpinned by a diversity of distinctive relationships with external groups. Although quantitative forms of 'evaluation at a distance' are wonderful from the point of view of administrative convenience (Power, 1999), they may present a grave threat to the integrity and continued survival of a range of academic disciplines. In particular, by treating all forms of knowledge as homogenous commodities (often unproblematically referred to as 'research output') that may be unproblematically represented, measured and compared without regard to the context in which they are embedded, such systems do violence to the diversity of long-established epistemic traditions. Homogeneity in terms of forms of assessment will surely result in a dangerous homogeneity in 'research' practice, as academic subjectivities are shaped by this emergent form of (supra-)disciplinary power. Does the world really need recondite journal articles and PhD theses, housed in an ever more disconnected university?[6] Do we really need more PhDs in, say, Medieval French? If such PhDs are not produced does this undermine the status of Medieval French scholars due to their lack of demonstrable 'research productivity'? Paradoxically, in their efforts to promote the neutrality and objectivity of such systems of evaluation, the proponents of same appear blissfully unaware of the impossibility of stepping outside of relations of power.

We are sensitive, of course, to the possibility that the espoused version of the Senior Lecturer appointment system may be very different to that enacted in practice. If, indeed, it is the case

that these generic practices are embedded differently in different faculties (it might be difficult to get evidence to substantiate this hypothesis due to confidentiality restrictions), then this should be explicitly acknowledged and scrutinised. Rather than attempting to preserve a veil of objectivity and political neutrality, it might be better to attempt to learn more about the particularities of different epistemic communities so that they may be better understood and cultivated. The notion of what constitutes 'research' or knowledge creation in different areas needs unpacking (see Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Latour, 1987; Latour, 1999 for examples of attempts to 'open up the black box' in the context of science studies), so that we may attempt to cultivate (a diversity of) good practices within the university in a sensitive manner. One implication of this might be a welcome shift in emphasis from 'research production' to social processes of education (which may take different forms depending on the epistemic context).

In conclusion, then, while the emphasis on accountability, fairness and transparency is eminently understandable in the context of UCD's historical approach to promoting academics, the enthusiasm for measurement and direct comparison needs to be tempered by a greater sensitivity to the diversity, and perhaps the frailty, of academic practice. If we are to build a 'knowledge economy', it would seem prudent to attend more carefully to the complexity and heterogeneity of knowledge-producing practices.

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1 For an interesting critique of the rather glib concepts of information/knowledge society/economy see Webster, 1995.

2 In cognitive theories of learning 'knowledge is viewed as symbolic, mental constructions in the minds of individuals, and learning becomes the process of committing these symbolic representations to memory where they may be processed' (Wilhelmsen et al., 1998). A key metaphor here is that of 'information-processing', inspired by the operation of computers.

3 Clark Kerr's ([1963] 2001) preference for the concept of the 'multiversity', over the university, also captures this sense of heterogeneity.

4 The two faculties in question were selected on the basis that they are often considered to be at opposite ends of the academic spectrum in terms of values and culture.

5 University Promotions Board, the predecessor of the University Committee on Academic Appointments, Tenure & Promotion.

6 For an interesting critique of contemporary research practice at business schools see Bennis and O'Toole, 2005.

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