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Visibilities and invisibilities in academic work and career building

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ABSTRACT

In the current turbulent higher education environment, academic work and career building are in a state of flux. The implementation of the principles of New Public Management have intensified managerial control over academic work. Growing dependence on external funding and metrics-based performance assessments have made career building increasingly competitive, selective, and risky. Disciplinary and organisational boundaries have been dissolving as interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral ways of collaboration have become policy priorities. These trends have challenged visible boundaries between disciplines, organisations, sectors, work tasks and academic roles. However, at the same time, new visible and invisible boundaries are being established. In spite of declaring to bring visibility, openness and transparency to academic work and career trajectories, the managerial university invokes new invisibilities which can reproduce some deeply-rooted visible hierarchies. This Special Issue explores the complex interplay between visibilities and invisibilities in academic work and career building. The six articles tackle this question from the perspective of interdisciplinary research, new notions of an ideal academic, resistance to managerial demands, doctoral education, the emergence of invisible researchers, and scholarly profession in different sectors.

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Academic work; career building; identity; power relations; boundaries

Introduction

This special issue explores the complex dynamics between visible and invisible structures, values, and ideals that shape academic work practices and career building in the current European higher education landscape. In the rapidly changing higher education environment, various established visible structures are being broken. Disciplinary and organisational boundaries are dissolving as new interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral ways of collaboration and knowledge production are prioritised by many policy authorities and funding agencies worldwide (Carayannis and Campbell 2009; Etzkowitz and Zhou 2018; Välimaa, Papatsiba, and Hoffman 2016). Furthermore, along with the

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implementation of the principles of New Public Management and managerialism in most European higher education systems, universities have transformed into hybrid organisations in which different values, practices, and roles are constantly being mixed and challenged (Pekkola et al. 2020).

Due to these changes, the boundaries between academic work tasks and roles become blurred. Inside the universities, the roles of an academic, a manager, and an administrator are being mixed (Whitchurch 2008; Deem 2004). Likewise, the boundaries between an academic and an entrepreneur are less and less clear-cut, as many academics are involved in entrepreneurial activities at their universities or act as consultants on the side or work as liaison between the university and the private sector (Gunter and Mills 2017; Jain, George, and Maltarich 2009; Lam 2010).

Paradoxically, simultaneous with decreasing conventional visibilities in academic work, new visible and invisible structures are being established, which creates new hierarchies in academia. Because universities as employer organisations aim to bind their employees tighter to their strategic goals (Siekkinen, Pekkola, and Kivistö 2016), organisational boundaries are being strengthened, accompanied by increasing managerial control over academic work (Carvalho and Santiago 2010; Deem and Brehony 2005; Siekkinen, Pekkola, and Carvalho 2019; Whitchurch 2010). Moreover, relying on standardisation, metrification, and 'one size fits all' ideology, the processes of academic recruitment, assessment, and promotion create new visible and invisible hierarchies in academic career building. This has resulted in increasing polarisation, as some are 'winners' and others are 'losers' (Ylijoki and Ursin 2015). The former constitute highly visible groups at the core of academia, such as the European research elite (Kwiek 2016), while the latter constitute the invisible mass of short-term and/or part-time academics at the margins of the university (e.g. Herschberg, Benschop, and van den Brink 2018). In addition, the lived work experiences of these groups are becoming so divergent that mutual understanding and respect are jeopardised, eroding the moral basis of shared academic values and ideals (Ylijoki 2019). A new kind of visible stratification also occurs at the level of disciplines, as they are increasingly valued and supported by their ability to create measurable societal impact and engage in various forms of academic capitalism (e.g. Slaughter and Leslie 1997), thereby remolding the opportunity structures for career building inside and outside academia.

However, the interplay between visibility and invisibility cannot be reduced to the simple replacement of old visible structures and practices by new ones. Despite declarations about bringing visibility, openness, and transparency to academic work and career trajectories (e.g. Evetts 2018), the current managerial university invokes new invisibilities. For instance, recruitments to university positions are often based on 'potential' and 'ethos' rather than on achievements (Van den Brink and Benschop 2011; Poutanen and Kovalainen 2017; Vellamo et al. *forthcoming*), that is to say on invisible tacit understandings instead of visible credits. This allows the reproduction of the deep-rooted hierarchies in academia, such as subtle gendered patterns and disciplinary pecking orders that continue to shape the social structures of higher education and the possibilities to build careers within academia and beyond. In this sense, the old visible hierarchies and inequalities in academia are not forgotten, but they are being replaced by new, more invisible ones.

In this special issue, we want to scrutinize in more detail the complex interplay between visibilities and invisibilities (see Garfortf 2012) in academic work and career

building. We ask what is visible and what is left invisible? Why? With what consequences? How is this intermingled with academic power relations? At the same time, we want to challenge the common notion of equating visibility with success and invisibility with failure and marginalisation. Therefore, we also ask what kind of resistance, silent power, and alternative ways of being an academic may take place behind the visible frontstage of academia? Furthermore, we want to describe the changing environment of academic work, where some boundaries are becoming more visible and some more invisible, such as the boundaries between organisations and between different roles and tasks, respectively. In seeking to answer these questions, our aim is to reach a fresh and in-depth understanding of the underlying tensions, biases, and potentials of academic life in the current managerial, competitive, and highly selective higher education environment.

The articles in the special issue tackle these questions from the perspectives and experiences of academics working in different career phases in different employment contexts. The common feature of all articles is that they have a special focus on research work and the different opportunity structures and obstacles embedded in it. We hope that together the articles offer tools for reflection and the mirroring of experiences in different work settings in the European higher education context and beyond.

In the first article, Oili-Helena Ylijoki explores invisible hierarchies in interdisciplinary research work and their impact on academics' sense of belonging and career building. Based on focused interviews with academics in Finland, she unpacks the current policy rhetoric on interdisciplinarity by highlighting the cognitive, epistemic, cultural, and organisational tensions and uneven power relations in interdisciplinary research. The article also shows the dominance of monodisciplinarity over interdisciplinarity, particularly in terms of the assessment of scientific merits and academic reward structures, reproducing conventional and deep-rooted hierarchies in academia.

In the next article, Anne Kovalainen and Seppo Poutanen develop the concept of an 'entrepreneurial gig scientist' to describe how the rise of entrepreneurial universities has shaped the ways in which the desired researcher and the academic career are understood. The authors describe the new ideal academic. They state that skills and competences in research work are no longer the core requirement; rather, academic researchers are expected to make themselves visible outwards and brand themselves as flexible, innovative, enthusiastic, and ambitious team players able to adapt to the entrepreneurial mode of contemporary universities.

Liudvika Leisyte continues the critical discussion on the changes in academic work. Based on interview material gathered in the UK, she explores in what kind of visible and invisible ways academics resist increasing managerial demands in their work and how this influences their identities. The article distinguishes both silent and more proactive resistance, including cynicism, humour, avoidance, symbolic compliance, and manipulation. However, all options are not available to all academics, and there are important differences between senior and early career academics.

In the article by Rosemary Deem, the author looks at doctoral education, which has been affected by current developments in the working life in and outside of universities. She describes the visible and invisible roles of doctoral researchers who balance their studies and their research work. Doctoral education can be reframed, taking into account the diversity of doctoral researchers and the changing environment.

In their article, Teresa Carvalho and Sara Diego approach the theme of invisibility by introducing the invisible group of researchers in Portuguese higher education. The authors describe the ‘uberization’ and projectification of academic work and academic careers that has led to the emergence of the invisible group of academics. Such groups of researchers can be found at all European universities.

In the last article, Taru Siekkinen, Elias Pekkola, Jari-Pekka Kanninen, and Terhi Nokkala discuss boundaries in the scholarly profession. On one hand, the boundaries between organisations are diminishing. However, on the other hand they are strengthening, as organisations tie employees to their strategies and apply managerial procedures to them. Grounded in survey data gathered at Finnish universities, the authors explore whether there are differences in the scholarly work done in different sectors. They find that some differences exist, but these differences are more between disciplines than between sectors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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