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To cite this article: Bruce Macfarlane & Damon Burg (2017): Legitimation, professionalisation and accountability in higher education studies: an intergenerational story, *Studies in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2017.1376640](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1376640)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1376640>



Published online: 19 Sep 2017.



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Legitimation, professionalisation and accountability in higher education studies: an intergenerational story

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ABSTRACT

The core themes of research into higher education studies (HES) have previously been identified through quantitative approaches focused on publication patterns, but there is a lack of fine-grained, qualitative analysis about the development of the field. This paper provides an intergenerational analysis of the emergence of HES in the UK since the 1960s drawing on autobiographical accounts. It reveals that many who conduct HES research retain a strong sense of disciplinary affiliation and regard its continuing epistemological health as closely linked to maintaining open borders with other disciplines. The professionalisation of the field is regarded as a mixed blessing bringing with it challenges with respect to maintaining an accessible approach to scholarship and communication with public and policy audiences. HES provides a case example of how a new academic subfield has undergone generational challenges in, respectively, seeking legitimacy, being professionalised and most recently responding to greater demands for accountability.

KEYWORDS

Higher education studies; academic tribes and territories; sociology of science; autobiographical research; intergenerational analysis

Introduction

The emergence of higher education studies (HES) took place after the Second World War, although a number of US universities, including Chicago and Ohio State, offered taught programmes in the 1920s aimed at higher education (HE) administrators (Fulton 1992). Since the 1970s, HES as a research field has grown internationally evidenced by the emergence of masters' and doctoral-level programmes, dedicated research centres, the growth of full professorial level appointments and a burgeoning literature clustered around core areas, notably policy studies and learning and teaching (Tight 2003; Horta and Jung 2014). There has also been an exponential growth in the number of HES journals and emerging interest in the relative status of this new subfield linked to its impact and influence (Bray and Major 2011). Historical stock is now being taken of developments in HES over the last 50 years or more (e.g. Macfarlane and Grant 2012).

Yet, to date, there has been little in-depth, qualitative analysis of the emergence of HES as an intellectual field understood by reference to the sociology of science. Previous studies have focused mainly on historical overviews (e.g. Albach 2014; Goodchild 2014) or the collation and analysis of quantitative data concerning research and publication patterns among HE scholars, both in the UK and internationally (e.g. Tight 2003; Horta and Jung 2014; Calma and Davies 2015). Quantitative studies have been valuable in identifying general patterns of scholarly publication and methodological approaches deployed. However, they have not offered fine-grained and in-depth accounts of HES as an academic subfield in all its disciplinary, organisational and intellectual complexity.

This study sought to respond to the need for a more qualitative analysis of the experiences and perceptions of HES researchers and how they have been shaped and reshaped over time. In so doing, it draws on conceptual distinctions between different generations of scholars made by Gumpport (2002) in her exploration of the emergence of feminist scholarship. There are strong parallels between the emergence of feminist scholarship and HES given the marginalised status of education as a disciplinary field within the academy (Becher 1989) and the connections between HES and academic development as a disesteemed area of academic activity and scholarly enquiry (Rowland 2001). Conceptually, the study draws on models relevant to understanding academic identity including the Biglan academic classification model (Biglan 1973). The relevance of this model relates to the extent to which scholars may define and identify with HES as rooted in one or more of various foundational disciplines of education such as history, philosophy, sociology and psychology. It also draws on the work of Elzinga (1985) in understanding the criteria that lead to the legitimisation of new areas of academic enquiry.

Methodology

The study analysed autobiographical accounts of HES scholars drawing on 24 semi-structured interviews. These focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of HES scholars with reference to their career history, intellectual biography and reflections on the development of the subfield. These interviews were also informed by analysis of CVs and publication lists as a means of gaining more autobiographical data. Interviews focused on identifying each scholar's route into HES, their goals and objectives and how these have developed over time, career-shaping events, principal intellectual networks within and without HES, influential concepts and paradigms, and any observations on changes within the field during their career.

Sampling for this study was based on a multistage, stratified approach. The population for the study was limited to UK-based academics conducting research into any aspect of HE. This population was then divided, on the basis of the date of their first HE-relevant publication, into three 'generations' of HE scholars. Adapting the terminology used by Gumpport, the following generational descriptors were used: 'pathfinders' (1963–1982), 'pathshapers' (1983–2002) and 'pathtakers' (2003 onwards). The year 1963 was chosen as the starting point for the three generations in a UK context as the Robbins report, published that year, recommended, among other things, greater research into HE with events subsequent to its publication leading to the founding of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) in 1965 (Shattock 2015). In sampling eight persons from each 20-year human generation (i.e. 24 persons in total), further stratification took place by reference to characteristics of the population as a whole, notably sex and area of research specialism. The pathfinder generation were the most difficult group to identify given that nearly all have retired, are in many cases no longer academically active or no longer living. Five of the eight interviewees within this group were male and three were female – a slight imbalance reflective of the considerable underrepresentation of female academics in UK HE as a whole during this period. Comparatively, fewer female academics appear as authors of HES papers during this era. In order to ensure that this did not result in overrepresentation of male academics in the study as a whole, five of the eight interviews in the pathtaker generation were conducted with female academics. A conscious attempt was also made to ensure that interviewees were drawn from all areas of HE research as defined by Tight (2003) and others, mainly interpreted as ensuring approximately equal number of interviewees from policy and learning and teaching areas of enquiry, respectively. All the interviews were transcribed using a reliable and experienced professional transcriber. In parallel with interviews, CVs of all participants were analysed for comparative data in order to provide stronger biographical profiling. The interview data were analysed inductively using the constant comparison method. This involved comparing the datum several times through coding and recoding in order to identify overarching common themes and patterns.

The study was granted ethical approval and participants were provided with an informed consent statement and assurances with respect to data security and storage. They also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time in line with the standard protocol. A particular ethical consideration in this study, especially given the use of autobiographical data, was to protect the identity of leading, and hence well-known scholars in HE studies (mainly in the 'pathfinder' generation) in order that their contributions are not subsequently identifiable. Participants are identified in quotations via an anonymised name and the year of their first HE-relevant publication.

Field entry

It is generally accepted that HES is not a discrete academic discipline (Becher 1994) but, rather, a field or subfield of the study connected with education and the social sciences. Entrants to the HES field tend to be drawn from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Analysis of the CVs of the 24 participants revealed that they were mainly drawn from disciplines and subjects broadly within the humanities and social sciences. In terms of Biglan's (1973) classification of academic disciplines, most participants were drawn from 'soft pure' backgrounds such as Sociology (Geoff 1988), Classics (e.g. James 1971; Eleanor 1980), English (Margaret 1994; Tony 1994; Brian 1995; Felicity 2008), History (Harry 1970; Charlotte 2012; Ava 2017), Political Science (George 2010) and Modern Languages (Terry 1974; Jane 2004). A large number of participants hold first degrees involving combinations from humanities and social sciences, such as Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Susan 1966), Geography and English (Robert 1978) or Psychology and Sociology (Donald 2008). It was far less common for field entrants to have studied 'hard pure' subjects, such as Mathematics and Philosophy (Fiona 1974) or applied areas generally, such as Psychology and Management (Scott 2016).

The *pathfinder generation*, with a first HE-relevant publication dating between 1963 and 1982, contained several pioneers in emerging areas of research in HE, such as student learning theory, the use of technology in teaching and the economics of HE. Many pathfinders had discovered HES via academic administration or other leadership positions in the sector. Many spent large parts of their careers in leadership and administrative positions as opposed to academic posts dedicated to HES. Analysis of their CVs revealed that their publication record, judged purely in terms of the quantity of outputs relative to the length of their academic career, was often modest by contemporary standards and typically contained more books, book chapters and reports than journal papers. This, perhaps, reflects the expectations of the academic environment in the UK prior to the institution of the research assessment exercise in the mid-1980s and its subsequent impact on reshaping academic output. It may also reflect the 'amateur' roots of HES in the UK and the part-time commitment early researchers were able to give HES in view of their other responsibilities and roles. Most pathfinders had also experienced relatively few institutional moves during their career.

The *pathshaper generation* (1983–2002) had often found their careers influenced or at least strongly shaped by increasing HE funding opportunities during the 1990s and early 2000s, such as HEFCE funding for teaching enhancement, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), European funding and other prestigious funders such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Many pathshapers had helped to found a research centre and were associated with the leadership of such units or research-focused academic development centres. Their careers had benefited from the growing influence of HES and its formal academic establishment in universities. All of them were full professors, whereas several pathfinders had either obtained a professorship late in their career or retired without attaining this academic title. Most pathshapers retained a strong affiliation to their first disciplines, such as sociology, often maintaining dual identities by publishing in both the HE research field and in one other.

The *pathmaker generation* (2003 onwards) all possessed a PhD relevant to HE studies but had often experienced a high number of institutional moves, relative to the duration of their career, as a result of short-term academic contracts linked to funded projects. As a result, perhaps, they were quite pragmatic in their outlook finding that their publications had been shaped by the necessity of

following funding opportunities, sometimes outside of HES. Their publications tended to be almost exclusively journal papers, as opposed to other forms of outputs such as books or book chapters, and their ratio of publications to the length of their career could be higher than members of the pathfinder generation in particular. This observation is reflective of contemporary career patterns of publication in a more performance-driven era linked to the demands of the UK research excellence framework.

On the basis of their publication patterns, it was clear that HES researchers do not all self-identify with the field in the same way. For some, HES was the only academic field in which they had ever published and were more likely to be found in the pathfinder generation, almost all of whom possess a PhD in HE. By contrast, three of the eight pathfinders interviewed did not possess a doctoral-level qualification. Other participants, typically pathshapers, had migrated into HES from adjacent academic fields such as sociology in which they had first published. Finally, the CVs of a number of participants indicated a nomadic academic career wandering in and out of HES and publishing in other disciplinary areas. These included leading HES researchers from the pathfinder generation.

This analysis helps to explain the different points of entry and academic identity of HES researchers. As a divergent rather than convergent academic tribe (Becher 1989), it means that several participants, including quite eminent contributors to the field, were not necessarily comfortable to self-identify as a 'higher education researcher' (e.g. Fiona 1974).

Reasons for field entry were explored at the beginning of each interview with 'push' factors including lack of interest in school-based educational research, unsuccessful early careers elsewhere in the public sector, the quantitative direction of economics as a discipline and a need to pragmatically research in the context in which they were working (i.e. the HE sector).

with no money and no research grants and having to do research, you researched ... 'where you stood'. (Dawn 1987)

Part of doing HES research 'where you stood' was picked up by other participants as stemming directly from an interest in improving their teaching practice – a view expressed by Henry (1996), a member of the pathshaper generation in the following terms: 'the focus of what we would write and publish about was the substance of what we were teaching'.

Pull factors identified included funding opportunities (e.g. ESRC, Leverhulme, Manpower Services Commission, etc.), the establishment of a new academic unit, involvement in European and international collaborations where HES was already more established and administrative and managerial roles working for universities and created by new (at that time) national bodies connected with HE and quality assurance such as the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in the 1960s or the HEA during the 2000s. The growth in research in learning and teaching in the UK was facilitated by the founding of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, later relaunched as the HEA. The funding offered by the HEA is recognised as having had a real impact on academic development as a constituent part of the HE research community especially for members of the later pathshaper and pathfinder generations.

There's been a sort of, since 2000, there's been sort of moments of suddenly lots of funding for academic development, you know the Higher Education Academy started off with a huge budget. (Andrew 2003)

I was actually pretty firmly identified with Education and I really didn't like very much school level educational research, partly because I didn't think I was equipped for it. And there was an awful lot of it around and I didn't really want to get into that and thought this is nice new field, and there's not much competition I suppose, I don't know how consciously but that was certainly part of it. And there always seemed to be things to do in higher education research. (James 1971)

Here, particularly in James' explanation, there was a sense that HE research was an area that some simply drifted into as a kind of career 'accident' rather than as a matter of deliberate choice. His own self-assessment was that he drifted into HE research having 'floated around quite a lot intellectually'

(James 1971). Other interviewees though, especially Susan (1966), were more assertive about their sense of intellectual direction. A further pull factor for Eleanor (1980) and Dawn (1987) was the opportunity to carry out research in an area that connected theory and practice. Both of these interviewees had clear ideas about the way HE research could address issues of social change.

Q: What were you trying to achieve through your research, what was your overarching kind of goal?

A: Erm ... well I think it was always primarily a matter of trying to understand the interconnection between policy and practice. (Eleanor 1980)

I have always been interested in implementation of policy rather than purely the construction of models. (Susan 1966)

This desire to do research that might inform policy decisions was a motivation for several participants. For example, Fiona (1974) saw her appointment, mid-career, as a university pro vice chancellor as an opportunity to have a direct impact on institutional policy drawing on her HE research. This sense of a scholarly mission to connect research and policy-making was most commonly expressed by the pathfinder generation.

Others described their influences more in terms of maintaining a connection with their first discipline. According to Geoff (1988), for example, 'sociology is my original field and I like to think that I never moved away from it', while Dawn (1987) expressed the sentiment that 'you can't do sociology without understanding social divisions, because that's what societies are made up of'. For others, such as Robert (1973), disciplinary influences were more disparate which he described as 'a set of tributaries really'.

Field status

The standing or status of education as a social science is a long-running debate, and the study of HE is subject to similar pressures (Kitwood 1976). Researchers in HE, across all generations, expressed concerns about the extent to which HE research is yet accepted as a legitimate area of academic enquiry. One of the concerns is that the relatively low status of education within the university inevitably affects HE research too.

education is always a poor relation and therefore higher education is tarred with the same brush. (Felicity 2008)

there's still an elitism within the sector. And that's probably, I don't know, motivated by the fact that it's [i.e. HE research] not always seen as a proper subject, and if it's not seen as a proper subject you're even more at pains to demonstrate your legitimacy. (Charlotte 2012)

Another tension connected with legitimacy and status of HE studies is the extent to which research is often conducted by individuals with a dual identity as a leader or manager of a project or institutionally ordained initiative and as an HES researcher. Jane (2004) worked in an educational development role and reflected that, while she did research, this part of her identity had not been recognised until she later moved into a school of education.

I felt that when I wasn't in a school they didn't expect you to do research anyway you know, so it was very difficult. That wasn't why you were employed. It wasn't your status really. (Jane 2004)

Jane's comment closely corresponds to the paradoxical nature of being an academic developer and the fact that this often involves a status as a para-academic with inferior terms and conditions of service (Macfarlane 2011).

Moreover, students who may also occupy a dual role as leader/manager and HES researcher frequently undertake projects connected with masters' or doctoral degrees within their own institution.

you know people in management positions doing a bit of research on this or a bit of study on that, you know that almost there's a sense that 'well we don't really need higher education research, we can do it ourselves'. (Eleanor 1980)

As Eleanor suggests, the single institutional basis of much HE research means that it can be seen as an amateur undertaking anyone can do. This might be seen positively as making the field open to all-comers but less positively the perceptions that specialist skills and knowledge are not required also undermines its wider legitimacy. As Andrew (2003) argued, HE research still struggles to get taken seriously.

the big challenge for it still is how does it get taken seriously as a research field, because it still very easily gets dismissed. And I think the other element of it is, is around because it struggles to express a collected body of knowledge then you get an awful lot of reinventing the wheel. (2003)

Field methodology

Linked to issues of the legitimacy of the HE field are questions regarding methodology. HE research is a more methodologically sophisticated field than it was 50 years ago. Early papers in *Studies in Higher Education* from the mid to late 1970s were often reflective pieces written by university teachers without recourse to empirical methods or an extensive review of the literature.

I remember Malcolm Tight writing 20 years ago and saying 'the majority of articles submitted to *Studies* have no methodological positioning at all'. That wouldn't be true now I think. (Tony 1994)

The development of the HE field, both theoretically and empirically, may be regarded both as a strength in generating more robust data and conceptual frameworks to inform the research design and analysis of the community of scholars in the field, and as a weakness in being excessively geared toward the generation of empirical data often on the basis of small-scale studies conducted in a single institution.

People often just interview a few colleagues in their own institutions ... institution studies that aren't very useful if they can't be generalised. (Felicity 2008)

it's the level of focus or the frame of reference, it's always a bit small Every dot has a meaning, and if I put all the dots together I come up with this picture. But in a true pointillist painting, the dots are just the medium through which you express something bigger. And we don't have many debates about where are the big, big holes in any of this. (Terry 1974)

It is unsurprising, perhaps, that small-scale studies are commonplace in HE research. This may partly be explained by the relatively isolated situation that HES researchers can find themselves in unless they are members of a bigger centre with funding for larger-scale, international work. It is also a consequence of what some participants saw as an empirical turn in the nature of research that is published with less space available for what one participant described as 'scholarly research' (Charles 1981) in reference to broader sociological and philosophical reflection without an explicit social scientific 'methodology'.

Empirical research is very, very important but so is scholarly research. And there is no space now for scholarly research, it doesn't generate income, it doesn't generate huge bucks, it doesn't generate neat and easily producible impact statements, but its absolutely vital to the world if the university is still to be a space for criticality in the world. (Charles 1981)

This sense of frustration about the limited vision of small-scale studies was shared by a number of other participants who felt that this norm was holding the field back in understanding the 'bigger picture'.

A lot of it [i.e. papers submitted to HE journals] are incredibly poor quality ... they haven't thought about audience, they haven't thought about originality, they haven't thought about the big messages that they're trying to get across, it feels very reproductive a lot of the time. (Margaret 1994)

Yet, newer entrants to the field among the pathtaker generation rarely expressed criticisms of this nature and are impressed by the multidisciplinary perspectives that are brought to HE research

You go to a higher education conference and you have people bringing in geography and sociology and philosophy and international studies and policy studies and various forms of pedagogy, and all of those kinds of things. And what's nice is that as, I suppose, an interdisciplinary field, you can draw on all of those kind of things and learn from them, but at the same time it means that higher education research doesn't necessarily have an identity. (Scott 2016)

Field accessibility

These methodological contentions link to broader concerns about the extent to which the HE research field, despite its growth, is accessible to wider audiences. The essence of this view is that HE is a social enterprise and research about it needs to be comprehensible to as many people as possible. This view was mainly expressed by members of the pathfinder and pathshaper generations who felt that the HE field has become steadily less accessible. Lack of accessibility was partly explained in terms of the use of specialist language associated with theory and methodology.

I think ... it's [i.e. academic knowledge] become much less accessible even within the higher education business. You've got to recognise that it exists but there are little worlds going on with little world language going on. (Robert 1973)

This trend was seen as having a number of consequences

I have seen it [i.e. academic economics] become more and more mathematical and that has never been what interests me. (Susan 1966)

It [i.e. the field of higher education] is an important social enterprise that deserves research in the way that other social enterprises do ... But I think the other side is that if you do institutionalise it, you know, then are you actually going to get people who have only studied higher education as opposed to a proper discipline. (James 1971)

I don't want higher education to become some sort of little specialism, some sort of little area of expertise, I want it to be big and generous and outgoing ... (Brian 1995)

The real task is communicating to the world ... the work is becoming too parochial. (Charles 1981)

These comments illustrate a view expressed by Harland (2009, 581) who comments that new lecturers and researchers in HE often find journal papers in HE studies 'hard to read and therefore to understand and critique'. However, at the same time, Harland notes that large numbers of new lecturers are encouraged to undertake research into learning and teaching in the context of their own practice with next to no training or support. This raises a key conundrum for HE as a field of study: it wishes to maintain quality at the same time as remaining open and accessible to new entrants.

Another worry is that HE research has become a victim of its own success in institutionalising itself and training a new generation of researchers in its specialist knowledge base, thereby narrowing the scope and vision of newer researchers in the process.

if you do institutionalise it, you know, then are you actually going to get people who have only studied higher education as opposed to a proper discipline. (James 1971)

Intra-field tensions

The participants in this study were deliberately reflective of research interests spanning 'learning and teaching' and 'policy', a division noted in previous quantitative studies (e.g. Tight 2003; Horta and Jung 2014). These are broad-brush characterisations of a more complex reality with HES researchers also clustered around a number of other specialist interests both in terms of research focus (e.g. widening participation, academic identity, equity and inclusion, graduate employability, leadership and management, etc.) and methodology (e.g. case study, feminism, grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, etc.). This diversity means that participants identified a range of intellectual networks and societies both broadly within the generic field of HE studies (e.g. SRHE, The European Higher

Education Society, Consortium of Higher Education Researchers, and now defunct bodies such as the Higher Education Foundation) as well as other specialist groupings such as the Association for Learning Technology and international organisations and affiliations (e.g. The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in HE [INQAAHE], World Universities Network, etc.). However, some participants, such as Carrie (2003) and Ava (2017), saw the boundary-crossing nature of their research as precluding an intimate relationship with any one network or grouping.

to be honest I've never felt part of a sort of network or a clique. And that's probably virtue of the interdisciplinary nature of what I do. (Carrie 2003)

I'm not a conventional strategy management scholar, nor am I a public policy scholar, nor am I a pure HE scholar, so I guess I find my home in the HE scholarship hard to find. (Ava 2017)

Running through the HE field, there appears to be a broader tension that reflects the concerns expressed in C. Wright Mills' (1959) classic *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills argued that the extremes of abstract empiricism and grand theory need to be avoided by those undertaking sociological research. The proliferation of small-scale empirical studies in the learning and teaching area tended to be seen, especially from a policy perspective, as failing to connect to the broader context, whereas, from a learning and teaching point of view, work in the policy studies area can be regarded as grand theory in making claims without sufficient empirical data.

There's too much ephemeral work about teaching and learning ... writing about things that are going on in their own institution, and what you don't see are large comparative studies. I think too many people are doing topics that are quite small and there are not enough people attacking large issues. (Harry 1970)

if you do something on the policy side basically you can sound off about your prejudices and you don't really have to have any empirical evidence. (Terry 1974)

HE research in the UK has become more internationally oriented and also more focused on learning and teaching than when the SRHE was formed in 1965 in the wake of the Robbins report. Shattock's (2015) analysis of the development of the SRHE between its founding in the mid-1960s and the early 1990s notes a shifting emphasis toward studies concerned with teaching, learning, the curriculum and the student experience. It also notes that 'the gap between policy makers and researchers ... has widened to a dangerous extent' (Shattock 2015, 15). While many HES researchers espouse a wish to connect their research with the policy arena, the challenges in making this connection seem to be greater than ever (Sabri 2010). This may partly be because HES researchers do not write with policy-makers in mind.

... whenever I go to higher education policy things within the higher education community, higher education research community, and they're calling it policy, I actually find there's very little policy there. So as a political scientist it's not what a politics department would call policy ... they're sort of talking about what's happened to them, or how policies affected their institution, making a brief reference to policy. (George 2010)

However, for some HES researchers, the policy and impact agenda threatens to undermine the diversity of research and the importance of small-scale work that is exploratory and seeks to open up critical questions rather than produce applied solutions.

If we keep going down that route why it's all about impact, is that going to privilege certain approaches to higher education research, which are probably not the kind of things that I have been engaged in because my projects have been small scale, relatively small scale, usually qualitative, often exploratory, don't have easy answers, you know that kind of thing. (Jane 2004)

Intergenerational change

The changing nature of academic research – broadly away from curiosity-driven work and toward funded projects judged on evidence of impact – is reflected in the autobiographical profiles of the

three generations. The pathfinder generation invariably list their publications without necessarily delineating separate sections related to different types of publication (e.g. journal papers, book chapters, etc.), whereas the pathshaper and pathtaker generations were more likely to do this emphasising the primary importance of their journal papers. The latter two generations were also much more likely to emphasise their success in attracting research grant income.

The purposes or goals of the pathfinders were largely self-defined and often grew from a mix of curiosity and opportunity. Although funding for research has always been important and a prestige indicator, historically, as Fulton (1992, 1814) noted, 'plenty of good research on higher education has been carried out without substantial external funding'. This comparative luxury is no longer available to the pathtaker generation who must be highly mobile and flexible in following funding opportunities attached to a series of junior positions in academe.

I've been shaped also by where the money is! Yeah, to keep going ... my career's not all about my own curiosity driven ideas, it's about working for other people ... I went back to do some other work in the School of Education, mainly to do with compulsory education actually to do with religious schools. That was not because that was what I was interested in, that's because what was paid. It had lots of money, it was because it was a grant and I was sort of around looking for work, so that's what I did. So I did something on religious schools, faith schools here in Britain. (George 2010)

Q: So what are your main goals and objectives as a HE researcher?

A: Well the main goal is to get a permanent academic post ... I want to be able to find a balance in doing academic research projects that are of interest to me and my particular pedagogical interests, my particular theoretical interests, but also having an awareness that I do need to get involved in things that perhaps aren't necessarily what I want to do but are strategically important for my career. (Charlotte 2012)

Short-term contracts and dependence on research funding make it difficult for pathtakers to establish their own academic agenda.

I've never really worked anywhere where they've taken me on because I'm a higher education researcher ... The problem I had then is that when my job moves on it's hard to keep those research areas going. You know it's hard because I'm no longer in that position. (Jane 2004)

Modern generations of HES researchers are more productive in terms of publications and concerned with generating research income. However, perhaps as a result of such pressures, they appear to have less clarity about and control over their own intellectual mission as HES researchers.

One aspect that seems somewhat surprising, given the global nature of the modern academy, is that few participants mentioned the influence of international scholarship. George (2010) was the lone example to speak on internationalisation in terms of co-authorship with colleagues who he met as a visiting fellow in New Zealand and through networking in Australia.

Reflections and conclusion

The development of HES as an area of academic enquiry may be understood by reference to a series of stages – legitimisation, professionalisation and accountability – that Elzinga (2012) identifies in the relationship between science, society and policy-makers. While Elzinga's analysis is largely of a generic, cross-disciplinary nature, similar processes can be observed in relation to the establishment of HES. In the 1960s and 1970s, HES scholars faced the challenge of *legitimation* in establishing a new subfield. Most entered HES as a career accident and it often took most of their career to obtain an established position as an HES researcher with the time and space to focus on research and teaching in HES. The careers of pathshapers coincided with increasing *professionalisation* in the 1990s as HES programmes expanded along with the number of research centres and professorial appointments. Funding from organisations such as the ESRC, the OECD and the HEA helped to increase the recognition of HES research. Finally, the careers of the latest generation, the pathtakers, have been

substantially influenced by the growing demands of *accountability* and the way this has shifted scholarly interests away from personal research agendas and towards the pursuit of funding opportunities.

These demands of accountability that so clearly shape the careers of pathtakers are what Elzinga has labelled epistemic drift. The requirements of the funders and the policy-makers become the dominant force (Elzinga 1985). HES researchers from the pathfinders generation were more likely to hold management and administration positions than the contemporary pathtakers. This reinforces the drift away from the goal of a research–policy nexus, as expressed in the Robbins report, and consolidates the academic professionalisation of HES. Hence, while the mission of many HES researchers remains focused on influencing policy, the forces of academic professionalisation appear to have made this goal harder to achieve.

While the relevance of Elzinga's stages – legitimisation, professionalisation and accountability – are readily apparent and may be easily applied to the case of HES, the reality is more complex. These stages overlap the generations and are all still evident to some extent today. Accountability has intensified for more recent generations connected with the pressures of marketisation, while professionalisation continues with doctorates in HES, for example, still growing. Legitimation was a particular concern for the pathfinders but is likely to remain a concern for the present and future generations as HES remains the subfield of a low-status academic field (i.e. education) and 'is not a scholarly or scientific discipline' (Albach 2014, 1319). The multidisciplinary nature of HES remains its strength, vital for regular intellectual renewal without a hard disciplinary border control, as well as a weakness, in making HES a loosely formed and divergent community of scholars with a myriad of academic interests. This is the status-relevance conundrum of HES as a field that makes it different than a conventional academic discipline.

HES continues to be, as one pathtaker commented, 'a very diverse and porous field' (Scott 2016) and its continuing epistemological health is reliant on maintaining strong connections with other disciplines. The vast majority of participants from all generations maintained a strong sense of disciplinary identity as well as an understanding of their place within the HE field. Coming into this field is often described as 'accidental' (James 1971), and some interviewees had a strong (or stronger) second identity rooted in an academic discipline. In many respects, this is vital in ensuring that new ideas from contributing disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, management studies and psychology among others continue to permeate the HE field and renew its knowledge base. However, unlike 25 years ago when 'all of the present generation of leaders in higher education studies are "immigrants" to the field' (Fulton 1992, 1821), the pathtaker generation are essentially home grown 'natives' likely to have a masters or PhD in HES. There is, thus, the attendant danger that knowledge creation in HE studies may ossify as a result of its success in developing specialist masters and doctoral programmes focusing on HE studies with a diluted treatment of key HE concepts associated with social science disciplines. This concern is linked to the extent to which the field is permeable to new ideas and welcoming of new entrants with fresh disciplinary perspectives.

Such concerns are, of course, nothing new. Silverman (1986, 25) argued that the HE field needed to maintain 'epistemological uncertainty and openness' to enable it to develop in new directions and remain open to members from other fields of study. The growth of HE research in terms of publication activity is linked to an empirical turn that has affected the social sciences more broadly and means that there is now a wealth of data about HE but, participants felt, a shorter supply of meta-analysis about the bigger picture both in the UK and internationally. This study has detected a deep-seated tension that despite the success and growth of HE research as an academic subfield since the 1960s, it risks becoming a 'small world' increasingly inaccessible to wider public and policy audiences. This is a reflection, drawing on the work of Elzinga (1985), of the conflict between the internal criteria that make a scientific field 'respectable' or intrinsically valuable in the eyes of academic peers as opposed to the external criteria that judge its value in terms of social policy implications.

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Society.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This study was funded through a research award from the Society for Research into Higher Education.

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