Being a researcher: The return of the native

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Synopsis: Jenny Ozga reflects on the importance of institutional ethos and political climate through a personal view of change in her own academic life.

I'm writing this from the point of view of an academic researcher in the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at the University of Edinburgh: this is how I identify myself now, though for quite a large proportion of my working life (which I hope isn't over yet) I was an academic manager in England. Now I privilege the research role in describing myself, though, inevitably, there's still management to be done. But the research is the key driver: the reason why I'm working more (probably much more) than I should. So in writing this piece in response to the invitation to say something about change in my academic life, I want to explore and discuss the centrality of research in my life since coming back to Scotland in 2000 to take up the role of Director of the Centre for Educational Sociology. I want to try to convey some of the pleasure and excitement that has come through my work in CES -- despite the enormous difficulties that any self-funded research centre faces in the current climate. The problems come from a context for research in education that is highly pressured and riddled with contradictions. I don't want to rehearse those here. Instead I want to convey some of the benefits of working in a dedicated research centre with expert researchers: such centres are rare-to the point of being endangered, in education in Scotland, and we need to celebrate, protect and promote them. In this piece, and writing from a personal perspective, I'll try to explain why.

I'm starting from the assumption that research is important. Indeed this seems a rather flat and inexpressive way of writing about research: it isn't just 'important', it's necessary and fundamental to academic identity. Without research there is no basis for teaching; without research there is no development. It was always important to me -- at least since my undergraduate studies in history introduced me to the excitement of following a thread of evidence and argument, and that importance was underlined by my MEd studies in the early 1970s with John Nisbet. I've never understood people who couldn't find a 'topic' or who talked (sometimes for years) about being 'interested' in research but could never find the time to do any. But research took second place to management for a long period, because I felt that I could be -- or could try to be -- a good manager and thus attempt to prevent or dilute some of the more unacceptable consequences of the various waves of managerialism that swept through Education Departments and Faculties, and across HE more generally in England in the late 1980s and 1990s (it does not seem to have been so strong in Scotland). With the benefit of hindsight this attempt to modify the direction and consequences of change was probably an error, as there was such a strong push towards changing workforce/management relations in all sectors, and the logic and force of that drive so very difficult to counter, that compromise became inescapable. The work of management, even good management, is written on water, and thriving departments can be restructured into mediocrity in less time than it takes to rewrite a job description. The reality of this, and the personal damage done to people struggling to make unacceptable policies and practices bearable became more apparent to me when I was able stand back and do some research on the processes of change that I was experiencing.

In this case the focus was on the feminisation of management in higher education, and the findings supported my hunch that women (myself included) were 'advancing' through university hierarchies as the senior management tasks in HE became more and more demanding and unmanageable, and as they required women to do 'emotional labour' in order to promote change (Ozga and Deem, 2000). This was an instructive lesson in the centrality of research and its capacity to enable us to look hard at the processes we are embedded in and working with. This example underlines the need to do independent and focused research on the problems that confront people working in universities: we are also research users -- we need an evidence base with which to confront and challenge claims that restructuring and modernisation are necessary and productive.

Coming to CES enabled me to identify as a researcher, first and foremost, and to raise my head from the constant pressures of daily short-term fire-fighting to absorb and analyse changes in higher education within a wider context of comparative study and research-based knowledge. In saying this, I don't want to give the impression that CES is a haven of calm and tranquillity, isolated from the pressures to demonstrate value and usefulness that frame higher education policy. On the contrary, because we have to earn our living (we are almost entirely dependent on research grant income to maintain activity, pay salaries and buy equipment), we are very market-exposed and much less insulated from economic and political pressure than those academics in conventional departments of education, who are not on short-term contracts and who don't have to pay their own way. However, while this produces pressure to work extremely hard and to be highly focused, there are very considerable compensations that derive from the long history of the Centre, which gives it a strong identity, and from the high levels of capacity to be found there, both in its long term members (some have more than 20 years' experience) and among its newer, international researchers, who have been attracted to CES because of its international reputation and activities, and who bring fresh ideas and perspectives to our work. Thus CES offers an intense, intensive and highly focused experience of research.

I found entering this work culture very challenging, but also stimulating and energising. It offered a contrast to the teacher education departments in which I had worked, where the pressures of (frequent) Ofsted inspections were followed closely by those of QAA, so that the RAE and publication were tasks that colleagues placed at the end of their lists of priorities, and research was experienced as a further management demand. In making these comments please note that I'm not 'blaming the victim': the regulation of teacher education in England (where I worked) is such that there is a major disconnection between research and teaching, and it takes enormous effort and imagination to create and sustain a research-driven culture.

In CES I found a space shaped by curiosity and expertise in pursuit of funding that made it possible to pursue enquiry generated from within, not steered or designed by someone else, or responding unthinkingly to government priorities. It's a rare combination: pursuit of funding can become an end in itself, and curiosity then gets driven out by pragmatism. In this environment I have learned an enormous amount about research that I hadn't realised that I didn't know. I thought I was an experienced researcher, but came to see that I had not been through the formative process of developing a collaborative research agenda, knitting together individual and group interests and skills, and arguing them through. The dominant mode of research production in departments of education is individualised and possibly competitive: in CES I found a friendly but demanding space in which to exchange ideas not only

about the topics for enquiry but about how we do research: how we know what we know and the different ways in which we interpret the social world. I've been well-taught here, by people who know how to keep their curiosity alive and flourishing while ensuring that proposals for fundable research get written. At the heart of my learning -- the change that I'm focusing on for this piece -- is the capacity to retain curiosity-driven enquiry while ensuring that it is framed intelligently (and thus achieves funding) but without losing sight of a very ambitious agenda that asks fundamental questions about education and its role and purpose in society. So we continue to do research that places Scotland in a comparative framework, within the UK, Europe and beyond, that is addressing key problems and issues in education and learning and that draws on and connects to debates in the social sciences. This is international research, whether it is focused on integrated children's services in a Scottish city, or the development of indicators for lifelong learning in Europe. It is international in its scope and ambition, not simply in its location.

This brings me to the core of the issue that I want to write about here. Coming back to Scotland and working with CES (which combines work that is national, that looks comparatively across the UK and also to Europe and beyond) brought the idea of mobility of people and ideas to the foreground of my work, both in a practical, day-to-day sense (we currently have researchers from nine nations working in the Centre) but also in relation to the problems and ideas that make up research agendas and that promote or inhibit research careers. It also highlights the issue of developing strong research cultures in education in Scotland, and the search for a productive relationship between inward-referencing and outward-referencing in research. Or, to put it more bluntly:how to be expert in the context but not parochial, and how to be international but not a tourist.

There is a disconnection between policy talk about researcher mobility and internationalisation and the reality in relation to research career progression and development and the promotion of genuine internationalism rather than opportunities for travel. The policy versions of mobility put increasing pressure on private individuals to find ways of coping with increased institutional demands, while attempting to live 'normal', ordinary, balanced, integrated lives. In the policy 'overworld' of mobility, such issues are not visible and not acknowledged. People and ideas are assumed to travel with the same (apparent) ease as data flow between cities and continents, and with the same de-contextualised assumptions about use and relevance. I realise from my work in CES and the way that being here has allowed me to draw together threads of enquiry and experience that have been developed throughout my working life, that I don't accept these assumptions about travel and movement: such processes need support and structure, and they also require some serious discussion and engagement with the difficult issue of how to relate the local and the national to the transnational. This is not (just) about researching in different geographical spaces, but about the task of conceptualising comparison in education/learning in complex and new interdependencies. Put simply, and in relation on my own environment, it's about keeping a focus on Scotland while locating it in the international, and not permitting a hierarchy of enquiry that assumes the international to offer more complexity than the local (a tendency perhaps exacerbated by some odd interpretations of international standing in the RAE).

At a personal level, and looking at the issue of researcher mobility, I'm dismayed by the erosion of support for research careers: policy statements (which bear little relation to institutional conditions) largely assume a rational actor making choices

about pathways that are clearly marked and entirely shaped by scientific choices. The messiness of life does not intrude here: in particular, attentiveness to family commitments, whether childcare or other forms of responsibility, is almost absent beyond the statement of minimum legal entitlement. This is a major change from the 1970s and early 1980s when, in response to pressure from feminist movements, the principles of equitable sharing of care and of acknowledging and even celebrating other forms of work-life balance were part of institutional culture, sometimes contested, but not eliminated from the workplace, as they seem to be today. Policy (including research policy) is wedded to an agenda of efficiency and a comprehensive emphasis on individualization through which people are required to be authors of their own lives. There is an increasing individualization of work, supported by a culture and economy of insecurity, that also dissolves basic oppositions like home and work, self employed and employee, and that, particularly in research careers, chops up work by contract and time. Researchers require the ability to cope with multiple careers, must learn to 're-design' themselves, to locate job market opportunities, to choose and fashion relevant education and training. As Sennett has pointed out, such patterns of institutional design deprive workers of authority and the capacity to produce a coherent 'narrative' of their lives and work. They also deny the opportunity to develop craft knowledge: craftsmanship is developed through trial and error, is personal and 'deep', and is a key element of good research.

In the policy 'overworld', researchers are encouraged to locate themselves in trans-national spaces of knowledge production. At the same time, the nation-states of Europe seek to maintain competitive advantage through attracting the best researchers to their 'local' environments. Can research centres in Scotland continue to attract 'mobile' international talent? Can they 'internationalise' their own research cultures. Will these pressures be responded to intelligently, so that there is an intellectual dialogue between the national and the international, around which research agendas can be built and maintained? From my experience, what works for researchers and for high quality knowledge production is a balance between mobility and security, between 'home' and 'international': a combination of the stimulation and refreshment that follows from new experiences and environments, and a strong stable core of research work and research workers. Research in education in Scotland is, perhaps, particularly vulnerable to the loss of good researchers to more stable and secure environments, and this could prompt a retreat to parochialism that would further damage the research culture.

To return to the theme of change: I'm very glad that I made the move to CES: it's a privilege to be in an excellent research centre that is energised by enquiry into what education/learning is doing for society and policy, in Scotland and Europe. I think that we have adapted and translated the concept of 'mobility' into something that works: but it needs further protection and investment if this model is to be developed elsewhere, and thus offer to others the experience of change from which I have benefited.

References

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