

University of Wolverhampton – Written evidence (PSU0068)

Quality of academic careers at post-92 universities

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Executive summary

- The majority of academics employed at post-92 institutions are unable to secure time and financial resources to realise their research, affecting their job satisfaction as well as reducing their ability to deliver first-hand research-informed teaching.
- The lack of financial resources available for the post-92 academic research and the adoption of the modern managerial university system, where institutions function as knowledge enterprises rather than knowledge communities, transition academics away from research into roles with heavy administrative workloads unable to contribute to the national research and development (R&D) with their knowledge and to further their expertise.
- Rather than focussing all the efforts on attracting new workforce, the Government could partially address the gaps currently being experienced in the UK STEM R&D by developing the academic staff already employed at post-92 universities. This could be achieved by diversifying research funding; encouraging institutions to decrease the level of administrative burden on academics and ensuring the application of protected research time within their work allocation.

Introduction and reasons for submitting evidence

The Government plans to increase the proportion of UK gross domestic product spent on research and development to 2.4% by 2027, and as such is looking to expand their STEM workforce within the industry and academia.

Whilst developing initiatives to attract new workers in the form of early career academics or mid-career professionals with a view to retrain and join STEM academia, the extant mid-career academic workforce is being overlooked and is at risk of abandoning their posts.

This advisory paper draws attention to a potential brain-drain of qualified and experienced STEM academics out of UK academia due to their dissatisfaction with the quality of academic careers caused by the disproportionate distribution of research funding and neo-liberal managerialism.

Written evidence

- Evidence provided is based on the perspective of 32 STEM academics employed at various post-92 universities in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. The participants obtained their PhD titles 8-16 years prior, and all identify as mid-career academics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to understand the level of satisfaction with the quality of academic careers in the UK, and to explore the participants' future career plans.

- To ensure generalisation of research findings, the sample population was selected to be representative of the current landscape of STEM academic population in post-92 institutions. Additionally, the findings were later presented to a group of 20 other STEM academics to gauge their perspective. All academics confirmed that the research findings do fully or partially apply to their lived experiences of UK academic careers.
- The neo-liberal managerial universities: where institutions act as businesses treating students as customers; increasingly socialise academics away from R&D. 100% of participants reported decreased levels of academic autonomy and academic freedom; and 93% of participants reported being overburdened with administrative tasks.
- 84% of academics were passionate about furthering their research. However, 59% highlighted the fact that they are unable to do so during their working hours as the work- allocation model has them working over capacity. The need to conduct research outside of working hours on regular basis, not only negatively affects the work-life balance of staff, but also disproportionately affects the careers of women and those with caring responsibilities; going directly against the efforts made towards equality, diversity and inclusion in academia.
- The lack of permanent research positions in the majority of post-92 universities forces most mid-career academics to transition away from research into solely teaching roles or management. 66% mid-career academics experienced difficulties with their career progression and 22% felt the only way for them to secure a more senior role in the institution was to follow a managerial route in lieu of research.
- In regard to career progression 69% of STEM academics employed at post-92 universities expressed desire to further their career through the academically more prestigious research route. In order to secure more research time 22% of academics were prepared to leave their current institution, 9% saw their future outside of academia and 12% were actively looking for research opportunities abroad.
- 100% of UK born academics were convinced that they would be better financially compensated for their knowledge in the industry and 44% of overseas nationals who had relocated into the UK for work in HE indicated that their expectations in terms of quality of academic career have not been met.
- The intensions of the Government to invest into recruiting more STEM experts into academia are to be applauded. However, unless the above highlighted points are addressed there is a real risk that in time the new recruits would follow their predecessors, abandoning academia or the UK, therefore maintaining the present skills deficit.

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