# Newer researchers in higher education: policy actors or policy subjects?

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## Abstract

In this article we explore the extent to which 42 newer researchers from several mostly European countries, working in the academic sub-field of higher education, were aware of, responded to and negotiated their careers in relation to higher education policies. Participants tended to divide into two similarly-sized groups: a group that engaged with and made strategic use of higher education policy, who we termed ‘policy actors’; and a group who felt that they were shaped by policy rather than working with it, who we termed ‘policy subjects’. These differences appeared largely to relate to our participants’ background prior to studying for their doctorate, their mode of study and the doctoral route that they were following. All of our participants appeared to perceive the relationship between their research and policies in individual terms, rather than in terms of being a part of a community of higher education researchers. We explore the implications of these findings.

## Introduction

European, and increasingly world, higher education policies, whether transnational (e.g Bologna) national, regional or institutional, have for some time promoted a marketised view of higher education related to the development of more restricted, instrumental views of research and education (Bok 2003; Henkel 2005). As the massification of higher education has developed, more managerialist approaches to running universities have emerged (Deem et al. 2007) and fresh dilemmas for university leaders have joined existing ones (Deem 2012). All this has had some dramatic effects on the academic profession (Locke and Bennion 2010) and the positioning of research into higher education as a field.

Changes in research funding practices and an increased emphasis on research selectivity and audit within and across national boundaries have caused many researchers to adapt their practices (Lucas 2006; Kehm & Lanzendorf 2006). This process has been exacerbated by the current period of financial austerity and there have been calls for research to more directly inform policies (for such a call in relation to higher education research, see Locke 2009). For example, the European Commission (2009, 2011) have signalled that humanities and social sciences research funded under Horizon 2020 will be expected to contribute to public debate and the tackling of societal challenges and be disseminated in a useable form to policy makers and the wider public. Other funders of research have similar expectations (for example see British Academy 2008). Austerity is also affecting European higher education systems in respect of reduced public funding, job security and opportunities and the possibility of academic promotion. This is leading to a renewed emphasis on teaching in European universities as research funding begins to decrease (European Commission 2013).

Changes to research funding practices and opportunities have also informed debates about the changing doctorate and what is required of newer researchers in different disciplines. Doctoral students are expected to be more aware of how their research contributes to society and the impact of their research (EUA 2005; Group of Eight 2013; RCUK 2013). The related critique of the narrow specialisation involved in some traditional doctorates in Europe (as contrasted with the USA model of the doctorate which is longer and broader) plus the high dropout rate for part-time doctoral students has promoted the development of professional doctorates firstly in the USA and then in Australia, Canada, the UK and Ireland, which appear to offer a greater opportunity for addressing professional dilemmas and social problems of practitioners (Loxley and Seery 2012; Kot and Hendel 2012; Costley 2013) as they are assessed on both a thesis and substantive taught units relating to participants’ professional work. As Kot and Hendel (2012) argue, professional doctorates are difficult to define. Here we use the term to denote programmes that include coursework assessed for credit and are explicitly aimed at those who are currently working in a professional context. Another concern about doctoral education is that there has been a shift from a knowledge to a training model of the PhD (Kemp et al. 2012, Winfield 1987) in some European countries, as pressure to complete doctorates in a shorter time span has become evident and completion rate league tables compiled (HEFCE 2012, 2013).

The literature relating to researchers’ experiences of policies, however, presents a very different picture of the extent to which newer researchers can influence and respond to policies. Changes to higher education policies influence the lives of experienced as well as newer researchers (Enders 2004; Leisyte et al. 2008). Whilst established researchers can often adapt to new circumstances and even benefit from changes to the academic profession (Musselein 2009; Bleikie 2012 ), the literature suggest that it can be more challenging for new researchers to adapt their practices and identities (Henkel, 2005). Additionally, newer researchers in higher education in general may not always be fully aware of policy changes within higher education (Archer 2008) or alternatively, continue to hold more traditional views of research and education despite having some awareness of policy shifts (Crossouard 2010). It is also becoming evident that the effect of policies is experienced differently in terms of the roles that newer researchers hold, e.g. whether as students, post doc researchers, or new lecturers (McAlpine & Turner 2011). Teelken (2012) notes the range of policy responses from administrative officers, doctoral students, lecturers, professors, deans and rectors to the existence and effects of managerialism, which she places on a continuum from professional pragmatism through symbolic compliance and formal instrumentality to rational resignation.

To date, research on how the doctorate itself and doctoral students are responding to some of these recent policy trends has largely focused on how students can develop more entrepreneurial and industry or employer/organisational focused practices (Bienkowska and Klofsten 2012; Gemme and Gingras 2012; Platow 2012). Whilst there has been research into how those who have doctorates have contributed to policy development (Johnson and Williams 2011), there has been little examination of how doctoral students’, or newer researchers in general, understand educational policy and how they might contribute to it. This is an important area for newer researchers in the sub-field of higher education because contributing to policy development is one of the most prominent ways in which their research can have a wider societal impact.

Overall, what is notable in this review is the contrast in the two literatures: that on the changing nature of the doctorate tends to characterise newer researchers as active in relation to policies and that on policies and academic identities which tends to characterise newer researchers as more passive. This led us to be interested in examining the extent to which newer researchers appeared to position themselves as active or passive in relation to higher education policies and how their experiences of policies related to what they were doing prior to their involvement in higher education research; the stage of their doctorate and; where relevant, the kind of doctorate being undertaken or that had been completed; their national context; their gender; the mode of study; and aspects of their current, past and future career and personal biographies.

In thinking about how newer researchers in higher education understand higher education policies, we draw on arguments about the ways in which education policy can be conceptualised when researching it. Such work has focused on examining the extent to which policies are seen as fixed texts that are located at the level of the government, regional or institutional agency that has produced them or in terms of the practices that are enacted in response to policy texts (see Ball 1994; Ozga 2000; Vidovich 2007; Taylor Webb 2014). In relation to compulsory education in the UK, Ball et al. (2011a, b; 2012) describe this difference in terms of whether those working with policy are policy actors or policy subjects. They provide a framework (set out in Table 1) which was developed in relation to how teachers in secondary schools interacted with policy. It offers a way of examining the extent to which people adopt a passive or active relation to policies in their work. It is important to be clear that these are not mutually exclusive categories: Ball et al. (2012) argue that different individuals may take on more active or passive roles in different elements of their jobs, in relation to different policies and the roles they take on can change over time.

### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

These ideas can also be applied to the ways in which newer researchers think about policy. Do they see it as something that is imposed on them from above and which positions them as policy subjects? Or do they see policies as relational, in that any policy needs to be enacted in local settings that offer the opportunity for reinterpretation and possibly, resistance as policy actors? It is these questions that we examine in this article.

## Method

We conducted interviews (face-to-face, Skype, and telephone) with 42 newer researchers researching higher education almost all of whom were studying for or had recently completed their doctorates and the vast majority of whom were based in Europe at the time of interviewing. We contacted these respondents through national and international learned society email lists, website postings and institutional or personal contacts. We recognise that this means there are a range of limitations beyond the usual ones of qualitative sampling for the data so derived. Table 2 sets out the characteristics of the participants who all identified themselves as newer researchers in the field of higher education.

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

The make-up of our sample meant that we had particular clusters of characteristics. In particular, those taking the professional programme were nearly all based in the UK, all studying part-time and were more likely to have had established careers in higher education before beginning their doctorates. This means that in our outcomes it is difficult to disentangle the different impacts of mode of study, doctoral route and background before doing a doctorate. Thus, we are cautious in the reporting of these outcomes. The students studying in this doctoral programme also all studied a module that involved them discussing the relations between their professional practices and policies. However, despite the limitations of our sample, the broad range of participants’ characteristics included suggests that our study does offer a meaningful insight into newer researchers’ experiences of policy even if this is more partial than we would have liked. Clearly there is scope for further studies in this area to develop further and challenge the analysis in this article.

Within the interviews we examined individuals’ relationships with, to and about ‘higher education policy’. We also asked them about their career aspirations as well as whether they saw themselves as internationally mobile. The interviews were carried out between March and July 2012 and it is important to recognise that the particular moment in which they were interviewed is likely to have impacted on their responses. In particular the international economic downturn and resulting austerity measures in all of the countries from which our participants were drawn is likely to have played a role in shaping their views of policy and their relationship to it. For this reason, our outcomes are best viewed as a snapshot at a particular moment in time.

In our analysis we focused on: whether participants found it easy to recognise examples of the impact of higher education policy on their own experience; the ways in which that policy had or had not impacted on their research; the extent to which they felt policy had shaped their careers; whether they felt able, either now or in the future, to be in a position to influence policy, the extent to which they discussed policies informally with friends and colleagues and how they defined higher education policy. In categorising participants’ responses we drew on the framework of Ball et al. (2011b) outlined earlier. This framework was used to identify how many different roles our participants appeared to hold in relation to policy at the time of their interview. We set out our findings in relation to this in the first section of our outcomes section.

In order to extend our analysis further, we identified whether our participants expressed passive or active roles and examined how this related to participants’ gender, national location, background before beginning their doctorate, their mode of study and doctoral-route, the stage of their doctorate and their future career aspirations. It should be noted that some of our participants expressed both passive and active relations to policies. In reporting these relations below, we focus on whether or not the accounts they gave **only** contained accounts of passive roles in relation to policies. In doing so, we characterised those who only described passive roles in relation to policies as ‘policy subjects’ and those who described active roles as ‘policy actors’ regardless of whether they also described passive roles in relation to policies. This is because we were interested in whether there was evidence of our participants being active in relation to some policy elements rather than requiring that they were active in relation to all policies.

All of the coding of the interview data was initially carried out by the first author and then checked by the other authors, with amendments made based on this checking process.

## Outcomes

Our focus was on how our respondents perceived the relationship between their research and professional practices and policies. The difference in our sample and focus from Ball’s meant that there were three roles identified by Ball et al (2011b; 2012) that were not congruent with the accounts of our participants (narrators; outsiders; and transactors). The role of narrator involves selecting the aspects of a policy that an organisation will focus on and none of our participants were at this level of seniority. Given we were focused on participants’ research and professional practices, it is not surprising that they did not identify themselves as outsiders to these practices nor did they see themselves as ‘transactors’ who simply sought to ensure that policy is seen to be done.

Our focus on newer researchers also encouraged us to ask about our participants’ views of their future relationship to policies. This led to us identifying an additional role in relation to policy; that of ‘Future Influencer’. This role had a passive and an active form. Table 3 shows the numbers and percentages of the roles that were identified from the participants’ accounts of their policy views and experiences and whether they were passive or active roles. It is important to be clear that individuals described holding multiple roles in relation to policy with the number or roles expressed varying from 1-4. The most frequent number of roles described in relation to policy was 2, with 50% of the sample describing this numbers of roles. We now set out each role in more detail.

### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

### Active roles

#### Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs are those who represent particular policies and seek to recruit others to the possibilities of policies. In our sample, six (14%) of participants gave accounts that were aligned with this role. These accounts took two forms. First, there were those who deliberately set out to shape the formation of policies. For example, Pavi described taking an active role in attempting to shape policy in his institution and saw this as a continuation of his previous activities:

I have been on the rector’s think tank as a student here. I definitely want to continue shaping policy as I have done since my Helsinki university student rep days (Pavi, Finland, 2nd year of traditional PhD but seconded from an NGO)

In contrast, Jack explained how he reinterpreted what he wanted to do in terms of current institutional policies and actively ensured that senior staff were aware of what he was doing and how it related to policy imperatives. This meant that rather than being entrepreneurial in relation to the particular policy, he was entrepreneurial in promoting what he is doing in terms of the current policy priority:

I was very conscious of university strategy around internationalization and I framed my project around the strategies of the university… I have actively volunteered to take part in policy consultation when institution does that and I actively try to make sure that senior staff who enact policy know what I am doing. I do engage deliberately with senior staff around policy. (Jack, UK, completed part-time Professional PhD Programme whilst working in a University)

#### Enthusiasts

In our study, enthusiasts appeared to be those who engaged in the policy process in creative ways. Thus rather than necessarily embodying particular policies in their practices, they embodied the importance of engaging in the policy process. It was this investment in the policy process that was crucial in identifying participants’ accounts as aligned with this role. In our sample, five (12%) of participants gave accounts that were aligned with this role. For example, Eleni gave a clear sense of her investment in the policy process:

I am involved in policy work now. I have done work for the European Universities Association UA and am part of the Eurodocs Mobility Working Group and I plan to continue this (Eleni, Greek but studying in the UK, just submitted full-time traditional PhD, which she studied following a master’s degree)

However, this enthusiasm for the policy process did not mean that our participants were uncritical in their engagement. For example, James described how his enthusiasm for engaging in policy processes was partly motivated by his questioning of how well informed policymakers were:

Having met people involved in policy, I spend a lot of time scratching my head. I now respond to policy reviews whereas before I would have trusted the policy makers. I don’t now because I realise that some are ill informed (James, UK, 4th year of part-time professional PhD programme whilst working in the Public Sector)

#### Translators

The role of translator was the active role in relation to policy that was most often aligned with the accounts of our participants, with 18 (44%) expressing relations to policy that aligned with this role. In our sample, these accounts tended to emphasise the ways in which they used policies to make changes they thought were needed in their institutions. The difference between ‘translators’ and ‘entrepreneurs’ was that entrepreneurs deliberately sought out policies that would promote their agenda whereas translators would respond to policy imperatives by interpreting them in ways that allowed them to undertake work that they felt was important. Sometimes, this could be in relation to policies that they had strong disagreements with. For example, Peter describes his relationship to the introduction of fees of £9000 in England:

I have an ambivalent relationship to the introduction of fees… It highlights the notion of students consuming a product, which I don’t think they are. I think it is a much more complicated relationship. But Senior Managers are now much more interested in what students do and how they feel about their studies … The perverse and unexpected impact of policy has been that people like me, who value students and want to give them a good experience, have been empowered to fight for them because of those consumerist principles. It enables me to do what I think should be done … I am able to call upon the £9000 fee student to argue for value for money and for students to be looked after but I still feel consumerism is problematic and not healthy for the sector (Peter, UK, 3rd year of part-time professional PhD programme whilst working in a university)

#### Critics

The role of critics of policy was those who deliberately maintained counter discourses in relation to policies and monitored the ways in which they were implemented at a local level. In our sample, only two (5%) of participants gave accounts that aligned with this role. This is not to say that there were not other critical accounts, rather that only two participants described being involved in the process of developing or supporting counter-discourse as opposed to trying to translate the meanings of policies. In these two accounts, there was a sense of a lack of power to resist policies. For example, Lesley described how she could not resist edicts from above in her institution but how in her teaching she encouraged her students to take a critical stance in relation to educational policies:

In my teaching I get students to explore new policies that are coming through in education and examine what the research evidence for them might be. So in a much broader way in my teaching I am using issues related to policy … I try to get students to question policies and it is interesting getting them talking about how policies work in their countries. I do a little bit to influence policy, as much as I can. (Lesley, UK, completed part-time Professional PhD Programme whilst working in a university)

#### Active future influencers

In our sample, nearly half of our participants gave accounts of how they might influence policies in the future. In analysing these accounts, we categorised some as active and others as passive (these are dealt with in the next section). The active future influencers were those whose accounts were detailed in terms of the ways that they would influence policy in the future. There was a clear sense of what this would involve, who they would work with and what they would do to influence policy. For example, Simon set out how he wanted to promote policies supporting blended learning in the UK:

In the future, I want to prove the benefits of blended learning in people’s home country to give them a UK higher education experience, through partnerships with others. I want to work with people like the British Council to promote blended learning in the UK (Simon, UK, completed part-time Professional PhD Programme whilst working in a university)

### Passive roles

#### Receivers

The most common role expressed by our participants was that of receivers of policies, with 31 (74%) of our participants providing accounts that aligned with this role. This mainly involved coping with policies in defensive ways rather than being creative about how they might engage with policies. A third of those who expressed receiver roles in relation to particular aspects of policies also expressed more active roles in relation to some policies. However, for others, they only experienced their relations to policies in a passive way. Sometimes this involved a sense of not wanting to engage with policies in relation to their research. For example, Irina outlined her reservations about engaging with policies:

I’m not really interested in doing or influencing policy work. It’s too much responsibility… I am quite wary of researchers giving policy advice as there is often not enough information to do this and we don’t know government priorities. I don’t want to be a policy maker (Irina UK, 2nd year of full time traditional PhD which she studied following a master’s degree)

#### Passive future influencers

As opposed to active future influences, passive future influences were those whose accounts indicated that they wanted to influence policy in the future but these accounts were unclear about what this would involve. Often this involved a sense that once they had greater power and status or they had produced larger scale research then policy makers would have little option but to listen to them. Eleven (26%) of our participants gave accounts that aligned with this role. For example, Grainne gives a sense of her expectations of what a more senior job would enable her to do:

I would like to influence policy in HE having spent so much time and money doing a PhD on student support, but I feel my knowledge is untapped in my present role and there are few others in my own institution doing any research on HE. I feel that influencing policy would be easier in a more senior job (Grainne, Ireland, 3rd Year of part-time traditional PhD, which she is studying whilst working in a professional services role at a different university)

### Differences in active and passive roles

In thinking about the differences in the views of policies expressed in the active and passive roles, there were four factors that appeared to be crucial. First, the greater number of active roles appears to reflect what it means to be passive. Whilst taking an active role in relation to policies can involve a number of different approaches, a passive role is characterised by the very absence of an approach. Thus the only difference in passive roles is whether they are related to the present or to the future.

Second, in relation to passive roles, policies were constructed as something that was separate from the kind of work our participants were doing and located at a macro or meso level above their work. These accounts also tended to position the participants as lone individuals not as connected to a wider community.

Third, and in contrast to passive accounts, more active accounts tended to position policies as an integral part of participants’ day-to-day work. The view of policies was relational, so that rather than being seen to operate at a level separate from the participant, policies were understood as operating between a number of interrelated levels such as national, institutional or micro. Finally, these active accounts tended to situate participants as members of wider and collective networks rather than purely as individuals. This view was expressed explicitly by James in his interview:

“I now recognize the importance of other people. I recognise the dialogical nature of corresponding with other people as being very helpful in shaping what might become key points, key decisions, or views to take forward to policy, whereas in the past I thought that wisdom came from the self.” (James, UK, 4th year of part-time professional PhD programme whilst working in the Public Sector)

These collective networks involved colleagues, policy makers, and other agencies. However, what was completely absent from all of the accounts of our participants was the sense that the newer researchers saw themselves as part of a community of higher education researchers, who contributed to a shared body of knowledge, which as a whole could impact on higher education policies. This lack of a collective identity *as higher education researchers* is particularly interesting because all of the participants involved in our study had somewhat ironically identified themselves as *newer researchers in higher education.*

### **Relations between roles and demographics**

In examining the relations between our participants’ roles in relation to policies and demographic factors, we placed them into two groups. One group, made up of just over half of our participants, contained those whose accounts only appeared to contain passive roles in relation to policies. We labelled this group as ‘policy subjects’. The second group, which we labelled as ‘policy actors’, (48% of participants), contained those whose accounts contained only active (17%), or both active and passive roles (31%) in relation to policies.

We did not find any relationship between our participants’ gender and their relationship to policy. Roughly equal proportions of women and men perceived their roles in relation to policy in terms of policy subjects or as policy actors. However, it is worth noting that nearly three quarters of our participants were women and so this outcome needs to be treated with caution. We also did not find any relationship between the national locations of participants and their stance towards policy. As Table 4 shows, those who were at the latter stages of, or had completed, their PhD were more likely to position themselves as policy actors than those in the first or second year.

### TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Table 5 shows that those who had established roles in Higher Education (as defined in Table 1) or other sectors prior to their doctorates were more likely to give accounts that involved them taking active roles in relation to policy than those who had come straight from a master’s degree or from an unstable career in higher education. Those who were in stable careers, whether inside or outside of higher education, were also less likely to describe their roles in relation to policy as purely passive.

### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Table 6 shows that those who studied part-time were less likely to give accounts that only involved ‘passive’ roles in relation to policies than those who studied full time, although this might be because those studying part time were more likely to be mature students who were working in professional roles whilst studying. It also shows that those who studied in professional programmes were less likely to have only ‘passive’ relationships to policy than those who studied traditional doctorates. This result could have been influenced by students on the doctoral programme being required to take a higher education policy module during their degree.

### TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

### Discussion

In this discussion we come back to the split we noted between literature which characterises newer researchers as actual or potential policy actors (EUA 2005; Group of Eight 2013; RCUK 2013) and that on policies and academic identities tending to characterise newer researchers as policy subjects (Henkel 2005; Archer 2008; Crossouard 2010). Our results mirror this dichotomous split. We found that there was an almost equal split between respondents who gave accounts describing how they adopted active and passive roles in relation to policies. Our outcomes show that those who already had senior or mid-level professional service or academic roles in higher education, were studying part-time and were studying in professional doctorate programmes that required a higher education policy module to be taken were more likely to understand policy in relational terms and were less likely to describe themselves as only having passive roles in relation to policies. In this way they were more likely to be policy actors than policy subjects.

These outcomes extend Ball et al.’s (2011a,b; 2012) work by showing how their categories play out in relation to newer researchers in higher education and highlighting a number of factors that appear to be related to taking a more active role in relation to policies as well as understanding policies in more relational terms.

In thinking about the implications of these outcomes for newer researchers, there are three possible interpretations of these findings. The first is that, because the professional doctorate that the students were taking included modules looking at policies, newer researchers should be given training into how to conceptualise and interact with policies. However, this interpretation underplays the fact that the newer researchers on professional doctorate programmes also tended to have established careers in higher education or a cognate field. This leads to the second possible interpretation. This is that newer researchers who are experienced professionals working in higher education are more likely to have relational perceptions of policy. However this was by no means always the case, with over a third of those with established careers in higher education tending to conceptualise policy in a more passive way.

This leads to our third interpretation, which is that our findings illustrate that becoming a newer researcher is part of a wider process of identity formation, which is partially dependent on the degree of experience newer researchers have working in higher education. This interpretation of our findings highlights the multiplicity of experiences amongst newer researchers into higher education and so emphasises the complexity involved in thinking about how to enable newer higher education researchers to impact on policies. This interpretation chimes with Ball et al.’s (2012, p.70) analysis of how policies are enacted in schools in terms of “a creaky social assemblage” and “fragile structures” in which there are a number of different positions available and where the positions individuals take change over time. Both our findings and Ball et al.’s (2012) highlight the complexity and messiness of people’s relationships to policies.

Another aspect of our findings which is noteworthy is the lack of a sense in our participants’ accounts of contributing to a collective body of knowledge on higher education that might impact on policies despite their self-identification as ‘newer researchers in higher education’. This outcome presents a sobering challenge for those who wish to develop a higher education research community which collectively co-produces knowledge that can shape higher education policies and practices. Due to it being absent from the accounts of our participants, there is very little evidence within our data set to help us to make sense of this aspect of our findings. The impression we gained was that it might be related to higher education being a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary field that includes contributions from many social science disciplines as well as research by business and public agencies (Locke 2009) and to working in a subfield which in Europe at least has many newer researchers in it but only a small number of senior and well established academics (Deem 2015). Whilst there is clearly strength in diversity, our outcomes suggest that a potential downside is that the lack of a clear body of knowledge can lead researchers to focus on the relation between individual research projects and policies rather than on the way in which the project might contribute to a collective body of knowledge that is far more suited to informing the development of policies.

## Conclusion

In our research we highlighted two distinct positions in relation to policies taken by newer researchers in higher education that related to particular aspects of their identities and individual trajectories. However, the one characteristic that did appear to be shared by our participants was a focus on themselves as individual researchers rather than as members of a broader community of higher education researchers. The ways of addressing this lack of collective identity and examining the extent to which these findings are true of education and other disciplinary groupings in the academy are questions for future projects.

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