

6-8 Sector Variations: “Choking over their sherry”

Introduction

Nobody would find it surprising to have a Media Department, and even in, more long established universities, it's not uncommon and no longer a cause of people choking over their sherry in the senior common room. (Participant 04)

The theme considered in this analysis is the extent to which the factors considered across the study vary across the English higher education sector, as portrayed by the diversity of participants (seven included here) in the study, together with the participants' own perceptions of any sectoral variation.

In respect of the sectoral variations in participant responses to the main analytical themes, a striking feature is the lack of any clear variations across participants from different media studies settings. For example, a superficial and stereotypical view of varying rationales for media studies might expect the response of Participant 09 (course leader for a foundation degree in media production in an FE/HE college) to differ from that of Participant 15 (course leader for an honours degree journalism programme in a Russell Group university). However, this was not the case:

I think it's important in a (...) in a modern society, a modern democracy if you like – that people have the language to be able to deconstruct programmes that they see, to be able to kind of make rational decisions, to be active audiences if you like.
(Participant 09)

We're thinking about (...) for instance the role of journalism in society. The effect of what- of what (...) how (...) journalism (...) i-works in practice on (...) how the world gets reported? (Participant 15)

Both participants are using the discourse of ‘*media literacy*’. The public differentiated discourses that associate ‘*media training*’ with college-based foundation degrees and ‘*media education*’ with Russell Group university honours degrees are not reflected in the participant responses here. The participants’ view of any sectoral variation gives a more complex picture.

Analysis

Participant 08 relates the variations she has experienced in terms of cross-sector practice norms that she associates with the institutions she has experienced. She has worked in several large post-92 universities but is now an associate dean and head of department in a small specialist arts institution that employs lecturing staff who, according to Participant 08, see themselves as part-academic, part-creative industry practitioner and this leads her to differentiate between their identities and behaviours and those of the “*professional academic*”:

In fact you meet them in their creative identity before you meet them as an academic here. It’s really different [laughs]. And that’s really hard to appreciate because you have expectations of how a professional academic behaves that you take with you from institution to institution that you go to, that are completely subverted here. And I don’t mean that in a good way always either [laughs]. (Participant 08)

Participant 08 then explains the position of her institution in relation to the sector-wide approach to research, seeing that as different to general-purpose and research-intensive universities:

You know [laughs]. Erm, but actually, no the research agenda is, it’s very, it’s sensible for the size of the institution that we are. And we kind of value, enterprise as transfer, scholarship, those sorts of things. (Participant 08)

Because we put forward four and a half people for the whole institution or whatever. One of whom was at international level, the others who were, you know, a few rungs down. So we put a lot of work, spent a lot of money to be bottom of the table and so the conversation was like, “God, you know, would it have been better not to be in the club?”. (Participant 08)

This response problematises the engagement of her institution with the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Due to the timing of the interview, the participant is referring to their previous submission to the RAE rather than the latest Research Excellence Framework (REF) (HEFCE, 2014). She perceives the RAE to have been incompatible with the practice-based work that predominates in her institution and presents this in terms of a discourse of league tables; “*a few rungs down*”, “*bottom of the table*” and represents universities who are successful in obtaining significant funding through the RAE as a “*club*” which implies exclusivity of membership and exclusion for her institution.

Participant 11 also points to the distinctive nature of his university which is also a small institution but with an explicit mission towards “social good” that is practically implemented through student voluntary work.

Well this place (...) this <Institution>, has a very overt (...) kind of a caring image. It’s formally a teacher training institution within the Cathedral Group of universities. Yeah. So they’re very much about being for social good and in their mission statement they go quite clearly for that compulsory element, whole degree or an optional element but it’s compulsory, it’s on the degree, is a volunteering module. (Participant 11)

Participant 11 does then go on to distinguish this from the way he perceives the Russell Group, giving an account that equates the whole Russell Group with a stereotype of Oxbridge and does not account for the significant diversity in

Russell Group members and does not fit the responses of the Russell Group participant in the study (Participant 15):

And a Russell Group's interpretation of universities who are training the brain to be an adaptable, we're training gentlemen for purposes if, for a, kind of a culture and things, it's why MA Oxford gives you an MA which you would of course have read more, once you'd graduated there [softly spoken]. So there is a whole class thing in there that you are, you know, would you argue that a PPE is vocational, from Oxford? Yes. (Participant 11)

This is then elaborated on to give a very full picture of the competitive environment for undergraduate student recruitment (likening it to a "call centre") that is clearly organised within a discourse of hierarchy; ("bands", "top end", "ones below them", "further down the food chain") that addresses the public policy discourses of 'core and margin' AAB recruitment and 'student number controls' (SNC) and sees additional students from a limited pool being recruited at the 'top end' and this then rippling through the 'hierarchy':

I mean, I don't, I mean it's weird at the call centre, there isn't a single homogeneous higher education market by any means, I think it's slipped into quite distinct bands and you know, if you're Russell group, especially in the top end of the Russell group, you're not, you don't face any problems. What I have noticed is a place like Kings College have doubled their film studies student intake. To suck up all the AABs which means your Reading's, maybe your Birmingham's and your Swansea's I guess are suffering miserably because they've been all, had all their students sucked up. Whether that's going to keep going down. Well, I think they won't because it's the AAB's and it's the SNC that's going to hit the ones below them but they were relying on AABs to really bolster. Yeah, yeah. Whereas places like here, Beds and your Bournemouth's and your things like that, which are a little bit further down the food chain, well we won't get, we get a proportion of AABs, so it can be 15 to 20 %, particularly if you include HND and HNC. (Participant 11, note that this interview took place before the government announced that the SNC would be phased out.)

At the time of the interview, Participant 16 had recently moved from a university that was affiliated to the 1994 Group at the time to a university that is a member

of University Alliance (2014). This cannot be a neutral view of either university as the participant chose to move from one institution to the other and so would be likely to see the move as a positive one but it is a useful account of the perception of the transition for an individual:

I think, it's been (.....) in the other kind of institution that I was in, I think there was a (...) it felt like there was a panic in that (...) we've tried to be this kind of, Russell Group place and we've not got into the sort of group and we've not been part of the Russell Group and so our research aspirations haven't quite been there and (...) we're having to find our money from somewhere else and don't get me wrong, I mean some, I had some fantastic teaching colleagues. But at the same time, there was an institutional panic and an institutional, we've got to get the money right? And it was all about money and there was, well there were lots of tick boxes about student experience and NSS <National Student Survey> but it was (...) I don't know, there was something missing, if you like. And then I've come here and there is just a, students are genuinely involved and genuinely integrated and sure, there's a panic about applications and stuff like that, but I think the students that are here, are genuinely cared about, (...) kind of, it's really difficult to put my finger, it's so different. It felt so instrumental and so individual, very neo-liberal and in here, it's very collective, supportive and communal, it's quite a drastic difference. (Participant 16)

This does give a picture of institutional and academic cultures, practices and discourses that can vary between institutions. The Russell Group is again seen as a dominant feature of the account of the former institution with a position just outside it seen as undesirable and unsustainable. This is related to the levels of research funding obtainable through the RAE/REF. There is distinction drawn between the institution (“*panic*”, “*we’ve got to get the money*”) and immediate academic colleagues (“*fantastic*”). The current institution is seen as more collegiate and more student-focussed, and these are both seen as positive factors.

Participant 19 had also recently changed institution from University B to University A:

<University A> does it better than <University B>, partly because it has such lousy equipment. If you have really poor equipment, then you start concentrating on, what can we do with the ideas? [Laughs]. And it really does; I mean, I think it is quite successful in the way it pushes ideas and develops them. (Participant 19)

Again, the move is viewed positively but the affirmative account of the conceptual elements of the curriculum is tempered by a cynical rationale based on resources and suggests, when considered alongside her responses to other themes, that she sees the practical production work as an important differentiator between institutions.

Summary and Conclusions

The participant responses here show that there is a broad, overt recognition of the differences between institutions delivering media studies across the sector. There is some recognition of an institutional hierarchy dominated by the Russell Group but in terms of media studies specifically, participants give very similar (or at least uncorrelated with an institutional hierarchy) accounts of what media studies means to them. This may be due to the strength of media studies outside the Russell Group and its relatively recent introduction to the academy as a distinct subject.

This analysis concludes the consideration of the discourses of academic practice that form this chapter. The analyses have revealed connections between the discourses of identity in the previous chapter and the ways these influence the discursive practices that constitute academic practices in media studies. These

practices are revealed as holding oppositional discourses in tension but illustrate the ways that academic practitioners actively manage those tensions to maintain their conceptualisation of media studies as a subject.