

Safe and sound

'The insecure scholar', one of THE's online columnists, calls for an academy that offers all scholars dignity and security

March 18, 2010



Over the past five months I have written a weekly online column for Times Higher Education under the pseudonym "the insecure scholar". I've used the column to tell my story and recount some of the everyday struggles of maintaining an academic career without a permanent position. Those five months have been a period of particular turmoil for me.

I'm a mid-career social scientist. Since completing my PhD, I have survived on a series of research contracts, visiting and postdoctoral fellowships and consultancy work. Things have been further complicated for me by a mild but persistent health problem that limits the hours I can work.

I started the column as I was contemplating the end of my research contract at a university. I was unable to source further funding during its course, and my head of department was unwilling to let me stay on an honorary basis to allow me to apply for grants once the contract ended.

The column recounted my fruitless struggles to find a permanent position, but ended on a relatively upbeat note as I secured an honorary post at another university, plus a small research grant and some consultancy work.

Along the way I shared my frustrations with a university system that makes life so difficult for those of us who are unable to follow conventional career paths. I also shared the excitement and benefits of my enforced freedom - the ability to write what I want, where I want and to follow my dreams.

Writing the column has been a wonderful, cathartic experience. I am grateful to THE for letting me write it and to the many people who posted supportive comments on the threads. It's clear that many academics share my views and are equally concerned by the ways in which the academy wastes the talents of many well-qualified scholars.

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One issue that recurred throughout the comments was the obligation owed to PhD students. It was repeatedly pointed out that many PhD recipients never get permanent university jobs - a considerable waste of talent. Some posters suggested that postgraduates should be warned about the difficulties they are likely to face on completion. Others argued that the entire doctoral system should be rethought to ensure a closer fit with the number of academics the system needs.

Personally, I would have been unlikely to heed warnings about the precariousness of my future when I started my PhD. I wanted to do it because I had an idea that I was desperate to pursue, and I think I shared with most postgraduates an idealistic passion for my work that would not be easily extinguished. This is a good thing: the world needs idealists and great scholarship is built on passion.

The problem with the system doesn't lie with how scholars are trained, but rather with the narrow ways in which academic careers are conceived. The dictates of the research assessment exercise (and its replacement, the research excellence framework) and managerialism require a certain type of academic: anyone who will not or cannot conform to this will struggle.

There are many scholars who do not do well in the current system: those (like me) who have disabilities or health problems; those who want part-time work; those who prefer flexible working; those who take years to produce research; those who prefer teaching over research, or vice versa; and those who find administration and bureaucracy uncongenial. We need these scholars and we need a system that is flexible enough to accommodate them.

I have managed to hang on to an academic career, and so have many others like me. Although our needs may be inconvenient and complex, we want security, too. I am not a genius, but I am good at what I do: I have contributed a lot to scholarship and deserve better than to live the rest of my life on a series of short-term contracts.

With the likelihood of deeper university funding cuts in the future, there are going to be many more insecure scholars emerging in the next few years. When and if the good times return, let's try to work together to ensure a dignified and secure future for us all.

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