CHER 32nd Annual Conference

Paper and Poster Proposal

Note: Please fill in the information between squared brackets. Delete when not applicable.

This whole document should not have more than 1,000 words.

**Title: Exploring doctoral employment in the UK: the value and limits of secondary data analysis**

Theories [ ] **Methods** [x] Nexus Theories/Methods [ ] Open Track [ ]

**Type of proposal:** Paper

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*NOTE: No further information or detail should be included. Add as many author lines as needed.*

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**Structured Abstract:**

**Purpose of this paper:**

This paper shares methodological reflections arising from a recent secondary analysis study of PhD employment outcomes in the UK. This study made use of the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education Longitudinal Survey (Long DLHE), which records employment circumstances 3.5 years after graduation. Long DLHE data provide the most comprehensive record of PhD employment currently available in the UK. Nevertheless, it will be argued that significant limitations emerge when using the dataset for this purpose; and that a new approach to researching doctoral career outcomes in the UK is needed.

**Design/methodology/approach:**

A bespoke dataset of UK domiciled PhD holders in the Long DLHE survey was created for the study. The dataset contained PhD graduates who obtained their degrees in 2008/9 and 2010/11; reporting employment activities in 2012 and 2014 respectively (n=4,731; 39.5% response rate). Key employment variables, such as job title, sector, salary and career satisfaction are covered. Uniquely, this dataset also contained demographic and academic variables through the use of *data linkage* to the Student Record dataset. Put simply, this allowed for employment outcomes reported in the Long DLHE to be analysed by variables including gender, ethnicity, age and doctoral institution.

**Findings:**

This paper will report on the substantive methodological issues of using Long DLHE data to examine PhD employment. A number of problems emerged during the creation and analysis of the dataset, which taken together seriously limit understanding of PhD employment in the UK. This stands in contrast to initiatives established in other nations to track the career pathways of PhD holders in detail (for example, the Survey of Earned Doctorates in the United States, the National Academics Panel Study in Germany, and Understanding PhD Career Pathways in Australia).

The Long DLHE affords a simplified and short-term view of PhD careers in the UK. The focus on employment destination implies a neglect of process; and indeed, the variables recorded in the Long DLHE offer little insight into career planning and decision-making, or the ways in which context and capitals may shape these. Further, the validity of recording destination at 3.5 years is questionable; given that permanent academic positions frequently take longer to secure, and entrepreneurial activities are likely to have a lengthier fruition time. At a more technical level, important variables are absent, abridged or suffer a high rate of data missingness. For example, social class – known to be associated with the short and long term outcomes of first-degree graduates in the UK (Britton et al. 2016) – is not routinely collected for doctoral students and thus, available for fewer than ten per cent of the sample. Doctoral institution is provided only in the form of university mission group, which is a considerable shortcoming when research performance varies as much within the research-intensive Russell Group as it does beyond it (Boliver 2015). The effect of these limitations is evident in the regression models developed from the analysis: most of the variance observed in doctoral employment outcomes is unexplained by variables in the dataset.

**Research implications (if applicable):**

The limits of the Long DLHE suggest that a new approach to researching doctoral career outcomes in the UK is needed. Following the approach of other nations, there is a clear case for a longitudinal study, which extends beyond the timescale of current data collection, and gathers robust academic, demographic and decision-making information. UK policy makers promise much about the economic and societal contributions of PhD graduates – but without, it would seem, the rigorous empirical basis to do so (RCUK 2014; Department for Education 2017). This is particularly concerning when doctoral employment outcomes are known to vary considerably by national context (Auriol et al. 2013); and knowledge economy discourse has been used in the UK to justify a loan system for doctoral study, and for partially shifting the cost of doctoral study from state to student (Department of Education 2017). This paper offers a starting point towards a more meaningful long-term evidence base by illustrating the shortcomings of present data.

**Practical implications (if applicable):**

(See above)

**Social implications (if applicable):**

(See above)

**What is original/value of paper:**

This is the first and only study to make use of linked Long DLHE data to explore doctoral employment. Both the empirical findings and methodological reflections are therefore novel. The potential political, social and economic value of this research is as articulated above.

**Keywords:**

Secondary data analysis; doctoral careers; career trajectories; labour market outcomes

**References:**

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Department for Education (2017). Postgraduate Doctoral Loans: government consultation response. London: Department for Education.

RCUK (2014) The Impact of Doctoral Careers. <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/skills/timodcfullreport-pdf/>

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**Biographical Details:**

Sally Hancock is a Lecturer in Education at the University of York, specialising in higher education research. She is interested in inequalities in access to and outcomes from higher education, including postgraduate study and labour market destinations.