CrossMark

Industry engagement with tourism research: The impacts of social control and emotional labour

Tiffany Low [a,*], Sally Everett [b]

[a] School of Management and Business, Aberystwyth University, Llanbadarn, Aberystwyth SY23 3AL, United Kingdom
[b] Deputy Dean (Quality and Student Experience), Lord Ashcroft Business School, Anglia Ruskin University, East Road, Cambridge CB1 1PT, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

With mounting pressure for 'high impact' research outputs and the attainment of external funding, universities are increasingly engaging in industry match-funded doctoral research programmes. Promoted as effective approaches for engaging in knowledge transfer, the challenges around such collaborative partnerships are scarcely discussed. E-mails, journals and meeting logs over a two year period generated by the author were analysed to examine some of the challenges faced by doctoral students involved in such programmes. The findings illustrate the challenges inherent in industry engagement and the inevitable social control over research. A reflexive account is adopted to explore issues of access, the social control of research and emotional labour. The paper hopes to stimulate discussion on reflective practice in tourism, and how to improve these relationships and their outcomes.

1. Introduction

In a changing landscape of tourism research, increasing social and financial control of academic work, and unprecedented pressures to attract external income through industry knowledge transfer, universities are increasingly turning to industry-funded doctoral research programmes. At a time where an ever-increasing emphasis is placed on combining industry needs with academic rigour this paper discusses the problems that doctoral students, in particular, face in this growing climate of industry engagement. The social control of research raises questions about the emotional labour of academic researchers and the importance of retaining doctoral students' academic integrity when this, at times, seems to dissolve within commercial pragmatism and unrealistic expectations. Thus it is the aim of this paper to examine the *social control* of social-science research through industry-funded grants.

It is estimated that in the United Kingdom (UK) nearly 8% of research students are funded by industry grants (Hodsdon & Buckley, 2011), and this figure may well be higher given the increasing number of European Union and research council schemes which also require industry partnership (e.g. European Union/Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarships (EU/KESS), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering (CASE) studentships). Added to this, is a cohort of international students studying in the UK, whose funding is often provided by industry partners in their home states (figures on this are currently not available).

Awareness of issues associated with industry-funded research is not new, and indeed the interaction between industry and the academy has been a part of policy-making in the US since the 1970s (Behrens & Gray, 2001). The mid-1970s saw work on the 'social control of social research' (Broadhead & Rist, 1976), although it appears little has changed since then, and there continues to be a dearth of literature relating to this inevitable, yet crucial, dimension of research. Recent pressures on increased commercialism, and the need to secure highly directed industry funding, present a number of challenges for the academy that can give rise to significant barriers which industry-funded doctoral researchers must navigate. While some discussion has taken place on the influence these arrangements have on academic freedom and integrity (e.g. Barendt, 2010; Nelson, 2009), the pedagogical implications of such co-operations, however, particularly in respect of higher degree research students, is something which has largely been ignored. Strategies for increased commercialisation of research are, in part, responsible for the erosion of academic autonomy and ambition (Gibney, 2012; Gunkel, 2010) occurring in what are formative years for doctoral researchers. Behrens and Gray (2001) note the importance of remaining cognisant of the unintended consequences of industry funded research which may have important policy implications.

The desire to blend academia and industry accentuates issues around access and associated barriers to conducting industry focused research, which often are largely ignored (Feldmann, Bell, & Berger, 2003; Okumus, Altinay, & Roper, 2007). Broadhead and Rist (1976) identify three main problems associated with externally funded research projects: (i) being given detailed specification of research problems congruent with the sponsor's perspective; (ii) an emphasis upon positivistic styles of research; and (iii) the threat of withdrawing

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1970 621 607.
E-mail addresses: til1@aber.ac.uk (T. Low), sally.everett@anglia.ac.uk (S. Everett).

funding should the research divert into undesirable territories. Underlying each of these problems is the presumption that a degree of engagement is achieved with the sponsoring body, and the degree to which sponsoring partners engage with the execution of the research is a further area which has received little attention. The power and influence of industry gatekeepers on academic research is a topic which often languishes in the hidden pages of doctoral theses, and, while recognised, are rarely legitimised as being worthy of research and discussion in themselves. The ways in which gatekeepers exert power and influence upon the researcher (and at times the researched), has a significant impact on the social control and direction of research, as well as evoking feelings of marginalisation in the individual researcher from the resultant tensions between industry and the (perceived) 'blue-skies research' of the academy (Tribe, 2010).

The issue of access to research subjects is one which can make or break a research investigation, or at the very least have path-altering consequences. While the personal challenges we face as researchers have been discussed previously (e.g. Everett, 2010), an area that has received relatively little attention in the tourism arena to date is the issue of access. Access issues associated with researching marginalised groups and ethnic minorities are well documented (e.g. Altinay & Wang, 2009; Cole, 2005; Lugosi, 2009; Miller, 2004), however research on negotiating access in a corporate industry environment is more limited (Feldmann et al., 2003). Much of the discussion around access issues are provided by experienced researchers, and offer little assistance to early career academics. Challenges and hurdles are presented merely as tactical issues (Gummesson, 2000), and the onus is often placed on the researcher, rather than the researched. Outsiders are not always welcome when they are seeking to investigate what are perceived to be awkward or sensitive issues, and even less so when the researcher enters the organisation at a level above or unfamiliar to the researched (Burgess, 1990). Tribe (2008) talks of a position of privilege that academics hold, attributable to their spatial and temporal situatedness which sustains their (powerful) position and authority. In the formative years of early-career academics however, and particularly for those engaged in industry-funded research, power is elusive and negotiations with gatekeepers over access to research participants reinforces this power(*less*) position of early-career researchers.

At its core, this paper explores issues of industry engagement and gatekeeper negotiations alongside academic autonomy, and the pedagogic implications of these in respect to researcher emotional labour. It offers critical insight on the nature of industry engagement within applied social tourism research by interrogating reflexive accounts of various stakeholder interactions and data generated during the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) process. Thinking is developed through the exploration and analysis of the personal experiences of a doctoral student undertaking an industry match-funded PhD programme. These issues are addressed by engaging with the so-called 'reflexive turn' of tourism studies (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005; Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007), and the purpose of the paper is to present an author-infused discussion of the three key issues of industry engagement, social control of research, and researcher emotional labour. Drawing on pertinent examples from field journals, e-mail correspondence and meeting logs to support personal reflection and first person accounts, the paper outlines the tensions between the aims of the funding company's charitable arm and the priorities of the commercial side of the business. In particular, the reliance on industry funding has raised concerns over the direction of research; where the student finds herself with interviewees who are more concerned about adhering to the company line than expressing their own personal views; who are keen to devise and provide pre-prepared answers; and who have altered the nature of the data generation through (re)engineering the focus of the research project.

The paper firstly embarks on a discussion on industry engagement and the attempts we make as researchers to make relevant not only our findings, but also our research questions. This section seeks to explore the degree to which industry engages with academic research, and how we can improve such cooperation in the future. Secondly, the paper presents a discussion on the social control of research and its influence on the epistemological consideration of positionality, outlining how the (re)engineering of research pathways by industry partners influenced the researcher's positionality. In particular, accounts of how the student was treated and (mis)understood are presented and discussed in the context of how identity and affiliations impact on the responses of research participants. Finally, the paper turns to the emotional endurance of doctoral researchers, and the pedagogical implications of emotional labour on research outcomes. Mental strain and its contribution to the physicality of research is not unique to this particular project, but attempts are made here to champion where it should be given more credence as a barrier to research.

2. Industry engagement, reflexivity and the social control of research

Some issues related to industry-funded research projects have been previously addressed, in particular the influence such partnerships have on the social control of research. Often, such control comes in the form of compromises which ultimately dictate and shape methodological direction, and force us to consider alternative routes of enquiry and investigation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2003). In doing so, our research positionality is brought into question, and affords us an opportunity to engage in reflexive practice. Reflexivity, according to Lincoln and Guba (2000:183), is "the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher", and that reflexivity causes us to consider the dualities we face through the research process. The multitude of roles we bring to the research process can, according to Reinharz (1997), be categorized into three broad areas of research-based selves, brought selves and situationally created selves. She argues that each self comes into play in its own distinct way throughout the research process, each with its own unique voice. Often these 'selves' are enacted simultaneously, and as such the researcher can find themselves confronted with a 'Jekyll and Hyde' complex, pushing and pulling at neatly formed ideas and values. In the case of industry-funded research, it is often the agendas, goals and commercial ambitions of research partners which prompt us to call into question our research-based selves through the need to alter and adjust our methodological choices.

Qualitative research in particular was once characterised as the twin process of 'writing up' (field notes) and 'writing down' (narrative), and inherent in this are difficulties which emanate through this process. Richardson (2000) notes that writing is a stage of discovery, both of the subject and sometimes the problem, but also a stage for discovering the self — in all its manifestations. Problems, and arguably benefits, often associated with such postmodern inquiries including "more dynamic, problematic, open-ended and complex forms of writing and representation" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000:184) are seen as problems which do not affect neo-positivist researchers. It is rather simplistic to assume that this plurality of selves only manifests itself in researchers concerned with the likes of social construction, interpretivism and phenomenology. In the same way positivist researchers are criticized for not embracing multiple realities in research, the opposite criticism may be levelled at post-modern researchers who might assume that the researcher journey of a (neo)positivist inquirer is a smooth one. So, while the critical realist paradigm underpinning the research does not explicitly call for a process of critical self-reflection, it is not to say that (neo)positivist researchers should not, or cannot, embark on a journey of critical self-reflection.

This process, and the reconciliation of multiple selves, helps in verifying the validity of the research, as well as affirming the appropriateness of the research method with the research problem. It also affords the opportunity to not only situate ourselves in the research (Feighery, 2006), but situate others, including stakeholders and gatekeepers of research. Self-reflection at seemingly insignificant moments, where we work through minor methodological confrontations and