



Becoming Academics: Embracing and Resisting Changing Writing Practice

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Becoming Academics: Embracing and Resisting Changing Writing Practice

- Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how global and local changes in higher education impact upon writing practices through which doctoral students become academics. The study explores how norms and values of academic writing practice are learned, negotiated and resisted, and elucidates how competences related to writing come to determine our academic selves.

- Design/methodology/approach

The study uses memory work, which is a group method that puts attention to written individual memories and their collective analysis and theorizing. We offer a comparison of experiences in becoming academics by two generational cohorts (1990s and 2010s) in the same management studies department in a business school.

- Findings

Our study indicates that the contextual and temporal enactment of academic writing practice in the department created a situation where implicit and ambiguous criteria for writing competence gradually changed into explicit and narrow ones. The change was relatively slow for two reasons. First, new performance management indicators were introduced over a period two decades. Second, when the new indicators were gradually introduced, they were locally resisted. The study highlights how the focus, forms and main actors of resistance changed over time.

- Originality/value

The paper offers a detailed account of how exogenous changes in higher education impact upon, over time and cultural space, academic writing practices through which doctoral students become academics.

Keywords: higher education, doctoral studies, writing, practice, resistance, memory work

Introduction

The transfer of managerial practices and accounting logics from private business to universities is a means to increase the efficiency and improve the quality of higher education and research (Amaral, et al., 2003; Broadbent and Laughlin, 2002). Across the Global North higher education is currently subject to reform with new forms of performance management, and academic work is increasingly determined by strategic goals set by managers and administrators (Bansel et al., 2008; Patterson, 2001; Sousa et al., 2010). Despite variation in pace and degree (Krejsler, 2006) such changes are ultimately reshaping the nature of academic work across the globe (Wedlin, 2008), not least in academic writing practice. Kallio et al. (2016), amongst others, show how the ethos of what it means to be an academic is changing from collegial to competitive. Crucially, these changes affect the ways doctoral students become academics (Mantai, 2017; Prasad, 2016; Wegener et al., 2016).

While managerial practices are increasingly global in the sense that the same principles of external accountability are exercised (Marginson, 2008), variation persists in how and at what pace higher education reforms are adapted in different societies (Shavit et al., 2007; Czarniawska and Genell, 2002), and how reforms are locally and situationally enacted by academics. The objective of the paper is to understand how such changes influence the doctoral studies process and how they are experienced by doctoral students whose views are

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2
3 seldom heard (Prasad, 2016). We ask the following question: How do global and local
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5 changes in higher education impact upon writing practices through which doctoral students
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7 become academics? We set out to answer this question by exploring how norms and values of
8
9 academic writing practice are changing, how doctoral students come to learn them, and how
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11 competences related to writing come to determine our academic selves. We also elucidate
12
13 how resistance to dominant and hegemonic notions of academic writing emerges and persists
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15 when it is seen to threaten situated understandings of what constitutes academic freedom.
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17 Where many aspects of academic writing such as its embodied, emotional and identity-
18
19 related nature are rarely discussed (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018), we pave the way for
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21 understanding writing practice as a central part of the institutional conditioning of how
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23 doctoral students become academics (Prasad, 2013).
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29 In this paper, we adopt a practice theoretical approach that enables us to highlight how we
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31 learn and become (academics) in, and through, participation in practice (Gherardi and
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33 Nicolini, 2002; Gherardi, 2014). We focus on describing the ways of understanding, doing
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35 and feeling, including normative ideals of what counts as good academic (writing) practice
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37 (Barnes, 2001; Geiger, 2009). We elaborate on how these normative ideals are formed, how
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39 they become configured, how they change over time, and become part of the doctoral
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41 students' experience. Our study complements extant research on changing higher education
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43 that has focused on processes of convergence across the globe as well as on national
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45 specificities in how reforms are adopted and adapted.
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50 The local context of our study is the Aalto University School of Business, formerly known as
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52 the Helsinki School of Economics, in Finland. Engaging in memory work and focusing on
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54 retrieving and analyzing subjectively important events in the construction of self into social
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56 relations (Haug, 1987; Crawford et al., 1992; Ingleton, 1995, 2000; O'Connor, 1998), we
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58 illustrate the shifting criteria of writing competence and the differing experiences in
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3 becoming academics. We compare two generational cohorts in the management studies
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5 department of the business school: those who wrote their doctoral dissertations in the 1990s,
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7 and those who did the same after 2010.
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11 The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We first discuss competence, writing,
12
13 and resistance in academia from the perspective of practice. We go on to outline changes in
14
15 the societal context of our study and detail how we engaged in memory work. We then offer
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17 narratives by the two cohorts of academics, discuss our ideas in the light of extant theory, and
18
19 offer conclusions based on our study.
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21

22 23 **Academic competence, writing practice, and resistance** 24 25

26
27 The starting point of this paper is that learning, knowing and becoming (an academic) are
28
29 inherently social activities. We learn and become in and through participation in practice
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31 (Gherardi, 2009b; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Practices are always contextual, historical,
32
33 relational, and they vary across time and space (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Feldman and
34
35 Feldman, 2006; Gherardi, 2000; Nicolini et al., 2003). They reflect particular fields of
36
37 interests and politico-economic settings (Contu and Willmott, 2003). Academic work and
38
39 notions of what it means to be an academic are constituted in a texture of situated practices
40
41 where a number of actors, with their differing logics and ways of doing and seeing things,
42
43 come together. As such, academic work, and writing as part of it, is something that is always
44
45 emergent (Gherardi, 2014). We are not only interested in studying what people do in
46
47 academic organizations, but focus on how practices are reproduced; what kind of implicit
48
49 norms, values and knowledge do they carry; what kind of normative and institutionalizing
50
51 power they hold; and how they are resisted and change over time (Geiger, 2009).
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56 Being recognized as an academic encompasses the idea that one is considered competent in
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58 writing (Cloutier, 2016) and publishing (Lund and Tienari, 2019). Our performances of
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3 writing practice are judged based on whether they are done well or badly, correctly or
4
5 incorrectly. There are no universal criteria by which our performances can be judged. As
6
7 academics, we are made accountable to context-specific norms (Barnacle and Mewburn,
8
9 2010; Gherardi 2009b) and it is essential for doctoral students not only to learn to deal with
10
11 their supervisors (Prasad, 2016) but also to understand what are the writing related norms and
12
13 values within a particular community. A skillful performance of writing practice entails
14
15 social recognition from established members of the community (Gherardi, 2009b; Lave and
16
17 Wenger, 1991). In the process of becoming academics, doctoral students are initially novices
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19 who participate at the periphery of their community (Prasad, 2013). Full participation may be
20
21 denied by powerful practitioners, or such denial can result from disciplinary power struggles
22
23 (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998, 165-167; Handley et al., 2006). Doctoral students
24
25 must learn whose opinions count, and to whom and to which standards the writer is
26
27 accountable (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Gherardi, 2006; Prasad, 2013; 2016; Wenger,
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29 1998, 165-167).

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36 There may be complex layers of local, translocal, and transnational accountability standards
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38 entailing various and even contradicting ideas of competent academic (writing) practice.
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40 These emerge from our disciplinary reference group, university reputation management
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42 systems, and personal career considerations. Together these translate into lists of legitimate
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44 outlets of conferences and journals, and activities to bolster accreditations and rankings
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46 through publications in the 'right' places. This makes it challenging for a doctoral student to
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48 understand what skillful performances of writing practice entail. Writing practices are also
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50 intertwined with non-writing activities like reading, thinking and talking as well as different
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52 practices of support like supervision, collegial encouragement, and sense of community that
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54 (fail to) emerge in local communities (Barnacle and Mewbur, 2010; Cloutier, 2016; Wegener
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56 et al., 2016). Academic writing is thus profoundly social (Cloutier, 2016) and it is grounded
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3 in local settings. This demands studying practices from the ‘inside,’ focusing on practitioners’
4
5 views and performances and the emergent and negotiated order. From this perspective,
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7 practice is knowledgeable collective action (Barnes, 2001; Gherardi, 2009a), which through
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9 reproduction becomes an accepted and governing way of doing and performing (Geiger,
10
11 2009).
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15 Local norms and values related to writing are negotiated and resisted. Dealing with the
16
17 ambiguities involved in socialization to practice, doctoral students attempt to make sense of
18
19 situated practices. While resistance is traditionally understood as collective, conscious, and
20
21 organized responses to power and control, it can also be subtle, ambiguous, and contextual
22
23 (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2002). Resistance
24
25 can be located at the level of subjectivities and it may be related to how individuals know and
26
27 challenge the ways in which their academic identities are constituted in hegemonic discourses
28
29 and practices (Lund and Tienari, 2019). To this end, Prasad (2013: 943) discusses how
30
31 difficult it is to learn to play the game *and* try not to lose oneself.
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36 Resistance to norms and values of academic writing practices cuts to the core of how doctoral
37
38 students become academics. Prichard and Willmott (1997: 262) note that academics “resort to
39
40 a variety of local tactics to evade and subvert as well as to accommodate and appease”
41
42 managerialist demands. In this sense, dissent is institutionalized in academia. Yet, the degree
43
44 to which dissent or resistance is considered acceptable by university managers and
45
46 administrators may be lessened today as academics are held accountable to externally defined
47
48 demands (Marginson, 2008; Wright & Shore, 2017). We suggest that resistance offers an
49
50 interesting avenue for understanding how translocal institutions and practices do not
51
52 necessarily overrule local (and alternative) practices in becoming an academic, instead, these
53
54 are likely to intertwine in complex ways and change over time. Knowledge is created,
55
56 sustained, contested, and made obsolete in and through practices, and it is in practice that
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3 contextualized, institutionalized, historically determined, and codified (writing) expertise
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5 becomes both a resource for and constraint to action (Nicolini et al., 2003; Gherardi, 2009a).
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8 We consider this below for our case of Finnish universities.
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10 **A changing societal setting**

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12
13 Finland offers a particular societal setting for our inquiry. It is located in the semi-periphery
14
15 of academia (Üsdiken, 2010) dominated by Anglophone academics, universities, and
16
17 understandings of the world (Meriläinen et al., 2008). Over the last 20-25 years, Finnish
18
19 universities have undergone a significant reform as they have become more international,
20
21 entrepreneurial, globally comparable, and competitive (Kallio, 2014). In the 1990s, based on
22
23 OECD and EU recommendations for self-assessment Finnish universities began to compare
24
25 the quality of their academic output with that of others in Finland and increasingly also
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27 abroad (Council of the European Union, 2004; OECD 2005; also Välimaa, 2005; Aarrevaara
28
29 et al., 2009).
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35 Today, Finnish universities are fully engaged with international and standardized
36
37 performance management practices (Kallio et al., 2016). Reaching this stage was a gradual
38
39 process. A new performance-oriented approach to managing Finnish universities was first
40
41 adopted in 1995, bringing about a gradual shift towards a market-oriented model. Universities
42
43 had traditionally been state-owned and state funded and focused on delivering a well-
44
45 educated working force to the private and public sector. From the mid-1990s onwards, the
46
47 relationship between the state and the universities started to change and focus was
48
49 increasingly placed on research output and diversification of research funding sources
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51 (Aarevaara and Hölttä, 2008; Aarrevaara et al., 2009). This was the time when the first cohort
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53
54
55 of authors in this paper were pursuing their doctoral studies.
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3 University rankings and internationalization of outputs, particularly English language
4
5 publications and their impact factors, became central measures of institutional and individual
6
7 researcher performance and quality in the 2000s (CIMO, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2007,
8
9 2009; OECD, 2005). A radical change then occurred in 2009-2010 when a new University
10
11 Act was introduced. The number and outlet of publications became one of the key indicators
12
13 in the university funding scheme (Kallio, 2014; Kallio and Kallio, 2014). Universities were
14
15 left with little leeway in choosing what objectives they wish to pursue, although they now had
16
17 relatively more autonomy to decide how they would pursue their goal in terms of strategic
18
19 focus, management, and resource allocation (Kallio, 2014). This was the time when the
20
21 second cohort of authors in this paper started their doctoral studies.
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26
27 Another central feature in the latest reforms in Finland was a number of university mergers,
28
29 the most significant of which combined the Helsinki University of Technology, Helsinki
30
31 School of Economics, and Helsinki University of Arts and Design into Aalto University. Our
32
33 site of research is the business school of this new university, which became a legal entity on
34
35 January 1, 2010. The merger sought to create the basis for a ‘world-class’ university. World
36
37 class was (and is) defined on the basis of performance on international university ranking lists
38
39 (e.g. Times Higher education and QS), international accreditation reviews (such as
40
41 maintaining the Triple Crown accreditation of the business school) and success in attracting
42
43 the *most excellent scholars and students* from around the world (Tienari et al., 2016).
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49 The decision by the university board to adapt a competitive academic career system as a
50
51 strategic management tool has marked the merger process (Herbert and Tienari, 2013). These
52
53 changes have fundamentally changed the criteria for defining competence and potential with
54
55 a narrow definition of good academic work performed by someone holding potential for
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57 making a career within the new performance oriented higher educational context.
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60 Competence was reconstructed; the “good” academic now publishes in the right international

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3 journals (listed in Financial Times 50) and is willingly dedicated to their academic work,
4
5 often at the cost of any other commitments in life. They have a positive and passionate
6
7 attitude towards change. “Good” academics are internationally mobile and active, and they
8
9 have a large international network of like-minded (renowned) scholars to co-author with. The
10
11 textual representations of academic work would have it that all people can in principle live up
12
13 to such definitions of academic quality, as long as they work hard enough and gain the right
14
15 merits. However, people are differently positioned to do this (Lund and Tienari, 2019).
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20 Overall, institutional changes have affected the internal functioning of Finnish universities in
21
22 terms of strategic management and branding (Aspara et al., 2014) and career systems
23
24 (Herbert and Tienari, 2013). They have arguably contributed to a polarization of identity
25
26 constructions among academics between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, even among colleagues in
27
28 the same department (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). The dominant discourse in academia in
29
30 Finland and elsewhere emphasizes fast-pace publishing in highly ranked journals
31
32 (Beverungen et al., 2012). This discourse silences disciplinary differences and resistance to a
33
34 culture of performance. It renders invisible local practices where academic competence is
35
36 differently constructed, where appropriate academic writing may be linked to writing books
37
38 or engaging in for instance feminist writing, or where ways to (simultaneously) engage and
39
40 disengage with performance culture are sought (Bansel, 2011; Phillips et al., 2014; Räsänen,
41
42 2008).
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48 In the following, in line with Gherardi and Perrotta (2010), we focus on the interconnections
49
50 of exogenous change and emergent relations and ongoing negotiations between actors in
51
52 stabilizing and destabilizing (new) academic writing practices in a given local setting. In
53
54 order to understand the changes in academic writing practice, we made use of memory work.
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58 **Processes of becoming: Tapping into the past**

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3 Memory work is a social constructionist method that focuses on subjectively important events
4
5 in the construction of self into social relations. As a group method, it aims attention at written
6
7 individual memories and their collective analysis (Crawford et al., 1992; Haug, 1987).
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10 Originally, it is a feminist method developed for women (Haug, 1987) but it has been widely
11
12 used also in other areas, especially in higher education studies (Ingleton 1995, 2000;
13
14 O’Conor, 1998). The method entails that we acknowledge our own participation in the
15
16 formation of our past experiences and, in our case, of our academic selves (Bansel et al.,
17
18 2008). The method breaks down barriers between subject and object of research, and the
19
20 “knower” and the “known”. In memory work, the role of an academic researcher is to
21
22 position themselves as members of the researched group where all participants become co-
23
24 researchers (Haug 1987). The memory work method consists of three phases: 1) individual
25
26 reflection, 2) collective reflection, and 3) further theorization of the materials.
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30
31 There are seven co-authors on this paper. The memory work was done by six of the authors,
32
33 of which three wrote their doctoral dissertations in the 1990s, while three did so in the 2010s.
34
35 The local setting was the same: the department of management studies in the Helsinki School
36
37 of Economics, which in 2010 became the Aalto University School of Business. The seventh
38
39 author is an outsider to this business school and his role has been that of critical co-author,
40
41 who did not participate in the 1st and 2nd phase of the memory work process, but joined in the
42
43 3rd analytical phase in examining the theoretical implications of the collective experiences.
44
45
46 By tapping into the memories of the senior and junior scholars we compare our experiences
47
48 and locate the changes in doctoral studies practice in the Finnish business school context.
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53 In the first phase of memory work, the idea is that each individual writes down a memory (1-
54
55 2 pages) about a specific episode, action or event in as much detail as possible, but refrains
56
57 from interpreting it (Crawford et al., 1992; Haug, 1987). As the process of doctoral studies
58
59 takes many years, we all structured our memory work by reflecting on individual, cultural,
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1
2
3 social and material features of doctoral studies practice. Thus in the first phase of our
4
5 memory work process, each participant contributed stories of their unique entry points into
6
7 academia, general reflections or descriptions of particular experiences related to insecurities
8
9 and (imagined or real) expectations placed on them, and, last but not least, accounts of the
10
11 forms of relationships, bonds and alliances that were important in interpreting, embracing and
12
13 resisting these expectations.
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17 In the second phase, participants shared their experiential notes and ideas with each other and
18
19 met to discuss common themes and collectively negotiate how to interpret the memory
20
21 materials. The two groups explored similarities, differences, generalizations, contradictions,
22
23 and silences to make sense of the ‘taken-for-granted’ social meanings of recurring events.
24
25 Holding the individual accounts together it became clear that particular themes had been
26
27 taken up by each participant, albeit in slightly different ways. These involved notions of what
28
29 constitutes the good academic, internationalization, writing practices, and forms of local
30
31 resistance. It also became clear to us that writing as practice cuts across all four themes. Each
32
33 of the participants had different experiences of living up to the prevalent expectations, and as
34
35 a result they were also positioned differently in terms of what they could “afford” to take for
36
37 granted. Nonetheless, the particular conditions in place for doing academic work and writing
38
39 were recognized by all. A decision was made to focus analytical attention on academic
40
41 writing practices, because of the central role this had been ascribed in the process of
42
43 individually and collectively explicating academic work practices. All authors focused on
44
45 detecting what kind of knowledge of writing practice we have shared and how this was
46
47 resisted when it was seen to restrict our understanding of what constitutes worthwhile
48
49 knowledge. Hence the meanings created are intersubjective and negotiated rather than
50
51 subjective or objective (Crawford et al., 1992, 49).
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3 Subsequently, one member of each cohort wrote a generational narrative of the discussion
4 that was commented on within each cohort. To avoid forcing collective meaning making, we
5 attempted to be respectful of differences among our experiences as suggested by memory
6 work scholars (Kouroulis, 2001; Onyx and Small, 2001, 780). From our negotiations of
7 meaning emerged two generational understandings of how knowledgeable academic writing
8 was constructed, what were the heterogeneous and shifting rules and values defining the
9 practice, and how we ourselves contributed to the reproduction and change of academic
10 writing practice.
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22 In the third and final phase, all memory materials produced in the previous phases – including
23 both individual reflections and generational narratives – were discussed and theorized
24 together (Crawford et al., 1992). It was collectively decided what were the themes that
25 highlighted the change in the writing practice and offered interesting points of comparison.
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Academics in the making in the 1990s

Implicit expectations. When we entered into doctoral studies in the early 1990s our
knowledge of academic work was limited, and our writing skills were underdeveloped due to
our poor training. However, this was not seen as a problem. Our professors trusted us in
learning to write. They did not put any effort into teaching us academic writing skills. While
participating in departmental activities and doctoral courses, we heard conflicting and

1
2
3 confusing claims of what good academic work and writing is. These issues were constantly
4
5 debated and negotiated. Eventually we picked up what and who were appreciated, and what
6
7 and who were not in our local community. Good writers were admired whether they were
8
9 writing in Finnish or in English, but the criteria for 'good' was not clearly explicated. We
10
11 were encouraged to do qualitative research, be critical, and find our 'own voice' in writing
12
13 but we never quite knew how to accomplish that. We also understood that a monography
14
15 thesis was preferred: mastering an extensive study from beginning to end was highly
16
17 appreciated.
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22 We were the first generation that was encouraged to write in English rather than Finnish.
23
24 However, making the final decision was ours. We made differing language choices for
25
26 different reasons. One of us adopted the English language as he had very good English
27
28 language skills and made a determined effort in getting better. One of us did not oppose using
29
30 English language, but decided nonetheless to write in Finnish because her English was not
31
32 rich enough to produce a thick ethnographic description. Some of our peers stuck with
33
34 Finnish language because communicating in English was far too difficult. At the time, the
35
36 language of the thesis did not seem to be a critical issue. However, writing in English was
37
38 considered a sign of internationalization.
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42

43 ***Becoming international.*** Our professors invited international scholars to the department to
44
45 teach in summer workshops. We were strongly encouraged to participate and go to
46
47 conferences abroad to make contacts, and we did as advised. At the time, it seemed that
48
49 writing one conference paper per year was a sufficient research output for a doctoral student
50
51 (and even for lecturers and professors). Conference papers represented potential publications.
52
53 The most admired conference was the European Colloquium for Organization Studies
54
55 (EGOS). If a doctoral student was accepted to EGOS, it was seen as a sign of writing skills as
56
57 well as competence and potential as a researcher. Some professors also emphasized the
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1
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3 importance of the Academy of Management, but in general, it was considered the wrong
4
5 forum for European qualitative research.
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8 During the latter part of the 1990s the criteria for what was perceived as appropriate
9
10 internationalization changed. Conferencing was no longer sufficient and you needed to go
11
12 abroad for extended visits. The aim of all internationalization efforts was to make contacts
13
14 that would enable joint research and publications. Some PhD students visited well-known
15
16 universities abroad but the majority of us did not. After completing our doctoral studies, we
17
18 had internationalized in differing degrees. Some of us were perceived more competent than
19
20 others to embark on an academic career because of having more international collaborators
21
22 and experiences of working abroad.
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26
27 ***Struggling to write.*** In the mid-1990s, the criteria for competent writing started to change due
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29 to political and institutional changes in Finnish academia that emphasized international
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31 publications. The business school administration and some of our professors put more weight
32
33 on articles and started to talk about article- or essay-based theses. However, writing an
34
35 abstract or a paper for a conference and turning it into an article was something we had to
36
37 learn on our own. The feedback and mentoring we got, while being useful in a substantial
38
39 sense, hardly ever focused on writing; how to argue better, how to position our study, how to
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41 highlight our contribution, how to write the discussion, or how to respond to reviewers'
42
43 comments. The professors had too many doctoral students to supervise and they too were
44
45 novices in the art of international journal publishing. They had mainly published in edited
46
47 collections that were still appreciated outlets. Only a handful of doctoral students were
48
49 writing together with their supervisors. One of us always enjoyed writing and learned article
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51 writing fast, whereas the two others found it more difficult. Nevertheless, for all of us
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53 collaboration with each other as well as with other doctoral students was essential in making
54
55 sense of our writing challenges.
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3 **Local resistance.** Our department seemed rather divided between those who began to
4 highlight the importance of publishing and those who fiercely resisted it by emphasizing
5 ‘finding oneself’ as a researcher and only writing pieces that had personal and academic
6 significance. The group most actively resisting the ‘publishing game’ (as they coined it) put
7 their efforts into developing departmental practices and changing our didactic teaching
8 practices towards co-operative learning. Some doctoral students were actively engaged in
9 these developmental efforts and found a way to gain academic credentials in teaching rather
10 than research. We felt that we had to take a stance with regard to the opposing views at the
11 department. One of us was actively publishing and not bothered about the developmental
12 efforts. One of us initially aligned her views with the resistance camp, along the lines of her
13 supervisor. She put a lot of effort into teaching development. One of us took the middle
14 ground.

15
16
17 In the doctoral seminars, and in the following ‘evening seminars’ at the local bar, we learned
18 that critical thinking and resistance was appreciated in the department. We actively
19 participated in debating about theories, teaching, and publishing with the senior faculty. Two
20 of us got involved in feminist politics by writing and organizing seminars about the gendered
21 practices of the department. In general, we were allowed to engage with activities and writing
22 projects that were not linked to our thesis. Our professors further protected us from the newly
23 established performance pressures enforced by the administration: When we did not manage
24 to finish our course work within set timelines, they wrote letters to the administration to
25 explain why this was the case, and that they appreciated the research we were doing. There
26 was a high tolerance of diversity of views and a relatively strong sense of community in the
27 department at the time.

28
29
30 **Ambiguous competence criteria.** During our doctoral studies, we had to adjust to ambiguous
31 and shifting understandings of what good academic writing is and what is perceived as

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3 competence in academia. By 2000, article-based theses had replaced monographies as the
4
5 most valued thesis format and a sign of academic competence. However, publishing in
6
7 domestic or any international peer-reviewed journal was seen as a testimony of good writing
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9 skills. A decade of slow change was behind us, and we were in a peculiar situation at the
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11 department. Some doctoral students and post-docs published more journal articles than their
12
13 supervisors. We were about to enter an era where those formerly seen as competent writers
14
15 were losing their standing if they did not live up to the new standards of excellence.
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17 Nevertheless, at the turn of the millennium the criteria of competence were still rather
18
19 ambiguous: publishing gave us appreciation in some circles but it was a demerit in others as
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21 some considered it a sign of instrumentalism and careerism. Overall, the criteria for
22
23 competence remained diverse and negotiable at the department. For example, you could still
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25 gain your credentials through community building and teaching development. While a
26
27 specific type of writing did not yet determine your worth as an academic in the department,
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29 the direction of change was clear.
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36 **Academics in the making in the 2010s**

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39 *Explicit expectations.* The second cohort entered the university in 2010-2011 when the new
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41 Aalto University was searching for its identity. The university (and business school) aimed at
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43 becoming 'world class,' and new entry criteria for doctoral studies were introduced by the
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45 administration. We had to have high grades from our previous studies, have a
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47 recommendation from our thesis supervisor, write a professional research proposal in
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49 English, and convince our potential supervisors of our ability. Further, all applicants who had
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51 not graduated from the business school had to take a standardized Graduate Management
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53 Admission Test. We were academically ambitious, and had to appear that way.
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3 Consequentially, at the first school-level tutoring event, we learned what we were expected to
4
5 do. We had to be serious about our studies, i.e. schedule and prioritize: ‘finish your studies
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7 within four years, work seven days a week, one hour free time per day in which one can
8
9 combine eating dinner and seeing your partner, and sleep eight hours per night.’ Those with
10
11 parenting responsibilities should cut down the hours spent with family because doctoral
12
13 studies called for sacrifices. Doctoral studies were an investment in the future
14
15 and internationalization was on top of the agenda. The professor presenting these ideas in the
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17 tutoring event seemed to deliver comments on doctoral students’ daily schedules in a rather
18
19 joking tone. However, the message was clear: you should either seek to comply with the
20
21 Aalto University Business School vision of a ‘good’ doctoral candidate, or quit the dream of
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23 becoming a successful academic.
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29 When we started our doctoral studies, an article-based thesis in English was the norm.
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31 Producing a monography was seen as problematic and requiring particular justification. We
32
33 all wrote our theses in English. We acknowledged the problems inherent in this choice such
34
35 as difficulties in expressing ourselves and losing contextual and cultural information in and
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37 through translation. Participating in courses, seminars and discussions, we learned which
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39 outlets were legitimate: journals in the Financial Times 45 (now FT50) list or among those
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41 journals receiving a top grade in the Finnish national journal ranking system. While writing
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43 articles in English had become the norm, many of the senior faculty members continued to
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45 publish their work also in Finnish, and so did some of us. Skills to write in Finnish were still
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47 valued in the department, and for some, writing in Finnish was a way of resisting the
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49 managerial changes in academia. However, a clear change took place after some new
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51 professors entered through the new tenure track system. Their new doctoral students (2014
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53 onward) were amazed that someone would ever want to publish in Finnish as ‘all important
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3 forums' are in English. One of us wrote an article-based thesis while the others resisted the
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5 practice and wrote monographies.
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8 ***Being international.*** Attending international conferences was expected, and not going was
9
10 not an option. We started conferencing already during the first year of our doctoral studies.
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12 We did not have any serious academic contributions to show, but the point was to network
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14 and find collaborators to write and publish with. At times, it was a struggle as we learned that
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16 people have the tendency to hang out in groups of their own nationality even in international
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18 conferences. For us, making longer research visits abroad seemed like a natural choice from
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20 the beginning, and some of us did this more than once. During our visits we built our
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22 networks, got valuable feedback on our manuscripts, and found co-authors to collaborate
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24 with. Being international was the norm, but only a few were asked how they actually spent
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26 their time abroad.
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32 ***Trained to write.*** We entered the doctoral program with good academic writing and English
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34 language skills. The school also took a more active role in promoting publications in
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36 particular journals, which were rewarded through a bonus system. We participated in
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38 seminars and courses by travelling representatives of major journals who explained to us the
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40 journal's expectations of contributions, structure, and style. Systematic teaching and training
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42 in writing was not offered. While these efforts may have helped us to be more successful in
43
44 our writing, we experienced them as standardized writing practice rather than a learning
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46 process and joy of writing. We felt that these efforts did not inspire us to produce better
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48 writing and some self-organizing took place. One post-doctoral researcher created a coaching
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50 group that helped us improve our writing process: write with more ease, craft better quality
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52 text, and discuss all the challenges we encountered in a supportive environment. Later, the
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54 coaching group became a course and part of the curriculum.
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3 For us, the process of learning to write happened via co-authoring and responding to
4 reviewers' comments on papers submitted to journals. While co-authoring with more
5 experienced colleagues is central for learning, there persists a particular rhetoric and
6 glorification of the independent, self-sufficient researcher in our department. While we found
7 co-writing extremely rewarding, at the end of the day the writing task is up to each
8 individual. For us, the article structure is no longer technically problematic but we are
9 concerned with audiences of our interdisciplinary research. The challenge is in writing
10 clearly, consistently, and convincingly across disciplines. This is not a concern for the
11 doctoral education in the school, because they expect us to publish in a rather limited range of
12 mainstream journals with a narrow remit and a standardized writing style.

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27 **General resistance.** Where there is control, there is resistance. While we were expected to
28 write article-based theses, not all of us did this, nor did we target our papers in FT45 (FT50)
29 journals, but journals where our thoughts found resonance. We drew from political and
30 feminist theory, sociology and philosophy rather than mainstream business studies. A group
31 of us met informally to watch political documentaries, read political poetry, and discuss
32 ecological, feminist, anti-capitalist, and socialist revolutionary politics. Our ideas and actions
33 found some support in the department given its rebellious past. This we learned over drinks at
34 the local bar. The department had gone thorough Marxist, ecological, and feminist phases,
35 and these ideas persisted in the circulating discourses.

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48 We extended our resistance beyond academia into demonstrations, writing newspaper articles
49 and web entries, and taking part in election campaigns. We established an informal Academic
50 Occupy group consisting mainly of doctoral students in our discipline. We resisted pretty
51 much everything from neo-liberalization and corporatization of academia to global
52 inequality. We lived, loved, and learned, and our sense of community was something special.

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3 *Narrow competence criteria.* Throughout our doctoral studies, the business school and most
4
5 of our professors told us that it is publications in the right places that count. However, the
6
7 alternative discourses emphasizing teaching development and writing in Finnish still
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9 circulated in the department. Hence, we could not quite understand how narrow the criteria
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11 for competence had become elsewhere, and how rough the battle over competence had
12
13 become in the business school and beyond. Our new Dean investigated the performance of
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15 the senior faculty using mainly FT45 (FT50) journal publications as performance criteria.
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17 Based on his assessment he decided not to renew the contracts of many faculty members who
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19 were on fixed term contracts. We were crucially affected by the turn of events. We had
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21 entered the realities of global academic labor markets where we are expected to leave our
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23 country, family, and friends in search of an academic career.
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29 **Discussion**

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32 In this paper, we have explored the strategies and actions that doctoral students enmeshed in
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34 the texture of educational practices with conflicting logics use in translating for themselves
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36 what good academic writing practice means in times of exogenous change (cf. Gherardi,
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38 2014). The two generational narratives of becoming academics show how practices are
39
40 reproduced and changed. They elucidate what kind of explicit and implicit norms, values, and
41
42 knowledge practices carry, what normative and institutionalizing power they hold, and how
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44 all these can be negotiated individually and collectively, resisted, and changed (Geiger, 2009;
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46 Gherardi, 2014). We have focused on our own performances as doctoral students in the
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48 emergent and negotiated order in the local setting of a department in a business school. We
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50 have considered academic writing as practice – as knowledgeable collective action (Barnes,
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52 2001; Gherardi, 2009a, 2010) – and showed how we as doctoral students learn to participate
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54 in negotiating and resisting the criteria of appropriate academic (writing) practice. The study
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56 shows how writing practice is enmeshed in the texture of other educational practices such as
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3 teaching and administration but also internationalization. In semi-peripheral locations like
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5 Finland, finding international collaborators is seen to be essential for becoming a successful
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7 writer in what has turned into a publication oriented academia.
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11 We have further highlighted how writing is intertwined with non-writing activities (Mantai,
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13 2017) such as talking about research in seminars and at the bar as well as different forms of
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15 local and global activism. We have elucidated how academic competence in writing is
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17 socially, historically and contextually defined, and how particular hegemonic notions of
18
19 writing are defied. Overall, we have considered how subversion of writing practice can take
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21 markedly different forms in different conditions as academics learn to resist demands put on
22
23 them and their identities (cf. Anderson, 2008; Bansel, 2011; Prichard and Willmott, 1997).
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25 Regardless of the specific forms of resistance and subversion, the paper has demonstrated
26
27 how changes in university policies have a profound although at times belated effect on
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29 academic (writing) practice and doctoral student experience within the same discipline and
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31 same institutional context (Neumann, 2007).
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37 In the experience of those of us who wrote their doctoral dissertations in the 1990s the
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39 competence criteria for academic writing were ambiguous and shifting. Professors and
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41 doctoral students shared a sense of resistance towards the emerging competence criteria,
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43 especially those set by the university administration. The professors' action in bypassing
44
45 official requirements was aimed at creating more space for doctoral students to engage in
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47 research and writing of their choice. The competence criteria set from outside were also
48
49 resisted by the advice given by the professors to take our time in finding our 'own voice.'
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51 However, no attention was paid to academic writing skills, which appeared to be a common
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53 practice at the time also elsewhere (Blaxter et al., 1998). In most cases, finding our own
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55 'voice' in writing was an extremely slow and cumbersome process.
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3 Moreover, how the professors reacted to the increasing publication pressures also emerged as
4 a form of resistance. The professors continued to encourage doctoral students to write their
5 dissertations in a monography format and they did not prevent anyone to write their
6 dissertation in Finnish language. The manner in which the professors dealt with the university
7 level requirements indicated where decision-making power still resided. It further showed
8 doctoral students that negotiating and resisting the new imposed rules can be done with some
9 effect. Instead of resisting new requirements for academic work coming from outside, the
10 resistance of some doctoral students focused on the departmental practices: while some
11 concentrated on making visible gendered practices, others focused on resisting didactic
12 teaching methods together with one of the professors.

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15 By the time the second cohort entered the doctoral studies program in 2010-2011, the
16 competence criteria for academic writing were explicit and students were offered support in
17 understanding the article format and structure as well as journal expectations. However,
18 courses directed at improving writing skills were still not offered. Further, the intensity of the
19 professors' resistance to the heightening pressures from outside had passed its peak. This
20 became visible in the way they dealt with the language issue. Some professors and other
21 senior faculty members continued to write in Finnish, mostly as resistance to the
22 managerialist changes taking place in the business school. While some encouraged doctoral
23 students to write in Finnish, such endeavors were now considered additional writing tasks
24 alongside the dissertation project. When new professors entered the department from 2010
25 onwards, the discussion about language gradually ceased, and English language as the one
26 best way to disseminate research was normalized (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). Another
27 example of the professors' decreased enthusiasm to resist restrictions coming from outside is
28 related to the monography format of the dissertation. The second cohort was not encouraged
29 to write a monography, since it was considered at the university and business school levels as

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3 something that needed particular justification, given the institutional pressures to publish in
4 highly ranked international journals. Still, some of us chose to write a monography.
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8 In comparison to the first cohort, doctoral students now seemed to receive much less support
9 from the professors in resisting the standards of academic practices coming from outside the
10 department. They had to cope with the increasing pressures on their own. At first glance, it
11 would seem that they adapted to the new strict requirements obediently. However, they
12 invented more subtle ways to resist the system that was seen to restrict their academic
13 freedom (cf. Prasad, 2013). Peer coaching helped doctoral students to write with more ease,
14 create better quality outcomes, and get over the feeling of loneliness in writing struggles by
15 discussing the challenges in a supportive environment (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018). This
16 emerged as an alternative to the standardized formulas offered in the publishing workshops
17 that the business school and the travelling representatives of major journals offered. Such
18 doctoral peer writing groups were important for processes of writing and becoming
19 academics also elsewhere (Wegener et al., 2016).
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37 Another illustrative example of how the second cohort resisted new academic standards – and
38 institutional pressures for intellectual inertia (Prasad, 2013) – coming from the outside is the
39 way in which they reacted to time use and efficiency norms set by the university
40 administration. We devoted time to reading books and articles on subjects and issues that we
41 felt passionate about, but which were ‘not useful’ readings to our dissertation projects. This
42 illustrates resistance to instrumentality of the doctoral process, such as related to the advice
43 given on setting priorities and scheduling one’s everyday life to complete the doctoral studies
44 in four years. The second cohort subverted dominant practices by engaging with them by
45 their own rules. Their resistance materialized also in activism outside the academia.
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3 Both generational cohorts of doctoral students who became academics learned to resist, but in
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5 different and contextual ways. As local practices define ‘truths,’ they become natural, real,
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7 and part of the individual selfhood of academics. The authors of this paper have become
8
9 academics in different ways. Through participation in the texture of practices locally, both
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11 cohorts have ended up following unique trajectories and in time learned to develop personal
12
13 stances to specific practices (Dreier, 1999) and to resistance (Anderson, 2008). We are
14
15 marked by our experiences. Our approaches to resistance in academic work may be different,
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17 but we have all learned to resist nevertheless.
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22 **Conclusion**

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25 Practice of academic work is enacted in contextualized and temporally bound actions of
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27 doctoral students with professors, administrators, and others in a business school. This
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29 constitutes a dynamic web of knowledge, skills, and understandings of both the collective and
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31 the self, and material resources that are synchronized over time. Through participation,
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33 novices and seniors learn to reproduce practices, but they can also collectively and
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35 individually resist and counteract, thereby allowing for change. Where the common
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37 understanding of practice becomes discontinuous and a rift emerges, it becomes destabilized,
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39 denaturalized, and critiqued. As such, universities are a specific context for making sense of
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41 resistance and resistant practices. Local practice is not necessarily subdued by the translocal
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43 in academia. Portrayed in our collective narratives are performances where a common front
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45 against pressures from the outside emerged. However, practices of resistance can also be
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47 adopted from the outside, and a subversive agenda can be forged with the aim of overturning
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49 both local and translocal practice. Overall, our study illustrates an actualization (not merely
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51 potential) of change in practice as we have elaborated change over time and connected to
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53 exogenous change in webs of relationships, resources, and institutions in how doctoral
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55 students become academics. Our study illustrates that becoming an academic is an ongoing
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3 process; we must learn to match the shifting criteria of competence. Failure to learn and
4
5 perform may result in the loss of recognition as an academic. It is thus crucial to consider
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7 how the professional development of doctoral students can be better nurtured.
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14 **Disclosure statement.** We acknowledge no financial interest or benefit that has arisen from
15
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Becoming Academics: Embracing and Resisting Changing Writing Practice

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