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Hyper-expansive academic workplaces (0044)

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Introduction

This paper evaluates the workplace environment of a subject specific group of academics across the UK. The expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum (Evans et al. 2006) was applied to survey responses from a UK national sample of higher education lecturers within Nursing and Midwifery based in a range of institutional workplace contexts. The continuum has previously been applied in case study educational workplaces such as schools (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2006) but this study will consider its wider application across a group of educational workers. The survey targeted lecturers in Nursing and Midwifery across the UK by identifying a key contact in each department who distributed the survey link to colleagues via e-mail. A key focus of the survey was to ask lecturers to identify 'positive' and 'challenging' aspects of their work using open ended questions and the narrative gathered provided useful insight into the priorities of the lecturers.

Lecturers in Nursing and Allied Health Professions work in close partnership with employers and previous studies have identified tensions within the four areas of their work and identity as teacher, researcher, leader / administrator and knowledge exchange consultant (Fisher 2006; McArthur-rouse 2008; Author 2009; Author et al. 2009; McNamara 2010; Author 2010; Findlow 2012; Author 2012). Engagement with research is widely seen as a key characteristic of higher education and is often interpreted as requiring individual academics to publish research outputs. In this context the pursuit of the research teaching nexus (RT nexus) is justified by the need to prepare graduates for the knowledge economy (EUA 2007; Bologna 2009).

Findings

Completed surveys were received from 254 lecturers (201 nurses and 53 midwives) providing in-depth answers to the open-ended questions, this was a 17% response rate. For the purposes of this short paper 9 selected characteristics from the expansive-restrictive framework are presented [in boxes] and each one is followed a relevant summarised finding from the qualitative analysis. Initially however, it is important to note that a large majority of the lecturers (150) explicitly identified that 'developing new clinical practitioners' was a key positive motivator in their work.

<p>Expansive: pursuit of formal qualifications valued and supported ---- pursuit of formal qualifications not valued or supported or seen as tangential to business need: Restrictive</p>

The opportunity to complete formal qualifications through part-time study appears to be a positive opportunity but workload pressures seem to undermine this for at least some of the lecturers.

Expansive: knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued ---- knowledge and skills of key workers or groups developed and valued: **Restrictive**

The lecturers describe a very rich environment for personal learning and development including more formal support such as completing postgraduate courses or a doctorate but also informal opportunities such as collaboration in teaching and research.

Expansive: cross-disciplinary groups and communication encouraged---
---- bounded communication and work: **Restrictive**

Lecturers commented very positively about multiple opportunities for boundary-crossing in the sense of working with colleagues from other health professional fields, from other subject disciplines across the university, from clinical settings, and from wider external networks.

Expansive: team work valued ---- rigid specialist roles: **Restrictive**

A considerable proportion of the responses specifically mentioned strong support from colleagues especially in the area of teaching. In contrast a similar proportion of lecturers described working in 'isolation', especially in relation to research.

Expansive: chances to learn new jobs or skills ---- lack of work mobility: **Restrictive**

Research, in contrast to teaching, was more often positioned as an area of their role which involved lone-working and a competitive culture.

Expansive: technical skills valued ---- technical skills taken for granted: **Restrictive**

The data revealed a considerable concern for development or maintenance of 'clinical' skills and reveals some tension for respondents around this issue.

Expansive: expanded job design ---- restricted job design: **Restrictive**

Lecturers valued the flexibility of their job and the autonomy, but many claimed that workload constrained their engagement in research.

Expansive: bottom-up approach to innovation ---- top-down approach
to evaluation: **Restrictive**

A few lecturers referred to their freedom to pursue research in an area of personal interest but a much larger proportion identified teaching as an area in which they were able to contribute to 'bottom-up' innovation.

Expansive: widely distributed skills ---- polarized distribution of skills: **Restrictive**

The survey responses identified issues related to skills distribution especially in relation to research skills, although this was often perceived as being controlled by workload allocation and informal networking rather than through formal role design or policy.

Hyper-Expansive Workplaces

The workplace of these lecturers, based on their own self-reported experiences, appears to be extremely expansive in terms of the opportunities for professional learning and development. However workload becomes a controlling factor and unwritten rules around priorities mean that in many cases it is research activity that is neglected. The close partnership with employers and the perceived need to keep up to date in relation to clinical skills creates an additional dimension to the opportunities. In this sense the workplace may be characterised as 'hyper-expansive' with an excess of opportunities and pressures for professional development to the point that individual or teams of lecturers are required to 'select' priorities. The possibility of a hyper-expansive workplace environment was revealed by the application of the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum which provide to be an effective evaluative framework (Evans et al. 2006). A term used by several lecturers is 'juggling' whereby they attempt to maintain progress in all areas of their work, but others appear to have committed to a specific pathway, frequently teaching, at the expense of other areas, particularly research. In general, despite the pressure felt by this group of lecturers to engage in research, many of them are primarily motivated by contributing to the development of new clinical practitioners and this appears to steer them towards both teaching and knowledge exchange areas of their work. Overall these particular academics may be considered to be juggling priorities as they pursue the research teaching knowledge exchange nexus (RTKE nexus) within a *hyper-expansive* workplace environment.

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