185 Teaching-based job roles in a research-inensive environment: Driving change or nowhere to go

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This research explores the role of teaching-based staff in educational enhancement as part of a wider research and evaluation exercise of strategic reform at a UK-based research-intensive institution. This research, in the context of large-scale policy and institutional change, highlights perceptions of the role of prestige in relation to research and teaching, sense of empowerment towards change, hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors on academic identities and motivation. The role of local culture influences the agency individuals feel in relation to educational change. This research identifies staff members' perception of their ability to drive change; perception and prestige of teaching and other educational activities; and the impact of new teaching-based job roles. The research highlights the challenges and successes of teaching-based staff in gaining credibility in their local departments, the negotiation of multiple identities across areas of work and disciplinary cultures, and the institutional-specific nature of roles.

Full paper

Introduction

This research explores the role of teaching-based staff in educational enhancement as part of a wider research and evaluation exercise of strategic reform at a UK-based research-intensive institution. This research, in the context of large-scale policy and institutional change, highlights perceptions of the role of prestige in relation to research and teaching, sense of empowerment towards change, hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors on academic identities and motivation. The role of local culture influences the agency individuals feel in relation to educational change. This research identifies staff members' perception of their ability to drive change; perception and prestige of teaching and other educational activities; and the impact of new teaching-based job roles. The research highlights the challenges and successes of teaching-based staff in gaining credibility in their local departments, the negotiation of multiple identities across areas of work and disciplinary cultures, and the institutional-specific nature of roles.

This research explores the experience of staff in teaching-based job roles, identifying what they value in their roles and what they perceive to be valued by their departments and the institution. We draw on the theoretical framework of the prestige economy, which is used to describe the collection of beliefs, values and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly (English, 2005). We apply this to efforts to enhance education and the student experience at a research-intensive institution, exploring how staff feel their disciplinary and pedagogical expertise is valued and what agency they feel they had to influence change in their departments.

Teaching-based roles

While higher education has always had positions for staff who have teaching as a dominant part of their role, the traditional tri-partite academic role of teaching, research and service/administration has dominated popular views of academia. Macfarlane (2011) has written about the unbundling of this role, and there has been a subsequent rise in teaching and teaching and scholarship-based roles (Rogers & Swain, 20121). Such roles have inconsistent titles and focus across the sector (Smith & Walker, 2021) and can lack access to development support (Smith & Walker 2022).

Methodology

The research utilises concept map-mediated semi-structured interviews with staff to capture multiple data artefacts. The research approach draws out 'pedagogical currency' metrics to support reward and recognition for high quality educational work. This research draws on four phases of data collection. The first phase commenced in 2019 and drew on interviews with 10 academics at the beginning of the implementation phase of a curriculum review across a number of departments and Faculties. Data collection was paused the following year due to Covid-19 pandemic and the demands of the shift to remote delivery of teaching. The second phase two years later explored an in-depth analysis of one department, with a further 10 interviews with academic staff, teaching fellows and PhD students with teaching responsibilities. The third phase, another year on in 2022, consisted of a further 15 interviews with staff across departments and Faculties. This was followed by the fourth phase (throughout the 2022-2023 academic year) which consisted of seven sets of department-based interviews (ranging from 2-6 interviews each). This research reports on thematic analysis of interviews with those staff who were in teaching focused job roles. The research project received institutional ethical approval and follows BERA research guidelines.

Findings

Thematic analysis is on-going. Initial findings There were complex understandings of academic identity and shared and competing motivations in relation to job role, disciplinary, professional, institutional and external national and international communities. We identified varying perceptions of the role of prestige in relation to research and teaching, sense of empowerment towards change, challenges of the hiring and promotion policies and disciplinary and professional factors influencing academic identities and motivation.

We identified very different departmental communities in which teaching-based staff were located. In a highly devolved research-intensive environment, the structure of the department significantly influenced the agency staff felt and their ability to enact change (Ashwin, 2009). The departments varied by disciplinary communities (e.g. 'teaching is different in physics') as well as the leadership and departmental culture about education and the authority of those in teaching-based roles to be empowered towards change (Annala et al., 2022).

Staff expressed more agency in departments that engaged with their educational expertise and took on more strategic roles enacting change within their departments. They were focused on educational improvements and understood the intent of wider institutional goals, engaged with some pedagogical and central support but this was not integrated into disciplinary practices, which still had primacy.

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