

# 163 The in/visibility of the ‘teacher’ role in a STEMMB-focused institution: Competing and complementary identities across career trajectories

Jessica Wren Butler, Kate Ippolito, Jo Horsburgh

Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom

## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

Higher education staff with teaching responsibilities are some of the most visible institutional employees to students and key avenues through which they form a relationship to their place of study. Those in teaching positions play multiple roles – as educators, sources of pastoral support, representatives of the institution, examples of the vocation (as teachers and/or as practitioners of what they teach), models of subject specialists, and embodiments of wider social categories and identities. However, it is widely perceived that in HE the activity of teaching is considered less professionally esteemed and rewarded than that of research (Bagilhole, 2016; Murray, 2022). This presentation summarises some indicative themes and presents interview data from a single-site research project that aims to better understand the experiences, identities, and self-conceptions of staff with teaching responsibilities at a UK STEMMB-focused institution, illuminating the complex relationships between academic identity hierarchies, social identity inequalities, and the ‘teacher’ role.

## Full paper

Higher education staff with teaching responsibilities are some of the most visible institutional employees to students and key avenues through which they form a relationship to their place of study. In STEMMB subjects in particular, contact time between teaching staff and students is often considerable and teaching staff perform a variety of tasks related to delivering learning that may extend beyond conveying academic knowledge and into demonstrating applied skills and cultivating practitioners, lending additional weight to the already significant interface between teachers and learners. Those in teaching positions therefore play multiple roles – as learning designers, sources of pastoral support, representatives of the institution, examples of the vocation (as teachers and/or as practitioners of what they teach), models of subject specialists, and embodiments of wider social categories and identities. At the same time, it is widely perceived that in an HE context the activity of teaching is considered less professionally esteemed and rewarded than that of research (Bagilhole, 2016; Murray, 2022) – a division and hierarchy of which students may be unaware but that nonetheless impacts on the wellbeing and professional identity of those who teach them and find their teaching role to be institutionally *invisible* (Wren Butler, 2021).

In this paper we summarise some indicative themes from a single-site research project that aims to better understand the experiences, identities, and self-conceptions of staff with teaching responsibilities at a STEMMB-focused institution, illuminating the complex relationships between academic identity hierarchies, social identity hierarchies, and the ‘teacher’ role. While findings are localised to one environment and its disciplinary foci, there is transferability to other institutional contexts given the increasingly globalised and homogenous nature of HE, particularly in England, in the wake of shifts towards a ‘marketised’ and ‘massified’ sector (Ball, 2012). Insights from this work help us consider the benefits and challenges the vital community of staff with teaching responsibilities face through their role, position, and status. Particular attention is given to any inequalities that could be mitigated to improve staff wellbeing and retention as well as student learning and experience, and to promote equitable and inclusive practices targeted at making diverse and welcoming institutions for both existing and potential employees and students.

The study uses semi-structured interviews of 60-120 minutes, conducted May-October 2023, to gain insight into participants’ perspectives and experiences. Respondents were purposively sampled from a pool of volunteers, aiming for 10 from each of the key teaching roles represented at the institution – staff in the academic job family with teaching responsibility; Teaching Fellows; GTAs – and from a diversity of subject positions (disciplinary focus, career

stage, social identity, etc.). 30 participants were considered appropriate, enough to contain a variety of perspectives yet manageable with the resourcing allocated to the project.

Data analysis will be undertaken from a post-structuralist, anti-positivist, intersectional feminist approach that understands societal inequalities to be a product of both local and systemic systems of hierarchical value assigned to individuals and groups based on identity features such as ethnicity, gender, social class, disability, LGBTQIA+ status, and so on, working in concert. Beyond this, we do not invoke a specific a priori theoretical architecture or work within a defined paradigm, instead allowing the data in conversation with extant research literature (e.g. Hattam & Weiler, 2021; Herman et al, 2021; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b; Pereira, 2017; Read & Leathwood, 2020), including our own previous work (e.g. Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018; Wren Butler, 2021, 2022), to determine the most productive approaches and concepts.

Early issues identified include:

- Inadequacy of job titles to encapsulate what staff do, their self-conception, or institutional status;
- Rigid hierarchies that undermine the status of teaching and teaching-focused staff compared to research-active academics;
- Inconsistent line management – lack of support and career development oversight, especially for GTAs;
- Unhelpful student feedback mechanisms – poor response rate, polarised and biased data, limited personal applicability, lack of utility for understanding performance or improvement potential;
- Some staff demographics – e.g. particularly early-career women – making conscious efforts to modify appearance, behaviour, demeanour, in preparation for their role in the teaching environment; this could be to accentuate or downplay femininity in male-dominated disciplines, conform to normative gendered expectations and reduce negative feedback, pre-empt attacks on authority/legitimacy, etc.;
- Confused disciplinary identity for teaching-focused staff who were previously research-active;
- Role models – whether or not they are teachers – tend to be inspirational as people rather than teachers.

Overall, these point to contingent visibilities and invisibilities for both individuals and the role and identities they inhabit, which we contend interact with social and demographic characteristics in complex ways.

## References

Bagillhole, B. (2016) An analysis of male cultural hegemony in senior management in UK academia. *Investigaciones Feministas*, 7(2), 9-23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/INFE.53778>.

Ball, S. J. (2012) Performativity, commodification and commitment: An I-spy guide to the neoliberal university. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60, 17–28.

Hattam, S. K. and Weiler, T. (2022) Reframing the 'illegitimate' academic: the critical role of professional development for sessional staff, *Teaching in Higher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2049743>.

Herman, N., Jose, M., Katiya, M., Kemp, M., le Roux, N., Swart-Jansen van Vuuren, C., and van der Merwe, C. (2021) 'Entering the world of academia is like starting a new life': a trio of reflections from health professionals joining academia as second career academics. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 26(1), 69-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1784742>.

Horsburgh, J. and Ippolito, K. (2018) A skill to be worked at: using social learning theory to explore the process of learning from role models in clinical settings. *BMC Med Educ*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1251-x>.

Loveday, V. (2018a) The neurotic academic: anxiety, casualisation, and governance in the neoliberalising university. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 11(2), 154-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2018.1426032>.

Loveday, V. (2018b) Luck, chance, and happenstance? Perceptions of success and failure amongst fixed-term academic staff in UK higher education. *British Journal of Sociology*, 69(3), 758-775.

Murray, Ó. M. (2022) ENHANCING ACADEMIC CULTURE: The Role of Teaching Fellows and Learning Technologists [report]. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/staff-development/internal/Enhancing-Academic-Culture.pdf>.

Pereira, M. d. M. (2017) *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia*. Routledge.

Read, B. and Leathwood, C. (2020) Casualised academic staff and the lecturer-student relationship: Shame, (im)permanence and (il)legitimacy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(4), 539-554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1748570>.

Wren Butler, J. (2021) Legibility zones: An empirically-informed framework for considering unbelonging and exclusion in contemporary English academia, *Social Inclusion*, 9(3), 16-26. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i3.4074>.

Wren Butler, J. (2022) 'I shouldn't be here': Academics' experiences of embodied (un)belonging, gendered competitiveness, and inequalities in precarious English higher education. In M. Addison, M. Breeze, and Y. Taylor (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education* (pp. 37-54). Palgrave. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86570-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86570-2_3).