183 Making connections between research and ancillary staff experiences in Higher Education: a literature review.

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The proposed paper outlines the literature review conducted as part of a SRHE-funded project exploring the experiences of ancillary staff (e.g. catering, security and cleaning staff) in UK Higher Education Institutions. An in-depth literature search was carried out using EBSCO host, and similar databases. The review captures the experiences of a group which has been given limited consideration in research and policy debates around HE. Initial findings highlight that, overall, the literature tends to focus on the benefits of having a clean, well looked after environment to work in, but lacks acknowledgement of the individuals who make it so (Amstutz, 2008; Campbell & Bigger, 2008). Where research explores the experiences of ancillary staff, it shows that this group experiences feelings of invisibility and non-belonging, as well as battling long working shifts and lacking social interaction in the workplace (Caridad Rabelo & Mahalingham, 2019; Du Toit, 2015).

Full paper

This paper is one of two papers part of a research project exploring the experiences of ancillary staff in UK Higher Education Institutions. The other paper focuses on the empirical data gathered via the staff interviews, with this paper having a sole focus on the literature review element of the study.   Ancillary staff (defined for the purpose of this study as staff working in catering, cleaning and security roles) are typically involved in 'reproductive work' and, as such, fulfil an important role in society. In the HE sector, their work helps to maintain the environment in which academics, those in professional roles and students operate.

An in-depth review of the literature in English language was carried out using EBSCO host, and similar databases, in addition to recommended articles by colleagues and scholars writing within the field and reference list signposting. Initial inclusion/exclusion criteria were discussed within the research team to enable a starting point for the search and help give the searches direction. A barrier to the initial stages of this process was an acknowledgement in varying terminology for this workforce. Detailed key words, derived from the initial inclusion criteria and developed throughout the reading, were used to access literature widely, including as many groups as possible. A literature categorisation table was created to keep track of key information from each resource relevant to the search. Identifiers such as location, source type, data collection method and which group of ancillary staff the source was focused on (cleaners, catering or security) were all noted. This was to ensure a clear snapshot of the texts captured by the search was available at a glance for the analysis stage. When searching the literature, it was occasionally necessary to explore the sample description for those ambiguous terms that remained unclear, to see if the sources were relevant to this review.

Findings from the review show that research about ancillary staff is rare and tends to focus on the quality or the costs of those services, with limited consideration of those doing the work and of their own perspectives (see, eg du Toit, 2015). The research in this area has a clear focus on the benefits of having a clean and well looked after workspace. However, there is a distinct lack of acknowledgement of the individuals to whom the responsibility falls to keep these environments safe, clean and catered for (Amstutz, 2008, Campbell & Bigger, 2008; Uleanya, 2020). Some of the texts we reviewed identify a stigma and spatial separation from co-workers, with some staff feeling as though people think they are 'beneath them' and, sometimes, experiencing feelings of not belonging and shame. Some researchers attribute the invisibility and misrecognition of ancillary to class divides, amongst other factors Caridad Rabelo & Mahalingham, 2019). While research shows that those managing ancillary staff have become more aware of the challenges they face, research shows that feelings of being invisible, concerns about work-life (im)balance, long hours and work being considered 'tedious' persist (Britten, 2021). Regarding catering staff, for example, one researcher noted that the catering role was broadly perceived as being 'intangible, perishable, and variable' (Tsai,

2016, p. 215). Those outsourced often feel a lack in direction from the overall strategic plan of the institution, resulting in teams feeling that they are expected to be reactive rather than proactive to any changes that happen within the institution, with little or no consideration of inclusion on strategy discussions for the implementation of such services (HEFCE, 2003).

This literature review is part of a larger project (Doing the dirty work of academia? Ancillary staff in higher education). As such, it is an important step to provide the context for the research in addition to informing the analysis and avoiding duplicating the work. Most crucially, as we have argued elsewhere (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023), the research literature is not 'out of the discourse' of academia. Instead, it constructs the objects it speaks of. Thus the review provides some helpful indication of how, from within HE, the work of academic researchers and policy-makers can contribute to the reproduction of the inner hierarchies of HE, for example when research on HE focuses on academics or professionals, yet renders invisible the cleaning, catering and security staff who enable them to work in safe and healthy environment. Thus, this literature review is a useful tool for researchers to reflect on the classed dimension of knowledge production and call for the generation of new connections between academic work and work positioned at the margins of academic cultures.

References

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