

## Emergent professions in higher education: an idea whose time has come (0136)

Cuthbert Rob<sup>1</sup>, David Langley<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom*,  
<sup>2</sup>*University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom*

### Introduction: the emergence of new professional identities

This paper considers the emergence of new professionals and professionalism in HE. There is a potential symbiosis of teaching, research, and professional development in the emergence of new professional identities. We report work on creating new postgraduate programmes to support not only individual professional development but also the development of recognisable professional or semi-professional associations. The emergence of professional groups is attracting increasing research interest (Whitchurch (2008), Gordon and Whitchurch (2010) *et al*). This paper sketches the nature of and the possibilities for growth of professionalism among those groups.

### Professionalism and its discontents

In academic identity the 'academic profession' has always come second to the discipline (Clark 1987, Becher and Trowler 2001). Massification, differentiation and specialisation problematised unitary views of the academic role; unsatisfactory interpretations through the lens of professionalism shifted the research focus to academic identity. Meanwhile other staff, transcending negative definitions as 'non-academics', became increasingly distinct, coming together in specialist semi-professional networks. Interactions between these staff and academics have also changed. The 'third space' (Whitchurch 2008) both constitutes and is constituted by changing identities and relationships for professionals and academics: perspectives on identities in HE must now encompass professionals as well as academics (Gordon and Whitchurch 2010).

Professionalism was once interpreted through key features: skills based on theoretical knowledge; education and training in those skills certified by examination; a code of professional conduct oriented to the public good; and a powerful professional organisation (Whitty 2008 citing Millerson 1964). Such static, normative conceptions of 'profession' as a destination in a stable social structure have been supplanted by a dynamic, contingent view of professionalism (Hanlon 1988).

For Fournier (2000:69) "... the construction of boundaries ('boundary work') is central to the establishment and reproduction of the professions." Social closure is a crucial part of professionalism, achieved by credentialism, discursive strategies, legalistic tactics, or otherwise. However: "The constitution of the professional field, or discipline, into an independent, autonomous and self-contained area of knowledge that is assumed to reflect some natural divisions and to be an autonomous object of analysis, is [also] central ...". This process is at work in research management, student services and other HE support services .

Crook's (2008:23) view: "... the application of historical perspectives confirms professionalism to be an artificial construct, with ever-changing and always-contested definitions and traits.", is mirrored in the literature on academic identity, now conceived as: "... a continuous process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction .... The concept of embedded distinctiveness now competes with the more fluid idea of individual positioning in and between spaces." (Henkel 2010:10).

This 'hollowing out' (Barnett 2008) of the idea of the professional has its limits. Fournier agrees that the logic of the market threatens to 'unmake' the professions by dismantling the field of professional knowledge, the boundary between professionals and lay persons, and boundaries between the professions and the market. But all is not lost: '... the prediction of the demise of the professions underestimates the power of professional knowledge to remake itself, to reconstruct its

boundaries.’ (Fournier 2000:84). Boundary work and continuous reconstitution of a professional field remains a key part of staff identity and what can still be understood as professionalism in HE.

### **Emergent academic and professional identities**

Existing professions remake themselves; new groups also stake out territory and construct new boundaries. Specialisation and differentiation lead to networking and demands for stronger professional identity. We envisage new professional associations emerging from existing networks, and we are developing postgraduate programmes to reinforce this growing professionalism.

Green and Langley’s (2009) research examined the need to professionalise research management. Research support has grown and diversified as research funding has grown and become more complex. In the UK and perhaps beyond, research management was typified by lack of consistency, little sharing of good practice and structural instability. Roles grew and diversified organically; the field was a ‘profession under development’ (Langley 2007). People working in research management lacked a professional identity and thus a structured career path or formal route for development. *Ad hoc* skills based training courses were valuable but failed to provide a route for professional and personal development. Inconsistency in structures and roles led to uncertainty as to whether research managers worked in an identifiable community, confused perceptions of their roles and significant inefficiencies. 19/20 HEIs in the (English) sample supported professionalization of research management, preferring a move from training to more formal scholarship and research programmes.

We argue that the identities of emergent groups of staff, their modes and philosophies of working, can be described in terms of professionalism, but only if we remake the idea of professionalism to fit ‘liquid modernity’ (Baumann 2000). Brint (1994) argues there has been a shift from social trust professionalism towards expert professionalism, and for Barnett (2008:197): “... professionalism is witnessing a lurch from an ethic of service to an ethic of performance. “ Lunt (2008) cites Bottery (1998): “... five ethics ... should inform the professional practice of the future: ... *provisionality* ... *truth searching* ... *reflective integrity* ... *humility*, and ... *humanistic education*.”, but she argues that modern professionalism can still be based on its traditional ethical principles: competence; respect; integrity; and, responsibility. We will draw in particular on Barnett’s (2008:190) conceptualisation: “... the *challenge* to professionalism lies in the handling of multiple discourses ... the *task* of professionalism lies in the critical deployment of discourses ... the *achievement* of professionalism lies in discursive creation.”

We will report progress in developing teaching, research, and professional groups embodying discursive creation and deploying multiple academic and professional discourses. We aim to facilitate a move away from short-cycle training towards longer-term education and professional formation programmes. In revitalising a professional ethic of service against the ‘lurch to an ethic of performance’ we might rediscover the wisdom lost in the ‘knowledge’ of practical skills training, as emerging professionals transform their career structures and reconstruct their professional identities.

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