

Shifting staff identities in validation events: Narratives of staff working in degree programmes within higher education 0254)

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Although a significant body of research on the overall rise of quality assurance exists within higher education (for example Becher, 1994; Newton, 2000; Morley, 2003; Harvey, 2004; Naidoo, 2005; Hoecht, 2006) relatively little attention has been given thus far to experiences of staff within validation or course approval events. Hammick (1996) discussed the existence of a micropolitical culture in the validation events of professional degrees and highlighted the issue that course validations in the future would occur within an increasingly competitive higher education market, and this warranted further debate and research on the topic. Other authors have identified the need for further studies into effects of descriptive approval criteria (for example, Horsborough, 2000), and the latently tenuous relationship between HEIs, regulatory agencies and professional bodies at approval events (Cusick and Adamson, 2004).

This paper will present the findings of a project examining the complexity of validation and approval events. The study is based within the authors' background of healthcare profession courses, particularly allied health profession (AHP) degree courses. The study examined the patterns of practice staff experienced within course approval preparations and events, and the ways in which governance structures surrounding the regulation of health professionals and universities, influenced the practice of approval within degree programmes. Narrative inquiry was adopted and this approach pointed up the individual narratives of those involved, against a backdrop of contextualised practices within the arena of course approval, to form a 'situated interpretation' (Josselson, 2006:6). Following Chase (1995), participants' narratives were understood as talk or writing organised around significant events relating to the past, present and future. Participants who

were academics, manager-academics, professional body education leads and staff working in teams supporting quality within higher education took part in interview conversations.

Data analysis was undertaken utilising the Voice Relational Method (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998). This method highlighted ways individuals were located inside a web of social structures, comprising course approval, to discover the influences of these and how this influenced action. Arising from this initial analysis three overarching messages arose from the findings for staff working in higher education. Firstly, governance systems surrounding profession related pre-registration degree courses appear to be preventing or disabling creation of curricula that equip students to deal with the complexity of practice. Secondly, within the arena of course approval there is scope for a disconnection between stakeholders, which may lead to disjunctions about the process and outcomes of what it means to be and become a healthcare professional. Finally, staff seemed to position themselves in certain ways and this influences the nature of course approval events and professional education in general.

The most striking aspect of the initial findings related to staff identities. This presented a troublesome phenomenon and centred on how choice was exercised by participants. For example, staff involved in course approval, dealt with changing demands by shifting their identities and adopting a certain position in the process. Differences in these positions related to how individuals chose to cope.

This presentation will illustrate the conceptual framework, which revealed ways in which staff adopted certain positions and identities in validation processes and during the event itself. These are: Governance Trustee, Professional Guardian, Enabling Strategist and Boundary Broker. Each of these positions, depending on how they are enacted, influence (or sabotage) creation of curricula that equip students for a complex world:

- The first position, Governance Trustee, was characterised by those whose primary concern was on maintaining and assuring governance systems. They were often gatekeepers with valuable technical information and used this capacity to shape compliance in others.
- Secondly, Professional Guardians' were those known for their unwavering concern in upholding professional knowledge and standards of practice, and could be observed defending subject interests.
- The third position, Enabling Strategists, portrayed substantive experience of working in hierarchical settings, politically astute they were extremely adept in anticipating the likely moves of others.
- Finally, the Boundary Brokers were those who achieved high status, having worked in various settings they were nomadic characters possessing a sophisticated ability for translation across different audiences. Consequently, they were an asset in approval events.

Although each of the participants held predominantly one position, a few participants occupied a position on the cusp with another. This was often revealed through literary devices, such as, the use of oppositional talk and metaphors within their narratives.

Since the initial interpretation of this study took place within the context of professional courses, the framework may not necessarily be generalisable. However, considering the ways in which changes in higher education are resulting in increasingly performative practices and how participants in approval events presented them 'selves', it is likely that the stances and position taken up by staff in this study may have resonance for academics across the sector. It is therefore hoped that this framework may be

transferable to other settings, in which similar forms of validation and approval occur, and this will be a point from which to start debate in the session.

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