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Changing professional identities and practice styles within the HE in FE sector: the role of research and scholarly activity (0081)

An individual's professional identity is acknowledged as being dynamic and constantly evolving as their career develops (Stronach et al., 2002). It is cited as being related to the culture of an organisation, social/professional interactions and self perception (Beijaard et al., 2004). Research into those working within the context of Higher Education (HE) in England have demonstrated the diversity and varied nature of lecturers' identities (e.g. Clegg, 2008). This reflects the wider changes that have taken place within HE over the last 20 years as the traditional boundaries within the post compulsory education sectors have gradually been eroded. In 1992 the arrival of new universities witnessed the emergence of one HE system, which, following the publication of the Dearing Report was extended further into an apparent "seamless" system of HE, as the Further Education (FE) sector became the focus for expansion (NCIHE, 1997). This recent expansion of HE into FE has changed the face of HE within England (Parry *et al.*, 2006), resulting in a new era of partnership working that has required those working across the HE-FE boundary to negotiate changes in their professional identities and practice styles.

The Dearing Report presented HE and FE with an opportunity to bridge the academic – vocational divide that had historically separated the two sectors. Whilst many FE colleges had previously delivered sub-degree qualifications with the support of universities, Dearing advocated a new model of collaborative partnerships that would see the vocationalism of the FE sector extended to HE. This was supported through the introduction of foundation degrees (DfES, 2003). Following Dearing, changes took place in institutional and individual lecturers' working practices. HE in FE lecturers were presented with a 'blank canvas' on which to develop foundation degrees and explore their new roles, albeit for most against the backdrop of FE and under the watchful eye of universities. Part of this new role

included opportunities for professional and personal development which included engagement with scholarly activity and research.

As HE in FE provision in England has expanded, a unique HE in FE sectoral identity has begun to emerge which is beginning to filter down and have an influence upon identities and practices within the sector (Parry, 2007). Within this emerging sector, it is important to consider the way in which research and scholarly activity is being conceptualised, contextualised and linked to professional identities and practice styles. This will help to inform our understanding of emerging HE in FE lecturers' professional identities and enable universities and colleges to provide adequate remuneration and support for these professionals as provision continues to grow.

This paper reports findings from ongoing research into the impact of HE in FE expansion in South West England. A specific staff development activity was used to identify a sample population to investigate the changing professional identities and practice styles of FE lecturers due to their increased engagement with HE. In the first stage semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twelve HE in FE lecturers to investigate their emerging professional identities. These interviews explored their roles and responsibilities, support for engagement with scholarly activity and research, and recognition they received from their college for teaching HE in FE. A further sample of HE in FE lecturers were invited to engage in discussions to explore their "lived experiences" as HE lecturers (Ashworth, 2003) and generate what St.Pierre (1997) refers to as 'response data' through an iterative process, whereby the initial discussions and their analysis are offered back to the respondents for further comment. This process promotes an in depth analysis and enrichment of the quality of the data collected.

The lecturers highlighted the contrasting audiences, environment and ethos of colleges and universities which meant they were exploring their roles as HE lecturers under very different conditions from their university colleagues (Turner *et al.*, 2009). The lecturers' sense of professionalism appears to remain strongly rooted in their role as teachers, supporting students' development and ensuring that students were provided with opportunities to reach their potential. Lecturers commented upon the enhanced sense of professional autonomy and the freedom they experienced through their HE teaching. However, for many there was a sense in which they were

performing multiple roles due to the often dual requirements to teach both HE and FE. This sense of a dual role has been recorded by others within the teaching professions (e.g. Stronach et al 2002) and therefore may not be unexpected, given the context these lecturers are working within. Their sense of performing multiple roles appears to be exacerbated by the considerable difference in HE and FE contracts and working conditions whereby lecturers were expected to meet the demands of contrasting quality assurance protocols, funding regimes and staff development requirements. This left them with the sense that they were teaching HE within the confines of FE. It reflected the limited opportunities they had to become subject specialists and engage with the scholarship of their discipline, which for them was a defining characteristic of being an HE lecturer. Consequently HE in FE lecturers are exploring their new roles isolated from processes of socialisation and professional interactions viewed as being integral to identity formation within HE (Beck & Young, 2005).

This dual role became apparent as they considered opportunities for scholarly activity and research. Such opportunities were discussed in terms of scholarly activity rather than in terms of scholarly activity *and* research, research being considered as an activity undertaken by staff in a university. References to scholarly activity were also related to discussions of their own continuing professional development, perhaps related to the requirements of the Institute for Learning, the professional body all FE lecturers are required to join (IfL, 2007). Whilst the challenges these lecturers face in undertaking scholarly activity are evident, the role of a HE in FE lecturer appears to be emergent and developing. This presentation will conclude with recommendations to continue to support this emerging role within, what is still regarded by many as, a volatile and changing sector (e.g. Parry, 2007).

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