

Being a University Lecturer in a Professional Field: tensions within boundary-crossing workplace contexts (0085)

University lecturers in the health professions are familiar with close employer partnerships, high levels of accountability that foregrounds student evaluative feedback, punitive review body processes, and tensions between prioritising teaching quality and research outputs. This paper focuses on a survey of experienced lecturers, in nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, radiography and occupational therapy, who work in a range of UK university contexts, including research intensive and teaching-led institutions. The analysis provides useful insight into the experiences of academics in professional fields including the contradictions within their workplace environment. Studying university lecturers in professional fields may contribute to understanding of changing academic identities and roles in more traditional subject disciplines.

From a socio-cultural perspective university lecturers in the health professions may be considered to inhabit a complex workplace involving overlapping communities of practice within which different priorities, discourses, rules and values apply (Wenger, 1998). From this perspective their roles involve boundary-crossing between academic practice in university contexts and clinical practice in healthcare settings. This workplace environment may include contradictions that make it difficult for these lecturers to fully develop their academic practice and identity (Engestrom, 2001).

In the UK the majority of university lecturers in the health professions have been appointed on the basis of their successful first career in clinical practice and on their potential to engage with scholarship and research once appointed to their new academic post. They may have a Masters Level qualification, but otherwise often have little or no direct experience of involvement in research activity. Previous small scale work has focused on the experiences of recently appointed university lecturers in nursing within their first five years in higher education (McArthur-Rouse, 2008; Boyd & Lawley, 2009). A larger scale study also focused on lecturers in their first five years of appointment to university posts but included lecturers across a range of health professional fields (Boyd, Smith, Lee & McDonald, 2009).

The work reported in the current paper focuses on the perspectives of *experienced* lecturers in the health professions, those who have worked in higher education for more than five years. Relevant university departments were identified through the programmes they offered in nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, radiography, and occupational health. The survey was distributed to the majority of lecturers within the target professional fields across the UK. The estimated response rate was 15% providing 230 completed returns from experienced lecturers who had more than 5 years experience in higher education. Participation was voluntary and anonymous at individual and institutional levels.

Having completed their academic induction these lecturers might reasonably be expected to represent the well established practices and identities within their professional field. The research questions centre on: how do university lecturers in nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and radiography experience their workplace and how does this impact on their identities? The project also asks how do these lecturers experience and value different forms of formal and informal support for their professional learning?

An on-line mixed methods survey was used that requested specific demographic quantitative information about age, gender, professional background, current roles, formal qualifications and years of experience. In addition it included a combination of structured and more open response questions relating to workplace experiences, expectations, support and future goals. Data analysis is now in progress and has used a combination of descriptive statistics plus qualitative content analysis of the open question responses.

Preliminary findings from initial reading of the data indicate that these lecturers generally enjoy their work, particularly their interactions with students. They gain satisfaction from contributing to development of clinical practice, mainly through supporting the development of new practitioners but in a few cases also through research outputs. They feel well supported in the workplace and enjoy the flexibility of their role and the opportunities for professional learning that they have access to. However many of the lecturers experience heavy workload pressures and having more time for research activity is their key request in relation to their professional development. Many of the lecturers are planning for or engaged in part-time doctoral studies and they identify informal forms of support, including mentoring, as most valuable to their progress.

Experienced university lecturers in the health professions feel they carry a heavy workload but gain much satisfaction from developing new clinical practitioners. They face tensions in their workplace and difficult choices about their professional development and academic identity including possibilities focused on research, on knowledge exchange, or on teaching. One implication for departments and institutions is related to expectations of professional educators and the value placed on research, knowledge exchange and teaching activity and outputs. Another is related to academic development for professional educators, including the need to encourage informal mentoring and collaborative support for research capacity building. Finally the completed data analysis aims to provide some insight into the responses of lecturers to working within boundary-crossing workplace contexts.

References

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