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The changing shape of professionalism in learning and teaching within the academy.

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Context of the research

The last twenty years have seen a developing debate about the evolution of the university and higher education (HE), and perceptions of their purpose and how best this can be achieved (Collini, 2012; Holmwood, 2011; Strain et al, 2009). The landscape of HE has also developed. The Dearing Report (1997) led to the establishment of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in HE (ILTHE), in 2000, and the subsequent establishment, along slightly more centralist lines, of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2004, both of which have (or had) the avowed purpose of improving the status of teaching and learning in HE and the professionalism of its proponents. The HEA has taken the lead in formulating the concept of professionalism in learning and teaching, via the UK Professional Standards Framework, UKPSF (HEA, 2011), and in formalising the modes by which professionalism is promulgated and validated. With the competitive environment of HE becoming more intense, this formalisation and the processes associated with it have taken on a momentum of their own. There is a new urgency towards achieving professionalization, driven by the need to improve the performance indicators, such as the percentage of staff with teaching qualifications, that contribute to university rankings.

Professionalism

Professionalism as a concept is, itself, somewhat contested (Evans, 2011). Eraut (1994), following Johnson's approach (1972, 1984), suggests that Professionalism should be treated as an ideology, an attractive approach as it allows us to recognise the contested nature of the concept while still making progress in refining its application. New entrants to the teaching profession in HE are inducted into this ideology by undergoing a postgraduate initial teacher education programme leading to a qualification – PG Cert in HE, PGCAP, PGCTLHE – generally accredited by the HEA at descriptor 2 level of the UK professional standards framework. Those already in the profession have the option of gaining equivalent status by applying for recognition from the HEA directly, by means of extended reflective self-reporting of evidence, corroborated by two referees. Until recently, the recognition route was relatively uncommon, however many universities have developed, or are developing, recognition routes, accredited by the HEA, and numbers engaging with them have dramatically increased. The HE sector as a whole is investing large amounts of its employees time and energy into pursuing a professionalization agenda through these two routes, the qualification-based initial teacher education route and evidential "recognition" route.

Research agenda

This paper discusses the phenomenon of professionalism in learning and teaching and the implications of its formulation in the UKPSF. How far does the HEA concept of professionalism encompass the "ideology" of the profession? What are the drivers and policies that are shaping the unfolding professionalization of learning and teaching in HE?

Using a new University as a case study (Yin, 2003), it explores the modes by which individuals demonstrate their achievement of professional status. Drawing on interview data, it compares the experiences and perceptions of those who join the profession through the initial teaching education route and those who are “recognised” as fellows, senior fellows, or principal fellows. How do the two routes view each other? How changed do they feel by the processes they have undergone? How far have the two processes addressed the ideological infrastructure of professionalism? How does it affect the perceptions of professional status of the participants, and how important do they feel that status is to the academy? To what extent is their pursuit of professional status an act of conviction or an act of compliance?

Finally, it offers a model for the ideology of professionalism as it applies to Higher Education and explores perceptions of the ideological aspect of professionalism.

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