

The Rise of the Blended Professional in Academia (0295)

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1. Abstract

This study aims at investigating the concept of the Blended Professional (BP) in academia. BPs constitute a so-called 'third space' in universities, placed between academics on the one hand and administrative or organizational staff on the other (Whitchurch, 2008). Often, BPs combine a scientific grade (PhD) with extra-academic experience, thus bringing in a unique profile and unique skills. Recent developments in research policies have sparked the evolution of BPs, as universities are more and more called upon to move beyond academic activities exclusively. We present the results of a triple case study investigating the indispensable role BPs play in today's universities, exploring the situation in three universities/HEIs (Italy, UK, the Netherlands). Specific attention is paid to questions related to identity; perceived freedom and control, and peer group formation. In the session we aim at discussing the first research results and explore how we can take the study further.

2. Outline

Various recent developments in research policies have sparked the introduction of a completely new group of employees in academia: the Blended Professionals (BPs). The concept of *blended* was firstly developed by Whitchurch to describe those who 'cross internal/external institutional boundaries and contribute to the development of new forms of third space between professional and academic domains'.¹ Today's universities are in the middle of a development into so called Third Generation Universities, meaning that they are called upon to be increasingly 'entrepreneurial' in the broadest meaning of the word.² Furthermore, academic work nowadays is characterized by new requirements and new skills, often placed upon it by national governments and following national policy frameworks. One could think of the requirement to collaborate with non-academic partners in research projects; the requirement to generate 'real impact'; the requirement of knowledge co-creation, and the requirement to bring in co-financing from public or private parties, in order to be able to win research grants. These developments all pave the way for BPs in academia.

Previous research shows that the group of BPs in academia is mixed:

¹Whitchurch, C (2008a). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 377-396.

²Wissema, J. G. (2009). *Towards the Third Generation University. Managing the University in Transition*. UK, US: Edward Elgar Publishing.

* Those with a mixed background: often they are PhD-holders but do not work as active scientists any more (Whitchurch, 2008³).

* Those who continue to have an academic and professional interest in their area of activity, thereby active in doing research. This subgroup consists of professional PhDs and sponsored professors.

* Those who might not feel to belong either to the academic or to the professional community, thus forming a third space category of professional staff in human resources terms in today's universities.

Research also shows some of the characteristics of these BPs, for instance:

* they may be perceived as 'mavericks' by academics and professional colleagues.⁴

* They may also be considered to be able to challenge the 'status quo', since they tend to look at any issues impacting on their home institution from an outsider perspective.

We are however aware that there are further groups of these blended professionals working in today's universities, including for instance those that have spent their whole career in administration or in management who have undertaken research degrees late in their career. In addition, we should note those who have moved to academic contracts late in their career in consideration of the high level of expertise gained in the field of professional practice.

For all these reasons, this study aims to address **the following research questions**:

- Who do BPs **feel** they are in HE surroundings? This question addresses the continuous search for identity (academic, administrative, or a mix of both), including coping with multiple and possible conflicting identities.
- Issues of **freedom and control** for BPs: how much professional space is allowed, how are they supervised, (how) are they required to report to superiors?
- Who are their **peers** and where are these peers located within (or beyond) the HE territory?
- Are BPs moving towards a third space community in today's universities (Carvalho et al, 2015)?⁵
- Are these BPs -- in consideration of their backgrounds -- able to valorise reflection in action (Schon, 2011⁶) or also reflection on reflection in action, so to help improve the effectiveness – or the impact – of their institutions?

Concerning the methods, we propose to carry out a triple case study, including a Dutch, an Italian and a UK university/HEI to demonstrate a snapshot of the reflection and practice of 'blendedness' in these cases. The case study will consist of a series of semi-structured interviews involving a small group of individuals in research management in addition to academic researchers. The universities involved in this study are Tilburg University (The Netherlands), Bologna University (Italy) and LSE (UK). The interviews will be carried out between August and October 2016. In order to have a conceptual and a more generalizable evidence of the nature and characteristics of the BPs, one would need a wider and a longer study looking into all types of blended-ness as mentioned above. Nevertheless, we believe our case study will provide some useful insights into BPs in selected universities from respective HE policy settings.

³ Whitchurch, C. (2008b). Professional Managers in HE: Preparing for Complex Futures. LFHE report

⁴ Whitchurch (2008b), *ibid.*

⁵ Carvalho, T., Marini, G., & Videira, P. The rise of blended professionals in higher education systems: empirical evidence from a survey in Portuguese higher education system (0301).

⁶ Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action (Vol. 5126). Basic books.

Benefits from this study that we expect to have deals with raising the awareness of:

- The concept of BPs in the contexts of HEIs and the various meanings of BPs by looking at definitions/cases arising from the body of literature
- How research policy environment(s) – the national and/or institutional agendas -- push the development of BPs in a planned or unplanned manner
- How BPs feel in terms of freedom and control regarding their jobs
- What indispensable roles BPs play in today's universities.

Results from this study aim to:

- Show the level of awareness that this group of BPs has progressively gained so that we may envisage the constitution of a third community in today's HE institutions
- Show how this concept of *blended* is getting recognition and attention across Europe and even much beyond it, so to become a global *phenomenon*
- Point to the understanding of the range of models of BPs in HE institutions, more or less widespread even depending on country. We should note that the group under investigation in this study cannot be exhaustive but should be regarded as what has already been described in the body of literature enriched with a further insight into issues of BPs.