The Contemporary Academic: orientation towards research work and researcher identity of higher education lecturers in the health professions

Pete Boyd and Caroline Smith
University of Cumbria

Abstract

Internationally, the increasing emphasis in universities on the quality of teaching, on student employability and on a corporate approach to entrepreneurial income generation, has created a tension around the primacy afforded to published research outputs as a focus for academic work and status. In this study a framework for academic socialisation is developed and used to understand how lecturers in health professional fields attempt to 'juggle' four areas of work - teaching, leadership, knowledge exchange and research activity. Studying academics in professional fields, with a well-developed focus on employability and strong partnerships with employers, provides useful insight into contemporary academic work and identity. A significant proportion of lecturers in health professional fields, even of those working in research intensive universities, appear to 'subvert' the paradigmatic primacy afforded across the higher education sector to research outputs and identity as a researcher.

Keywords

Academic development; Workforce development; Academic work and identity; Healthcare education and training; Professional learning

Introduction

This research investigates the workplace experiences and identities of higher education lecturers in the health professions across the UK. Academic work has developed over time in a complex way because of variation across national systems, subject disciplines, institutions, and departments as well as in the agency of individual academics. Lecturers in higher education may focus their efforts on different areas of their work including teaching, research and knowledge exchange, or pursue leadership roles within increasingly corporate universities. The term knowledge exchange is used here to include consultancy by academics as well as other collaborative engagement with external organizations and groups. Higher education leaders might be expected to provide clear guidance for academics on the value placed by their institution on contributions within these different areas of work. This paper contributes to the body of research that is attempting to capture the characteristics of academic work and identity in contemporary higher education.

Health professions lecturers are familiar with knowledge exchange activity and partnership with graduate employers, alongside more traditional areas of academic work such as research and teaching. In this paper we analyse responses to an online questionnaire of higher education lecturers in the professional fields of nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, radiography and occupational therapy. The lecturer respondents, all with previous clinical practitioner experience, have worked for between one and thirty years within higher education roles in a range of research intensive and teaching-led institutions across the UK. The purpose of the study is to investigate the academic work of these lecturers in order to inform academic development support but also to gain some possible insight into the impact of strong partnerships with employers on higher education. The research question is: how do these lecturers in health professional fields engage with research activity and researcher identity as part of their work in higher education?

In some ways the world of work inhabited by these lecturers in health professional fields reflects the direction of travel of many universities and academics. The boundaries of higher education are increasingly 'porous' and academics are developing wider ranges of identities influenced by activity beyond the university (Clegg, 2008). In addition universities and departments have differing views of scholarship and Clegg speculates that academics working in less research-intensive environments may have opportunities to develop alternative identities which are less constrained by the 'rules' of research audits. There are potential contradictions within contemporary higher education, as Henkel points out 'While 'research reputation' is the strongest academic currency in higher education institutions, they expect its strategic potential to be exploited to enhance income and broader influence as well as their academic reputation' (2005: 164). Studying academics in the health professions thus provides useful insight into the workplace experiences of the contemporary academic.

Our analysis reveals that these academics, from across the wide range of higher education institutional workplaces in the UK, reported different responses to academic socialisation. Some of these academics appear to be 'subverting' research work and researcher identity. We found that the pressure to publish research was widely felt, even among staff whose institutional context or contract condoned their

subversion of research. We considered carefully our choice of the term 'subvert' and use it here to mean 'overcoming a widely asserted principle' of the primacy of research work and researcher identity across higher education.

Changes in higher education

In higher education workplaces modernity has brought about fragmentation and change with considerable impact on academic identity (Bridges, 2000; Marginson 2000; Becher & Trowler 2001; Barnett 2003). These authors identify intensification of academic work and a new class of managers and administrators with a more corporate and managerialist approach, as significant challenges to the identity of academics. Henkel concentrates on the significance of the subject discipline and on threats to academic autonomy (2005). She argues that the 'increased corporate strength of universities is part of the context which explains how academic autonomy has become, for many academics, something that must now be set against competing rights' (2005: 173). In the current higher education sector the concept of the 'academic profession' is contested (Williams 2008) and new visions of the 'academic workforce' are being considered (Coates & Goedegebuure 2012).

In the UK and more widely, the influence of research audit helps to ensure that publishing research and being a researcher are dominant pressures on the work and identity of academics (Harley 2002). For example Henkel argues that the 'personal agendas' of academics are rooted in their doctoral and post-doctoral studies (2005: 167). In addition, in responding to the research audit process in the UK, Henkel argues that higher education institutions increasingly use the concept of 'strategic research' and this managerial influence on the focus of research activity challenges academic autonomy but also re-emphasises the status of research in the role of the university and the work of academics (2005: 167). The emphasis on research as a prime measure of academic success is not confined to research intensive universities or to well-established subject disciplines and is increasingly found in new, more teaching focused, universities and in professional fields such as teacher education that are relatively new to higher education (Sikes 2006; Oancea 2010).

Generic studies of academics may provide useful insight into identity building during induction (Trowler & Knight 2000; Smith 2010) but they may tend to underplay the significance of differences between subject disciplines. Subject disciplines develop differing 'knowledge regimes' that govern how knowledge is created and valued (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot 2002). It can be argued that whilst earlier work emphasised identification of academics with their subject discipline research networks (Becher & Trowler, 2001) the changing higher education sector means that other influences including structure and role may have increasing influence in the corporate university (Henkel, 2005; Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). Academic work and identity may be expected to combine elements of teaching, researching, managing, writing, and networking (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight 1998). In a study using analysis of critical incidents Gale argues that new academics in a teaching led university are strongly focused on teaching activity and on their identity as university teachers rather than on writing, networking and research (2011).

The orientations of academic staff towards different areas of their work are likely to be influenced by a mixture of formal and informal 'rules' at sector, subject discipline, institutional, and departmental levels as well as by individual agency. In a study of the 'rules' as expressed by the approach to the evaluation of faculty work in research intensive universities in the US, Hardre & Cox argue that the subject discipline and departmental levels must retain considerable influence (2009). Corporate universities change in response to external drivers, such as those presented by new government policy, and this helps to shape the 'rules'. As an example in the UK, the research audit process has considerable power over the lives of academics (Harley 2002). Within this policy framework Billot (2010) proposes that institutions need to work at removing barriers that prevent academics from redefining their identity and also suggests that individual academics need to learn to tolerate role ambiguity.

Many academics would argue that a distinctive feature of university teaching is the link between teaching and research (Humboldt 1970; Brew & Boud 1995; Barnett 1997; Jenkins & Healey 2007) although good research and good teaching have been found to be only 'loosely coupled' (Hattie & Marsh 1996) and the widely accepted assumption that the research-teaching nexus (RT nexus) is necessarily a 'good thing' has been countered by some commentators (Trowler & Wareham 2007). Whilst research is widely assumed to underpin both university teaching and university knowledge exchange activity, this may require the academic to critically engage with research as a scholar but there is a question remaining as to their need to be a 'researcher'. Wider interpretations of what an academic needs to be have been informed by Boyer's work which proposed four areas of scholarship as teaching, discovery, integration and application (1990). Within this definition the scholarship of discovery is closest to traditional views of research and the scholarship of application is related to knowledge exchange.

There has been an increasing emphasis on 'knowledge exchange' activity in the higher education sector, this involves academics in providing consultancy or engaging in collaborative activity with external organizations and is also referred to as 'enterprise' or 'engagement' activity. There are powerful drivers encouraging UK academics across the sector to build knowledge exchange activity with employers. These include pressure to find new sources of university income, pressure to strengthen graduate employability, and pressure to gather evidence of the 'impact' of research outputs. Lecturers in the health professions work closely within partnerships with employers because of the work-based learning element of their undergraduate programmes and because their university departments provide postgraduate and other professional development courses for clinical practitioners.

Academic identity

The concept of identity is useful in this study of academic work because it fits best the scope or our interest, which goes beyond 'role', 'contract' or 'job description'. From a sociocultural perspective understanding changes in academic work require a focus on identity as well as practice. Identity is viewed as a 'pivot' between the individual and the social so that there is a profound connection between the practice and the identity of an academic (Wenger 1998). This means that it is important to focus in the analysis of data on 'research' as an area of work, but also on 'researcher' as an element of

academic identity. Identity may be defined as sustaining coherent but dynamic reflexive biographical narratives that are sensitive to the wider social and cultural context (Giddens 1991). From a sociocultural perspective identity is in continual negotiation with practice and may be conceived of multiple interwoven trajectories related to membership of different communities (Wenger 1998). In the current study this means that to gain insight into academic identities the research instrument must draw out narrative data from lecturers focused on their workplace experiences. However, when investigating academic identities there is a risk of focusing on similarities and forcefully developing typologies rather than accepting a more nuanced, situated, fragmented and dynamic version of multiple professional identities (Stronach et al. 2002). Therefore the survey instrument used in the current study used open response prompts rather than questions that focused for example on specific areas of work or particular elements of academic identity.

Working from an academic development perspective D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) usefully combine previous work by Taylor (1999) and Kogan (2000) in describing categories of academic identity which are inclusive of higher education professional fields because they consider practitioner identity, as a nurse, teacher and so on, as one sub-category. Their concept of academic identity finds space for the previous clinical practitioner role and identification that may be held by, for example a nurse educator, even after long years working as a university-based lecturer.

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. Small-scale qualitative studies have identified the considerable challenges faced by newly appointed academics in nursing (McArthur-Rouse, 2008; Boyd & Lawley, 2009). For academics in nursing there is a tension around the extent to which they should maintain more procedural knowledge in clinical skills and experience as well as propositional academic knowledge (Fisher 2006; Barrett, 2006; McNamara 2010) and this has been positioned as a tension between 'rival knowledge regimes' (Findlow 2012). The initial stage of the current research project focused on lecturers in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions in their first five years of appointment to university posts (Boyd, Smith, Lee & McDonald, 2009; Smith & Boyd, 2012). That study found that the workplace context of the new lecturers may have encouraged them to hold on to previous identities as credible clinical practitioners and only slowly move towards identity as an academic in their professional field.

In considering the development of identity by new academics Smith (2010) identifies an emergent typology of academic socialisation including 'resonant', 'dissonant' and 'rejection'. Smith defines resonant engagement with academic socialisation as largely untroubled and involving agency by academics including some level of challenge to neoliberal managerialist discourses within higher education. Dissonant engagement with academic socialisation involves new lecturers in a more troublesome experience of induction. As Smith points out, even within the same university the expectations for teaching and research outputs during the probationary period may vary hugely between departments despite a supposedly common institutional framework (Smith, 2010: 585). Smith found that lecturers experiencing dissonant socialisation changed

during the one year duration of the study as they became more familiar with routines and the work context (2010). A small number of academics in Smith's study experienced a socialisation characterized by rejection. This was a rejection of the socialisation process and of academic identity as a desirable objective. The emergent socialisation framework developed by Smith (2010) presents, with further development, a useful analytical tool for the current study.

The Online Questionnaire

This study used an online questionnaire and targeted all higher education lecturers in the UK within the professional fields of nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and radiography. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the academic workplace experiences of lecturers. The online questionnaire used some structured questions to establish biographical details but then used three relatively open questions to obtain narrative data from lecturers concerning their experiences of working in their higher education roles. These open ended prompt questions invited and allowed an extended narrative response by participants. This provoked rich data from many respondents although it did allow for considerable variation in the length of responses. In this way this core section of the online questionnaire had some similarity to a semi-structured interview but without the advantage of the interviewer being able to use further neutral prompts to encourage less verbose participants. In this paper we focus on the research question: how do these lecturers in health professional fields engage with research activity and researcher identity as part of their work in higher education?

Relevant university departments in the UK were identified through the programmes they offered in the five health professional fields. This involved more than 200 academic departments. A contact at head of department level was established and used to distribute the online questionnaire link via email to relevant lecturers so that they were individually invited to participate. In this way, with a measure of uncertainty due to reliance on colleagues, the questionnaire was distributed to the majority of lecturers within the target professional fields across the UK. The estimated response rate was 17% providing 375 completed returns from lecturers.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous at individual and institutional levels so that respondents were not required to reveal which university they work in. This decision was made during the process of obtaining ethical clearance for the study but was partly because it may have inhibited honesty in responses to the prompt questions. Not knowing the university weakens the data somewhat because aspects of the workplace context for individual respondents is only known through self-reporting within the questionnaire response, it would have been useful to be able to distinguish between university workplaces using published data, for example on research audit. However, a structured question was used to ask respondents to score the priority given to research activity and researcher identity within their department; this at least provided a self-reported indicator as an alternative to knowing the particular place of work of each respondent. Three open questions in the questionnaire prompted lecturers to provide narrative about their experiences of working in higher education and prompted open responses to positive aspects, difficult aspects and professional priorities in their work. The approach to analysis included three stages. The

questionnaire was distributed to the full spectrum of UK higher education institutions offering programmes in the health professions. Therefore the study might be considered to be a reasonable attempt to capture the full range of work and identity of academics in health professional fields in the UK.

In the first stage of analysis a thematic qualitative approach was used to consider responses to the three open questions (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). The findings are reported below, using illustrative quotes, firstly in relation to workplace environment and then to priorities and ambitions of the lecturers. This section of the findings provides some voice for participants and make explicit our interpretation of the data to identify emerging themes.

In the second stage of analysis the response from each individual respondent was considered holistically, in order to classify the lecturers' reported experiences in relation to an amended version of the emergent typology of responses to academic socialisation developed by Smith (2010). The resonant, dissonant, rejection classes developed by Smith were considered in this study to apply to four areas of work and identity: research - researcher / teaching - teacher / knowledge exchange - consultant / leadership - leader. For the purposes of the current paper the focus is on orientation of the lecturers towards research and being a researcher.

In the third stage of analysis the classification of the lecturer responses using the amended typology was compared to their responses to the direct question within the questionnaire which asked them to report the priority for research in their own departmental workplace. The development of the typology from qualitative analysis of the narrative data, combined with the self-reported indicator of the departmental workplace priority for research, provides insight into the academic socialisation of the lecturers.

It is important to note the limitations of the data and of the approach to qualitative analysis. Firstly the estimated response rate of 17% was reasonable considering the nature of the questionnaire and its distribution. The overall sample size is a strength, however the response rate requires us to maintain a sceptical view of the representative nature of the sample. It is possible that lecturers who were experiencing a troublesome socialisation into higher education may have been more likely to dismiss the questionnaire and not respond. However some respondents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to reflect on the challenges they were experiencing. In addition the analysis classifies the questionnaire responses but this is this is not intended as an attempt to label the lecturers themselves, because their practice and identity are considered to be complex, multiple, and dynamic. When classifying the questionnaire responses the boundary between research resonant and research dissonant was particularly difficult to distinguish, as even the happiest researcher is likely to experience some troublesome challenges. However a new distinctive classification of 'subverting' research and 'subverting' becoming a researcher emerged during the analysis. The term 'subvert' is used here to mean the over-turning of the widely asserted principle that within higher education 'research' is more important than teaching, knowledge exchange or leadership. Based on biographical data gathered as part of the questionnaire process it is clear that for a proportion of the respondents their particular formal role within their higher education institution may not include a contractual requirement to be a researcher and to publish research. These

respondents are included in the analysis whilst recognizing that their 'subversion' of research in these cases remains valid in relation to the wider higher education sector but appears to be condoned locally by their institution.

Findings

The 375 questionnaire respondents consisted of 54% lecturers in nursing, 14% lecturers in midwifery, 14% lecturers in physiotherapy, 9% lecturers in radiography and 9% lecturers in occupational therapy. The majority of questionnaire respondents were female (85%).

The sample of 375 respondents includes just 12 academics who had gained their doctorate prior to appointment to a higher education post. In addition the sample includes 44 lecturers who have gained their doctorate since being appointed to higher education and 53 who have commenced their doctoral studies but not yet completed. The remaining 266 respondents have not yet engaged with doctoral study. These figures indicate the preference in the UK for appointing new academics in the health professions on the basis of their clinical expertise and experience rather than the more traditional approach of requiring a PhD as an entry level qualification.

Many respondents gave full responses to the open questions in the questionnaire and they generally reported a positive and enthusiastic engagement with their work in higher education. However the focus of the current study is on orientation to research and for many colleagues this was revealed as a troublesome area of work and identity. There are many positive aspects of their work experiences revealed in the data and before beginning the detailed analysis it is worth noting some of these in a concise way. The lecturers enjoy contributing to the learning of new practitioners, the flexibility of their work and role, the support for their own professional development, and the intellectual company and discussion in their workplace. They also enjoy more mundane elements such as no night shifts, no uniforms, and generally not having to handle life and death crises. On the other hand they sometimes appear to grieve for the gradual loss of their hands-on clinical skills and for the lack of direct interaction with patients and carers.

Research as work

This section presents a thematic qualitative analysis of the narrative responses of lecturers to the open prompt questions 1 and 2 below. The analysis pursues emerging themes but focuses on research as an element of work and identity.

> *Questionnaire question 1: What are the most positive aspects of your role / experiences of working in higher education?*

> *Questionnaire question 2: What have been the most difficult aspects of your role / experiences of working in higher education?*

In responses to question 1 many lecturers commented on the research environment as a positive aspect of their workplace. Comments included an appreciation of

autonomy: 'freedom…as long as my work is covered then I have a relatively free rein to pursue other interests…'. Other comments focused on formal support: 'mentor…extremely helpful and supportive' and informal social environment: 'coffee breaks are rarely dull'. Many responses included comparisons with previous clinical workplaces which for most respondents were in the UK national health service:

> *The staff team is very supportive and helpful, nothing is too much trouble for people here, which is nice. Developmental opportunities are available, I would not have been supported to undertake a PhD in the clinical setting.*

> Lecturer in occupational therapy – female / aged 40-50 / 5 years in HE

This quote illustrates the positive comments of these respondents concerning both informal and formal support for research capacity building. Some responses illustrated the complexity of the workplace and role of these academics:

> *Supervising PhD students…setting up clinical research trials and as a result being involved (once again) with patients. Presenting research at conferences and networking with other researchers in the field.*

> Lecturer in physiotherapy – female / aged 50–60 / 16 years in HE

The quote above illustrates how this particular academic found a route back to interaction with patients through research activity. Within the questionnaire data there were clear indications that respondents, especially recently appointed academics, grieved over the loss of contact with patients and carers.

In responses to question 2 on difficult aspects of their role and experiences a significant proportion of the lecturers commented on expectations for research as a challenging aspect of their workplace:

> *As a lecturer with no practical research experience at all, the most difficult aspect of my job was becoming 'research active'.*

> Lecturer in nursing (health visitor) – male / aged 50-60 / 13 years in HE

However an overwhelming focus of these comments on difficult aspects focused on lack of time due to a heavy workload dominated by teaching. Illustrative comments show the range of workload issues raised by respondents: knowing when to stop; workload (the volume) and impact on home life; I have seen many colleagues burn out and leave; I still don't take enough holidays. It is worth quoting a comment that illustrates a generally held perspective amongst the lecturers:

> *The job is potentially vast and never-ending. It could consume every part of your life. There is…an expectation that you devote 40 hours a week to teaching and 40 hours a week to research…there are some moments of satisfaction, like getting a paper published, but the expectations are being raised year on year...*

> Lecturer in occupational therapy – female / aged 40 – 50 / 8 years experience in HE

Within the responses there are frequent complaints about lack of time for research and this tends to suggest a priority given to teaching and other responsibilities before research is considered. However the pressure for research activity and outputs is felt by many respondents across a range of roles:

> *…the pressure to carry out research…as a 'tutor' it is not in my remit but there is still quite a lot of pressure to do it. In order to be promoted it is a pre-requisite.*

> Lecturer in nursing – female / aged 30 – 40 / 7 years experience in HE

In the quote above the respondent appears to be in a post that 'technically' does not require research outputs but they are clearly still aware of its significance within their workplace.

Some comments suggest that pressure for research activity and outputs is generated from institutional rather than departmental level:

> *…[there] seems to be quite a pull between actual teaching time and research and publication which is what the university wants us to do. [There] doesn't unfortunately appear to be enough time for both. [I am] now being pushed to undertake a PHD…not sure as to how I am going to fit all of this in!*

> Lecturer in midwifery – female / aged 30-40 / 3 years in HE

A number of respondents raise issues around work/life balance and its impact on family life. Within the data there appears to be a gender related issue concerning the impact of family responsibilities within a long hours working culture particularly affecting women:

> *Since I had the children, balancing a contract, specifying roles but not fixed hours, with the needs of my family has been the worst part. I could no longer sit up all night marking, because I had a baby to feed…it is heartbreaking to be in an unproductive meeting while some-one else picks up my daughter on the last day of term…*

> Lecturer in occupational therapy – female / aged 30 – 40 / 8 years in HE

It is worth noting that a number of responses to question 2 commented directly on their feeling of insecurity of their employment contract. The comments revealed either that the lecturers felt at risk of being made redundant or of non-renewal of a fixed term contract.

Overall this initial analysis confirms that these lecturers in professional fields experience the pressure for research activity and outputs that is common across the higher education sector. Their response to the pressure for research and being a researcher is nuanced by their commitments to teaching new practitioners and to engagement with their field of clinical expertise. These lecturers experience many opportunities for professional learning at work but generally find that their heavy

workload is a major challenge for their prioritisation of research activity and their development as researchers.

Ambitions for professional development

In order to pursue the orientations of the lecturers towards research activity and identity as a researcher this section presents analysis of responses to question 3 below. This section applies Smith's framework for academic socialisation but also pursues themes emerging from the data in order to evaluate the framework.

> 3. *What do you see as priorities for your own professional development in higher education, and where do you see yourself in 3 years time?*

A proportion of the lecturers appear to experience resonance in their academic socialisation towards research, meaning that they reported their development as a researcher as positive and relatively untroubled. In response to question 3 these lecturers explicitly focused on progress in research activity:

> I would like to be a key figure in developing research in the department. I envisage building my research and publication profile. Teaching is a secondary aspect of my career but I would hope to move towards senior lectureship.
>
> Lecturer in occupational therapy – female / aged 30-40 / 2 years in HE

The quote above clearly positions teaching as secondary but leadership and knowledge exchange were also mentioned by some respondents:

> Developing myself towards a senior lecturer role…this will mean concentrating on certain aspects of my development…in this instance research grant funding and output and an increased administrative role within the school regarding enterprise initiatives…
>
> Lecturer in physiotherapy – male / aged 40-50 / 6 years in HE

Many responses to question 3 expressed a resonant academic socialisation with regard to research but were at the early stages of development as a researcher:

> On the way to completing my PhD with 50% time spent on research.
>
> Lecturer in physiotherapy – female / aged 30 – 40 / 6 years in HE

> My teaching role is well established. Having just obtained a PhD I hope to publish and undertake some post-doctoral research
>
> Lecturer in nursing – female / aged 50-60 / 12 years in HE

These responses were interpreted as demonstrating a relatively untroubled academic socialisation with regard to research. These lecturers appear to be orientated towards

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research in a positive way and be prioritising research activity and identity in their professional development.

Within responses to questionnaire question 3 only a relatively large proportion of lecturers reported a dissonant experience of academic socialisation explicitly in relation to research. These lecturers showed awareness to varying extents of the pressure for research activity and outputs within the higher education sector, within their institution, and within their department and role. However they expressed a more troubled engagement, or lack of engagement, with research development:

> Big push to PhD and improve research profile but only just able to think about this.

> Lecturer in radiography – female / aged 40 – 50 / 20 years in HE

The quote above illustrates the way that even experienced academics feel pressure to gain a doctorate but that other pressures or priorities have prevented or inhibited this, most often heavy teaching and administrative workload is cited. Some respondents related their ambitions explicitly to their age:

> [I have been] told that at my age I would be a fool not to undertake a doctorate!... so I suppose that will be a priority to try to make time to start this…

> Lecturer in midwifery – female / aged 30-40 / 3 years in HE

Again this quote illustrates the pressure on a relatively young respondent for beginning as a researcher by gaining a doctorate and the issue of time for this element of work. In contrast retirement is mentioned by a considerable proportion of the respondents:

> The obvious solution to my PhD dilemma is to abandon it and retire. Sad though - not how I had wanted to end my career…

> Lecturer in occupational therapy – female / aged 50 – 60 / 7 years in HE

> Completing [my] doctorate before I retire!
> Lecturer in nursing – female / aged 50-60 / 9 years in HE

> Retired! But may think about doing a PhD then!

> Lecturer in nursing – female / aged 50-60 / 7 years in HE

The final quote above seems quite ironic, that completion of a doctorate will need to wait until retirement. In other cases retirement was seen as an opportunity to do some part-time clinical work.

In responses to question 3 a small proportion of the lecturers appeared to have rejected academic socialisation and were focused on leaving their higher education post. Most of these lecturers expressed an ambition to return to clinical posts.

In responding to question 3 many of the lecturers demonstrated resonance with other areas of academic work alongside their orientation towards research. Their responses demonstrated resonance within academic socialisation as a teacher, as a leader or as a facilitator of knowledge exchange in clinical employer environments. Often lecturers would mention two, but sometimes three or even four of the work and identity areas of teaching, research, knowledge exchange and leadership. Whilst some lecturers attempt to juggle all four, others appear to be making decisions about different pathways:

> I had thought about PhD… but unsure about the commitment I have for this at the moment - unsure what direction I am taking…
>
> Lecturer in midwifery – female / aged 40 – 50 / 6 years in HE

Analysis of responses to question three helped to develop a modified framework for academic socialisation which built on Smith's work (2010) but recognised the four different areas of academic work and identity. We would argue that understanding academic socialisation requires such a focus on different areas of work because our data shows strongly the variety of identities and pathways taken by these lecturers.

Typology of responses to academic socialisation

The previous section of the analysis provided some exemplification and lecturer voice in relation to resonant, dissonant and rejection responses towards becoming a researcher within the process of academic socialisation. This next stage of the analysis uses the modified framework for academic socialisation as a tentative typology in order to classify each of the 375 lecturers using their responses to the open questions in the questionnaire.

TABLE ONE HERE

Table 1 shows that only a small proportion 4% (n=16) of the lecturers appear to have rejected academic socialisation. Within this group of 16 individuals 11 are in the first five years of appointment to higher education posts. Some of these respondents focus on clinical skills:

> I do not see myself in higher education for very much longer…I miss working with patients and fear that I am losing my clinical skills and wonder how I can continue to be a effective lecturer when getting so outdated…
>
> Lecturer in physiotherapy – female / aged 40-50 / 4 years in HE

Others have a focus on knowledge exchange but do not see their role within this as based in higher education:

> I am returning to [clinical] practice…I hope to develop courses in the practice setting to support CPD for all levels of staff and will be collaborating with the HEI but not working directly for them…

Lecturer in nursing – female / aged 40-50 / part-time contract / 7 years in HE

Beyond the small proportion of the lecturers who were classified as rejecting academic socialisation the analysis now turns to those that explicitly acknowledge research activity and identity in their questionnaire responses but have varying stances towards it.

Table 1 shows that a proportion (17%) of the lecturers express resonance with academic socialisation focused on research activity and becoming or being a researcher. Of these 64 'resonant researchers' 25 are within their first 5 years of working in higher education roles and 39 have 6 or more years experience in higher education. The age distribution of this class of lecturers does not appear to be significantly different from that of the overall sample. Table 1 shows the numbers of lecturers classified as resonant academic socialisation as a researcher. The proportion of lecturers in nursing appears to be relatively low and the proportion of lecturers in physiotherapy appears to be high.

Table 1 indicates clearly that a large proportion of the lecturers 40% express dissonance with academic socialisation focused on research activity and becoming or being a researcher. Of these 148 'dissonant researchers' 50 are within 5 years of their appointment to higher education posts and 79 have 6 or more years in higher education roles. The age distribution of these dissonant researchers does not appear to be significantly different from that of the whole respondent sample.

Altogether, combining these two groups of lecturers, 57% of the lecturers expressed an orientation towards research activity and building identity as a researcher even if that process of becoming a researcher was troublesome. This large proportion of lecturers who demonstrate in the questionnaire responses their awareness of the significance of research activity and outputs is not surprising given the emphasis on this within the higher education sector. In some ways the fuzzy boundary in the typology framework between resonant and dissonant in attempting to classify academics is not overly important in terms of the argument presented in this paper.

However, in a significant finding from the analysis, a large proportion (39%) of lecturer responses were classified in a newly created classification within the modified framework. This classification has been entitled 'subverting research activity and researcher identity'. The term subversion is considered appropriate because these lecturers are overturning the widely accepted principle established in UK universities and the higher education sector that research is the most important area of work for an academic. For this group it is clear that research activity is not their priority. It is possible that these lecturers are not rejecting academic socialisation but are rejecting the research and researcher element of it. They appear, at least at the time of completing the questionnaire, to be choosing to build work activity and identity as higher education teachers, leaders or facilitators of knowledge exchange. For example some of them do not see the researcher pathway as relevant to building activity and identity in knowledge exchange:

> [I]…don't really want to go down the research route - I'd love to be a Nurse Consultant and keep riding those 2 horses called Academic & Clinical!

This lecturer in nursing appears to be choosing to focus their work and identity on becoming involved in knowledge exchange and does not explicitly highlight a place for becoming a researcher within that. The category of subverting research includes lecturers who appear to ignore pressure for research, do 'just enough' to satisfy it, or who appear to procrastinate and plan to start their PhD at 'some point in the future'. Within the analysis we consider this kind of response to be 'subversion'. By this we mean that the individual academic is applying their agency to subvert the generally held sector wide principle of the primacy of research activity and researcher identity.

An important element that complicates and moderates this finding is that by cross-checking with the one of the direct questions included within the questionnaire concerning the role and contract of each respondent it was found that within this 'subverting' group a considerable number (45) stated that producing research outputs is not an explicit expectation of their role or in some cases of their team or department. For these respondents this suggests a lack of contractual expectation and within the analysis this was considered to be an institutional level intervention that had influenced the agency of the individual in subverting research activity and researcher identity. The data suggests contradictions within the pressures on academics at different levels: the wider higher education sector; national; institutional; departmental and even perhaps at the level of teams within those departments. Our interpretation is that the lecturers may still be seen as subverting research and researcher identity in relation to the wider higher education sector, even when this behaviour is apparently condoned locally by their institution or department. This tension is revealed in lecturer responses because they still feel pressure to pursue research and researcher identity even when they are not contractually obliged to do so.

Many of the lecturers use the terms 'juggle' and 'balance' to describe their management of workload and choice of priorities or pathways across the four areas of their work. Some respondents explain carefully but rather unconvincingly how they will pursue all four areas of work - teaching, research, knowledge exchange and leadership.

Institutional and departmental context

Overall the analysis indicates that some lecturers are choosing pathways of work and identity within their academic role and many of them pursue research, or teaching, or leadership or knowledge exchange. Many however, appear to combine two or more of these areas of work and identity. A large proportion (39%) of the lecturers do not explicitly include research activity and identity within their overall professional development ambitions, they appear to be 'subverting' research activity and identity.

A direct question in the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the priority for research within their department and this gives a self-reported measure of workplace pressure for research outputs as shown in table 5. In considering these results it is important to note that the overall response rate to the questionnaire was only 17% and

this may for example have included a lower proportional response from lecturers with a resonant experience.

TABLE TWO HERE

In Table 2 the distribution of lecturer responses classified as 'research resonant' shows a steady decline from university department workplaces rated as having a high priority for research towards those where research is rated as a low priority. However it is also important to note that even in workplaces where research was perceived as being of low priority a small proportion of lecturers experience resonance in relation to their development as a researcher.

The 'research dissonant' distribution in Table 2 shows a more even distribution so that some academics across a range of university departmental workplaces find their development as researchers to be troublesome to some extent. The rate of rejection of academic socialisation is also evenly distributed across the range of workplaces.

Table 2 shows that even in university departmental workplaces that are perceived as giving high priority to research there is a proportion of academics whose questionnaire responses are classified as 'subverting research'. Table 2 also indicates a general pattern that an increasing proportion of lecturers subvert research in institutional workplaces where priority for research is lower. An element of these patterns in the data may be explained by institutions mediating the lecturers' orientation towards research by employing academics staff in roles such as 'university teacher' which are not formally expected to be research active.

Juggling priorities

Whilst reporting that they carrying a heavy overall workload, in many cases dominated by teaching responsibilities, many lecturers in health professional fields appear to juggle with four different areas of work: teaching, research, knowledge exchange and leadership. The pattern of work areas appears to have developed somewhat since earlier studies of academic workload (Blaxter et al. 1998). The lecturers feel different pressures from the higher education sector, from their professional field networks, from their institution and from their department, concerning research activity and researcher identity (Hardre & Cox 2009; Harley 2002). These pressures include contradictions, for example between spending time on teaching and supporting students rather than focusing on research qualifications and outputs. The lecturers are involved in identity reconstruction and experience considerable role ambiguity (Billot 2010). The multiple identities held by lecturers in the health professions appears to include one of 'clinical practitioner' but the place of clinical credibility and skills in the identity of an academic appears to be unresolved in many of the lecturers' workplaces. These lecturers would benefit from support to clarify and plan their multiple identity trajectories and to clarify the established academics that might form suitable identity role models (Wenger, 1998).

The concept of academic socialisation appears to be useful in understanding the orientation towards research and the academic identity of these lecturers in professional fields throughout their careers rather than only when they are newly

appointed. The framework using resonance, dissonance and rejection (Smith 2010) benefits from modification to allow for different responses in the four areas of work of teaching, research, knowledge exchange and leadership. The study has identified an additional category of 'subverting research activity and researcher identity' within lecturers in the health professions. This category of subverting research, overturning the principle that researcher is the highest status academic identity, is relevant in understanding lecturers' orientation towards research activity and outputs. However, subversion is not always dependent on the agency of the individual, because for some lecturers there is no contractual expectation set by their institution for them to be researchers. The findings of the survey have provided an estimate, based on self-reporting, of the proportion of lecturers in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions that are in non-researcher roles. These roles involve priority for teaching, knowledge exchange or leadership responsibilities and a range of titles including 'university teacher' are sometimes used by institutions but in many cases the title of 'lecturer' is used but does not reveal that they are not expected to be research active. These findings demonstrate the breadth of the academic role in professional fields in higher education such as the health professions. They give some indication of the possible direction for the work of the contemporary academic as the emphasis on employability and knowledge exchange activity increases across more traditional subject disciplines.

The presence of lecturers in nursing, midwifery and the health professions who subvert research activity and researcher identity, even within university departments where research is a high priority, is an important characteristic of higher education. These academics are choosing or being directed to pursue identity trajectories that emphasise knowledge exchange, leadership or teaching and are overturning the privilege given to researcher identity in the higher education sector. This choice might be seen as a positive response to the tensions they experience in their workplace and appears to be more sensible and perhaps more likely to lead to excellent outcomes than trying to juggle different areas of work. The traditional view of academic work, giving primacy to research outputs and researcher identity, has been challenged by the increased focus in recent years on the quality of teaching. But for the contemporary academic the additional focus on employability and knowledge exchange activity may be moving them closer to the experience of these lecturers in the health professions.

Conclusion

There is a need for academic staff to engage in identity work, reflecting on, planning for and pursuing their professional learning and academic identity. The study has shown how contemporary academics across the health professions are often juggling different areas of work including teaching, knowledge exchange, research and leadership. Our analysis shows that a proportion of academics in health professional fields appear to avoid this juggling by 'subverting' research activity and research identity, they take a different career development pathway. In some cases the agency of the individual academic appears to be significant in choosing this pathway but in some cases institutional mediation influences the decision. Overall however, whatever their institutional context or contractual position, lecturers in the health professions acknowledge the continuing primacy of research work and researcher identity across

the higher education sector, despite this a considerable proportion of them choose to subvert it.

The findings imply that leaders and academic developers at university and departmental level need to understand, explicitly acknowledge and support these different areas of work and identity. They need to be aware that unwritten 'rules' such as the sector wide pressure for research activity in higher education will be powerful influences on academic staff in addition to more local structures of contract and reward. Contemporary academics need reasonable expectations, provision of clear identity role models, and support to manage workload and prioritise within it. Where universities or departments choose to employ lecturers with different roles and expectations for research they need to be explicit and to allow for effective and equitable processes for remuneration and progression. The possible tensions between the priorities of university subject discipline departments and those of the institution and wider sector deserve further investigation. In the recent past there has been a focus of research and development activity in higher education centred on the research-teaching nexus (RT nexus) but perhaps a new period of focus should develop on the research-teaching-knowledge exchange nexus (RTKE nexus) in order to acknowledge changes in university engagement and the priorities of individual academics.

This study has shown that the framework for academic socialisation is a useful tool for analysis and potentially for supporting identity work with academics. The findings lend support to Clegg's (2008) speculation about the porous boundaries of higher education and the development of alternative identities that contemporary academics may have opportunities to develop. As the focus on knowledge exchange rises in increasingly corporate style university organisations the juggling or choosing of priorities between teaching, knowledge exchange, research and leadership areas of work and identity is part of the life of the contemporary academic. It may be that academics in more traditional subject disciplines are moving inexorably towards the complex, dynamic, and potentially contradictory workplace contexts which health professions lecturers already inhabit. Studying this group of lecturers in professional fields provides useful insight into the work and identity of the contemporary academic.

Acknowledgements

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