Understanding the educational workforce in post-compulsory education: introduction to the special issue

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There are three reasons for compiling this special issue of Research in Post-Compulsory Education on understanding the educational workforce in post compulsory education. First, there is relatively little in the literature that brings together diverse perspectives on what it is to be a practitioner working as a professional in the sector. This journal is dedicated to bringing research perspectives to bear on educational practice, with the aim of bringing about transformational change and improvement. Second, the context for those working in the post-compulsory education has never been so challenging. It is vital that those who work with learners have opportunities to engage in policy literate reflective practice, including comparing their own with practice elsewhere. Third, during the last eighteen months or so the journal has attracted high quality contributions that simply asked to be collected within a themed issue.

Themed issues have disadvantages, they take up space that would otherwise be available for work on other topics; however they have the over-riding benefit of bringing together in one place related work that can form a corpus of current practice that is reported and made available to practitioners and researchers alike for reflection and critique. The contributions described below split into two broad themes. The first group of papers report research carried out in the English FE (Further Education) sector, including one sixth form college, on teacher education, teaching cultures, and the teacher as professional. The second group focus upon professional identities in non UK higher education.

It is striking how rarely items about teacher educators in Post Compulsory Education (PCE) in England feature in the academic literature. There is a small selection of well-known items such as (Harkin, Cuff and Rees 2008) and (Noel 2006), but the first of these was an 'interim report' which never emerged as a final publication. There is more literature addressing teacher education in other parts of the education sector, but a small proportion features teacher educators themselves, and very rarely those working in PCE (Boyd, Harris and Murray 2007), (Murray 2008); (Noel 2006); (Thurston 2010). Thurston’s (2010) suggestion that this group of teacher educators is to some degree invisible in the teaching and learning community appears well founded.

Reforms to initial teacher education between 2007 and 2012, including a reinforcement of the (2001) requirement for new teachers to gain teaching qualifications, and a new set of qualifications, resulted in considerably more teachers in the sector gaining those teaching qualifications. By 2012 73% of the workforce possessed a teaching qualification which involved at least one year of study, and was level four or above (LSIS, 2012). Alongside this eleven Centres of Excellence in Teacher Training (CETTs) were established and they were able to support and fund a wide range of projects, research and development in addition to extending professional networking and Continuous Professional Development Opportunities for the teacher education community.

The first of the articles, by Jim Crawley, focuses upon one of those funded projects on ‘the professional situation of teacher educators, what could be considered their essential characteristics, and their support needs’. The aim was to engage the teacher education community in reflection about their professional situation, and to improve the visibility of this group as a more cohesive community of professionals as a result. A series of focus groups led to the design of an online questionnaire for PCE teacher education practitioners to complete. The resulting survey, the largest of its type in England, gained 161 participants, and a rich range of data on themes such as their ‘essential characteristics’, ‘ subject knowledge’ and ‘support needs’ was gathered.

The working environment for the PCE workforce in general is recognised as challenging, complex, at times hostile, and one which involves a great diversity of learners and range of teaching contexts (Lucas 2004); (Shain and Gleeson 1999); (TLRP, 2008). This environment is bound to impact on a group working so directly with PCE professionals (i.e. PCE teacher educators) and this research confirmed that is the case. Providing a stable and supportive learning process for teachers working in such challenging circumstances is shown as crucial to PCE teacher educators, in addition to recognising the need to positively model best practice in and across the sector. Overall the results of this research suggest that PCE teacher educators do not allow the challenging context of PCE at to affect their commitment and efforts to support their trainees and it may even the case that it spurs them on.

The second paper by Matt O’Leary also explores in the current English policy context what it means to be a ‘professional’ in further education, a debate that has been on-going over the last two decades. In an attempt to codify professionalism, the previous New Labour government developed a package of reforms for the FE workforce, which were crystallised first by the introduction of a set of professional standards and qualifications for those teaching in the sector (FENTO 1999; LLUK 2006) and then a new common inspection framework under Ofsted. These reforms reflected a political desire to monitor and improve FE teachers’ professional skills and knowledge, and prioritised teaching and learning as the main vehicle with which to drive the ‘continuous improvement’ agenda. Classroom observation or what is commonly referred to in FE as the ‘observation of teaching and learning’ (OTL) subsequently emerged as a pivotal tool for evaluating and measuring improvement, whilst also seeking to promote teacher learning and development at the same time. Drawing on recent research into the use of OTL in FE colleges, this paper focuses on two case study colleges in the West Midlands whose contrasting OTL practices serve to exemplify what he refers to as ‘expansive’ and ‘restrictive’ approaches to professionalism i.e. ‘opportunities’ and ‘barriers’ to professional learning respectively. Through the lens of OTL, the paper examines the role that this particular intervention plays in shaping notions of professionalism among staff working in these two colleges.

The experiences of staff in these two colleges are explored through the narratives of three stakeholder perspectives i.e. senior managers, observers and observees. The research data presented are taken from semi-structured interviews carried out as part of a wider mixed methods study into the use and impact of OTL on the professional identity, learning and development of FE practitioners (O’Leary 2011). Given the enormity of the data generated and that some have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. O’Leary 2013), the scope of this paper is restricted to examining qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews of participants.

The two case study colleges presented here were chosen because they provide such rich, contrasting examples of the differing contexts, cultures and practices associated with ‘expansive’ and ‘restrictive’ approaches to OTL. The paper argues that it is time for a move away from the predominantly restrictive ways in which observation has been used in the sector to date i.e. largely as a performance management tool, to more expansive models that seek to prioritise teacher learning above all else. It acknowledges that such a move would undoubtedly go against the grain of current normalised models of graded OTL and signify a bold step in re-defining its use in the sector. It remains to be seen whether or not colleges are prepared to take such a step, but equally the paper concludes that to ignore the distorting and counterproductive consequences of this initiative is surely not an option for policy makers and practitioners alike committed to the on-going improvement of teaching and learning in FE.

The debate revolving around the concept of teacher professionalism is not new but neither is it static. The changing nature of the term ‘professional’ has attracted interest from those policy-makers and academics who wish to remodel it drawing from their own perspective of what it means to work for the State, as an educational practitioner or as a team-player in an increasingly market-oriented organisation. David Stoten explores these themes through the lens of teachers in the Sixth Form College sector, a sector in which he has worked for 24 years. The impact of New Public Management on the Sixth Form College sector should not be over-stated; for many teachers it has transformed their place of work, the manner in which they work and how they are judged. When combined with the imperatives of a post-2010 education market, we can see that the complex roles and professional identities within teaching are undergoing major change.

The theoretical underpinning of the research draws from Juergen Habermas’ post-Marxist critical theory approach to the State in late Capitalism, and its de-moralising of the professional salariat. De-moralisation is not, as one may initially suppose, concerned simply with lowering morale but exploring the impact of change on the values-system of those who work within or for the State bureaucracy. The research explores teachers’ views of their work, their identity and their sense of belonging, their views on management and Central Government policy. The findings suggest that the State should aim to engage more productively with teachers as partners in education provision instead of placing the profession in a place perceived servitude.

In his contribution, Kevin Orr traces cultures and the development of ideas about teaching in English further education.Teachers and teaching in England’s further education sector were subject to closer scrutiny than ever before under the previous New Labour government with its emphasis on economic development and social justice through widening participation in education. In 2001 the government instigated the first statutory requirement for FE teachers to have or be working towards a teaching qualification and the government tightened its control of the content and form of teacher education for FE with legislation in 2006. Professional standards, a required annual period of professional development and a licence to practice (in the form of Qualified Teacher in Learning and Skills status) were all introduced in the effort to centrally enhance the quality of teaching as defined by the government and its agencies. The Coalition government’s Lingfield Review (2012) has now brought this period to a close with its recommendation to withdraw the statutory requirement for FE teachers to hold teaching qualifications. As the policy wheel of teacher education has turned full-circle in England’s FE sector the question remains as to what really influences the development of teachers in the sector.

The prolific Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLC) research project studied English FE between 2002 and 2005 and it developed the concept of a ‘learning culture’ (James and Biesta 2007, 4) to analyse the formative interaction between the student and the environment of the college. The TLC project’s primary emphasis was on students not teachers, but this concept is helpful in understanding the development of teachers’ professional learning, also. The project was, moreover, inter-disciplinary and sophisticated and it explicitly placed FE provision within its social, economic and political context (James and Biesta 2007, 11). Nevertheless its focus was, like much research in this field, “on the localised setting” (Hodkinson et al. 2007, 25) and this holds some risks. Consistent focus on the local setting in FE can lead to the overstatement of local influence which displaces more powerful and wider structural influences, in this case on ideas about teaching in the sector. At its heart this is a methodological issue that involves the scope of the research methods chosen which may systematically ignore the macro-level.

This paper specifically examines the influence of localised workplace cultures on ideas about teaching in a large urban college in the north of England. It employs a restricted concept of culture to firstly seek evidence of the existence of distinctive cultures within the college before discussing the effect of these cultures on the practices and identity of teachers. Even in the few discernible instances of sustainable and distinctive local cultures in the college there was little evidence that these had led to distinctive ideas about teaching or teaching practice. The paper concludes by suggesting that the most powerful influences on teachers in FE derive not from the individual workplace but from ideas dominant in society about education and teaching.

Norman Lucas draws upon two research projects to evaluate a decade of reform concerning the professionalization of further education teachers and discusses future prospects under the new coalition government. It suggests that policy initiatives to regulate FE teachers have taken place within an industrial or occupational paradigm of the past that keeps FE separate from the more professional frameworks of schools and HE. Drawing upon research the paper also shows that after a decade of reform, successive standards and regulatory frameworks have not brought about national coherence. Rather it has fragmented the system even further and diverted attention away from addressing more fundamental weaknesses such as developing stronger mentoring and workplace support. In conclusion, the analysis looks to the future arguing that the threatened revocation of the 2007 regulations combined with the present economic situation facing colleges will lead to the marketisation of FE ITT. This has profound implications for the quality of provision and the professional status of FE teachers who seem to be returning to their voluntarist past.

Martin Suter makes an important contribution to our understanding of reflective practice. Ideas of a ‘reflective practice’ for teachers in the post compulsory education and training sector (PCET) in the United Kingdom continue to be influential. Models of reflective practice are central to most initial teacher training courses and the continuing professional development of teachers in the sector as mapped out by the Institute for Learning. The author argues that the process of reflective practice has often been presented as being unproblematic, but that research undertaken with a group of trainee teachers suggests that there are issues which might constrain the effectiveness of reflective practice. These issues include organisational and management issues in the professional setting that can enable or impede the process of reflective practice.

In the first paper from overseas, Josephine Arasa and Mike Calvert report research that builds on work carried out in England looking at how Faculty negotiate their personal and professional identities. It focuses on a sample of full-time Faculty in a private secular university in Kenya. Weekly time logs with follow-up individual semi-structured interviews were used as a basis for an examination on how faculty spend their time and cope with the dilemmas they face. The research probes the motivations and priorities of Faculty and draws tentative conclusions regarding their professional identities.

The principal findings suggest that faculty do not appear to exercise much agency, appear to accommodate their working conditions and management direction and have a narrow interpretation of professionalism. Many of the activities that faculty engage in are contractual in nature and these take priority (with teaching mentioned most) at least as far as work at the University is concerned. Faculty appear to block out periods of time for what they consider to be core activities related to their functions and these blocks can be eroded and are susceptible to change and interruptions due to management diktat, family issues, interruptions by colleagues and students. As a result of the above, some colleagues report time slipping away and that the level of control or accountability is lower than it might be. Space and priorities for research are varied as are opinions on teaching load. Faculty justify forcefully their choice of action either in terms of conscience, lack of agency or pragmatism as a response to unexpected occurrences. There was relatively little criticism of the management. It is clear that the family takes priority over work. Some are aware of the need for work/life balance but struggle to achieve this. This is particularly the case with female faculty. Finally, it is clear that money is an important consideration and influences behaviour to a considerable degree in some cases.

In contrast with the UK, where ‘new managerialism’ appears to have ‘contributed to a sense of fragmentation of academic labour, diminished autonomy and increased the level of administrative duties’ (Kreber, 2010: 173) and high levels of stress are reported (Stronach et al, 2002), there is a sense that the Kenyan uses the relative freedom that academics enjoy to arrive at an acceptable balance of demand and reward often supplemented by alternative employment.

The picture emerges of a rapidly increasing workforce, very positive about teaching facing the challenges of intensification of labour, conflicting priorities, outside pressures and a sense of lack of control over their professional lives. In contrast to the UK findings (Calvert et al. 2011), what was most striking was the lack of dilemmas and agonising between competing claims on time that characterised the work of the UK lecturers. The Kenyan Faculty appeared to approach tasks in a pragmatic way with priority often given to family matters and a tendency to let things happen. Notions of professionalism appeared to be less well developed and appeared to point to compliance and acceptable standards of behaviour.

Li Bai, Jan Millwater and Peter Hudson examine workplace influences on Chinese Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) academics’ development as researchers in two Chinese higher education institutions in this qualitative collective case study. Data sources included research documentation and interviews with 12 Chinese TEFL academics. Both institutions were keen on research capacity building, but they accorded different attention to TEFL academics’ research.

Despite differences in the conceptualisation of culture, general findings from studies in the field have been that a supportive and stable work environment would facilitate academics’ research productivity, and a lack of research culture is frequently identified as the impediment to research productivity. Thus, fostering a nurturing research environment and providing support are perceived as critical to improving the research performance of academics (Baird, 1994; Hemmings, Rushbrook, & Smith, 2007; Hiep, 2006; Pratt et al., 1999).

Researcher development has become an international issue with the development of higher education across the world. Academics are not only required to enhance teaching competence, but research knowledge and capacity to inform their teaching and contribute to research in their fields. As indicated in this study, academics require support for research capacity development; however limited human, financial and technological resources were allocated for their development into researchers. While only a small sample size was used in this study to examine the efforts of two TEFL departments from two institutions in researcher development, these findings and insight from this collective case study may have applications to other similar (TEFL) contexts within China and beyond as the two institutions were purposively selected for their typicality among Chinese higher education institutions. That is, the two institutions were situated in the economically Middle Region between the economically underdeveloped Western Region and the economically developed Eastern Region. As such, the experience reported in these two institutions should ring true to other national and provincial institutes within China, and therefore the research findings would be useful for policy formation at other Chinese universities as well.

In the final paper of this issue, Jamal Abu Alruz and Samer Khasawneh report research aimed to develop and validate a psychometrically sound and convenient measure of professional identity questionnaire (PIQ) and to determine the level of professional identity among faculty members employed by higher education institutions in Jordan. The PIQ was administered to a sample of 551 faculty members employed by three universities in Jordan. The data set was subject to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) utilizing principal axis factoring with oblique rotation to uncover the underlying structure of the PIQ. Four factors emerged with 25 items retained. These factors were self-related identity, skill-related identity, work-related identity, and student-related identity. Internal consistency reliability coefficients for these factors ranged between 0.89 and 0.94. The results indicated that faculty members possessed high levels of self-related and skill-related identities; moderate levels of work-related identities, and low levels of student-related identities.

Although further research and development directed at improving the psychometric qualities of the PIQ is warranted, this research suggests that the PIQ may offer considerable benefit to higher education institutions’ practice and research in Jordan. From a research standpoint, this investigation is important because it represents an important effort to draw attention to the importance of professional identity research in Jordan and open up new avenues of investigation. Also, this research represents an important effort to disseminate and share important tools and expertise across geographic and cultural boundaries. Further, an important area of future research should focus on the development of a path model, where the work-related identity affects skill-related identity and self-related identity and student-related identity.

From the practical stand point, the ability of Jordanian higher education institutions to use the PIQ effectively can reap many benefits to the growth, development, and sustainability of these organizations as well as to the economic growth of the whole nation. Such combined efforts can contribute greatly to the economic growth of the nation as a whole by developing and nurturing the expertise and competencies of the national workforce. Moreover, there are areas of concern that university administrators should give close attention. First, it should be the norm to involve faculty members in presidency managerial functions including planning, designing, leading and controlling to instill commitment toward university goals, visions, policies, and procedures.

Further, there is a need to develop the identity of faculty members in relation to their students, which is a cursor for institutional success. For instance, policies should be issued by the university system in Jordan to encourage faculty members to move away from the traditional teaching-learning process toward a more real-life, hands-on experiences. This can be accomplished through increasing student representation on working groups, training workshops, committees and governance bodies, and frequent employment in the local community. Consideration needs to be given to changing the whole university environment to emphasize flexible and harmonious learning environment characterized by trusting and caring relationship, lifelong learning, and individualized learning.

The contribution of this volume to understanding the educational workforce in post-compulsory education is wide-ranging. Crucially the contributors together make a significant contribution to our understanding of the complexity and pressures of the role, however the voices from Kenya remind us to guard against easy generalisations based on the assumptive world of the researcher. That said, there seems to be a common thread that links all the articles in this volume: a recognition of the value and importance of capacity building to bring about transformational change in post-compulsory education. What is important though is to recognise the crucial issue of context, both within and across national boundaries. The evidence of this collection is that the sector has become more rather than less diverse in recent times, and that proffered solutions must be appropriate for the time and place in which they are applied. This Journal will continue to play its part by providing a medium through which research on our professional world can be presented, shared, critiqued and celebrated.

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