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The HE in FE practitioner: an emerging identity or a confused nomad? (0064)
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In 1997 the Further Education (FE) sector was placed at the forefront of proposals to expand Higher Education (HE) provision. To support this, Foundation Degrees were introduced, which in turn influenced institutional and lecturer working practices. This paper will present the results of an investigation undertaken with college lecturers working within a partner college network to explore the impact of this expansion on their professional identities. Delivering HE in FE presented practitioners with a new territory which they needed to explore in terms of relationships with universities, expectations of learners and the environment they are working within. They demonstrated that further re-conceptualisation of college lecturers identities as HE in FE practitioners will be necessary if HE in FE is to continue to grow as envisaged, to enable them to adjust to the opportunities and challenges associated with working across two diverse sectors.

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In 1997 the Dearing Report placed the Further Education (FE) at the forefront of plans for future expansion in Higher Education (HE) to widen participation and promote the accessibility of education throughout the life course (NCIHE, 1997). Dearing advocated the introduction of a new sub-degree qualification that would bridge the academic-vocational divide to bring together universities and colleges to work in partnership (NCIHE, 1997). Prior to this colleges delivered courses that were validated, inspected and assessed by external organisations (Edward et al., 2007). Therefore the introduction of foundation degrees resulted in changes in institutional and individual lecturer working practices (HEFCE, 2003). Not only did they have to adapt to a new qualification, new quality systems and in many cases new collaborative partnerships, college lecturers had freedom to design courses in a supportive environment (HEFCE, 2000; 2003).

Researching HE in FE provision in South West England

University of Plymouth Colleges is the primary provider of HE in South West England. Partner institutions of the University of Plymouth have a longstanding commitment to HE, however sustained growth in HE provision has taken place in the post Dearing era. Across the 2007-08 academic year a series of staff development activities were facilitated across the network. Four colleges with mature HE provision, which had included investment in infrastructure, were used to identify a sample population to explore the impact of expanding HE provision on college lecturers. Participants in a specific staff development activity were contacted by email to outline the research project and request their participation. All recipients of the email volunteered to participate in the research, subsequently 12 practitioners (three from each of the four colleges targeted) were selected. This research was
designed to be small scale and regional in its focus, to enable identification of issues relating to practitioners’ professional identities.

Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed in full and manually coded using the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The interviews explored the educational and professional backgrounds of the respondents, including how they became involved in HE, their perceptions of the role of HE practitioners working within universities, and how this compared and contrasted to the role they performed.

Findings
As is often the case for many FE lecturers (e.g. Bathmaker & Avis, 2005) the majority of the interviewees did not originally aspire to teach; their entry into teaching was almost accidental, primarily due to their vocational expertise. Their transition to HE was equally as unplanned, evolving as their teaching responsibilities developed. This may have a considerable impact of their emerging professional identities. The professional ideals of FE lecturers have been cited as remaining strongly rooted in their area of professional expertise (Robson, 1998; Spencerley, 2006). Therefore, regardless of the level they are teaching at, college lecturers are often negotiating two sets of professional values.

Delivering HE within an FE college presents practitioners with a new territory they need to explore in terms of relationships with their collaborating institutions, expectations of their learners and the environment they are working within. Therefore the college lecturers perceived that they were teaching HE within the confines of FE whereby the college systems and management are geared towards FE, with limited concessions made for HE (Gleeson et al., 2005). Consequently the college lecturers referred to the expectations of their attendance at FE staff development activities with limited time being provided for them to engage with scholarly activity which they viewed as an integral part of the identity of HE lecturers working within universities. They also cited further examples whereby the imposition of an FE model of governance served to counter the independence in learning they were trying to foster with their HE students e.g. the requirement to take attendance registers for their HE classes (Turner et al., 2009). Likewise whilst many colleges have invested in infrastructure to support their HE provision, often this space can be shared with FE learners meaning the “adult” learning environment the lecturers associate with HE is compromised by the presence of school leavers.

FE colleges are perceived as serving those learners who may not have previously succeeded in their studies, providing a supportive environment in which students can develop (Hodkinson et al. 2007). The college lecturers reflected this, referring to the holistic approach taken to their teaching which develops both the learners’ knowledge of the subject and the skills they needs to support the learning process (Briggs, 2005). Despite this they felt they delivered the same subject matter as their university colleagues, however, due to differences in class size and learner profiles they did not teach in what may be considered a “HEI style” e.g. large group lecturers. The smaller group sizes enabled
college lecturers to encourage small group working and form professional relationships with their students. Whilst the college lecturers felt this was advantageous to their learners academic development it often left them at the beck-and-call of their students in a way that they did not perceived their university colleagues would be.

New opportunities – new challenges?
The changes in HE in FE have presented the college lecturers with new opportunities and challenges, which will have a considerable impact on their identity formation. Socialisation processes, particularly building relationships with those performing a similar role, are integral to this (Bernstein, 2000). In the colleges sampled HE represented a minority of the institutions’ provision and contact with the University was restricted to the formal procedures or staff development activities. Subsequently identity formation was taking place in isolation, which, as one college lecturer described left them feeling like a “confused nomad.” In engaging in HE teaching they are presented with another identity to assume which needs to align alongside existing professional values. Yet others within the group have embraced this emerging identity, viewing themselves as agents for change promoting the accessibility of HE. If HE in FE continues to grow, as envisaged by policymakers, further re-conceptualisation of the identity of the HE in FE practitioner will become paramount to support this role and the individuals working across these two diverse sectors.

References


HEFCE. 2000. *[Foundation Degree Prospectus]*. Bristol: HEFCE.


