

*'Time spent among other people is where meaning is found.'*¹ *The 'working lives' research report on narratives of occupational change in further and higher education in post-devolution Wales*

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The issues and their significance

Occupational research on higher education (HE) and further education (FE) is an area of study that has been neglected in educational research, and in employment research on occupations (Gornall, 1999). As a result, and whilst there are some moves to address this (Musselin, 2007), there is a paucity of qualitative data not only on Lecturing staffs' careers and aspects of professionalism, but on the changing nature of educational and teaching work as employment. The aim of the project was to address this.

¹ We thank Paul Hansen, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for generously agreeing that his quotation should become the title for this report.

There has been some research on FE in England (Gleeson and James, 2007, James et al., 2007), on learning and working in FE colleges in Wales (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2007; 2008) and on academic work in HE (Fulton, 1996; Henkel, 2000; Tight, 2002; Deem, 2003). These contribute to our understanding of lecturers' experience, but there is important research still to be done to include the collective and major upheavals of incorporation (1993), Dearing review (1997), devolution (1999) and the New Framework (Natfhe, 2003, 2004) – as well as the whole backcloth of competitiveness, sector policies and consumer-driven change in education and roles.

Given the significance of the post-16 education sectors in Wales, particularly for the Welsh Assembly Government's (WAG) policy agenda, the team argue that it is now vital to provide up-to-date and in-depth studies of teaching professionals' working lives, since it is through their occupational practice that Wales will be transformed into a 'knowledge-based' economy' and a 'learning country' (HEFCW, 2004, 2002a and WAG, 2001)

Research

The Working Lives (WL) study was conceived as a pilot, and as such it identified a cluster of FE and HEIs in south-east Wales as a target sample population. In studying the experiences of lecturers, the main objectives of the project were to:

- develop an initial thematic review of relevant literature sources to set the theoretical context
- organise a research event in order to explore and rehearse issues in data collection
- use qualitative software to analyse results and identify themes
- build the capacity of the team for the development of future work in the area
- establish and create a collaborative research framework and network
- create abstracts, papers, proposals and presentations to disseminate and promote the work

The WERN Bursary created the opportunity to engage in collective empirical study, with a view to developing this research agenda further – and also for engaging in collaborative cross-disciplinary research. The project brought researchers together from Education and Social Sciences, Human Resource

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Management and Business Schools – staff working in different institutional settings and in different phases of career and research development.

Working together also brought about interesting debates and challenges about building collaborative capacity across sometimes competing institutions and otherwise autonomous disciplines (see Sillitoe, 2007).

Research processes

Given the short lead time and timescales, the Working Lives team had to (a) develop a common understanding of the research area quickly (b) build their collaborative and communication tools and capacity in short time, and (c) to identify productive/sustainable research questions. This also needed time for those less experienced members to participate in, contribute to, and learn how to undertake research, and therefore to gain and share their experiences within the group. The team were time-poor but well-resourced in experience, so despite constraints, all research issues and processes were agreed through frequent discussion and debate across the three campuses, ensuring that the research skills and 'knowledge capital' of all were fully utilised.

An important aspect of the key process of developing research questions for the study – and of debating methodology and appraising future proposals – was the opportunity to have an experienced senior academic and 'Mentor' as part of the team. Because this was formally structured into the WERN scheme, it created access to a resource that improved the work and helped the individuals to 'professionalise' as researchers.

Methodology

A data-gathering research day, with participants from HE and FE, was organised for March 2008 in the former ELWA (now Wales Assembly) Building in Bedwas. A wide spread of institutions and regions was represented. A short introduction was given by the team on the purposes of the study.

Two structured focus group sessions were held, one for FE staff, one for HE, each running simultaneously. The sessions were facilitated and recorded, with observers taking notes. The context provided an apprenticeship and learning arena for two PhD students, each differently located in their own doctoral trajectories, who assisted in the collection and later transcription of data.

Focus groups were the mode of data-gathering preferred, because they comprise groups of individuals selected and assembled by researchers for the purposes of discussion and comment, from their personal experience (Powell and Single, 1996). The success of these groups thus relies not only on individual data but on insights produced by the interaction between participants, in a way that might be less available utilising other methodologies (Bloor et al., 2000). In this context, the 'power' differentials between the participants also had to be considered: some of these colleagues knew each other, in role, across the sector, and statuses were not equal. The focus group setting thus provided an insight into degrees of consensus on given topics, within and across institutions.

Careful consideration was also given to research team roles and responsibilities, in order to ensure consistency across the two focus groups. The moderators found the role demanding and challenging: they had to secure participants' trust and at the same time, encourage and promote open, interactive dialogue (Gibbs, 1997). Innovatively, at particular (scripted) points, visual stimuli were introduced into the focus groups, in order to draw out affective experiences and to stimulate emotional responses, which could then be discussed. One of these stimuli was that of a 'tidy desk' with a multitude of paper and boxes underneath it. This provided an instance of particularly strongly-evoked responses – and also reinforcement for the team of the merit of mixed media (verbal and visual) as part of a productive methodological strategy (Banks, 2001). Finally, the team roles that were adopted consciously drew upon and developed skills in situated non-judgmental qualitative research experience.

Themes

Themes from the focus group data included findings that were in common across both groups (FE and HE) and those that were unique to one or the other. The former included issues such as:

- early and mature career positioning differences, and initial career experiences;
- administrative work that lecturers routinely undertake;
- administrative organisation of self and pressures of e-mails;
- perceptions of the drivers of change;
- feelings of being overloaded and overwhelmed;

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- working at home and at night in order to cope;
- working in Wales: was this different? (No, they said!).

All of the above suggested rich themes for future research, and there will be a need to be selective in how these are taken forward. The data were analysed in a number of workshops run by University of Glamorgan research staff in Health Sciences. These tutors arranged special training and advice sessions for the team, using the software package NVIVO. Two post-graduate students who had provided research support to the team also participated in the training and data analysis.

Feedback

At the end of the Research day, participants were asked to compose 'post-cards to the Minister' summarising their suggestions for system improvement, and they were also invited to provide some exit evaluation data to the team in an innovative way. The 'liquid café' approach (R. Seel, 2006) which is an adaptation of the 'world café' technique (J. Brown and D. Isaacs, 2001) involved inscribing feedback about the day on paper tablecloths set out around the room: a form of 'writing on the desk' for posterity – or research. Comments, which were universally positive and offered by all, included

- The best of the best experience ever
- We need leaders with enthusiasm and desire
- Very interesting to hear from more experienced HE people – thank you!
- Strange to hear how others perceive our institution!
- Very good and educational
- Thank you
- Nice to meet colleagues in an informal setting
- A real[ly] good afternoon. Nice to hear other people's views and opinions.
- Interesting topical debate, results? Wait and see!
- An interesting afternoon – good to share ideas.

(WERN WL Liquid Café comments / feedback (March 2008))

Future developments

The Working Lives project has been successful on many levels. Not only has there been added-value and progression in research capability for experienced as well as new researchers, but there has been development of a doctoral proposal for one team member, and another is considering this. In addition, two doctoral students were recruited to provide administrative and research assistance, which undoubtedly increased their own capabilities and contributed to the project. The team have had Abstracts accepted for presentation at two major national conferences – British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2008, Inquiring Pedagogy in Education (IPED) 2008, and the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) 2008. These forms of dissemination are taking place alongside networking with others to publicise the study and in seeking further collaborations; discussions are continuing to identify sources of future funding for this research.

An A4 poster (in Welsh or English) about the team and the Working Lives WERN project is available from knowledge@glam.ac.uk.

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