

More Than Just a Teaching Fellow: The Development of the Academic Identity of UK Life Sciences Teaching Academics

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Academics are increasingly being employed in UK universities on “Teaching and Scholarship” pathways. The primary duties of the role are characterised by a high teaching and administration load, and a requirement to “engage in scholarship”, a term which may mean keeping up to date with disciplinary literature, or educational literature, or taking a more active role in carrying out pedagogical research in the form of The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Healey, 2000; Richlin & Cox, 2004). Alternatively, there are also research-active academics who may choose to concentrate on teaching, researching in education within their discipline. This study, based in Life Sciences in UK institutions, investigates how individuals who pursue a teaching path negotiate their identity within a culture which rewards high profile, high impact disciplinary research. Using a mixed methods approach, the study consisted of two stages. In stage one, a questionnaire was developed using Semantic Differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Osgood & Suci, 1969) which looked at fifteen terms associated with academic identity. Data from participants was grouped according to biographical information and analysed using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test (Mann & Whitney, 1947) and Effect Size (Cohen’s *d*) (Cohen, 1998) to identify areas of statistically significant difference. Statistical analysis revealed areas of difference associated with three areas: research, teaching and learning, and administration. In stage two, graphical representations of individuals’ Semantic Differential results were used during interview to provoke discussion about experiences of academic life. What

emerges is a picture of the challenges faced by academics who specialise in teaching and scholarship, working in a culture that favours and rewards disciplinary research excellence. Despite this, these academics demonstrate their perseverance and their passion for teaching, learning and scholarship within Life Sciences. The study helps to understand the development of the role of the teaching academic as a new category of academic staff, how these individuals see themselves as academics, and their efforts to be recognised as professionals in their own right. It also highlights the importance of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in supporting the development of teaching academics, and the variety of locations that these communities of practice may be found. The study confirms the need for a shift in some departmental and/or institutional cultures in order to accommodate, acknowledge, support and reward (Cashmore, 2009a, 2009b) these academics and the contribution that they make towards the success of UK Higher Education.

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