Vol 5 | Issue 2 (2017) | pp. 112–114

JOURNAL OF
Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

www.jpaap.napier.ac.uk

Talk the Talk and Walk the Walk: Are Career Academics Gatekeepers to Students' Tacit Knowledge?

Mike Murray[1], Stuart Tennant[2], Alan Forster[3], Nigel Craig[4], Alex Copping[5], Nick Pilcher[6],

[1]University of Strathclyde, UK, [2]University of the West of Scotland, UK, [3]Heriot Watt University, UK, [4]Glasgow Caledonian University, UK, [5]University of Bath, UK, [6]Edinburgh Napier University, UK

ABSTRACT

An opinion piece that argues for a more balanced portfolio of academic staff within faculty, whereby pracademics are 'pivotal' academic staff who can 'talk the talk and walk the walk' with students who have industrial placement experience.

Keywords: placement; transition; identity; learning; academics

Career academics or 'pracademics'?

> *The Department wishes to appoint an outstanding and inspirational Teaching Fellow in Civil Engineering…. With this in mind, experience of practical engineering design through industry experience is essential.* (University of Bath, 2017).

The pending Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS, 2016) has seen an increase in the number of academic vacancies requiring candidates who possess industrial expertise. This is counter posed to a dominant position of recruitment aimed at satisfying the Research Exercise Framework (REF). REF aligned vacancies are typically staffed by career academics (Tennant, Murray, Forster, & Pilcher, 2015; Craig, Tennant, Murray, Forster, & Pilcher, 2016) with little or no industrial experience and sheltered by academic life. In contrast 'pracademics' (Andrew, Lopes, Pereira & Lima, 2014; Pilcher, Forster, Tennant, Murray & Craig, 2017) have industrial capital that is essential if universities are serious about their rhetoric on employability:

> *Higher Education Providers (HEPs) have a responsibility to engage with student expectations about higher education. For the most part, this is interpreted as supporting students to increase their employability via the embedding of opportunities for work-related learning, personal development and other interventions that enhance human, social and cultural capital.* (Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne, 2017, p. 9).

In this opinion paper we argue that the dominance of career academics, condoned by the UK Government vis-a-vis the REF, has stymied the university experience for students in transition from a disciplinary industrial placement, returning to, and through, their university studies. An impoverished experience for students is unacceptable given that the Engineering Council (2104) recognise that placements provide "opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and understanding and begin to apply professional judgment" (p. 31).This newly found authentic expertise helps students to contextualise their learning and *must* be incorporated into their learning journey (for the benefit of all students and academics) within the formal curriculum and produce evidenced outputs (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011; Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012). It should not be ignored through convenience, ignorance or willful neglect. We recommend a more balanced portfolio of academic staff within faculty, whereby pracademics are 'pivotal' academic staff who can 'talk the talk and walk the walk' with students. Indeed, it is known that students place value in their academics having had relevant industrial exposure. In a recent survey (Neves & Hillman, 2016) of 15,221 students attending universities in the UK, 47% of students believed that it was very important for academics to have relevant industry or professional expertise, compared to 26% of the sample who though it was very important for their academics to be active researchers in their subject. An outcome mirrored in other European countries (Christensen & Erno-Kjolhede, 2011).

Students returning to university following employment and/or a short placement period leave behind a Community of Practice (CoP), where their learning has been shaped by collaborative behaviour and tacit knowledge. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that on transition through 'their' academic studies, their placement identity remains undisclosed. Indeed, Allie et al. (2009) have recommended that faculty should help students develop a range of authentic engineering identities but argue that "programmes in many higher institutions represent a relatively narrow set of discursive identities, primarily research and academic identities" (p. 362). Career academics are perhaps unsuitable role models for such students, largely unable to 'walk or talk' industry practice and discourse. Might it be that these academics are powerful, albeit fearful, gatekeepers (Anderson & McCune, 2013) to the students' agency to 'liberate' their new found identity? Perhaps embarrassed, perhaps grudging, but discombobulated by students who have

real industry experience that may be drawn upon to question their reliance of theoretical knowledge as an authority figure in HE? Career academics retain an academic identity whilst the student has taken on an industrial and professional identity (Case & Jawitz, 2003). Pracademics are best placed to empathise with the student's new identity, and both parties will have 'war stories' to share about their character formation, tacit knowledge and the application of theories learned to the fuzzy and often uncertain world of practice. This is uncharted territory for career academics and, at best, can only be simulated.

It is noted by Auburn (2007) that a common problem faced by placement students upon their return to university is dissatisfaction with teaching methods; more specifically, the return to doing the bidding of staff members seems to be unfulfilling having experienced the alternative on placement. Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner (2016) explain that this is due to the comparative lack of accountability next to the workplace. Pang (2015) highlights another difference in practice between the two communities, stating that placement students are expected to originate behaviour in the workplace; that is, they are expected to take the initiative and find work to do even when not allocated any, a way of working alien to the undergraduate experience. The problems that arise from these discrepancies suggest it may be desirable to align the academic and work communities as closely as possible. Will Graduate Apprenticeships (Skills Development Scotland, 2017) solve this problem?

The organisational culture within faculties may require reform to facilitate such developments in accordance with the 'four cultures' asserted by Gibbs, Knapper and Piccinin (2009), who cite the works of McNay (1995) and Ramsden (1998) as a means to examine four different cultures as a context for the leadership of teaching. The four cultures provide some assistance in our conceptualisation of a proposed CoP that would extradite tacit knowledge from the student placement experience with (1) the bureaucratic culture (students are seen as statistics) and (2) the corporate culture (students are seen as units of resource) ruled out. Alternatively (3) the collegial culture (students are seen as apprentice academics) has some appeal, particularly due to its alignment with Lave and Wenger's (1992) original research featuring apprentices. However, (4) the entrepreneurial culture, where the orientation is to the outside world and where students are seen as partners rather than customers, arguably offers the most appropriate fit with the vision for our CoP. This approach would open up new opportunities for the construction of a shared curriculum where students have 'real agency' to become engaged in partnership learning communities (HEA, 2015). This issue has resonance given the revised National Student Survey (2017, Q. 21) asks students whether they "feel part of a community of staff and students". It is vitally important that this community is formed with faculty career academics who have a genuine desire to inspire, motivate and excite students through research informed teaching, offset by pracademics who can temper and apply theories to real engineering projects. This will require more resolve from TEF than is currently evident, and will require appropriate incentives for faculty (Lowden et al., 2011) to incorporate employability measures.

Biographies

Mike Murray is a teaching fellow in the Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering at the University of Strathclyde. Mike is interested in the heritage and history of civil engineering and pedagogy. Email: m.d.murray@strath.ac.uk

Stuart Tennant is a lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland. Research interests address a range of management topics including teams, supply chain management and economic exchange. Professionally, he is SFHEA and MCIOB and a member of the Association of Researchers in Construction Management scientific committee. Email: Stuart.Tennant@uws.ac.uk

Alan M. Forster is a research active Associate Professor in building conservation, low carbon design and construction technology at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. He is programme leader for MSc in Building Conservation. Professionally, he is a FHEA, FCIOB, FCABE, and an elected member of the RICS (Scotland) Building surveying Professional group. Email: A.M.Forster@hw.ac.uk

Nigel Craig is a senior lecturer and programme leader at Glasgow Caledonian University in the area of Construction Management. His research interests information technology, quality, non-conformance and customer satisfaction. He has contributed to work in journals such as Structural Survey, Engineering Construction and Architectural Management and the Journal of Records Management. Email: Nigel.Craig@gcu.ac.uk

Alex Copping is an Associate Professor in construction project management at the University of Bath. His research interests revolve around the relationship between project complexity, project management methodologies and the management of resources. He is a SFHEA and a FCIOB. He is a member of the scientific committee for ARCOM, COBRA and SEEDS. Email: a.g.a.copping@bath.ac.uk

Nick Pilcher is an FHEA, lecturer and programme leader at Edinburgh Napier University, and helps students write in academic subjects. His research interests are language, education, and qualitative research. He has contributed to work in journals such as Qualitative Research, Teaching in Higher Education, and the Journal of Education and Work. Email: N.Pilcher@napier.ac.uk

References

Anderson, C., & McCune, V. (2013). Fostering meaning: Fostering community. *Higher Education*, *66*(3), 283-296. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9604-6

Andrew, N., Lopes, A., Pereira, F., & Lima, I. (2014). Building communities in higher education: The case of nursing. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(1), 72-77. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2013.859850

Allie, S., Armien, M.N., Burgoyne, N., Case, J.M., Collier-Reed, B.I, … Wolmarans, N. (2009). Learning as acquiring a discursive identity through participation in a community of practice: Improving student learning in engineering education. *European Journal of Engineering Education, 34*(4),

359-367.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/03043790902989457

Auburn, T. (2007). Identity and placement learning: Student accounts of the transition back to university following a placement year. *Studies in Higher Education, 32*(1), 117-133.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070601099515

Artess, J., Hooley, T., & Mellors-Bourne, R. (2017). Employability: A review of the literature 2012-2016. Higher Education Academy.
Retrieved from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/employability-review-literature-2012-2016 [accessed 27 February 2017].

BIS. (2016). Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice.
Retrieved from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265- success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017]

Case, J., & Jawitz, J. (2004). Using situated cognition theory in researching student experience of the workplace. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 41*(5), 415-431.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20013

Christensen, S. H., & Erno-Kjolhede, E. (2011). Academic drift in Danish professional engineering education. Myth or reality? Opportunity or threat? *European Journal of Engineering Education, 36*(3), 285-299.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2011.585225

Craig, N., Tennant, S., Murray, M., Forster, A., & Pilcher N. (2016). The role of experienced practitioners in engineering education: The end of an era? ISEE 6th International Symposium for Engineering Education, The University of Sheffield, July, 14-15th 2016, pp 271-278.
Retrieved from: http://isee2016.group.shef.ac.uk/docs/presentations/Paper%2034.%20%20Nigel%20Craig.pdf [accessed 17 May 2017].

Engineering Council. (2014). UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence, 3rd Edition,http://www.engc.org.uk/engcdocuments/internet/Website/UK-SPEC%20third%20edition%20(1).pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., & Wenger-Trayner, E. (2016). Communities of practice as a social theory of learning: A conversation with Etienne Wenger. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 64*(2), 139-160.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2015.1133799

Gibbs, G., Knapper, C., & Piccinin, S. (2009). Department leadership of teaching in research-intensive environments: Final report. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.
Retrieved from: https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/filemanager/root/site_assets/research_resources/research/series_1/S1-17%20Gibbs%20-%20Departmental%20Leadership%20-%20Final.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

Higher Education Academy. (2015). Frameworks for student engagement through partnership. Higher Education Academy.
Retrieved from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/student-enagagement-through-partnership-new.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355

Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D., & Lewin, J. (2011). Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. The Edge Foundation.
Retrieved from: http://www.edge.co.uk/media/63412/employability_skills_as_pdf_-_final_online_version.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

McNay, I. (1995). From the collegial academy to the corporate enterprise: The changing culture of universities. In T. Schuller (Ed.), *The changing university?* Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press.

National Student Survey. (2017). National Student Survey 2017 - Core Questionnaire.
Retrieved from: http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/NSS2017_Core_Questionnaire.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

Neves, J., & Hillman, N. (2016). The 2016 student academic experience survey. Higher Education Academy.
Retrieved from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/student_academic_experience_survey_2016_hea-hepi_final_version_07_june_16_ws.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

Pang, P. (2015). Learning to work during work placement: Negotiating access to work and participation through 'origination' and establishing a 'legitimate presence'. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 67*(4), 543-557.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2015.1076501

Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S., & Lawton, R. (2012). Pedagogy for employability. Higher Education Academy.
Retrieved from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012.pdf [accessed 27 February 2017].

Pilcher, N., Forster, A.M., Tennant, S., Murray, M.D., & Craig, N. (2017,) Problematizing the 'career academic' in UK construction and engineering education: Does the system want what the system gets? *The European Journal of Engineering Education*. Published online 3 April 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2017.1306487

Ramsden, P. (1998). *Learning to lead in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Skills Development Scotland. (2017). Graduate level apprenticeships.
Retrieved from: https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/our-products/graduate-level-apprenticeships/ [accessed 27 February 2017].

Tennant, S., Murray, M., Forster, A., & Pilcher, N. (2015). Hunt the shadow not the substance: The rise of the career academic in construction education and some implications for teaching standards and student learning. *Teaching in Higher Education. 20*(7), 723-737.
doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1070342

University of Bath (2017). Teaching fellow-fixed term, architecture and civil engineering.
Retrieved from: https://www.bath.ac.uk/jobs/Vacancy.aspx?ref=CT4670 [accessed 27 February 2017].