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Enhancing the Agency of Early Career Academics

Mark Breslin, Julie Harvie, Brian Leslie, Evelyn McLaren

University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

This article explores the lived experiences of four early career academics (ECAs) transitioning from school educators (within the primary and secondary sectors) to lecturers in initial teacher education in a United Kingdom Higher Education institution. These ECAs were established teachers with strong practitioner identities within their field of education and experienced in reflective practice. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how their agency was impacted in this transition. The concept of agency is firstly explored, and an ecological model presented and used as a framework in this study. A collaborative autoethnographic methodological approach is used to structure personal and professional reflections in order to gain an insight into the evolving identities of the ECAs as they embrace and develop new careers within Higher Education (HE) as lecturers. Factors emerge which have both hindered and enhanced agency and this paper sets out some recommendations for change. It is hoped that HE establishments may find these findings useful to consider when inducting new staff and helping them develop and flourish in the early stages of their academic careers.

Keywords: Agency, identity, early career academic, academic scholarship, academic induction

Introduction

AdvanceHE (2021) recognises that the transition into HE can be challenging for those entering an academic career. This issue has been highlighted by several studies as potentially impacting the job satisfaction of ECAs, their productivity and the student experience (Boyd, 2010; McAlpine, Amundsen & Turner, 2014). Whilst some generic studies have been conducted, this research addresses a gap in the literature by focusing specifically on teaching professionals entering Initial Teacher Education (ITE) within a university setting. This is an under researched area with a lack of precise statistical information regarding numbers transferring from school to HE. There are many professional schoolteachers who are recruited to work within ITE programmes (Boyd & Harris, 2010) and these are often assigned to teaching focused contracts rather than research based ones, which Smith and Walker (2021) observe, could be problematic. The overall numbers of ex school teachers are small within HE, but proportionally high within ITE. It could be argued that it is imperative that lecturers working with student teachers have significant experience of professional practice. Shulman (2012) highlights that within a professional programme, experience of professional practice is fundamental to bridge the gap between academic theory and practitioner experience. This research investigates the lived experiences of such practitioners in transitioning from a professional setting into academia, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by ECAs. An autoethnographic study has been conducted and factors affecting the agency of those entering an HE institution from a school environment are reflected on.

As this paper is concerned with the agency of ECAs, so it is necessary to begin by clarifying and defining what is meant by this term. Agency is a concept which is growing in popularity within educational literature, (Etelapelto et al., 2013), however many models and theories around this subject exist and it could be described as an amorphous term. This article begins by considering the nature of agency then draws on an ecological model to elucidate thinking on the subject. This paper considers reflective writings and discussions which focus on the participants' personal thoughts and experiences of their transition to HE. Common themes are considered under the three main agency model headings namely: iterational; practical-evaluative; and projective, while drivers and barriers to agency are identified within each category and recommendations for future practice are then made. It is hoped that some of the issues raised in this article will stimulate discussion within the HE sector, and lead to improvements in the induction and professional development process for ECAs. Several areas are highlighted for consideration by HE institutions and recommendations made.

Agency

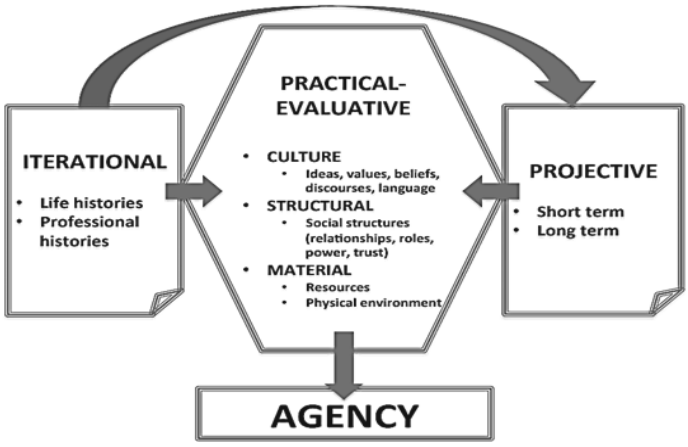
Agency can be conceptualised in many ways and it is possible to categorise discussions pertaining to it around four main theoretical domains namely: social sciences; post-structural; socio-cultural; and the identity and life-course approaches (Etelapelto et al., 2013). Each of these traditions hold different perspectives on what agency is and how it can be realised. Social science

literature on the subject is dominated by a focus on social and economic structures and their impact on the ability to effect social change (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Here agency can be viewed as a factor which is weighted against powerful and influential structures in society. Post-structuralist theory is heavily concerned with the construction of language and discourses and how this can constrain or enhance the ability of individuals to act. For example, some feminist post-structural research considers how language can be used to create categories, hierarchies and classifications which privilege some genders while disadvantaging others (St. Pierre, 2000). Socio-cultural ideologies focus on collective and social networks and environments as being key to developing the ability of people to thrive and develop (Archer, 2000; 2003). On the other hand, identity and life-course approaches see agency as something which people do, based on their previous experiences, present situations and future orientations (Etelapelto et al., 2013).

Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) assert that much of the literature on agency conceptualises it as variable or capacity. Variable in terms of being measured against other factors such as structures (Hitlin & Elder, 2007), or capacity in terms of being perceived as an intrinsic quality or capability a person has which enables them to realise the outcomes they wish to achieve (Korsgaard, 2009). However, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency is an analytical category in its own right. They attempt to go beyond what they argue are various one-sided points of view by theorising the interplay between the different dimensions of agency, namely: iterational; practical-evaluative; and projective. They describe these key elements as "… a chordal triad of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones" (Embriyer & Mische, 1998, p972). These three facets of agency interact simultaneously and constantly as people go about their daily business.

Priestley and colleagues (2015) have developed the concept of 'agency as phenomenon' and take an ecological approach to this. Agency here is not considered as being something which a person has or possesses, but rather, something which they are able to achieve, and which is affected by the 'chordal triad' (iterational, practical-evaluative and projective) as identified by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship between these three dimensions.

Figure 1 – Ecological Model of Agency



Adapted from Priestley, M., Biesta, G. & Robinson, S. (2015) *Teacher agency: An ecological approach.* London: Bloomsbury

Iterational factors are the beliefs, views and opinions which are shaped by life and professional histories. These influence the thoughts a person has, the choices they make and the actions that they carry out, whether consciously or subconsciously. A lecturer who has had personal experience of being discriminated against, for example, may be more active in advocating for marginalised students than someone who has had no such experience. Similarly, a person who has had training in digital technologies may be more likely to incorporate this into their teaching practice than someone who has not. Iterational factors link to projective factors which are short term and long-term goals. Actors continuously engage with memories and experiences from the past, project hypothetically about the future, and adjust their actions according to what emerging situations are occurring in the present. At times there may be a greater emphasis on regressive thoughts, at other times more orientation towards the future or a focus on present happenings. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p1012) refer to this constant flow between past, future and present as 'relational pragmatics' which they say affects the ability to respond critically and flexibly to structural contexts.

The practical-evaluative dimension of agency includes culture, structure and materials. Culture involves the values held, the discourses and language used. Structure includes social structures, relationships, power and trust. Materials can be resources and the physical environment. All of these elements interact with each other (as shown by the arrows in Fig. 1) and can enhance or inhibit agency. The ecological model identified has been adopted as a framework in this research for considering the experiences of four ECAs working within the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. Each of the dimensions identified in this model will be used to consider how the agency of the ECAs has been affected in the transition from school-based practitioner to academic.

Methodology

This project took the form of a collaborative autoethnographic study, "… an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p345). It is self-focused and puts the researcher at the centre of the research (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2013) in order to examine and analyse the lived experience in a form of critical pedagogy which creates knowledge (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Daniels and Varghese (2020) argue that reflexivity and critical self-awareness are skills which need to be fostered in those involved in education and Izadinia (2014) argues that more autoethnographic studies should be done by those in education. This approach shares the commonality of studying and finding the story in 'I' and is committed to the self as the critical inquiry component (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008). This type of research challenges traditional thinking about what constitutes research and opens a space that simultaneously places the researcher/participant in both roles.

Collaborative autoethnography involves the sharing of experiences among researchers to identify common themes relating to the social and cultural contexts of the participants. These discussions provide spaces for collective dialogue where power is shared 'with' and 'for' participants rather than exerted 'over' them (Moloney, 2011). This has been described by Chang et al., (2013, p2) as distinctive from other methodologies in three ways, being "… qualitative; self-focused; and context conscious." The four ECAs in this study took the role as researchers and participants in order to explore their own personal and socio-cultural selves and identities. Delamont (2009) notes that often autoethnography has an agenda which is important to the researcher. In this case the researchers felt strongly about the need to raise awareness of the highlights and challenges that can face ECAs in HE especially in fields that involve professional standards. Their intentions were to impact positively on induction processes and professional development supports in place.

In this study the researchers had ongoing meetings over a two year period to discuss their experiences of the transition from working in primary and secondary educational settings into tertiary education and to examine correlations which emerged. This timescale allowed for in depth analysis and sustained discussion to explore and challenge assumptions. During these meetings reflective notes were taken and were structured around the agency model (Fig. 1) where expectations, emotions, values, and roles were all discussed and recorded using reflective notes. As Pollard (2014) observes, reflection is essential for enabling the understanding of choices, decisions and behaviours that routinely effect professional identity. Identity is viewed here as something which is not static but fluid and shifts over time influenced by the social and cultural environment (Day et al., 2006). This is referred to as the 'identity-trajectory' by McAlpine et al. (2014, p1).

Having four sets of notes allowed for a wider perspective of discussions to be accepted. After these meetings the researchers then met again to conduct a thematic analysis using the reflective notes to identify if there were any common themes that appeared across the experiences using thematic coding. Reliance on the identification of themes as the goal of analysis was endemic in this qualitative research. Bazeley (2009) suggests, however, that in order to gain meaningful conclusions and to enrich analysis of qualitative data, the researcher should consider other strategies such as: improving interpretation and naming of categories; using comparison and pattern analysis to refine and relate categories or themes; using divergent views and negative cases to challenge generalisations; creating displays using matrices, graphs, flow charts and models; and using writing itself to prompt deeper thinking.

Once the data had been collected a process of analysis began, using codes to identify themes: -

- Open coding – where data was divided into similar groupings to form preliminary categories of information.
- Axial coding – following on from open coding the categories identified were grouped into emerging themes.
- Selective coding – the emergent themes were then compared and contrasted to articulate a coherent understanding of what had been uncovered.

Once themes from the data had been identified they were then used to prompt further discussion and to draw conclusions and make recommendations for practice. In line with Hernandez et al. (2015), the credibility and trustworthiness of this research was pursued by triangulating data from a variety of sources (e.g. individual data from memory, self-reflection and external sources). Interactions and discussions also involved challenging and probing perspectives.

Limitations of Study

One limitation of this study might be considered its small scale and the fact that the participants had similar professional backgrounds and worked within the same university. This may make it harder for generalisations to be made from the findings. However, both Stake (2000) and Faltis (1997) argue that generalisation need not and should not be a goal of all qualitative research. It is up to readers to draw their own conclusions and generalisations based on the evidence and the relevance to their own particular circumstances. While this study is unique, within it there may be elements that present similarities for readers to draw upon in relation to their own settings (Faltis, 1997). Stake (2000) refers to this process as 'naturalistic generalisations'. Yin (2003) describes 'analytic generalisation' as the generalisations drawn about the phenomenon being studied when data is analysed, as opposed to statistical generalisation. It is hoped that this research will produce such analytical generalisation which can be useful to educational practitioners.

Iterational / projective factors

One of the common themes to arise from this study is that all participants believed that they had 'hit the ceiling' in their previous careers in both primary and secondary schools and this had been a major influence in applying to work in the university setting. Two had been Head Teachers, one had been a Principal Teacher and the other a subject leader. For example, one participant spoke about their local authority manager discouraging them from further study as they said this might impinge on their time to make school improvements. Others said that within their departments, they had gone as far as they wanted to go and were looking for a change of direction. Another commonality was that all had experience of working with external agencies before transitioning to the HE Sector. Some had secondments to their local authorities, liaised with Scottish Government and other professional bodies and so felt they had developed a wider perspective on education than perhaps their colleagues who had not had these kinds of experiences. They thought that being able to see the 'bigger picture' may have also been a factor in their move into HE.

In the main, the move to HE was not done acquisitively as the participants potentially received a decreased salary and lost beneficial working conditions, for example losing annual leave. Rather it was for personal development and challenge. The participants in this study spoke passionately about their subject specialisms or education in general. They expressed their commitment to lifelong professional learning and a desire to promote this practice for novice practitioners. This drive to help others to develop in a previous field is common within several academic disciplines that recruit academics from the industries they are linked to for example education, medicine and accountancy (Boyd & Harris, 2010; Boyd & Lawley, 2009; Lindsay & Smith, 2021). In these studies, it was found, the participants often linked their practice to their previous identity as practitioners (Boyd & Harris, 2010). They viewed themselves in a state of transition from one professional identity to another (McAlpine et al., 2014). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) acknowledge the projective aspect of agency which is linked closely to the past and present and is described by Priestley et al (2015, p24) as 'an intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past'. The ECAs who are the focus of this research, expressed their desire to create transformation in practice through developing their knowledge, understanding and self-efficacy in scholarship activities. This is in line with what Shulman (2012) describes as being a professional rather than a craftsperson, and utilising scholarship to enhance learning and teaching.

Practical / evaluative factors

Shift in professional language

When coming to work in the HE environment, participants said they found a number of things confusing and hard to navigate. One of the main cultural changes noted was the shift in the nature of professional language (Chick, 2014). In some studies, this has been found to be a common experience of practitioners moving from a professional setting to an analogous one in HE (Boyd & Lawley, 2009; Boyd & Harris, 2010). Like schools, there are numerous acronyms deployed by established staff that take several months (or longer) to make oneself fully aware of. Awareness often comes by encountering them in events they are linked to e.g. codes used for grading within an exam board (Boyd & Harris, 2010). This can result in feelings of unease, awkwardness and a lack of confidence until terminology becomes familiar. All of the ECAs felt that an induction reference manual would have been a useful tool to have been given. They also struggled about knowing who to contact for information or advice and said that although there was a plethora of information on the website, this could also be hard to navigate in terms of finding the 'right person'.

Scholarship versus traditional research

The ECAs in this study were all employed on teaching and scholarship (T&S) contracts. Another theme which emerged in relation to this was that each participant found a tension between the demands on them for scholarship and the emphasis on research within the University. For example, the researchers noted the focus on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) during many staff meetings and continuing professional development (CPD) discussions, but this was not something that was explained clearly to them and which was not directly applicable to them on their T&S route. The contemporary Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was a tangential topic for discussion at best by comparison. Participants all said that they were unsure why the REF was so heavily focused on and often felt alienated from discussions when these were centred on this topic. Another issue which emerged was the lack of clarity around the term 'scholarship' which caused a certain amount of anxiety among the ECAs. Smith and Walker (2021) suggest that those on teaching contracts can experience a lack of definition of what scholarly activity comprises. When clarification of the definition of scholarship was sought, all participants reported that it was acknowledged within the University that there was not a clear and consistent understanding of this and the difference between scholarship and research was blurry and unclear. Smith and Walker (2021) have found that of 48 mid-sized UK establishments, only 2 had a widely circulated definition of what scholarship was to help their staff be clear on how to engage with scholarly practice. Kern et al. (2015, p2) note that a "lack of consensus persists" in definitions of SoTL, therefore the ECAs' situation is not an uncommon one within academic teams.

This situation caused particular anxiety because the Professional Development and Review process, linked to career progression, requires evidence of scholarship activities to be detailed. Smith and Walker (2021) point out that the time allocated to scholarly activity for those on teaching based routes can be limited, and at senior grades this lack of time creates incompatibilities of

promotion criteria aligning with a university teacher's remit. Boyer (1990) defined scholarship around four aspects; discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Discovery is the dimension that is the closest in definition to traditional research work. Integration is use of knowledge in interdisciplinary and novel ways. Application is the use of knowledge in a concrete fashion. Teaching is for effective knowledge transfer. The participants perceived that these aspects were not always equally valued. Boyer (1990, p89) asserts that integrating and valuing all these aspects "recognizes the great diversity of talent within the professoriate" and " also may prove especially useful to faculty as they reflect on the meaning and direction of their professional lives". In conclusion, Boyer asserted that: "What we urgently need today is a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar— a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching". Work on framing what scholarship can be defined as has since continued. There has been challenges in narrowly defining scholarship for University Teachers leading the practices undertaken in scholarly activity to be described as a "Big Tent" by Chick (2014). Defining specific practices, activities, and outputs on two domains within a structure like the Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching (DART) model created by Kern et al. (2015) may allow practitioners to reframe what they do within scholarship and be more aware of other related activities that could broaden and enhance their scholarly work and output. The ECAs felt that a large part of their current activity could be framed as activities related teaching on the private rather than the public end of the DART model.

Practical experience undervalued

Shulman (2012, p3) states that:

> Both scholarly teaching and a scholarship of teaching are deeply valued in the professional community. Scholarly teaching is like the clinical work of faculty members in a medical school's teaching hospital. I would never wish to be associated with a medical school that was not home to outstanding clinical faculty.

However, all the ECAs commented that it seemed teaching and practical experience was valued less than research experience in the HE setting (Smith & Boyd, 2012). An example of this was given that when trying to secure a permanent teaching post within the university, one of the members of the group had failed even to secure an interview for a permanent teaching job they were already doing on a temporary basis, despite having had almost thirty years teaching experience in the field. When getting feedback as to why this was the case they were told: "What is valued in school is not always valued in the university". The post subsequently went to someone with a research background and little teaching experience.

Professional development

Another theme that the ECAs identified was the relevance of the Post Graduate Certificate of Academic Practice course which was compulsory for all incoming academic staff. These credentials are common in most HE institutions (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2020). This course is part of the induction process and focuses on aspects of teaching and learning for those academics involved in teaching students. Although the participants in this study had a combined practical teaching experience of 66 years, they were still required to complete a two-year course based on the principles of learning and teaching. This was alongside researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds with little or no knowledge of the theory of teaching and learning. While those with little teaching experience may gain much from such a course, each one of the academics in this study expressed the view that the course was limited in its usefulness to them and restricted their time in engaging in more relevant and meaningful professional development activities. Lindsay and Smith (2021, p36) found that: "Typical induction process tended to be geared to those who have followed a traditional academic career path rather than mid-career switchers and were not tailored to their needs". All participants noted that having to write assignments on topics they had studied for years (e.g. assessment) reduced their agency in engaging with scholarship activities they wanted to develop. This aligns with the findings of Boyd (2010) when examining perceptions of formal induction for teaching and medical professionals. A positive seen by the group of their experience of this course was the chance to speak to and build networks with other ECAs across disciplines. Another was gaining insight into university procedures and techniques through the perspective of the wider body of the institution. However, the ECAs reflected that on the whole they would have found an alternative course which allowed them to build their knowledge of scholarly and research practices more beneficial. This assertion is supported when Cameron (2021) states that, within a body of academic staff that were dual or second careerists: "These individuals enter HE from industry positions and may not possess a 'traditional' research profile" (p .26).

Hierarchical structures

A further theme emerged from this study related to the hierarchy within the university which differs from that of a school environment. It was noted by each participant that as an ECA it is not immediately obvious who has ownership of a particular remit. This correlates to the findings of Smith and Boyd (2012) who carried out similar research looking at the transition of medical professionals into HE. The importance of professional dialogue and networking both formally and informally was highlighted by McAlpine et al. (2014) in helping newly appointed members of staff to navigate their unfamiliar environment. The participants within this study identified that a large proportion of understanding of the new workplace derived mainly from informal networking interactions. Knowledge was accrued by this process rather than being driven by policy or procedural documentation and this was also true of the induction process.

Each participant had a varied experience of the mentoring programme which ranged from good to non-existent. Some participants experienced a reliance on the goodwill and collegiality of staff rather than any formal mentoring. Smith and Boyd (2012) recognise that there is a level of autonomy that is fundamental in a university and it would appear that as a result the mentoring system can have an irregular, or even a minimal, impact. This is linked to the mentee/mentor workload, the areas of expertise that exist, and relational dynamics (McAlpine & Akerlind, 2010). It was concluded that the induction was not eminently geared up for second career professionals finding themselves transitioning to academic life. Each participant of this study identified the mentoring system as an additional layer of complexity in the hierarchy which presented both positives and challenges for them.

Informal networks

Some of the structures within the School of Education provided opportunity for all four ECAs to develop and shape their own career path in keeping with their areas of expertise and interests. This was achieved through a range of local and collegiate learning opportunities such as Research and Teaching Groups where small groups of colleagues met on a monthly basis to discuss their teaching, research project interests and funding opportunities. As well as these more formal events many informal collaborations occurred. An example of an informal network that was not tightly structured and which directly contributed to the scholarship of the ECAs in this study was the input of an experienced visiting academic who helped them form a support network centred on developing scholarly activity. This was the catalyst for the ECAs to embark on a project around scholarship. Boyd and Harris (2010) term this 'fuzzy learning', and they espouse its effectiveness in supporting ECAs in developing their scholarly work. All of the participants in this study acknowledged their informal collaborations as one of most meaningful development activities that they participated in. This was similar to the findings of Brooks, Franklin-Phipps and Rath (2018).

The transition from school teaching into HE takes considerable time and requires learning from more experienced colleagues (Smith & Boyd, 2012). As noted above, moving beyond the formal induction programme and establishing informal support networks can be an invaluable resource (Wenger, 1998). The lived experiences of the academics within this writing acknowledge the significance of building up knowledge of the 'go to' colleagues as an informal support (McAlpine et al., 2014).

Autonomy

Each participant within this study had a different experience in relation to the initial levels of responsibility each were asked to take on when they started. While one said they were given time to shadow others and "…. eased in gently" others felt pressured into taking on programme leadership roles from a very early stage. One of the ECAs reported a tension that while their high levels of responsibility on starting in post presented challenges in the beginning, with little support being offered, (both administrative as well as academic), looking back they can see that this gave them a certain level of autonomy and ownership over their teaching and scholarship activities. Indeed, all of the ECAs reported that they felt much more autonomous over their workload in the university than they had done in their previous roles and felt this was an enhancing factor in providing them with agency. Autonomy was a positive theme which emerged from the participants' discussions in terms of shaping their own career paths and being able to carry out work related duties in a time and place of their own choosing (apart from direct teaching slots).

Physical environment

Informal networking within HE can be impacted by the physical environment. Being located in a shared office provided two participants in this study with opportunities to learn informally from a range of colleagues. However, a challenge of this working environment was noted as frequent interruptions and distractions with no private space for meetings or confidential conversations. The other two ECAs with individual offices noted that while they had an appropriate working space to fulfil their role they experienced feelings of isolation and found establishing informal support networks more challenging due to limited daily interactions with colleagues (McAlpine & Akerlind, 2010).

Each ECA noted an impact on agency as they adjusted to working in a larger environment with a more diverse range of teaching and learning spaces than experienced in their previous roles within school. They all highlighted the benefit of having access to a wider range of resources available within the University to support teaching and learning which provided opportunities for enhanced creativity and agency. However, the sheer scale of teaching across the University campus resulted in high demand for appropriate teaching and learning spaces. Due to the range of requirements and rooms available across an extensive timetable, each of the ECA had experienced some rooms not being fit for purpose for the activities carried out within Initial Teacher Education programmes. This affected the pedagogical approaches that could be taken, for example collaborative learning was inhibited when having to teach in a lecture theatre or a small room without tables. One of the ECAs was based in a purpose-built specialist environment with all the resources necessary which enhanced their agency in delivering high quality teaching and learning. However, the remaining three ECAs faced the difficulties of navigating a vast geographical area often having to walk up to a mile while carrying bulky, cumbersome resources necessary for their lessons. This was due to the fact that the central timetabling system often planned consecutive lessons for staff members in different buildings. Factors outwith the control of the ECAs resulted in lectures and seminars being allocated using an automated non-holistic method. Indeed, many HEIs have identified a sustained rise in student numbers over the last decade which has been a contributing factor in centralising the administration of timetabling

and room allocation, resulting in an increase in the difficultly staff experience of gaining access to appropriate teaching spaces (Higher Education Statistic Agency, 2020).

Time management

Other challenges that were highlighted as impacting negatively on agency relate to both time management and pressures of working within a setting that does not run to a master timetable like a school or hospital (Smith & Boyd, 2012). HE is made up of a range of colleagues with differing contracts. All the ECAs within this study were working on a T&S contract which mandates a high teaching workload with only 13% of their time allocated for scholarship. This differs from research contracts where a higher proportion of time is allocated to research and scholarly activity. Smith and Boyd (2012) highlight the pressure of balancing scholarship and teaching, stating that, teaching is a key priority, but scholarship is essential to uphold academic credibility. However, it was noted by all ECAs that regimented timetabling of classes meant that they were often unable to attend structured events such as writing retreats, conferences and other CPD opportunities that would enhance their scholarship (Smith & Boyd, 2012). With a high level of teaching workload, the balance between meaningful scholarship and quality teaching and course management was highlighted as a challenge by all four academics.

Discussion and Recommendations

Boyer (1990) uses the term scholarship when expressing a need to evolve the practices within HE to make the processes of teaching and research more interrelated rather than competing activities (Glassick, 2000; Booth & Woollacott, 2018). This collaborative autoethnographic study has been a scholarship activity that has used a framework of agency to identify and analyse factors that can impact ECAs in fulfilling their academic role. Recommendations will now be offered to support ECAs negotiating the transition into university in future.

Robust and consistent induction procedures

Making the induction process more consistent for all ECAs would help with building the confidence and overall experience of new members of staff. The role of the formal mentor is particularly important and having a uniform approach to training mentors would be beneficial in giving a more positive experience to both mentors and mentees. This would ideally result in all ECAs being assigned a suitable mentor and having a programme of regular contact with them in the first few years of their appointment. A standardised induction manual with an outline of structures, key policies and contacts would also be helpful in allowing new members of staff to identify and access key people and develop a clearer understanding of the hierarchical structures in place and physical surroundings.

Fostering collaborative cultures

HE institutions should focus more heavily on developing collaborative cultures and informal networking opportunities where ECAs can identify issues important for them and develop solutions to problems which may emerge. The impact of this would be to promote confidence and inclusivity. Opportunities for those on teaching and scholarship contracts to work with those on research contracts would also be beneficial in facilitating the sharing of expertise and experience and reducing perceived barriers which may exist between the two.

Improved timetabling

This study found that there needs to be a greater alignment between timetabling and the needs of students and staff. This is essential for the facilitation of adequate rooms in suitable locations and ensuring high quality teaching and learning experiences for all.

More suitable professional development opportunities

Professional development should be tailored more closely to the needs of ECAs. In particular, compulsory programmes such as the Post Graduate Certificate of Academic Practice should take account of participants' teaching experience and those who need more support with developing their research and scholarship competencies. When writing retreats and other scholarship activities are planned, the teaching commitments of those on teaching and scholarship contracts should also be taken into consideration to ensure they are able to access these events.

Clear definition of scholarship

HE institutions should work towards clearly defining the term 'scholarship' especially for those on teaching and scholarship contracts. This is essential in providing ECAs with a clear understanding of what is expected of them in terms of fulfilling their contractual obligations but also in ensuring they are able to make advances in their career.

It is hoped that HE establishments may find these recommendations useful to consider in order to improve the experiences of ECAs within their establishments.

Conclusion

This article has presented the transition of those beginning a career in HE as potentially problematic. The findings of a collaborative autoethnographic study have been considered in terms of the experiences of four ECAs. An ecological model was found to be useful in clarifying the notion of 'agency' and in providing a framework around which discussions could take place. The participants in this study structured their professional dialogue around iterational, practical / evaluative and projective factors to explore how their agency was impacted either positively or negatively. Themes emerged from the data in terms of enabling the ECAs to achieve agency and from these themes some recommendations have been made. Although this was a small scale study it is hoped that these recommendations can be utilised by institutions to enhance the transition of those beginning a career in HE.

Biographies

Mark Breslin is a lecturer of Physical Education, health and wellbeing and Initial Teacher Education at the University of Glasgow. He is a former teacher of Physical Education. Mark is currently the Programme Leader of both the Bachelor of Technology Education (BTechEd) and the Master of Design & Technology Education (MDTechEd) within the School of Education at the University of Glasgow.

Julie Harvie is a Lecturer in Education and a former Primary Head Teacher. She is Programme Leader for In and Into Headship at the University of Glasgow, a member of the National Design Group for educational leadership in Scotland and a co-convenor of the SERA LiSEN network. Julie also works on Initial Teacher Education.

Brian Leslie is a Lecturer in Technology Education at the University of Glasgow, and a former secondary teacher of Technology. He currently teaches and supervises on both the MDTechEd and BTechEd. He is also part of a team that delivers Technologies courses within several primary education programmes.

Evelyn McLaren is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Glasgow and a former primary teacher. Evelyn is currently Programme Leader of the Master of Education Programme; teaches on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate Initial Teacher Education courses. Evelyn also supervises MEd Professional Practice dissertations.

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