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Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Edmond, Nadia; Little, Brenda and Reeve, Fiona (2010). The meaning of HE in developing professional identities: some reflections on workbased foundation degrees and skill utilisation. In: SRHE Annual Research Conferenc 2010, 14-16 Dec 2010, Newport.

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2010/abstracts/0120.pdf

oro.open.ac.uk

SRHE paper for 2010 conference
'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?'; Exploring Meaning, Identities and Transformation in Higher Education

Title: The meaning of HE in developing professional identities: some reflections on work-based foundation degrees and skill utilisation. (0120)

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Part 1 Abstract:

In a climate of financial constraint there is increasing pressure on HE to justify its draw on the public purse. Viewing HE as investment in raising the skill level of the workforce raises the question of the effectiveness of that investment and understanding effective skill utilisation is therefore critical. In this paper, the authors argue that the relationship between experience, education and skill utilisation is more complex than notions of skill acquisition suggest and skill utilisation depends not on the 'possession' of skills but on the dynamic interaction through social practices between individual factors and the social context. Drawing on empirical work in the context of part-time Foundation Degrees the authors report on how HE can be instrumental in shaping and transforming identities at work and argue for the need to research the role of HE in mediating social practices in the workplace to support skill utilisation.

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In much of the skill utilisation literature, skills mismatch is seen as inefficiency or waste and the focus is on the supply of appropriately skilled individuals for the needs of the economy. This 'supply side' focus has been an aspect of UK policy for some time and is evident in the Leitch Review of skills (HM Treasury, 2006) and resulted in an 89% increase in supply of First degree graduates in the UK between 1989 and 1996 (Mason, 2001). However, recent data points to a "productivity gap" whereby increasing investment in the skills base is not resulting in improved productivity (see for example, CFE, 2008). Notwithstanding this, there is evidence that level of qualification impacts on performance, for example, quality of patient care is improved in hospitals which employ a high proportion of qualified nurses (Aiken and Patrician, 2000). Elsewhere in the public sector, Blatchford et al. (2006) have argued that the impact of TAs on the learning of children is dependent on their level of qualification and pedagogical knowledge and Early Years settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress (the Institute of Education, 2004). Looking at graduates employed in the public and private sector, Mason (2001: 6) has argued that "not only are graduates often capable of performing [non-graduate] jobs to higher standards [...] but there is also considerable scope for some of these jobs to be redefined and expanded in order to take advantage of graduate level skills and knowledge". We need to understand effective skill utilisation and the role of Higher Education in maximising skill utilisation. In this paper, we respond to the conference theme through an exploration of the role of the academy in meaning, identities and transformations in work-based and professional learning.

Sicherman (1991) suggests that over and under-education reflect substitution between different methods of acquiring human capital (on average, over-educated workers have less work experience and under-educated workers have more work experience). This view of education and experience as alternative routes to 'competence' is at the heart of the notion of 'equivalence' in competence based qualifications. But we would argue that the relationship between experience, education and skill utilisation is more complex and both the 'acquisition' metaphor (Sfard, 1998) and notions of substitution and equivalence are limited. Research by Brennan et al. (2010) into the learning outcomes of higher education shifts attention from narrow notions of capability and competence and towards more subjective notions of confidence and aspiration and they found that full and part-time students' new identities were more to do with personal confidence than knowledge and skills. Skill utilisation, whether by new recruits or newly trained employees, can be seen as the asserting and granting of a new identity (as more highly skilled worker) and is best understood in terms of the factors and practices which enable or inhibit the emergence of such new identities. These factors include the particular context, hierarchies and workplace practices as well as HEI practices.

Research by the authors provides complimentary perspectives on this. As part of a wider study of FD and HN practices in England and Scotland Gallacher et al (2010) explored how part-time students employed in the Early Years sector in England used their participation in an FD to gain access to new areas of work. Work-based assignments on 'child protection' or 'partnership with parents', provided opportunities for students to access organisational policy and engage in discussions with senior staff,

and in some cases to shape changes to practices. As a result some students had been identified as taking a lead on that topic for the setting. In these cases the work-based nature of the assignment had increased both the knowledge and visibility of the employee. While students in this position felt their skills were recognised by management, in most cases this had not led to a formal change in role or increased pay, a phenomena noted elsewhere in the sector (Knight et al, 2006).

Edmond (2010) has focussed on the distinctive nature of part-time foundation degrees for teaching assistants (TAs) and her analysis revealed that participation in the Foundation Degree resulted in HE practices and artefacts mediating workplace practices in ways which were instrumental in individuals claiming an 'intermediate' identity (not a teacher but "more than a TA"). The claiming of this intermediate identity was expressed as the utilisation of skills in participating in certain (teachers') practices. Such participation and its associated claimed 'intermediate' identity was discursively constructed as deriving from a complex interplay between 'inherent' characteristics or individual disposition of the TA, development of expertise through study contributing to 'professional confidence' and access to teachers' practice. As with the Early Years sector this occurred independently of formal changes in role or pay.

Greenwood and Little's study of the impact of Fds on students and the workplace (Greenwood, Little et al., 2008) focussed on a number of programmes across a limited range of private and public sectors, primarily in business and management; and in early years/teaching and learning support settings. The majority of students and graduates interviewed cited increased confidence as the main gain from their studies. For those already in the workplace such increased confidence tended to be expressed in terms of communication aspects of workplace activities ('being able to converse, sounding more knowledgeable'; better understanding the 'correct' language to be used and feeling more able to engage in discussions'); and also a general increase in self-esteem (both in their personal lives and in the workplace). But the study also found some instances where Fd students experienced an ambivalence within their workplaces towards fully utilising the learners' increased knowledge and skills, and re-inforcing their increased confidence and self-esteem.

These studies, amongst others, suggest that skill utilisation depends not on the 'possession' of skills but on the dynamic interaction through social practices between individual factors (which may include knowledge and skills but also others such as confidence, creativity and aspiration) and social context. To understand the extent to which work environments are more or less enabling of learning Felstead et al 2009 argue for a need to examine the organisation of work and how this is influenced by wider forces.   Building on this we argue that part-time higher education supporting professional development can have a distinctive role to play in mediating social practices in the workplace to support skill utilisation and further research is needed to examine the micro processes through which this is played out.

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