

HORIZON SCANNING REPORT

Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning

The *Perfect* STORM?

Dr John Unsworth examines the issues
within recruitment and retention of the
higher education work force in the
current turbulent climate

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The Perfect STORM?



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The future workforce requirements of Higher Education (HE) globally present a number of challenges; not least the ability of Universities to recruit and retain the right calibre of staff to meet their ambitious agendas around teaching, research, enterprise and international development. Whilst the diversity of HE in the UK and globally makes generalisations difficult, it is true to say that for some institutions, their current strategies and/or lack of workforce intelligence may result in a recruitment and retention problem. Could HE be caught in a perfect storm, partially of its own making?

Across the world, HE systems in Scandinavia, the United States and Canada have been increasing the number of academic staff in response to rising demand for course places and growing internationalisation. Whilst the numbers differ by subject and discipline, on the whole, the UK and Australia have either stood still or seen a slight reduction in academic staff numbers as a result of falling student recruitment (Reilly, Miller and Hirsh, 2014). In some subject areas the

UK has seen a wave of redundancies over the past 10 years, although this appears to have tailed off in 2015 (Reilly et al, 2014, UCEA, 2015). This is partially as a result of falling student numbers following the introduction of student finance through loans, but also in response to some universities seeking to change their existing workforces to meet the challenges of the next 5-10 years.

At the same time, the UK sector has seen changes in the use of non-standard contracts and in some cases, zero hours contracts for academic staff. In the US and in some European countries, the concept of tenure for professorial staff still exists with the notion of a job for life.

Retention – should I stay or should I go?

The Universitas 21 report (Reilly et al, 2014) described how universities need to focus on the development of their own staff, because they are in competition with other institutions effectively fishing in the same pool. While it is clear that universities need to get better at managing and developing existing talent, for

some institutions the lack of robust workforce data hampers their ambition. This lack of data in some UK institutions has been highlighted most recently during the debate about the impact of the UK leaving the European Union (Brexit), and the loss of talent as a result of EU nationals possibly having to leave the UK. This issue was also highlighted by the report into HESA reported teaching qualifications (HEFCE, HESA & HEA, 2016).

The exact changes which tightened borders and reduced migration might bring in a post-Brexit and Trump era remain somewhat unclear. It's not yet clear whether EU nationals who work in UK HE will be permitted to stay, and whether they would be eligible to work in the UK under a new points based immigration system. Exact numbers of staff are unknown, and the House of Commons Education Committee have repeatedly pressed Vice-Chancellors for specifics, in terms of the number of staff effected, during a series of tours of UK universities (WonkHE Daily, 12 January 2017).

Some HE systems have demographic issues with an ageing workforce partially as a result of rapid expansion in the 1960s and

1970s. This is certainly true of Higher Education in Australia and Canada with the median age of academics in Canada being 50 years (Hugo, 2005 and Reilly et al, 2014). In the UK, changes to retirement age following the Equality Act (2010) make workforce planning more complex in terms of age, although UCEA (2015) indicate that concerns about the age profile of the UK workforce have eased as a result of a period of severance and redundancy.

Many universities use specific teaching related criteria as part of reviewing applications for promotions, and some institutions have specific learning and teaching promotion pathways to Professorial Chair. However, for many the criteria are not as transparently applied as they perhaps should be, with rejected applicants receiving feedback about lack of research income and publications beyond those related to pedagogical research and teaching development. Subbaye and Vithal (2015) undertook to evaluate which teaching criteria actually mattered during applications for academic

promotions. They found that in South Africa, there were 10 criteria which include:

- teaching methods
- student evaluations
- peer evaluations
- developing courses,
- the study of higher education
- recognition of teaching
- sharing teaching experiences,
- supervising students,
- and the rationale for teaching and assessment.

To the surprise of the researchers, all of these criteria appeared to matter in the promotion decisions made by South African institutions, although post-graduate supervision and the sharing of teaching experiences were especially important. Perhaps the important message from this research is that for teaching staff to feel valued there needs to be a clearer articulation about how teaching criteria are considered during promotions alongside other criteria such as research, engagement and enterprise.

The Times Higher Education Best University Workplace Survey 2016 (THE, 2016) raised some concerns about growing dissatisfaction amongst the UK HE workforce, particularly in relation to job security and leadership from the Executive and at Departmental level. In addition, the survey raised concerns that staff (and indeed some subjects), are, in the eyes of the staff themselves, not valued by the university. These concerns do little to alleviate the perception that HE may be heading for a recruitment and retention crisis. That said, the majority of respondents reported that their research and teaching was a source of satisfaction to them and that they liked working with their colleagues.

In the UK, the Stern Review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) will have an impact on staff retention. Stern has proposed an end to the portability of REF outputs, thereby ensuring that publications and research impact is assigned to the institution where the academic was employed at the time of writing. This means that there will be a short 'transfer window' for academics who wish to find another post if they wish to be included in the REF submittal in their new institution. At the same time the review proposes that all eligible academic staff should be entered into the assessment exercise rather than allowing institutions to select their 'brightest stars' (Matthews, 2016). While these proposals may reduce the accusation of "gaming", which enabled certain institutions to perform well in the 2014 REF, they may also have unintended consequences.

You may be asking what all of this has to do with teaching? Well, one of the unintended consequences is the threat to move academic staff onto "teaching-only" contracts. Such a move would be detrimental not only to the careers of staff who spend a large proportion of their time teaching, but also to staff who engage in pedagogical research. In addition, such a move could see a further threat to the research teaching nexus with less research-informed teaching, within some institutions.

Kneale, Cotton and Miller (2016) examined the 2014 REF submissions



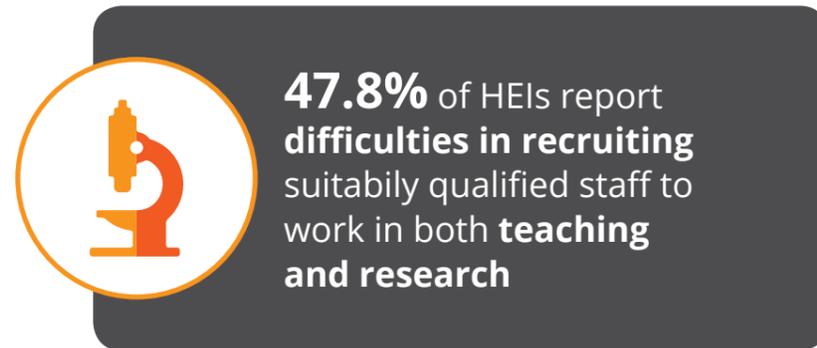
and identified that pedagogical research from HE related submissions accounted for only 9% of the Education Unit of Assessment (UoA). Pedagogical research in HE has been described as the 'Cinderella' of academia despite increasing levels of research activity (Cotton, Miller and Kneale, 2017). For many institutions, pedagogical research could strengthen the Education UoA - and this is another reason for avoiding a move to teaching-only contracts for staff in the future.

An alternative approach would be to promote the notion of integrated academic practice, where academic staff are involved in knowledge exchange, teaching, research, enterprise and academic citizenship. Staff with a high teaching workload could engage collectively in high quality pedagogical research, allowing them to contribute to scholarship and ultimately to any future REF. Locke (2016) supports this notion, arguing that a universal academic contract incorporating a number of roles would allow greater freedom for both the employee and the employer.

Recruitment – how attractive is an academic career?

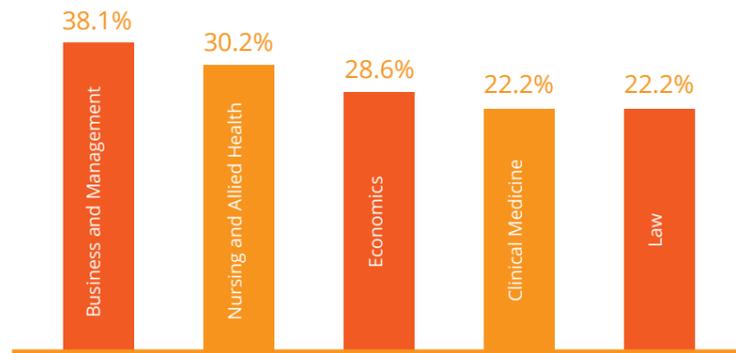
Changes in pay and reward in certain occupations have resulted in academic roles being comparable to, if not less attractive than, roles outside of the HE sector. This has resulted in recruitment problems for academic staff from management, finance, law and health care professions. In addition, changes to occupational pension entitlements in the public sector, with a move from final salary schemes to career average and changes to early retirement rights in some professions, have resulted in experienced staff seeking to stay put in their current role rather than pursuing an academic career to protect their pension entitlements.

According to the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA, 2015), 27% of post-1992 institutions in the UK report difficulties in recruiting, although this is often confined to



Institutions

reporting recruitment problems in:



certain grades and disciplines. The most common issue in terms of staff grade is trying to recruit suitably qualified staff that enables the academic to work in both teaching and research, with 47.8% of HEIs reporting difficulties. A further 49.5% of institutions report problems with recruitment to professorial level posts. The most difficult to recruit to disciplines are Business and Management (38.1% of institutions reporting problems), Nursing and Allied Health (30.2%), Economics (28.6%), Clinical Medicine (22.2%) and Law (22.2%). The most commonly cited issue is a lack of qualifications, with 22% of post-1992 institutions reporting this as an issue (although only 6% of pre-1992 institutions believe this is the case).

In the UK, a number of universities have set out clear policies that academic staff must have PhDs. The rationale for this appears to be twofold, firstly, to build research capacity and secondly to promote high quality teaching through a philosophy of 'learn from the best'. To what extent this policy is achievable or even desirable is open to question. A study by Tight (2012) found that in the UK only 45.7% of academic staff were qualified to PhD level, although a more recent survey by Universities UK (UUK, 2014) found that this had risen slightly to 53%. The move towards an all-PhD qualified Faculty may be easier to achieve in some disciplines than other. For example, there are fewer academics qualified to doctoral level in Law, Nursing and Midwifery.

For these disciplines, academia is a second career as most of these academics have had several years of experience, often at a senior level within their profession, before they took up their first academic post. In addition, the availability of PhD studentships and funding to study at doctoral level in these disciplines is less commonplace than in some of the biological or physical sciences for example. As a result recruiting new staff with PhDs in certain disciplines is difficult in the extreme. Inevitably, one university is poaching staff from another.



Policies which require all academic staff to have a PhD have placed huge strain on Faculties and Departments trying to implement this, with staff requiring study time, sabbaticals, funding and of course having sufficient appropriately experienced and qualified staff to act as PhD supervisors. At the same time, individual staff who do not wish to study for a PhD often feel sidelined, and many of these choose to leave employment prematurely through early retirement or redundancy, thus potentially exacerbating staffing problems.

The notion of all staff needing a PhD to promote teaching quality appears to be built on the US premise that academic staff need a 'terminal degree' (Babb, 2015). However, having a PhD and experience of research is no guarantee of teaching quality, and students appear to prefer academic staff who have received specific training to teach and who have relevant industry and professional experience. The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey results (HEPI / HEA, 2016) show that 57% of students surveyed felt that it was 'very important' that academic staff should have received specific training to teach, and 47% prefer teachers with

industry or professional experience compared with only 26% who felt it was very important to be taught by active researchers.

Locke (2014) articulated how traditional academic roles are being eroded with increasing workloads, erosion of work/life balance and a lack of opportunity for future development. At the same time there has been an increasing separation between teaching and research with more specialised roles. All of this serves to make the academic role less attractive to some people than it once was.

Traditional career pathways for academics have also changed and many now downplay teaching in favour of research. The notion of a stable career has largely gone in most European countries (Altbach and Musselin, 2008) with a move to the 'up or out' promotion system which is common in the United States. While the non-tenure to tenure system of the US provides a clear pathway, it is highly competitive and often does not nurture talent.

It is likely that difficult-to-recruit-to posts will exist in some disciplines for the foreseeable future, and policies such as requiring all staff to have a PhD will further exacerbate recruitment problems. As many public and private sector professions have improved pay and conditions, the notion of transferring to a potentially unstable career in academia may become increasingly unattractive. To counter this, universities need to develop clear academic career structures including those which enable academics to engage in both teaching and research, invest in staff development and manage and develop talent from within through transparent promotion systems.

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