Reconstructing identities in higher education: the rise of the 'blended' professional

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Changing environments in higher education have impacted on the roles and identities of both academic and professional staff, and a new cadre of 'blended professionals' has been identified, who might be said to work in a 'Third Space' between academic and professional spheres of activity (Whitchurch 2008, 2009). These include, for instance, teaching and learning, widening participation and employability professionals, research and knowledge managers, and educational technologists.

Although hierarchical line relationships continue to exist, these may be less significant in day-to-day working than lateral networks, and individuals may identify more closely with projects and teams than with formal organisational structures. Associated with these changes, the concept of service has become re-oriented towards one of partnership between professional and academic colleagues, students and external agencies. Yet such developments have tended to occur 'under the radar', and have not been fully articulated or explored. The session will report on two studies that considered the implications of such developments for both institutions and individuals, describing identities that have tended to remain hidden within binary understandings of institutional communities. Narratives arising from the case material will be analysed, including ways in which staff work across academic and professional spheres to establish new spaces, knowledges, relationships and legitimacies. Challenges arising for both individuals and institutions will also be considered.

Biography

Dr Celia Whitchurch has been a Senior Lecturer at the UCL Institute of Education since 2007. Before that she had a career in university management and administration at the Universities of Kent, London, Birmingham, and King's College London. Her research interests include the changing roles and identities of academic and professional staff, changing models of employment, and higher education policy and management. She has led four projects for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education on professional identities and staffing models, and has over 30 publications.