Talk the talk and walk the walk: Are career academics gatekeepers to my tacit knowledge?

Mike Murray, University of Strathclyde

Stuart Tennant, University of the West of Scotland

Alan Forster, Heriot Watt University

Nigel Craig, Glasgow Caledonian University

Alex Copping, University of Bath

Nick Pilcher, Edinburgh Napier University

**Keywords:** placement, transition, identity, learning, academics

# 1 head

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 et al 2015, Craig et al 2016) with little or no industrial experience and sheltered by academic life. In contrast “Pracademics” (Andrew et al 2014, Pilcher et al 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 et al 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 (2014, p.13) recognise that placements provide ‘opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and understanding of theoretical concepts to practice and to exercise their professional judgment’. This newly found authentic expertise helps students to contextualize their learning and “must” be incorporated into their learning journey (for the benefit all students and academics) within the formal curriculum and produce evidenced outputs (Lowden et al 2011, Pegg et al 2012). It should not be ignored, through convenience or 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 these students. Indeed, it is known is that students place value in their academics having had relevant industrial exposure. In a recent survey (Neves and Hillman 2016) of 15,221 students attending universities in the UK, 47% of the 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. This is also something mirrored in other European countries (Christensen and 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 and uncharted territory. Indeed, Allie et al (2009, p. 362) have recommended that faculty should help students develop a range of authentic Engineering identities but they argue that ‘programmes in many higher institutions seem to represent a relatively narrow set of discursive identities, primarily research and academic identities’. 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 fearful, powerful gatekeepers (Anderson and McCune 2013) to the student’s 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 and Jawitz 2003). Pracademics are best placed to identify with the students new identity and both parties will have ‘war stories’ to share about their identity 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 a 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 et al (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. While the problems that arise from these discrepancies suggest it may be desirable to align the academic and work communities as closely as possible,

The organisational culture within a department may need to be modified to facilitate such developments in accordance with the “ four cultures” asserted by Gibbs et al (2009) 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 the proposed CoP 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, 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 ‘their’ higher education. This issue has resonance given the revised National Student Survey (2017) asks students (Q.21) “I 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 the TEF than is currently evident and will require appropriate incentives for faculty (Lowden et-al 2011) to incorporate employability measures. As Graham (2016) has posited *Does teaching advance your academic career?*

### 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.

*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.

*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.

*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.

*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.

*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*.

### References

Anderson, C., & McCune, V. (2013). Fostering meaning: fostering community. *Higher Education*, *66*(3), 283-296

Andrew, N, Lopes, Pereira,F and Lima, I (2014) Building communities in higher education: the case of nursing, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19:1, 72-77,

Allie, S, Armien, M.N, Burgoyne, N, Case, J.M, Collier-Reed,B.I, Craig, T.S, Deacon, A, Fraser, D.M, Geyer, Z, Jacobs, C, Jawitz, J, Kloot, B, Kotta, L, Langdon, G, Le-Roux,K, Marshall, D, Mogashana, C, Sheridan, G and 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*

Artess, J, Hooley, T and Mellors-Bourne, R (2017) Employability: A review of the literature 2012-2016. Higher Education Academy.

BIS (2016a) Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/523396/bis-16-265- success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265-%20success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf)

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.

Christensen, S. H., and 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.

Craig N Tennant S Murray M Forster A and Pilcher N. 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, ISBN 978-0-9930611-1-0.

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.

Forster A Pilcher N Tennant S Murray M & Craig N (????) The fall & rise of experiential construction education: decoupling & recoupling practice & theory. *Higher Education Pedagogies*. (submitted for review 02/12/16)

Gibbs, G, Knapper, C and Piccinin, S (2009) Department Leadership of Teaching in Research-Intensive Environments: Final Report. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.<https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/filemanager/root/site_assets/research_resources/research/series_1/S1-17%20Gibbs%20-%20Departmental%20Leadership%20-%20Final.pdf>

Graham, R. (2016) Does teaching advance your academic career? Interim report on the development of a template for evaluating teaching achievement. Royal Academy of Engineering. <http://www.raeng.org.uk/publications/reports/does-teaching-advance-your-academic-career-(1)>

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge university press.

Lowden, K, Hall, S ,Elliot, D and Lewin J ( 2011) Employers’ perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates, The Edge Foundation

<http://www.edge.co.uk/media/63412/employability_skills_as_pdf_-_final_online_version.pdf> (accessed 20/02/2017).

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

<http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/NSS2017_Core_Questionnaire.pdf>.

Neves J and Hillman N (2016) The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey, <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/student_academic_experience_survey_2016_hea-hepi_final_version_07_june_16_ws.pdf>

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.

Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S. & Lawton, R. (2012) *Pedagogy for employability*. Higher Education Academy<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012.pdf> (accessed 20/02/2017).

Pilcher, N., Forster, A.M, Tennant, S., Murray, M.D and Craig, N (Under review) **'Problematizing the ‘Career Academic’ in UK Construction and Engineering Education: does the system want what the system gets? *The European Journal of Engineering Education***

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

Tennant S Murray M Forster A and 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

University of Bath (2017) Teaching Fellow-Fixed Term, Architecture and Civil Engineering. <https://www.bath.ac.uk/jobs/Vacancy.aspx?ref=CT4670> (accessed 21/02/2017).