

## Negotiated professional identities of academics in the context of structural reform and innovation at the university

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the results of a qualitative narrative study that focuses on academics' professional identity and teaching practice at the university during the structural reform at Tallinn University, Estonia. The aim of the research is to understand how professional identity is formed in relation to the development of teaching practice in the frame of interdisciplinary projects introduced as an innovation at the university. The central research question is: How do the continuously changing university context, suggested teaching approaches and innovative projects affect professional identity, beliefs and teaching practice of academics? The empirical data consists of 48 narrative interviews with academics from different study fields. The empirical data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis with narrative coding. On the individual level there are slow but meaningful changes in teaching practices, as well as beliefs, understandings and professional identities of academics.*

**Keywords:** academics; professional identity; university; teaching practice; narrative study.

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper focuses on understanding how the identities of academics are negotiated in the context of structural changes at the university. Universities are undergoing contradictory changes, putting demands on the work of academics. Estonian universities, similarly to higher education institutions in Western Europe, North America and Australia have been led by neo-liberalization tendencies characterized by decrease in public funding and dependency on competence-based funding, introduction of new public management models, rise of audit culture and bureaucracy, ranking and metrics, merging of curricula and university units (Aavik, 2018). The academic staff are expected to fulfil multiple roles, including research and teaching, but increasingly also administrative and developmental tasks. We can argue that teaching practice and teaching excellence is not at the centre of emphasis in neo-liberal universities. On the other hand, there are multiple examples of outstanding universities where efforts have been made to develop teaching excellence and instructional approaches of university teachers or to introduce interdisciplinary learning initiatives that are expected to challenge previous learning and teaching practices and result in transformative change in teaching culture (Holley, 2009). However, adopting changes always involves re-construction of professional identities of academics. We will be exploring the interplay between professional identities and changes in teaching practice triggered by interdisciplinary learning introduced. The central research question in this paper is: How has the changing university context affected professional identity, beliefs and teaching practice of academics? We base our arguments on the analysis of narrative interviews conducted with academics from different study fields at Tallinn University

## **2. Professional identity of academics**

In the frame of the constant changes in education the implementation research has been generally concerned that often the top-down initiated innovation effort has not involved widespread adoption (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011). Adapting to educational changes always means making sense of the changes (Spillane et al., 2002) and oneself in the changing work realities. Sense making is also strongly related to identity (re)-construction (Louis, 2010, p. 18). Existing research shows that universities are unique places of being and of engagement between human beings, also universities are places of complexity-in-being (Barnett, 2003, p. 179). University academics and how they construct and reconstruct their professional identities have been actively studied by many scholars (Barnett, 2005, Clegg, 2005, Harris, 2005, LaPointe, 2009), but the concept of professional identity has been defined differently (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004, p. 122).

Identity is a socio-cultural category by means of which we present and locate ourselves socially (Noy 2004, 116). Professional identity is considered to be a personal and cognitive

construct (Benwell & Stokoe 2006), subjective phenomenon, which consists of values, beliefs and experiences (LaPointe 2009, 1); it is a part of the self-concept related to the profession individuals develop (Sancha & Molinero 2016). Inspired by the constructionist view on career identity, Kirsi LaPointe argues that professional identity is a practice of articulating and performing identity positions in narrating experiences (LaPointe, 2009, 2). We draw on the idea of professional identity as not a fixed phenomenon, but rather relational to others and the context. Most of the authors treat identity development as an ongoing process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004, p. 108). Universities and academic life are becoming more and more complex and differentiated spaces, which influence professional practice and identity of academics. Scholars have argued that traditional academics identities based on collegiality and on autonomy are under threat (Clegg, 2005, 332). However, identity construction is a complex and contextual process of continuous re-interpretation of one's previous experience in relation to peers, therefore different identity profiles could be expected to exist among professionals (Canrinus et al., 2011).

### 3. Study context

Interdisciplinary learning introduced as an educational innovation at Tallinn University provides a unique context for our study. Since 2016 interdisciplinary projects *LIFE - Learning in Interdisciplinary Focused Environment* - targeted at solving real-life problems have been integrated as compulsory courses into bachelor and master level curricula at Tallinn University. *LIFE* projects are aimed to differ from general courses as here the active role of the students in setting the aims and scope of the learning has been emphasized and the role of the supervisors is rather to support the group processes. (Erialasid Lõimiv Uendus (ELU) kontseptsioon, 2018). The interdisciplinary project courses mostly carry the philosophy of student- or learning-centered pedagogical approaches such as „collaborative learning“, „problem-based learning“ or „active learning“. The study was conducted by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from four disciplines during 2016–2018.

### 4. Research design

Empirical data was collected using a narrative interview design (Rossiter, 1999). As a method, narrative interview is based on a generative question and focuses on experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Creswell, 2013, p. 54). When carrying out narrative interviews, we applied the unstructured approach and focused on academics' stories about their professional identity and teaching practice. The interview started with a generative question “Please tell how you became a university teacher, tell everything that is important for you in teaching”. In the last stage of the interview eight thematic questions

were asked. After the narrative interview, examples of innovative teaching and *LIFE* supervision practices were asked for. All interviews took place at the university in a venue familiar to participants. Interviews (duration ranging from 1,5 to 2 hours) were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed by four researchers.

*Data collection* took place in two stages. *The sample* of our research was created by combining stratified random (Bryman, 2008, p. 190) and criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2002). In the first stage, separate lists of randomly selected academics from five institutes were created. In the second stage, final sample was created of those academics who had been active in supervising *LIFE* projects. Narrative interviews were conducted with 48 academics, aged from 29 – 60 years, 11 were male and 37 female; the teaching experience ranged from two to 30 years.

*In the data analysis* we employed the qualitative content thematic analysis method (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007) with narrative coding (Saldana, 2009, p. 46). Clandinin and Connelly (2001) refer to the stories as “field texts”. Frank points out that people tell stories, but narratives come from the analysis of stories (Frank, 2000, cited Realay & Have, 2005, p. 227) Analysis process started with reading and re-reading interviews and included next steps: 1) identification of the empirical materials for analysis; 2) preparation of the materials for inductive analysis; 3) open holistic coding, searching for themes and categorization; 4) narrative coding (Saldana, 2009, p. 46). The purpose of narrative coding was to reconstruct different stories into central narratives (Flyvbjerg, 2016). Three types of narratives were constructed: *LIFE* narratives, Professional Identity narratives, and Teaching Practice narratives. The data was analysed and triangulated by four researchers.

## **5. Findings: Identities in the narrative**

Below we present the summary of the findings from the first stage of the ongoing project. The findings indicate similarities to the previous studies on the professional identity of academics arguing that the university context and personal factors play important role in the formation of identity (Lankveld et al., 2017, Trautwein, 2018, Trede, 2012). Professional identities are closely shaped by personal and contextual factors - personal life events and choices, professional experience, and teaching practice at the university. Our findings showed that professional identity of academics is interpersonal and related to previous personal, professional and meaningful experiences and the self-concept.

Firstly, identity developing means creation of self-consciousness. “Entering” the university and turning points are meaningful experiences for academics and also as intrinsic components for constructing professional identities.

Secondly, professional identity is related to values and beliefs. The changes at the university have not only influenced values, but made the values even stronger.

Thirdly, the complexity of professional activities and roles of academics have led to the lasting internal identity conflicts, which are visible due to: a) role conflicts and need to perform different and often contradictory roles; b) hybrid identity (combination of different types of identities) or rule bound/regulations of the university; c) the time limit for reflecting on one's own teaching practice; d) myriad of teaching tasks.

Fourth, teaching practice has been experienced differently by academics. It was regarded as an isolated practice; activity or approach; experimentation; communication with the students; students' learning and their responsibility; developing a relationship with the students; collaborative teaching practice with high expectations in relation to students; collaboration with the students and colleagues; as a personal and emotional experience.

Based on the analysis we have identified different professional identity profiles among the academics: academics as *autonomous creators*, *active followers of change*, *upholders of traditional teaching/learning culture*. All of them have different sense of self-concept, professional identity and different degree of agency to influence teaching practice and learning culture at the university.

We present an example from Paul's story, a story of an "*autonomous creator*". Due to the complexity of the analysed empirical data, we selected and present the meaningful narrative from his story which mirrors personal meanings of being an academic, supervisor of LIFE projects and a strong sense of professional identity in relation to the teaching practice at the university. **Paul**, (Ph.D) is 44 years old and works as a senior researcher. His work task include teaching, supervision of students and supervision of LIFE projects. He has 13 years of teaching experience at the university and has supervised three LIFE projects and is currently supervising two projects. The beginning of his story is related to his previous experience as a school teacher and is closely connected to his personal life. To illustrate how Paul's professional identities are formed and co-constructed, we will present below the narrative, which has been constructed by using quotes from his interview. His professional identity is distinctive and not typical, related to strong self-positioning, values and previous experience. The changes at the university have not only influenced his values, but made his values stronger. We title this narrative as Paul's **MISSION NARRATIVE**

*It is a long story. I came to the university in 1994 to study teachers' profession as I had already worked one year as a teacher. My work experience as a university teacher is a short one. Perhaps it is good that I don't have any fixed frame how one should teach. I tend to explore many things on my own. What matters is what we want to achieve, what is the aim, what is the aim of the education. Education is the only way we can affect considerably the environmental behavior, behavior of people. As part of the restructuring at the university the*

*change was looked forward to. For me it is important that the LIFE projects would succeed as this could bring a qualitative change what happens at the university. I see LIFE as an opener that teaching methods and learning approaches could change at the university. LIFE is a practice demonstrating that by implementing a project you can learn something way more intensively, entirely differently. For me LIFE is a step towards that direction. That there could be an interdisciplinary project implemented by students.*

## **6. Closing remarks**

Changes require not only creating and developing innovations for supporting students' learning, redesigning teaching and learning processes and approaches, but also adopting innovative strategic approaches for supporting academics and their professional development and identity (Gibbs 2005). Overall we conclude that professional identity development is a significant and meaningful process for academics because it is one of the main resources for adaptation to the developments and broad changes.

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