

TOWARDS FLEXIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Thursday 22 January 2009

Title and Presenter:

Pathologies of flexibility? The consequences of flexible employment contracts for teachers, students and management

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Sub Theme & Paper Type:

Flexible People – Presentation

Abstract:

Flexibility in Higher Education is increasingly viewed as something to be valued and actively strived for. It can have beneficial outcomes for a range of issues across the sector. But flexibility can also have pernicious consequences.

In this presentation I'll discuss one area where flexibility is not always desirable – in relation to the theme of flexible people. 'Flexible people' can mean flexible contracts – those which are fixed-term, and/or part-time - which can have adverse consequences across the board: for management, for teachers, and for students. Flexibility in contracts may be attractive to managers at departmental and central university levels because of the possibilities they afford for responding to unforeseen developments in the management of the permanent workforce, in addition to responding to financial pressures.

However, for managers at university level, flexible contracts can be seen as anathema to the pursuit of progressive employment policies and challenging to the notion of universities as socially responsible actors. For departmental managers, flexibility in teaching contracts can undermine departmental collegiality and cohesion. Flexibility in contracts may perform a vital role in allowing teachers, particularly early-career colleagues, to develop teaching skills and experience necessary for securing a permanent position in future (for example by offering hourly-paid teaching contracts to PhD students). However teachers on flexible contracts may experience more significant initial set-up costs in relation to the design and delivery of modules, and may not be paid directly for the preparation as opposed to the delivery of teaching. They may not experience the same level of formal (and indeed informal) support from departments and the university. These limitations may in turn have knock-on effects for students whose tuition is affected by the potentially higher turnover of flexibly-employed teachers.

The discussion is illustrated with examples from preliminary empirical research and will invite discussion on the issue of whether flexibility is always to be valued or whether it contains fundamental pathologies alongside its beneficial possibilities.