

## TOWARDS FLEXIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Thursday 22 January 2009

**Title and Presenter:**

**The Flexible Academic: Meeting the challenge of teaching, research and professional practice in new academic disciplines**

*Julie Jomeen and Jacquie White*

**Sub Theme & Paper Type:**

Flexible People - Presentation

**Abstract:**

The University Learning and Teaching Strategy identifies the need to drive up the quality of the student experience through educating students 'within a research-rich learning environment, designed and delivered by staff working at the frontiers of academic enquiry and professional practice' (LTS Strategic Objective 6.3). Across the last two decades, several professional disciplines have been assimilated into Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including nursing, midwifery, allied health professions and education. The higher education (HE) reforms of recent years and resultant changes has presented educators involved in professional disciplines with a number of challenges, not least the need to redefine themselves and their roles as university lecturers and 'academics'.

Universities are traditionally hierarchical, and there is a clear stratification of HE both across and within HEIs which potentially leads to deep divisions. There is a clear traditional identity associated with being a lecturer and/or academic. The first defined as a position delivering both teaching and research, the second as person who works as a researcher. Yet for the profession based disciplines there is a third strand to the role, that of professional practice and the need to prepare students fit for professional registration. Indeed prior to integration into HE, the focus was almost exclusively on this element of the role resulting in disciplines less established in terms of traditional notions of academia, in particular research.

The challenge therefore is to redefine the notion of what it means to be 'academic' and how that can be negotiated within traditional university notions of academia where stereotypes often shape intellectual identities (Steele 1997). The traditional teaching role of a lecturer, is one of instructor, an authority and expert who orates their knowledge to their students (Rogers 2002). The contemporary reappraisal of the roles of teachers and learners, where learners play an active and instrumental role in the teaching-learning encounter, calls for a radical change. It will be argued that newer 'academic disciplines', have successfully risen to the challenge. This paper discusses how those working within 'new academic disciplines' present a more contemporary and flexible notion of what it means to be 'an academic'.