

Media practitioners engaging with higher education.

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Introduction

This Case Study focuses on teacher-practitioners in higher education (HE) and the benefits and challenges that they have encountered through this type of engagement. Its aim is to explore whether practitioners' engagement with HE has made a significant impact on lifestyle and work practices. Most importantly, though, this case study will qualify what HE has given to teacher-practitioners and how they will look to apply their experiences to future achievements and aspirations.

Interviews with media teacher-practitioners provided a detailed understanding of their roles in particular subject areas, along with the impact the university has had on their personal work practices. This research has also revealed new skills and knowledge learned by the professionals and explored the expectations of the industry practitioners with regard to their current participation in universities.

Most importantly, the research has brought to the surface three main issues: time for reflection, interaction with highly intellectual individuals and change of lifestyle. In an industry where time is a constraint, there is little time to think and reflect on new and innovative ideas. Having settled into their roles within HE, practitioners have been able to engage with academic staff and find the time to reflect on their work and research related ideas. It seems that they have benefited from this engagement in their ability to apply increased intellectual rigor when assessing new project ideas.

Interviews were conducted with five professional industry leaders working as teacher-practitioners. At the time of this study all five professionals had completed, or were in the process of completing, their secondments at Bournemouth University. They were all appointed as practitioners-in-residence, specifically located in the Media School within one of the School's four academic groups: Journalism & Communication; Media Production; Computer Animation, and Corporate Marketing Communications. All of the posts were

funded by the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP)¹. Based on these interviews, four main themes have emerged.

1. Engagement in higher education

Many practitioners, especially those with no prior engagement with HE, had preconceptions of universities as "shabby", under-resourced and under-funded. Although this may be true for some universities, the practitioners at Bournemouth University Media School were surprised at the clean modern facilities, with new buildings and access to appropriate equipment. Generally, academic staff working alongside practitioners were considered very friendly. Some were perceived as highly entrepreneurial. To some practitioners, there appeared to be more shared responsibility and a greater sense of collective ownership than they had expected.

Prior to the secondments, some practitioners believed universities were completely "out-of-touch" with the industry and reality and that they could be insular, very academic and theory-based. They assumed that academic staff were over-burdened with their own rules of engagement and academic validation and not always aware of new practices. These beliefs changed rapidly when media practitioners realised that universities are very much in touch with media industry and have up-to-date and highly valuable professional contacts. They also noted that there is a high level of talent within the university, along with a willingness to learn that adds a cutting edge to most university staff and students' career paths.

In most cases, the media practitioners were involved with the university either as a guest-speaker or part-time lecturer. Most often, they were invited to apply for the teacher-practitioner position in residence by a colleague or friend at the university. Their aim was to share their own expertise and knowledge both with academic staff and with students who were eager to explore the latest media industry practices.

¹ The Centre for Excellence in Media Practice is a HEFCE funded Centre of Excellence, see: www.cemp.ac.uk/.

Delivering presentations, lectures and seminars to both undergraduate and postgraduate learners further enhanced their roles as teacher-practitioners, enabling them to understand their students and share industry working methods. More often than not, they were also assigned to undertake university-related project work and advise on new course designs and development. To each of them, it was this level of experience and quality of environment which constituted an offer too tempting to be refused.

As the residencies came to completion, each practitioner felt that they had benefitted from the way their teaching roles fitted with their professional ambitions. They all felt privileged to work with academic staff members who have made a significant impact on their professional work and who welcomed them into the teaching profession. Some of the practitioners have continued with part-time teaching and lecturing, which has served to extend their relationship with the university and their learning.

Lesley Tadjell Foster – Specialist in Data Audit and Data Privacy Issues:

“ ... my work in Marketing and Communications opened a window of opportunities to build a legacy on data protection and privacy and to upload this material onto the Universities VLE. This took five to six months to complete.”

2. Benefits and challenges

There have been a number of benefits and challenges to each practitioner working at the university, and the benefits have generally outnumbered the challenges. Working at the university has been interesting and there has always been something challenging to achieve. The practitioners have thoroughly enjoyed working with the students and have felt appreciated for sharing their experiences and skill set with them. For Richard Clemmow, exploring media and communications for the first time with learners was a great experience and relaying 25 years of industry experience to interested students became fulfilling. On a more personal level, the residency enabled some of the practitioners

to discover more about themselves, their goals and future developments.

Tim Wright – Commercial Producer: “ ... appreciated working with very clever, energetic and generous people at the University. Discussions with academic staff across the faculty have emphasised the need on my part for more intellectual rigor when working on new project ideas and a slower more rigorous approach to research and planning. Often, in my line of work, I work alone or with a group of people who are often in a hurry and don’t have the time to contemplate or reflect upon their ideas.”

With the benefits, however, there were also challenges. For some who had never taught and lectured, this was the biggest challenge of all. Becoming an academic and preparing for undergraduate and postgraduate learners was time consuming. Keeping students interested and being able to condense experience into a limited timeslot also proved very difficult. It was important to know what was essential to the student and what information could be discarded.

Most of the practitioners found the pace of work at the University slower in comparison to the very quick changes that take place in the industry; academics tend to work in 3 to 4 year cycles, while the media industry completes projects within 12 month cycles.. The language and jargon at the University was also initially confusing: both to the practitioner and, sometimes, to the students. The jargon was very university-specific and was a hindrance in the first few days of secondment. To some, time management became a challenge as the increased travelling compared with their usual schedules sometimes affected project commitments. Overall, there was seen to be considerable support from the university and academic staff, who helped organise lectures and seminars around professional commitments.

Liisa Rohumaa – Journalist: “ ... leaving the hub, the business of day-to-day journalism on working with the best paper in the world is a loss. It's much slower in the university and losing good stories is a loss but I now have the best of both worlds; without having the daily grub of deadlines.”

3. Transferable skills, achievement and outcomes

In the UK's creative and media industries, time is a major factor and the group dynamics tend to be project focused and temporary. Working with students in a team over several weeks, keeping the group engaged and dedicated for extended periods of time, helped focus the mindset of practitioners. Their experiences, shared with the students, will hopefully overlap with their professional lifestyles with skills that are transferable. Having worked as practitioners-in-residence, contacts with academic staff and universities have been established and will hopefully be maintained.

Liisa Rohumaa benefited greatly in terms of reflection. She realised the need to be creative in terms of her new ideas, investigating different ways of working and finding new approaches to journalism. She used her time of reflection to find new perspectives that she could take back to her working environment, analysing how journalists work, think and utilise user-generated content.

All of the practitioners accepted that their teaching methods and presentation skills have been enhanced during their residencies. There is more awareness of the complexities and challenges of teaching, an awareness that has grown considerably as a result of their experiences. They understand the need to make sessions participative and discursive and not simply a 'show and tell' exercise. Interacting with students has made the practitioners more aware of their specialist subject areas and encouraged them to examine their own methods and working practices.

John Dale – Director was able to learn quickly as academics were quick to help him out when needed. He found teaching very difficult and a challenge that he worked towards making it a possibility.

All five practitioners thoroughly enjoyed working with the students, particularly with first year students who are always enthusiastic to learn. Some are envious of the ones ready to embark on their media careers with a new and fresh outlook to creative and media practice.

Others are happy to have shared their professional experiences and knowledge so that they can prepare students for their exciting journey ahead of them.

4. Future expectations and sustainability

All five practitioners interviewed enjoyed their work commitments and have made friends at the university. Interacting and working with people from different disciplines and backgrounds has been stimulating, especially getting involved with the intellectual challenges of their colleagues' research and practice, which has been intellectually challenging. They have enjoyed the part work/part lecture lifestyles, and would like to set an example for the practitioners who will follow them. The practitioners see the need for industry to open the doors to academic institutions and work towards more mutually conducive arrangements that will benefit both industry and students.

Currently, there is no funding to keep a practitioner in residence in the long term. The practitioners felt that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should do more to encourage practitioners-in-residence to stay longer, whether in teaching roles or other engagement in research projects. They felt that HEIs should also invest in links with industry leaders and invite them as guest speakers, other ways of interacting with students interaction and engagement in the subject area.

Richard Clemmow – Content Producer: "Further expectations are to get work colleagues to follow suit and look outside the fairly closed world of UK Media."

Tim Wright – Commercial Producer: "... would like other industry leaders to get more involved at the university as it toughens up critical thinking facilities and makes you realize that there is a historical and cultural context for work."

Four of the five practitioners have sustained relationships with the university and are still involved in teaching, delivering seminars, conducting research and in advisory roles. Only one interviewed practitioner-in-residence has returned to full-time work. To some practitioners, it was a relief to find a regular two or three day a week job where there was

time for both reflection and contemplation. They appreciated both the time and space to let ideas generate, percolate and mature, in a stimulating environment where they could engage in discussion with learners and academic colleagues. To others, it was a way to share knowledge and expertise with those who were interested.

Teacher-practitioners have contributed valuable expertise, specialist skills and knowledge to academic staff and students. In return they have gained significant benefits and transferable skills which they bring to their working practices. Not only has their experience added to the flexibility of lifestyle but has given them the opportunity to meet academics who have encouraged them to reflect on their own working practices. The nature of life within a university has freed them from a mountain of commercial deadlines and provided them with time and space for their ideas to develop and materialise. Overall, it has helped them make subtle changes to their mid-career professions without creating a disruption to their own professional engagement, and in many instances improving that career development.