

Nurturing researching professionals in higher education

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In Ireland, early retirement is being offered to public sector workers to reduce public spending. By the end of February 2012 it is estimated that over 9,000 experienced public servants (2,000 from education), will leave their jobs and under the Employment Control Framework for Public Sector Pay, they cannot be replaced. This mass exodus of experienced personnel is a new phenomenon in Ireland and the long term costs of this austerity measure will not be quantifiable for some time. However, the immediate impact is a vast depletion in the levels of experienced staff, many of whom held posts of executive responsibility. What will become of all this experience? In higher education, many academic staff will leave behind a rich portfolio of their research, writing and teaching experiences in their publications and journal articles. However for those in other posts such as: Directors of Access and Student Services, Examination's Officers, Career Development Officers and other posts deemed non-academic, staff will take their experience with them leaving behind great chasms in the knowledge and 'know how' of the institution. Many colleagues taking early retirement have already been asked by their employers to provide last minute reports and recommendations about their roles because so little is understood about their work practices.

This level of unawareness about the work of this non- academic 'practitioner' group is due in part to the multifaceted nature of the work but also because engagement in writing and research is uncommon. Yet the professional knowledge and experience gained in these posts is invaluable with many practitioners leading the development of innovative approaches to student support, access, widening participation, eLearning technologies and many other aspects of learning and curriculum development. However without research and writing, in most cases knowledge transfer is lost. This void in research is being experienced most acutely in Ireland at present because so many are leaving thus it is a timely example for the subject of my paper as it illustrates the risks inherent in the absence of scholarly 'practitioner' research. In my paper I will consider how this knowledge and the context in which it was created, could be researched and recorded so that transfer of these professional 'knowings' and 'know how' can be used to advance knowledge for future practice. I will also explore how conventional epistemologies influenced how research is defined and who can do it thereby excluding a whole population of 'practitioners' from becoming researching professionals in their field.