

# The understandings of practitioner-lecturers on professional hybrid-identity

Elina Reva<sup>a1</sup>, Marvi Remmik<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>North Estonia Medical Centre, Tallinn Health Care College

<sup>b</sup>Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu  
Viljandi Culture Academy

## Summary

### Introduction

Higher education in Estonia is changing along with the developments taking place in the European Union and now. There is a need to involve practitioners who are capable of offering a high-quality teaching service in higher education institutions. This article concentrates on the practitioner-lecturers who are specialists in their fields and, at the same time, teach at schools according to the established curricula.

The success of a teaching practice is determined by a lecturer's professional identity, its development and manifestation. Thus, the practitioner-lecturers who continue working in their field of study and also teach at a higher education institution, may have a very unique professional identity.

Researchers consider the concept of identity to be very broad (e.g. Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2000) and the borders of the term vague, and no consensus of the content has been reached (Ehala, 2018). Generally, identity is believed to be one part of the human self-concept which is developed in a mutual relationship with other individuals.

In the context of professional development, the topics mostly discussed are identities linked to human roles, including professional identity and hybrid-identity. Based on the definition by Goltz and Smith (2014), professional identity is linked to both external (deriving from environment) and internal (deriving from personality) actors. The development of a professional identity is in constant change. It is a dynamic process, a reality that evolves at an individual as well as social level (Correa et al., 2014; Marcelo, 2009).

Hybrid-identity is widely (Goltz & Smith, 2014) in the context of professional development, which forms an entity due to the joining of two or more important professional roles. In this entity, the roles themselves bear various

---

<sup>1</sup> North Estonia Medical Centre, Sütiste 19, Tallinn, 13419 Estonia;  
elina.reva@regionaalhaigla.ee

identities (Shreeve, 2009). Two professional identities are interrelated by knowledge, as well as practical and professional experience (Reybold, 2008). There is one thing characteristic to the development of a dynamic professional hybrid-identity. The behaviour of one professional identity will prevail while another professional identity evolves (Warin et al., 2006). Thus, the development of a professional hybrid-identity is actually a process of changing professional identities. It is a sort of psychological dissonance that is witnessed in a discomforting situation (Warin et al., 2006).

The development of a hybrid-identity of a practitioner-lecturer may turn out especially disrupting due to the need to link two work cultures and accept the differences between them. This requires positive psychological support and support from the environment. Without the presence of such actors, the professional hybrid-identity is out of balance. This may at times result in the decision not to work as a lecturer anymore and return to professional work (Smith & Boyd, 2012). Usually the latter shows that the development of a lecturer's professional identity lacks support or has stopped for some reason (Shreeve, 2009).

Being aware of the essence of the hybrid-identity of a practitioner-lecturer is important in the context of teaching practices. It is important for the development of the identities of future professionals, as well as for supporting the professional identity development of practitioner-lecturers. In order to shape and develop the teaching practices of practitioner-lecturers via developing their professional identity, it is necessary to understand the professional (hybrid) identity of these practitioner-lecturers and the actors shaping it in their understandings.

The aim of the study is to determine how the professional hybrid-identity is manifested in the view of practitioner-lecturers and what affects its development. Based on the aim, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How is the professional hybrid-identity manifested in the view of practitioner-lecturers?
2. What factors do practitioner-lecturers point out as affecting the evolvement of their professional (hybrid) identity?

### **Study design and selection of the subject**

The study was carried out among 18 practitioner-lecturers. Next to their daily vocational work, they also taught at Estonian higher technical colleges in social, healthcare or technology fields. The sample was comprised intentionally. During the period of data collection, the subjects were working full-time in their field of profession and half-time teaching. The work experience of the subjects varied between 3 and 45 years, and their teaching experience between

0.5 and 45 years. The workload of practitioner-lecturers at a higher education institution was on average 78 academic hours per school year. For data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioner-lecturers. Hence, a plan for a semi-structured interview was drawn. In these interviews, the focus was on teaching practices of practitioner-lecturers.

After the interview plan was finalised, experts in their fields were asked to specify and complement the questions. Once the questions had been modified, a test interview was carried out with two practitioner-lecturers.

Following the test interview, no crucial changes were made to the interview plan. The transcript per interview took up approximately seven pages and the total of transcribed material was 105 pages. To analyse the data, qualitative deductive content analysis was used. The latter was led by a theoretical overview of previous studies and findings. A framework of categories was formed as a basis of the data analysis. The framework itself was based on the literature overview, which was used to categorise the most relevant and characteristic meaning units from the interviews. Based on the data analysis, meaning units were distinguished.

## Results

The study results revealed that the practitioner-lecturers expressed a strong bond to their vocational work, which was also their main field of activity – main job. Working in their profession was seen as the prerequisite and basis for their teaching related work. The advocated understandings were in accordance with the previous study findings. The latter emphasise the descriptions of work-related positions and experience that appear when expressing professional identity.

The vocational belongingness was evident in the understandings of practitioner-lecturers, whereas the teaching-related belongingness was not deeply expressed. Being connected to the teaching community was briefly mentioned and the practitioner-lecturers did not express its importance. Also, the weak connection between the teaching community and practitioner-lecturers was illustrated by the lack of topic-related meaningful opinions, differentiating from the teaching community or even being opposed to the latter. The findings of the study indicate that practitioner-lecturers perceive themselves as practitioners in a higher status and therefore define themselves as practitioners. The results do not refer directly to the professional and teaching-related hybrid-identity of practitioner-lecturers but do refer to its evolving. The practitioner-lecturers' identity can also be called a complex identity, because it is multifaceted and unique.

There are many affecting actors in the evolving of a balanced professional hybrid-identity. On the one hand, understanding the affecting factors enables to support the evolving of the hybrid-identity of practitioner-lecturers. This, on the other hand, reduces the inconsistencies in professional work and teaching, affecting teaching quality. During the interviews with practitioner-lecturers the effect of the professional work experience on teaching, which also had an impact on the hybrid-identity, became obvious. The effect of professional education on the development of the identity was visible in the appearance and importance of the professional competence of practitioner-lecturers.

The influence of teaching-related education was not expressed in the interviews. The practitioner-lecturers rather expressed their knowledge on what the necessary and unnecessary characteristics of lecturers include. As they did not point to actors supporting teaching, this hints at a hybrid-identity, which is currently in the process of developing or unbalanced. It deserves to be highlighted that the practitioner-lecturers believe the lecturer's identity to be important, because practitioner-lecturers value their success as lecturers thanks to their vocational competence. It is also important to point out that the practitioner-lecturers' identity development is also taking place thanks to the teaching practice. Hence, due to the original hybrid-identity, practitioner-lecturers are also valuable to their field of profession.

*Keywords:* practitioner-teachers, professional identity, professional hybrid-identity, qualitative study