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Leveraging the potential of third space faculty developers to foster individual and collective flourishing faculty professional identities in higher education

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Abstract

In the context of higher education, which is a complex environment of shifting landscapes, academic identity is perceived as being eroded, and new identities associated with hybrid roles abound. Flexible support mechanisms are needed to counter the destabilising effects of the recent erosion of tradition-bound structures. This study explores how an understanding of faculty professional identity might be used by faculty developers to inform individual and collective development initiatives and foster flourishing. Using a qualitative methodology, focus group discussions with faculty developers probe the potential utility of a measure of faculty professional identity. Utility is evaluated at three levels of practice: institutional, collective and individual. Findings demonstrate the potential for faculty developers, with their third space positioning, to play a pivotal role in guiding individuals and institutions as they navigate increasingly complex higher education contexts. Recommendations include recognising the strategic potential of

faculty developers as institutional gatekeepers of sensitive data and enablers of collective flourishing. A data-informed, adaptive, person-centred approach to individual faculty development that delves into the being as well as the doing to facilitate individual flourishing is proposed.

Keywords faculty development; flourishing; faculty professional identity; third space; academic identity

Introduction

Higher education institutions have become intricately layered tapestries of structures, roles and relationships, which interact and overlap in what Henseke et al. (2021) dub a multiverse or pluriverse. Academics have traditionally been characterised by the researcher–teacher duality of their professional practice. The term 'faculty' is used in this article to include academics along with teaching professionals not engaged in research. A wide range of roles engaged in neither research nor teaching are sometimes called administrative or professional staff.

The term 'third space' is particularly useful in the higher education context, where professional roles which straddle the academic–administrative divide are increasingly common (Whitchurch, 2008). These roles raise questions regarding not only boundaries, but also credibility, power, legitimacy and knowledge (Whitchurch, 2018).

Faculty developers, also termed 'educational' or 'academic developers', defy the conventional boundaries and institutional logics of professional identities in the higher education context, and epitomise several of the established understandings and applications of the concept of the third space professional (Denney, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008, 2015). From their relationships and interactions to their positioning in time and space, several aspects of the professional practice of faculty developers support the claim that they are archetypal third space professionals. These may include the partnerships and collaborations which they both participate in and facilitate, the programmes and support they provide, and their physical location, as well as the events they organise and host.

This study forms part of a larger research project (see Puhr, 2023) in which the unique third space lens of faculty developers was used to facilitate the explicit identification and articulation of the complex multiple dimensions inherent in the professional identities of higher education academics (faculty). The relationship between identity and flourishing was also probed. Originally a pragmatic Deweyan concept (see Dewey, 1929), flourishing has become a cornerstone of positive psychology. It is defined by Seligman (2011) as a state of well-being characterised by positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

Positing that an increased focus on the being of identity might complement the current focus of faculty developers on the doing of faculty practice, the following research question is posed: How might an understanding of faculty professional identity be used by third space faculty developers to inform individual and collective development initiatives and foster flourishing?

Context and literature review

Theoretical framework

For the purposes of this research, which is situated in the context of higher education and interrogates identities rooted in professional practice, identity is framed using pragmatic identity theory, as conceptualised by Levitan and Carr-Chellman (2018). Pragmatic identity theory is informed by the works of Dewey (1929) on human flourishing and self-concept, Peirce (1868) on the importance of social context, as well as the fallible, correctable nature of being and James (1890, 1901) on sources of self-awareness. Pragmatic identity theory provides an anti-essentialist theory based on the primacy of change, growth and relationships, where 'identities are malleable and embedded in context' (Levitan and Carr-Chellman, 2018: 147). It posits that identities are a dynamic accumulation of the taken-on, the constructed and the imposed, and it rejects the psychogenetic–sociogenetic dichotomy underpinning much of the research

on identity by acknowledging that the psychogenetic mental development of subjective agency is in constant negotiation with the sociogenetic interactive development of social structures.

In addition to concepts of identity and flourishing, several practice theories underpin this research. Bourdieu (1977a) positions practice as mediating between structure and agency, and the concept of field provides a framework with which to interrogate the higher education context. The habitus, 'a system of shared dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu, 1988: 279), is pertinent in considering the values, beliefs and behaviours which inform professional practice extending to awareness of the value of behaviours (Bourdieu, 1977b). The habitus is constituted only in embodied practice, and it is often both arbitrary and subconscious (Webb et al., 2002), offering a lens to interrogate accepted codes of behaviour among professionals.

The Bourdieusian concept of capital encompasses both material and abstract objects, artefacts and attributes which may have intrinsic or symbolic value in a social setting (Webb et al., 2002). The concept may be applied to hierarchies, power and status in the context of higher education institutions, especially given that some legitimate authority is needed to designate the value of symbolic capital.

Heavily influenced by Bourdieu, Holland et al. (1998) share a pragmatic rejection of the psychogenetic–sociogenetic dichotomy, and their concept of figured worlds positions identity in practice. The forces of agency, power and privilege wield extensive influence in figured worlds, as intimate inner processes are enacted in 'practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed "worlds"' (Holland et al., 1998: 7). Even when agency is weak or contested, it is present and active in the 'space of authoring' (Holland et al., 1998: 272), in which personal authorship is informed by social efficacy.

Whitchurch (2008: 377) is not alone in asserting that 'shifting identities and blurring boundaries' in higher education have resulted in an eroding of the established authority of institutional structures in forging identities. The relationships and networks that inform social identities play an increasingly important role (see Cohen, 2021; Henkel, 2010). Gelfand (2018) would characterise this as the loosening of a previously tight culture, a process that may not be comfortable for those implicated.

The role of faculty development

This article explores the potential role of faculty development in fostering flourishing faculty identities. Steinert et al. (2019: 963) define faculty development 'to include all activities faculty members pursue to improve their knowledge, skills, and behaviours as teachers and educators, leaders and managers, and researchers and scholars, in both individual and group settings'. This definition places faculty development in the hands of the faculty, providing agency and autonomy for individual faculty, and implying that faculty developers play a supportive and facilitating role. It also acknowledges the multiplicity of activities in which faculty may be involved. The same authors assert that faculty development can have a profound impact on higher education teaching identities, with the power to support and strengthen established identities, or awaken and develop those that are burgeoning. In their systematic literature review, Van Lankveld et al. (2017) found 11 articles asserting that development activities strengthen teacher identities in higher education faculty.

Four aspects of faculty development are proposed by Centra (1989), encompassing personal, instructional, organisational and professional growth. These continue to inform understandings of the role of faculty development in the twenty-first century (McAlpine et al., 2007). However, the work of faculty developers has tended to focus heavily on the instructional, practice-based pillar of Centra's (1989) model, as discussed and theoretically interrogated by McAlpine et al. (2007) and evidenced in the influential *Guide to Faculty Development* (Gillespie and Robertson, 2010). The role of developers has evolved over time, from a focus on tactical, individual teaching practice, to strategic, organisationally coherent learning culture (Gibbs, 2013; Mårtensson and Roxå, 2021; McGrath, 2020). However, the primacy, described by Gibbs (2013), of manuals and guides providing practical advice persists (Marek et al., 2021).

A heavy concentration on the doing of teaching in development activities is understandable, given the exposed and public nature of faculty work (Barrow and Grant, 2012; Way, 2018). However, Way (2018) suggests that the focus on practice belies the importance of the underlying being of identity. Gunersel et al. (2013) claim that the construction of a higher education teaching identity can be a lonely and daunting endeavour, and they find that collaborative forms of faculty development are highly beneficial to this process. However, Locke et al. (2016) caution that standardised one-size-fits-all faculty

development programmes may not meet the needs of faculty with increasingly diverse backgrounds, suggesting that there is also a need for providing tailored and targeted support to meet the needs of individual faculty. Billot and King (2017) concur, and advocate for programmes that focus on encouraging socialisation, and providing support mechanisms and platforms for faculty. Sotto-Santiago et al. (2019) point to the specific needs of historically marginalised faculty in advocating a tailored approach.

In addition to focusing on practice, faculty developers tend to prioritise the needs of new faculty members (Way, 2018). Way (2018) points out the lifelong need for development, and claims that an explicit recognition of the interaction of identity and practice is needed, asserting that the fear and trepidation experienced by even the most experienced faculty can be negated by the enhanced sense of control and efficacy that a strong awareness of identity provides.

Research suggests that insights into the dimensions and contextual factors which are hidden within professional identities might draw attention to how these identities underpin professional practice, particularly in contested or changing contexts (Barbour and Lammers, 2015). The same authors claim that the nesting of professional identities in organisations is often oversimplified. Understanding the extent to which organisational and professional identity mesh might have significant potential value for third space faculty developers, who are challenged to 'build a more supportive academic culture' (Billot and King, 2017: 612).

Nias (1989) claims that faculty with robust and flourishing professional identities are more inclined to engage with development, better able to handle change and more likely to innovate in their teaching practice. However, Land (2007) suggests that the growing pressure on faculty to attend, record and report participation in faculty development results in a risk that faculty development might be seen as a bureaucratic obligation. There is a need for initiatives which are adaptive, and which are perceived as relevant and worthwhile by faculty (McCune, 2021).

In 2013, Austin and Sorcinelli predicted that faculty development would become a strategic lever, playing an increasingly important role in institutional effectiveness and excellence (Austin and Sorcinelli, 2013). The global Covid-19 pandemic placed faculty developers in the spotlight, and demonstrated the support that they could provide in facilitating agility and assuring quality in teaching and learning (Dumont, 2021). This study has the potential to offer faculty developers a highly accessible insight into the nature and strength of faculty identity at a time when faculty development has never been in higher demand (see Gibbs, 2013; Mårtensson and Roxå, 2021; McGrath, 2020; Sugrue et al., 2018; Sutherland, 2018).

Methods

This research was conducted in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018). Ethical approval was granted by UCL Institute of Education, London on 19 July 2021.

To explore how an understanding of faculty professional identity might be used by faculty developers to inform individual and collective development initiatives and to foster flourishing, focus groups were selected as an appropriate method for capturing a range of interactive perspectives in the context of collective sense-making (Wilkinson, 1998). Using non-probability purposive sampling, which is considered appropriate for research requiring a specific participant profile (Bryman, 2012), members of the Swiss Faculty Development Network were invited to participate. Online videoconferencing allowed geographically disparate participants to take part, and conversations were conducted in English.

Focus group participants (n = 9) were randomly assigned to one of two groups. The focus group question guide included an introductory descriptive overview of the research; an explanation of the graphic visualisations of faculty identity data was provided as a prompt; and loosely structured questions were used to probe how the graphs and data might be interpreted, aggregated, shared and used to inform faculty development initiatives and practice.

Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed using the integrated functions of Microsoft Teams. Following a thorough cleaning and pseudonymising of the transcriptions, a rich interpretative data-driven thematic analysis of the focus group data was conducted in six steps, as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Inductively generated codes were drafted and refined during three iterative readings of the entire data set. Code families provided additional insights into specific nuances in the data in the form of sub-codes.

Although the focus group question guide, and the research question can play a role in searching for, reviewing and defining themes, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) recommend carefully reviewing codes and coded data to identify topics around which codes cluster or form patterns. These topics were then refined to formulate themes.

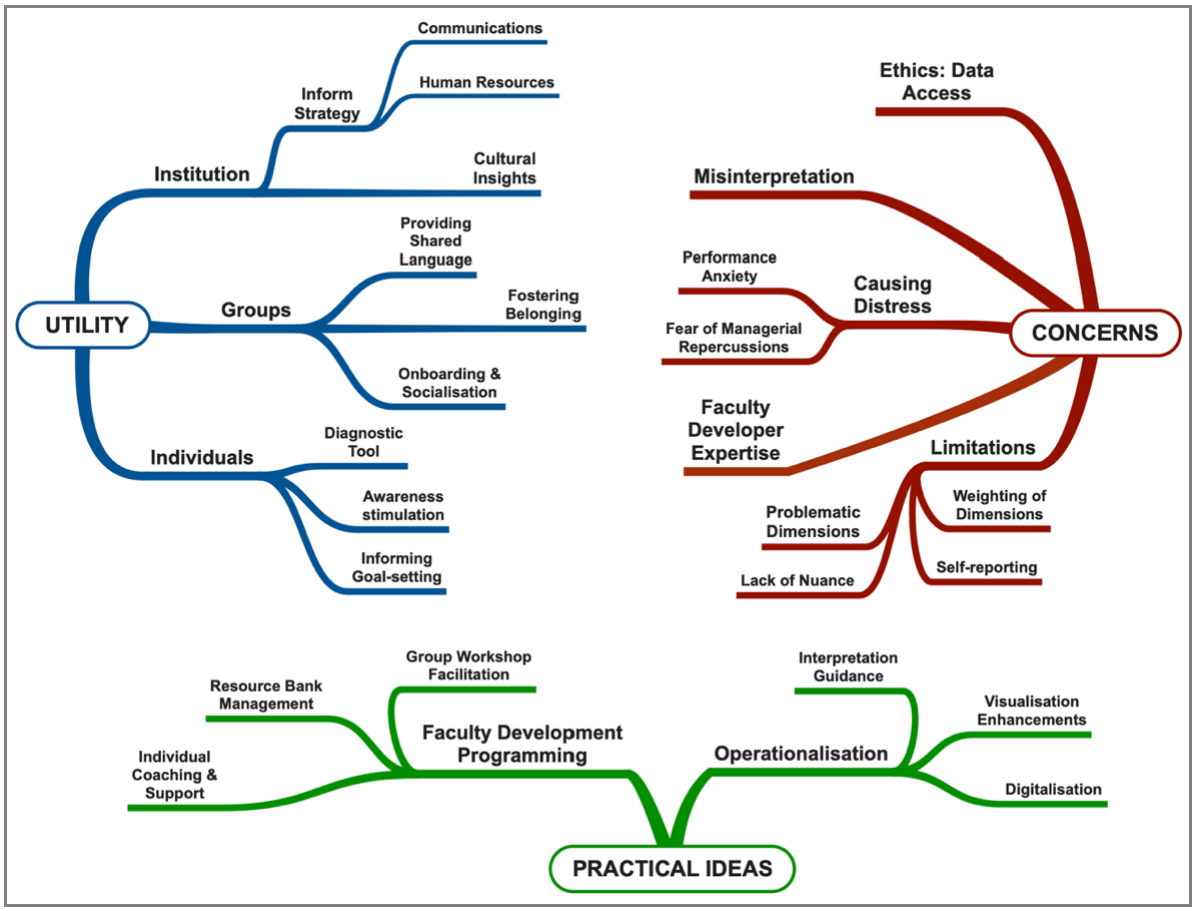
Findings and analysis

Three central themes emerged during the iterative thematic analysis: Utility, Concerns and Practical ideas. Figure 1 provides an overview of the three themes, illustrating their subthemes and the several areas of interest associated with each.

The focus group discussions suggested that an understanding of higher education faculty professional identity might be useful at three organisational levels: institutional level, group level and individual level. These three levels of utility provide the scaffolding for the presentation of the thematic analysis.

The comments, questions and conversations of focus group participants were insightful, thoughtful and generous. They were also, by turns, provocative and humorous, betraying a genuine engagement with the topic. To capture these nuanced and valuable contributions, the data are presented in an illustrated analytical narrative to draw out the connections between themes using the participants' voices, as well as integrating pertinent literature. Rather than being addressed separately, the themes of concerns and practical ideas are woven into the discussion of utility.

Figure 1. Thematic map of focus group data



Institutional utility

Participants pointed out the need for insights into organisational culture and well-being that aggregate faculty identity data might provide. Maeve suggested that the data might offer a nuanced awareness of 'what's valued in my institution?' The 'shared dispositions and cognitive structures' of Bourdieu's (1988: 279) habitus were evoked by Rose, when she pointed to the potential benefits of the shared 'framework and language', and Kate surmised that, in addition to educational developers, departments including human resources and communications might be interested in aggregate institutional data.

Several participants agreed that questions regarding organisational identity might be prompted, revealing potentially compelling similarities and differences between institutions. Sam enthused, 'that would be really interesting ... in terms of exchanges between faculty developers'. This implies that understanding the *being* of faculty identity has potential value at institutional level.

The prestige of research in higher education is well-documented (see Bourdieu, 1988; Clarke et al., 2013; Macfarlane, 2016; McCune, 2021), and both Kate and Sam saw an understanding of faculty professional identity as having potential to raise the status and profile of teaching in research-intensive institutions: 'What are the stories we want to be telling about teaching?' (Sam).

Participants also discussed potential utility for strategic decision making, providing institutional leaders with 'tools to think about how to invest in staff development ... satisfaction and well-being' (Kate) by precipitating questions such as 'which of these [dimensions] are the ones I need to worry about ... where do I need to pay closer attention ... are some more strongly correlated than others?' Ben reasoned that it would be possible to 'rank the various [dimensions based] on how important they are' for the institution.

Sam argued that institutional faculty identity data might also help guide development programming, and Mike suggested that aggregate data gathered before and after an institution-wide faculty development intervention might capture the impact of the intervention, an idea eagerly supported by Ben and Kate. This nuanced and data-driven approach to faculty development programming resonates with a need identified in scholarly literature (see Billot and King, 2017; Gunersel et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2016; Sotto-Santiago et al., 2019; Way, 2018).

Participants' remarks about institutional power dynamics called to mind both Bourdieu's symbolic capital (Webb et al., 2002) and the figured worlds of Holland et al. (1998). In the multiverse of contemporary higher education institutions (Henseke et al., 2021), where third space professionals negotiate traditional hierarchies and boundaries (Whitchurch, 2018), Kate worried that the data might draw attention to some stakeholder inconsistencies in institutional goal setting: 'the things we see on this chart might not be shared goals by the leaders at our institutions'. Ron cautioned that insights can only be actionable if those with access to aggregate faculty identity data have the power to 'do something about it'. Lee pointed out that those in positions of power may not 'take the time to understand what it all means'. Her caricature of institutional management resonates with several studies decrying the rise of managerialism in higher education (see Bostock and Baume, 2016; Sachs, 2001). In a similar vein, Mark, although enthusiastic about the value of aggregated faculty identity data for institutional leadership, had privacy and data protection concerns regarding the sharing of individual data.

Group utility

The potent tendency to categorise faculty into groups is a feature of in-group identification (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019; Trepte and Loy, 2017). Although these in-groups may be heavily influenced by shared approaches to *doing*, focus group discussions revealed that shared understandings of being exist based on many factors. Maeve spoke about the 'many cultures within the culture' at her institution, joking, 'Everyone always says, "We're different" ... Yeah, yeah, yeah – you're all different.' Several participants were curious about the potential value of comparing aggregate data for different types of groups, and Mark suggested that this 'could be even more useful than just the aggregate of the institution', offering early- and late-career faculty as an example.

The development of programmes based on groups identified using faculty identity data included 'educator exchanges' (Rose) for a particular dimension of faculty identity by putting out a call for volunteers with a high score to 'share their experience'. This echoes the view that identities are 'taken on through shared practices' (Taylor, 2007: 28). Rose also imagined workshops in which faculty would find 'overlap' and 'commonalities ... explore their identities and talk about intersectionality ... in a safe space'.

This approach responds to the challenges of identity formation identified by Gunersel et al. (2013), and addresses the needs of historically marginalised faculty (see Sotto-Santiago et al., 2019).

The onboarding of new faculty was seen as a particular context which might benefit from identity insights 'to help them position themselves in various dimensions' (Ben). For example, the formative power of one's discipline (see Henkel, 2010) emerged in Maeve's observations regarding the power and influence of discipline, and Ron spoke about embarking on a teaching role as 'socialising into a discipline' of epistemically bound groups of faculty as similar to a community of practice (see Lave and Wenger, 2001).

Individual utility

Possible utility of faculty identity data for individuals dominated the discussions and transcended the themes, subthemes and thematic components of the thematic map (see Figure 1). Kate captured this mood by declaring, 'I think everything else pales in value in comparison to what it brings ... an individual ... you are presented with a mirror.' This evokes the underlying psychological processes of pragmatic identity theory as crucial in the forming of faculty identities.

The first potential use of faculty identity data at individual level is helping faculty 'examine their own identity' (Rose), and providing a starting point for 'thinking differently about identity' (Ron). Kate declared that 'self-awareness ... is the most valuable part', envisaging 'layers' of awareness. She imagined an example where a faculty member has a low score for relationships with colleagues, and reflects that this is 'an area where I'm really struggling, but that might not be my fault. Maybe I'm the only ... woman in a team of men.' This resonates with research regarding marginalised faculty by Sotto-Santiago et al. (2019), and with the huge demand in the US for 'more programming on diversity, equity and inclusion' by providing 'a good entry point to initiate some of the more difficult discussions' (Rose).

The potential of faculty identity data to cause distress was the object of intense discussion. Participants agreed that faculty would want immediate access to their data, but Maeve worried about the tendency to superficially assume that 'a higher score is better'. Lee anticipated that some faculty might find their results 'quite disconcerting'. To counteract the risk of individual faculty jumping to negative conclusions, participants made several practical suggestions to assist faculty with the interpretational process: providing a key with dimensional definitions; including examples as an interpretational guide; and implementing a three-step process to accompany faculty, in which faculty would first select the dimensions they consider important, complete the survey and receive the results, and then discuss with a faculty developer. These suggestions chime with Cisneros's (2021) advice, that 'it will be helpful, in a live setting, if you can narrate and animate the building of your [graph] piece by piece'.

Participants enthused about Ron's idea of a more autonomous faculty experience that might include a 'digital, online … adaptive' reporting tool (Ron), where faculty would first have access to a limited number of preselected dimensional results, and could later choose to return and access other dimensions in an 'inquiry into my own data' process. Other ideas for digitalising the user experience included interactive 'tool-tips' to make dimensional definitions accessible, and integrating helpful resources to address faculty questions about how to interpret data and the next steps they might take. Amyrotos et al. (2021: 175) argue that technologies are available to provide 'individualised, user-centred delivery of information/insights', and they highlight 'the need for user-centred/persona-driven data exploration through adaptive data visualisations and personalised support'.

Whether interpretation of individual faculty identity data is accompanied by faculty developers or is autonomous, the intimately personal data captured gave rise to discussions about the potential for a novel approach to professional development for both faculty and faculty developers. Maeve enthused that understanding faculty identity might be even more valuable to faculty developers than to faculty themselves. This echoes studies suggesting the importance of self-awareness in tackling the implicit tensions in layered contemporary professional identities (see Caza and Creary, 2016), which is particularly acute for higher education faculty (Nevgi and Löfström, 2015; Puhr, 2023).

Kate anticipated some resistance from faculty who may see identity data as 'way too touchy-feely', but Ron countered that the quantitative nature of the data would win over some sceptics. Sam had some reservations about faculty developers feeling 'uncomfortable', and not wanting to 'let people down by not being able to accompany and follow up'. Kate agreed, while acknowledging that faculty identity data demonstrate that personal and professional development are 'intertwined':

> To be flourishing, you need to have both. You can't just develop people as instructors ... that is often our key mandate [as faculty developers], but the personal development stuff should also be considered somehow. [Faculty identity data provide] justification for branching out, if we're not already offering development in this area.

This echoes Centra's (1989) recommendation that faculty development should encompass personal as well as instructional, organisational and professional growth, and Way's (2018) assertion that the underlying 'being' of identity merits more attention: 'Begin by taking inventory of who you are.'

Goal setting, already discussed at institutional level, was also mentioned for individuals. Using an identity measure as a 'diagnostic tool' (Kate), the faculty member and a faculty developer would meet and 'come up with a plan together' (Lee), 'you've got a gap ... and you can work on developing and closing the gap' (Mark). Ian imagined longitudinal utility as a 'professional development tool' to help achieve a carefully managed 'steady progression', where faculty developers provide a development roadmap. Lee agreed, and imagined focusing on three or four dimensions initially, before moving on to others.

Concerns that goal setting might go hand in hand with managerial tracking and repercussions suggested the tensions between agency, power and privilege in the figured worlds conceived by Holland et al. (1998): 'faculty are very scared of being evaluated and what consequences are going to come', reasoning that it would be 'important then to really accompany this tool' (Maeve).

Although the possibility that comparing individual and aggregate results might exacerbate performance anxiety was a concern, Ben appreciated that it could help new faculty to 'reflect on where they are and where they want to go, and help them choose the path'. He mentioned *nudge theory* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), suggesting that seeing aggregate faculty identity data might prompt the individual to act, and Ron hoped that sceptical faculty would find the comparison motivating.

Participants also raised concerns about how, and with whom, individual results should be shared, with Sam noting that it is 'really personal'. Mark felt that access to individual data should be 'up to the individual', and Kate agreed, saying, 'it's really their data'.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature by providing evidence that an understanding of faculty professional identity would facilitate the development of the being of faculty identity alongside the doing of faculty practice. The potential for faculty developers to play a central role in supporting awareness and fostering flourishing for individuals, groups and institutions is also evidenced.

Equipping faculty developers to play a strategic role at institutional level

At an institutional level, aggregated faculty identity data might reveal institutional strengths, as well as weaknesses which could be tackled strategically. However, the potential for misinterpretation and misuse of data raised by research participants as a concern at both institutional and individual levels of utility underlines the need for an impartial and knowledgeable role in the analysis of both individual and aggregated data. With their third space positioning and their comprehensive insights, faculty developers are uniquely placed to play the role of interpretational gatekeepers, ensuring that data are collected, accessed and interpreted responsibly at individual, group and institutional levels.

Not all faculty developers currently have the sphere of influence in their institutions to undertake such a strategic role, and aligning faculty development recommendations with the perspectives of institutional management might present challenges. Inter-institutional networks of faculty developers could provide insights, working models and support mechanisms to those embarking on strategically influential roles within their institutions.

An innovative, data-informed, adaptive and person-centred approach to individual faculty development

Ambitious and nuanced adaptive approaches to individual faculty development emerged from this research. On the simplest level, faculty identity data were seen as a conversation starter in the context of individual consultations between faculty and faculty developers for goal setting or performance evaluation purposes. The potentially transformative impact of the data, and the risks of misinterpretation

and distress, led participants to imagine sophisticated, person-centred, multi-phase approaches. Clearly conceived consultation conversations and processes ranged from a skilfully accompanied gradual reveal of faculty identity data to a more autonomous, digitally supported experience with carefully curated resources. An adaptive online platform facilitating supported, technology-enabled, user-centred access to, and interrogation of, the data might help tackle the anticipated reluctance of some faculty who tend to evade personal conversations.

The potential of faculty identity data to identify possible flaws or biases in an individual's metacognitive processes, and the orientation of the data away from the typically practice-driven approaches to faculty development, and towards the much-overlooked underlying identities of faculty, offers an opportunity for faculty developers to broaden the scope of support provided to individual faculty. However, developing an adaptive, person-centred approach that delves into the being as well as the doing of higher education faculty might represent a daunting prospect for faculty developers, and might reveal an expertise deficiency requiring training for developers. This paradigm shift meets development needs identified in several studies, and it provides an opportunity for a shift in focus to facilitating flourishing.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by UCL Institute of Education ethics board. The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with British Educational Research Association (BERA) standards.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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