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Exploring emotion in the higher education workplace : capturing contrasting perspectives using Q methodology

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Abstract

This article presents an original application of Q methodology in investigating the challenging arena of emotion in the Higher Education (HE) workplace. Q's strength lies in capturing holistic, subjective accounts of complex and contested phenomena but is unusual in employing a statistical procedure within an interpretivist framework. Here Q is used to capture the emotional tone of the working lives of academic and support colleagues in one UK Higher Education Institution (HEI). Research design and data analysis were underpinned by the concept of appraisal, which has an established history in stress and emotion scholarship across a range of disciplines. Four distinct illustrative workplace accounts are presented and analysed in terms of their relevance for individual emotion and wellbeing. The utility of this application of Q methodology in surfacing and comparing differing experiences of university life is discussed and the implications for institutional research and practice are considered.

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