The academic role in the future

Comprising Presentation (20 minutes) plus interactive Workshop encouraging debate (40 minutes)

The academic as a process worker: academic contexts and role incongruence

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Under the all-too familiar managerialist paradigm, the higher education product has become increasingly standardised. The need for portable credentials has made education content very similar around the world, particularly for studies linked with professions. The additional confines of accreditation and the need to comply with standards of various national quality control agencies, means that the contemporary academic now is obliged to follow a process to ensure that the educational product is delivered equitably and consistently to all students. In industrial contexts consistency with a sense of sameness is indeed a laudable objective. However, such a context in higher education provides significant challenges for the construction of academic identity.

Whereas critical thinking and contribution to new knowledge traditionally have been valued in academics as knowledge workers, increasingly academics are expected to work in research teams with outputs aligned with institutional priorities. As a result, regardless of the importance placed upon research by the individual knowledge worker, only research that is significantly aligned with priorities receives recognition and reward.

How do academics fit into new, more narrowly defined (some might say confined) roles, ones that challenge perceptions of autonomy and academic identity? Churchman and King (2009), Clegg (2008), Whitchurch (2008), Becker and Trowler (2001) and others point out the importance of academic identity as part of a sense of academic self. These writers suggest that older academics have historical perspectives they lament and many, along with the emerging new academics, have been able to construct their identities within the context of the domain they currently occupy. If it is to be successful, identity construction must form a continuous process. In the time-poor academy of today, the opportunity to reflect and consider personal positioning within the academy can be fleeting before more change arrives and identities require restructuring.

Coates et al (2012) identified that Australian academic job satisfaction was considerably lower than in many countries with only UK and Portugese academics reporting lower levels of satisfaction. The continuing discourse of academic dissatisfaction suggests that workforce practices have not changed in step with the changing operational context. Corporations would be criticised for this form of incongruence and yet higher education institutions essentially operate as corporations without having grappled with the harder steps of rethinking and implementing changes in workforce needs.

Interactive session encouraging debate…

The academic role in the future – what could it look like?

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For process workers, the freedom to construct an identity may be very limited. Perhaps process workers would not need to be as qualified as the classic 'academic' of the past. This opens the door for the creation of new academic roles and new forms of employment in higher education. Indeed, Coates and Geodegebuure (2012) suggest that 'workforce customisation is the way of the future'. One way to realise this would be to create potentially new roles for those engaged in the process of delivery as distinct from those responsible for the development and/or design of, educational products.

Working in groups, participants will be asked to engage in a discussion covering the following questions:

1. Are there distinct academic roles that can be mainstreamed?
2. Is there room for more specialised academic jobs (e.g. development versus delivery of educational content)? What qualifications would they require?
3. What recognition and reward systems might be appropriate for different roles?
4. How might appointed knowledge workers move between roles?

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