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### **Mavericks, translators and Cinderellas: business facing academics reflect on academic identity (0118)**

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Higher Education in the UK is changing and individual universities position themselves in this new landscape. Commonly accepted understandings of academic identity fail to account for the complexity of twenty first century university life. Drawing on a practice based project interviewing fifteen academics in a business facing university I argue for a more proactive stance in opening up and exploring the potential of academic identity at the individual level, enabling academics to have a clear grasp of their developing, distinctive academic identity and what this means for working engagement in the contemporary university. This in turn means that any, or indeed all, of the current considerations of academic identity may apply; the challenge is not to decide which is right but to enable a process of individual understanding. Conversational interviews are used to explore the changing nature of academic identity with business facing academics.

SRHE symposium

### **Mavericks, translators and Cinderellas: business facing academics reflect on academic identity**

Outline (937 words)

The significant shift at the beginning of the twenty first century in 'academic knowledge work' (Deem et al 2007) to include the extension of academic activity from teaching and research to include other elements such as consultancy and entrepreneurial endeavour has significant implications for academic identity. Few academics would regard themselves as operating in a steady-state environment, reliant on guaranteed public funding (Temple 2009) change is now part of the academic way of being.

Academic identity is largely assumed to consist of teaching and research in an individual balance related to sector and university demands as well as to personal skills and aspirations. I argue that this traditional focus needs to be opened up and explored. Twenty first century higher education teaching is no longer based on lectures where individual academics face large groups of students to present knowledge. Teaching now is as likely to be the design of distance learning materials, engagement through the internet with students one has never met, or providing intensive input for an overseas project, as it is to be the traditional seminar or tutorial. Knowledge in many instances is co-created with learners rather than passed from lecturer to student. The nature of university teaching has changed and includes activities and engagements which require a different way of thinking about the process and practice of teaching itself.

Similarly, in the social sciences at least, research may include funded projects which are more like consultancy, and may even include teaching, pilot programmes and evaluations for a range of public sector bodies as well as traditional investigations and generation of new understandings. Given that

at times it is difficult to separate and label the two activities a concern with the balance between the two aspects or the number of academics who do more or less of each seems less than helpful. Even within a performative culture there is some room for individual identity.

The business facing activity that is my focus of interest is a challenge to the academic identity model we currently accept. Commercial activity could potentially be divided and relabelled; a pragmatic process of deciding whether a particular activity is more like teaching or more like research. But this denies the different nature of the business activity revealed in the study - the networking and translating, the creative approach to commercial work. Giving forms of work labels in order to pretend a fit with a model of teaching and research that is in itself questionable as an accurate description of the contemporary position offers little value. In addition once we move away from the teaching research simple nexus there are other issues to be considered. Although the move to a leadership role is seen to change the individual from academic to manager of academics (Winter 2009) this is not always reflected in the reality where individuals combine both roles; where then does leadership figure in academic identity? The contemporary university needs more individuals who 'lead' at the local level and see this as part of their academic responsibility not as a burden to be avoided. In addition Macfarlane (2005) among others makes a strong case for academic service, both internally and externally, which is unaccounted for in the traditional teaching and research dichotomy.

Individual academics in a contemporary university do not see their identity in terms of as separation of teaching and research. If therefore we continue to use this way of defining academic identity we are disenfranchising those who should own the descriptor. My enquiry reveals academics integrating teaching, research and other activity in a seamless engagement with 'knowledge work'. More than this the integration, rather than separation, of these activities is part not only of the identity of the academic but also of a sustained attempt to improve quality in each aspect. A virtuous circle of activity with campus teaching underpinned by real world engagement, short courses providing cutting edge challenge, industry links feeding academic updating, external networks providing research opportunities. For each academic the particular combination of activities enables a focused engagement with discipline or professional knowledge which offers a superior approach than any one activity alone. This consistent and persistent interaction and interdependence offers a dynamic dimension which provides a freshness of approach and commitment. My study looked specifically at successful business facing academics but all the evidence points to the fact that these individuals are successful academics – the business facing activity appears to assist them in achieving this. It is of course also possible that the reverse is true that only successful academics can manage business facing activity effectively but this does not diminish the argument.

If then we were to put aside the need to define academic identity in relation only to the teaching/research continuum this opens up potential for a different way of considering academic identities. There is no longer the need to try and force particular activities into labelled silos, in fact the opposite – the importance would be in encouraging individual academics to seek synergies, overlaps and links in order to create their own seamless engagement. The participants in my enquiry, although passing comment on the challenges and demand of working life, had shifted in their identity to see themselves working in a different way. Universally there was a commitment to making things work for

themselves, their students and their commercial clients, whatever this took in the way of personal effort and engagement. Individuals were prepared to learn new skills, adopt different working strategies, engage with their discipline knowledge in innovative ways and seek fresh alliances with commercial partners. In short they were prepared to embrace a different way of being an academic.