Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education – Expanding the Parameters of Academia

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Case Material

- Two LFHE funded studies 2005-2009
- 9 institutions; 70 respondents; UK, US, Australia
- 42 respondents in roles with significant academic elements (mainly non-academic/split contracts)
- All had academic credentials including master’s/doctorates and publications
- Backgrounds included continuing education, teacher education, English as a second language, academic literacy, policy research, scientific research and practice
• Increasing movement of staff between higher education and other sectors eg practice settings; public policy/funding agencies; business/industry
• Doctoral research training provides generic skills for broader types of role as well as academia
• Roles in eg research management or knowledge transfer increasingly specify a doctorate
• Academic career paths becoming less linear (eg Strike’s (2010) “career climbing frame”; Coates and Goedegebuure (2010) “snakes and ladders”)
• Blurring of binary division between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ work
• Academia as a “T-shaped profession… people are equipped with competences and skills which are relevant for employment outside academia, but also for an increasing diversification of job tasks within the academic profession” (Enders/de Weert 2009)
• “academics, researchers and teachers are working in an environment of complex, differentiated social groups and influences, where structures and relationships are more fluid” (Henkel, 2009)
Example: Learning Partnerships Manager

• Exemplified by job description for Learning Partnerships Manager, requiring:
  “…academic credibility to ensure that innovative and complex operations are delivered with high standards and quality… [and] experience of generating external income and involvement in project management”
Example of fields of activity

• *Teaching and learning* eg tutoring, programme design/documentation, study skills/academic literacy
• *Community partnership* eg employer engagement, workplace learning, outreach sessions
• *Web-based learning* eg online programme design/development/adaptation, web-based discussion fora
• *Institutional research* into eg student recruitment & outcomes, benchmarking, educational practice
• *Research enterprise* eg preparation of bids, knowledge transfer, spin out, bespoke programmes for industry
Preference for academically-oriented roles

- People who could have gone ‘either way’…
- Positive choice/intentionality arising from eg:
  - Ideological commitment to eg widening participation
- Subject discipline no longer interesting/too isolating
- Preferred team working
- Research inactive or preferred Mode 2 orientation
- Pragmatic eg role offered route into higher education, career development, funding opportunities; or needed job in specific location
Extension of academic identities

Community networks

Project Portfolios eg

Widening participation

Teaching

Web-based learning

Teaching and learning networks

Mode 2 Policy research

Research

Mode 2 Institutional research

Community partnership

Third leg

Business partnership

Disciplinary networks
Model I: Integrated

- Project roles recognised by institution/embedded in structures (eg institutional research, US)
- More likely to lead to “a professional cadre of people who could have been faculty members… they can go as far as the work takes them… they can go toe-to-toe with faculty” (educational outreach manager, US)
- Appeared to be the most stable environment for project work (‘neutral’ policy zone) but
- Could lead to frustration with bureaucratic structures, micro-management, lack of feedback
Model II: Semi-autonomous

• Roles in fully or partly self-funding units eg enterprise and innovation centres; learning support units
• Recognised by institution
• Sense of direct stake in project/responsibility for decisions
• Evident in UK, US and Australia
• Appeared to be the most rewarding environment for project working, but
• Greater exposure to risk/organisational politics
• Less organisational safety nets
Model III - Independent

• Individuals who, because of their background, are able to make a unique contribution eg in a faculty context on start-up projects or new programmes
• Minimal recognition by institution
• Work around formal structures/‘under the radar’
• Sometimes reflected in split or fractional appointments in relation to specific projects
• Most likely to lead to concept of the ‘academic or project consultant’
• More evident in UK and Australia
Example of academic/project consultant role

- Employed on multiple, fractional contracts/ran own business
- Located between academic department, educational technology unit, central administration
- Involved in teaching, programme development, organisational restructuring
- Contracts arose through contacts/networks: “most areas try to retain you when they know that you can actually do the job within the parameters…”
- Because of ‘casual’ status not always linked into internal communications
Example of academic/project consultant role II

“I’ve never been on a career path as such… [I see myself as] achieving work for the university that benefits academics and students… and showing academics and administrators that they can think kindly of each other and work together”.

“[In the university] there are no positions that allow you to teach and project manage in one role… in the business world there is a great deal more freedom in creating positions that suit the needs of the organisation”.
The three models considered in terms of structure/agency

• Roles defined to a greater or lesser extent by existing structures eg in a job description
• In the *integrated* model structures may be enabling (eg allowing judgement to be exercised in a devolved system) but also constraining (eg by exclusion from central decision making).
• Those in the *semi-autonomous* model more likely to exercise agency in developing their project, and also to influence existing institutional structures and processes
• Those represented by the *independent* model likely to be able to exercise agency in working around existing structures, but less likely to be able to influence or change such structures.
Variables in emergence of academically oriented roles

• Institutional or sub-institutional culture more significant than organisational structure/type of institution, and reflected in eg
  • Approach of institutional colleagues in facilitating project work eg making imaginative appointments
  • Type of project and recognition accorded to it
  • The stage of its development/maturity
  • Ability of individuals/teams to accommodate tension between eg academic and project timescales/budgetary parameters
Conclusions I

• New roles arising from contemporary environments co-exist with traditional academic roles
• Possibilities for staff with academic backgrounds to:
  – make a career of academically oriented project work
  – move in and out of project work but stay in higher education
  – revert to mainstream academia
  – make a career in another sector eg policy/funding agencies, business/industry, NGOs or third sector
Conclusions II

• Reduces space for mainstream academic activity?
• Encourages casualisation/fragmentation of roles? OR
• Exploratory space/stepping stone to other opportunities...
• Value added/dividend eg releasing time for ‘mainstream’ academics to undertake research; supporting process of acquiring research funds
• Also reflects individual preferences…