

What are academics for? Enduring perceptions and key challenges

Abstract

The experience of the last thirty years suggests the categories we use to describe what universities and colleges do are breaking down. The core academic activities of 'teaching' and 'research' are disintegrating and the roles fragmenting. Yet, academics themselves hold on to the enduring belief that, not only are they what all academics should do, but also that they are fundamentally interdependent activities. Paradoxically, the disintegration of teaching and research is allowing their reintegration in novel and innovative ways. However, this process cannot, ultimately, be successful without the fundamental reconfiguration of academic work to meet the needs of a different student cohort and a changing society and economy. This paper draws on the international study of the Changing Academic Profession, debates around the teaching-research nexus and an understanding of the deeper trends in the political economy of higher education, to explore how we need to rethink the academic role.

Outline

This paper draws on the international study of the Changing Academic Profession, debates around the teaching-research nexus and an understanding of the deeper trends in the political economy of higher education, to explore how we need to rethink the academic role.

The experience of the last thirty years suggests the categories we use to describe what universities and colleges do are breaking down. One example of this is the addition of a 'third dimension' of academic endeavour, summed up in words and phrases such as 'knowledge exchange' and 'collaboration with business and the community'. These activities have always drawn heavily on research and teaching and their outputs but, in turn, have helped to transform the 'core' activities. Other major developments, such as the changing nature of knowledge and its production; widening participation and facilitating progression; and the use of open educational resources, also bring into question the original 'base' categories as cohesive, distinct and discrete 'bundles' of activities.

The core academic roles of 'teaching' and 'research' are disintegrating and fragmenting. Teaching is increasingly disaggregated into a multitude of activities to facilitate learning. Indeed, the centrality of 'classroom-based instruction' in higher education pedagogy is in question, despite the preoccupation with 'contact hours' at national policy level. The variety of forms, modes and locations of learning, the different needs of learners and the requirements of graduates entering a range of employment and further training are fundamentally changing the nature of education at this higher level. The processes of 'facilitating learning' are being disaggregated and increasingly undertaken by multi-skilled teams in which each member specialises in one aspect. In parallel, there has been a growth in the numbers of staff in 'non-academic' roles, including professionals – experts in quality assurance, information technology and marketing – and 'para-academics' performing core academic tasks such as student admissions, learning support and assessment (Locke and Bennion, 2011).

Likewise, the spectrum of research has broadened, as the range of government, corporate and social bodies interested in its outputs has extended. This spectrum includes traditional knowledge generated within a primarily disciplinary and theoretical context largely governed by academic interests. Increasingly, it has incorporated applied, collaborative and interdisciplinary research generated in a variety of social and economic contexts in response to specific problems and in order to meet a range of users' needs. The impact on research activity – and researchers' activities – however, is not in question. Related to this, the research role is fragmenting between, for instance, basic research, data analysis, project management and the preparation of research proposals. This fragmentation of roles and the spectrum of activities – from large scale, high cost, collective 'knowledge production' to individual academics researching in their own time with little or no institutional (let alone external) funding support – makes the single 'base' category, 'research', problematic.

Yet, academics themselves hold on to the enduring belief that, not only are they what all academics should do, but also that they are fundamentally interdependent activities. The relationship between research and teaching has become a highly contested issue perhaps because evidence of synergy between them is so modest and inconclusive. Teaching and research can exist in a range of relationships with each other – positive or negative, integrated or independent – and it is a matter for strategy and policy, at system, institutional and departmental level, whether synergies can be found between them. It remains for higher education institutions to maintain and maximise the beneficial relations between the two, if they wish to do this. Research, teaching and the relations between them are matters for strategic choices about the nature and future of a higher education institution. Ultimately, views and actions on these matters reflect differing beliefs about the nature and purposes of higher education and the contribution of graduates to a knowledge economy (Locke, 2004).

Paradoxically, however, the dislocation and disintegration of teaching and research is allowing their reintegration in novel and innovative ways. For example, the integration of undergraduates into departmental research cultures promoted by Warwick and Oxford Brookes Universities' Reinvention Centre and student-driven research into improving their own learning experiences at the University of Exeter. Likewise, open access to research outputs and open innovation models of networking between universities and businesses can increase the awareness, understanding and potential for collaboration and the exchange of knowledge to a much wider audience (Wilson, 2012). These new ways of reintegrating and reinventing the core activities of higher education are only just beginning to be explored, let alone investigated and understood and this ought to become a priority for researchers, teachers and institutional managers alike. However, significant obstacles to this lie at the heart of the academic profession and the way it is currently conceived and configured (Locke, forthcoming (a)).

This process cannot, ultimately, be successful without the fundamental reconfiguration of academic work to meet the needs of a different student cohort and a changing society and economy. We are at a significant transition point:

The traditional model of academic work evolved to serve the knowledge generation and knowledge dissemination needs of a student body and a society different to those it serves today. The unbundling of academic work is an evolutionary stage in the way in which universities are organized to fulfil their social mission. This process will not be successful if a diverse range of contributions are not placed on equal footing within the policies and cultures of universities. (Bexley et al 2011: xv)

This will not be easily or rapidly achieved and the key leadership and management challenges are:

- for leadership and governance, to re-engage academics in strategic decision-making
- in managing diversity in the workforce and in the activities of the academic enterprise
- attracting and developing talent: introducing flexibility in employment without creating unfairness, and
- reconfiguring work design, workloads and working conditions.

(Locke, forthcoming (b))

The paper offers some suggestions for approaches that might be taken in addressing each of these challenges.

References

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