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Academic Work from the Perspectives of Aspiring Academics: An Exploratory Study of Doctoral Candidates from Four Disciplines in Australia

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Abstract: Several studies have highlighted the changing nature and forms of work in the academic profession, but few have examined from the perspectives of doctoral researchers who aspire for an academic career, or aspiring academics, who may contribute to shaping the academic profession. *What types of activities do aspiring academics consider academic work, and what are the implications for doctoral training and the future of the academic profession?* This paper addresses these questions, drawing on qualitative interviews with doctoral students at a research-intensive university in Australia, who come from four disciplines (Physics, History, Biomedical Engineering, and Economics and Business). Building on Ernst Boyer's scholarship typology, this paper proposes a conceptualisation of academic work domains based on how the outcomes of intellectual inquiry can be communicated. I argue that conceptualising academic work from a communication perspective allows for a language to speak of and recognise the meaning of different academic work domains. The study raises questions about how doctoral training could prepare aspiring academics for work areas beyond research, particularly engagement, and how institutional structure could accommodate and recognise the diversity of work areas.

Paper: Introduction

Much of the work on the topic of the changing academic profession has focused on understanding the nature and implications of changes from the perspectives of academics (Henkel 2000; Coates et al. 2009; Teichler, Arimoto, and Cummings 2013), yet few studies have examined from the perspectives of future academics. This is particularly important for doctoral students who occupy the interface of changing academia on the one hand and changing doctoral education on the other (Deem 2020). While attention has been drawn to anxieties and tensions associated with pursuing an academic career (Waijjer 2017; McAlpine and Amundsen 2018; Cook et al. 2021), improving academic training for those – even just a lucky few – who will enter academia is no less important as it is crucial to maintaining the health of the profession. *What types of activities do aspiring academics consider academic work, and what are the implications for doctoral training and the future of the academic profession?* The paper addresses these questions by drawing on findings of a PhD project that explores the academic profession from aspiring academics' perspectives. Data come from 32 semi-structured interviews with doctoral students at an Australian research-intensive university, who come from four disciplines: Physics, History, Biomedical Engineering, and Economics and Business, representing soft-hard, pure-applied categories (Biglan 1973; Becher and Trowler 2001).

Analytical framework

This paper uses Boyer's scholarship typology (1990, 1996) as the analytical starting point to examine academic work. Despite critiques, his typology remains relevant in the higher education debate because it not only touches the heart of academia but also allows for scholarly creativity. Boyer's typology has five dimensions: the *scholarship of discovery* refers to 'the commitment to knowledge for its own sake, to freedom of inquiry and to following, in a disciplined fashion, an investigation wherever it may lead'; the *scholarship of integration* recognises scholars who 'give meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective'; the *scholarship of application* emphasises the relevance and application of knowledge; the *scholarship of teaching* refers to work, based on disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, that 'both educates and entices future scholar' (Boyer 1990, 18–24); the *scholarship of engagement* calls for an academia-society partnership 'in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems' (Boyer 1996, 27).

Findings

Interview data indicate a range of academic activities centred around research and teaching, which generally reflect the dimensions of Boyer's scholarship. However, participants distinguish, explicitly or implicitly, between doing research and the meaningfulness of research; the latter is attached to communicating outputs of the former. There is a similar, though implicit, distinction underlying Boyer's typology: *doing research* (discovery and integration) and *communicating research outcomes* (teaching, application and engagement). From this perspective, there are three domains of work based on how the outputs of research, or intellectual inquiry, are communicated to different groups of audiences.

Academic publication domain includes different forms of academic written communication, often directed at an academic audience, such as articles, books, or conference papers. The different written forms underscore the importance of academic writing in building and maintaining an academic career. *Teaching domain* primarily refers to teaching in the university classroom context, directed at students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. *Engagement domain* includes a range of activities directed at the broader public audience and stakeholders beyond the university walls.

Participants indicate different preferences for these work domains, which generally fall into three groups.

Academic publication group (Figure 1) includes participants who prefer research and academic publication, which are deemed central in establishing and maintaining an academic career; by contrast, teaching and engagement are deemed peripheral, if not distracting. This view reflects the importance of academic publication as noted in the literature (Hyland 2000).

Academic publication-teaching group (Figure 2) includes participants who prefer both, though with varying proportions, academic publication and teaching domains, which are considered mutually supportive. Engagement constitutes an outer layer, which is optional but necessary to fulfil academics' social responsibilities. This view reflects the common conception of academic work that places teaching and research at the centre before reaching outside of the university walls (Kogan 2000).

Academic publication-teaching-engagement group (Figure 3) includes participants who prefer to be involved in all three domains alongside research. They consider having the third domain, engagement, as an essential part of academic work. This view reflects the increasingly emphasised engagement area as the third mission of the university (Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno 2008).

Conclusion

Conceptualising academic work from a communication perspective enables a language to speak of and recognise the meaning of academic work based on domains other than research, i.e. academic publication, teaching, and engagement. The findings raise questions about how doctoral training in Australia could be improved to prepare aspiring academics for areas beyond research, such as engagement, and how institutional structure could accommodate and recognise the diversity of work areas.

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Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3