Changing Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education:
The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce

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Abstract

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This paper draws on the contributions of twelve international authors to a monograph entitled *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*, to be published in November 2009 (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2009). In exploring issues arising for higher education managers and leaders from diversifying institutional communities, it suggests that academic and professional identities are not only multi-faceted, but are also subject to movements that occur at different rates in different contexts. This poses a number of management challenges, and a model is offered that relates possible approaches to managing people to different organizational environments.


**Presentation**

**Changing Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce**

**Introduction**

This paper draws on the voices of twelve international authors who contributed to a research monograph entitled *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*, to be published in November 2009 (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2009). It reviews issues arising from a diversification of contemporary academic and professional identities, and the implications of these for the way that management and leadership are conceived in higher education. Key challenges arise, including changing staff expectations and aspirations, new forms of recognition and reward, the dispersal of management and leadership activity, and the emergence of more fluid, ‘amoeba’-like institutions. The global economic downturn provides a further challenge, as resource constraints are likely to reduce opportunities for development at all levels, fostering competition as well as increased imperatives for collaboration between institutions and the individuals working in them. The paper aims to offer a framework within which these challenges might be reviewed.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that questions are raised in the literature about what it means to be an academic or a professional in contemporary higher education. The traditionally discrete roles of teaching, research, technology transfer and/or administration are increasingly overlaid by, for instance, community and business partnership, widening participation, outreach, and the student experience. Learning design and support has added another dimension. However, while for some this may imply an identity crisis, for others it enables new identities to be forged. Although considerable attention has been paid in the literature to a diversifying student body, and environments in which this has occurred, consideration of a diversifying workforce, and the challenges that this presents, has been more muted. There may have been a reluctance to focus on this because the concept of ‘management’ is subject to significant contestation in academic contexts. On the other hand, there would appear to be a need to do so, because research suggests (Whitchurch, 2008a) that both academic and professional staff are likely to experience greater anxiety about managing people than about, for instance, managing budgets.

**Management and leadership contexts**

Higher education systems worldwide are undergoing change, partly because of environmental pressures, and partly because of the aspirations and approaches of new generations of staff. Not only is the central ‘core’ of academic faculty diversifying as a result of new entrants to the academy, for instance from the health and social fields, but also, alongside them, a ‘penumbra’ of highly qualified professional staff is emerging, contributing in areas as diverse as teaching and learning, information services, institutional research and development, enterprise, and community partnership. The activities of all these groups increasingly overlap, with two-way traffic occurring between them, and this has implications for the identities of a range of staff. Close partnerships arise, for instance, between heads of department and professional managers in trying to maximise opportunities for colleagues with what are often severe resource constraints. Management and leadership responsibilities (which may be lateral, and between peers, as well as hierarchical) are also occurring at an earlier stage of people’s careers. The ‘people dimension’, therefore, comprising relationships that are constructed between, for instance, senior management teams, managers such as deans and heads of academic and functional departments, and colleagues
who contribute different forms of expertise to cross-institutional projects, are increasingly critical to institutional survival.

There is a significant literature on changing academic identities, particularly in the context of ‘managerial’ approaches (for instance, Henkel, 2000; Kogan and Teichler 2007; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007; Barnett and di Napoli, 2008), and the case is well made for special considerations to apply to management and leadership in higher education, particularly in the face of the specialization of professional services in areas such as strategic planning, finance, estates, human resources, and student services. However, higher education institutions are also facing pressures from wider societal trends. These include the desire of younger generations to achieve work-life balance, more flexible working patterns, and more project-oriented, portfolio careers (Strauss and Howe, 1991; Florida, 2002; Middlehurst, 2009, forthcoming). Furthermore, the not insignificant traffic of both academic and professional staff between higher education and other sectors suggests that influences from elsewhere are likely to permeate.

Kolsaker (2008), in exploring the impact of ‘managerialism’ on academic professionalism in six English universities, concluded that ‘much of the literature is overly negative in claiming proletarianisation and demoralisation’ (Kolsaker, 2008: 523), while Harman (2003) qualified prevailing negative views of the impact of change in an Australian study. Although he acknowledges that ‘the transition to the new higher education environment has been painful and damaging for the profession, with many academics feeling deeply frustrated, disillusioned and angry’, he also comments that ‘Many have made successful transitions to productive involvement in research links with industry and in other entrepreneurial activities without jeopardizing their academic integrity’ (Harman, 2003: 121). At the same time, a cautious welcome was given by Stromquist et al (2007) to the diversification of the contemporary professoriate, provided that safeguards were put in place over academic standards of programmes and working conditions of staff.

Changes have impacted upon higher education systems, institutions and structures worldwide, albeit with differences in precise details, profiles, timing, and accommodations. While there are substantial cohorts of academic staff who continue to perform primarily research or teaching roles, combinations of management and teaching and/or research roles have also increased over the last twenty years, as have examples entailing service, commercialization, community and other third-stream roles and links. The questions may not be so much are academic identities changing, but rather how widespread is the trend and what are the principal manifestations and implications. Authors such as Dowd and Kaplan (2005) point to “boundaryless careers”, suggesting that Whitchurch’s (2008b) typology of bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded, blended identities have potential relevance for academic as well as professional staff.

It may be, therefore, that a new ‘trinity’ of activity may be emerging, incorporating an individual’s academic interests, any specialist expertise or involvement in areas such as outreach, e-learning or enterprise, and management or leadership responsibilities, albeit the latter may be in a local setting such as a research, project or course team. Thus, programme leaders and principal investigators are likely to encounter ‘people’ challenges as part of their day-to-day responsibilities, for instance in relation to demands for flexible working alongside heavier teaching loads. Addressing such challenges may result in solutions that are tailored to local circumstances, but can also be shared with, and adapted to, other locales. It may be that new identities will emerge from these developments, in turn creating pressure for new organisational space. Such developments may require more permissive structures that can accommodate multiple partnerships and lines of communication, as opposed to singular reporting routes and chains of command, as exemplified by Whitchurch’s concept of “Third Space” (Whitchurch, 2008a; 2009).
Challenges arising

A changing external environment impacts not only on formal contracts of employment, but also on what is known as the psychological contract, which has been defined as ‘The perceptions of… two parties, employee and employer, of what their mutual obligations are towards each other’ (Guest and Conway, 2002, quoted in Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD], 2009). This, more informal, contract is based on interpretations and understandings by both employer and employees of formal terms and conditions of employment. Expectations and aspirations are likely to be influenced by staffing policies and working practices in institutions that have authority for decisions about staff, as well as by relationships between colleagues and membership of a disciplinary or professional community. The significance of the psychological contract is recognised by the increasing use of, for instance, surveys of staff satisfaction in higher education (e.g. Knight and Harvey, 1999).

In higher education, the changing psychological contract is leading to new forms of:

- Recognition and reward, for instance, the use of titles such as director of teaching and learning, and discretionary responsibility allowances at local (school or faculty) level, to provide recognition for people who may not be able to achieve immediate promotion.
- Role portfolio, incorporating activities that are adjacent to teaching and research such as widening participation, business partnership and community outreach.
- Career track, with the possibility of multi-choice career pathways (Strike, 2009, forthcoming).
- Professional development, for instance, mentoring, sabbaticals, and tailored opportunities (Middlehurst, 2009, forthcoming).

Within a single institution, therefore, there may exist individuals who see themselves as having different professional identities, and different concepts of, for instance, academic autonomy, what constitutes applied research, relationships with students and teaching methods. Thus, programme teams may wish, because of their traditions and/or clientele, to have different criteria and procedures for recruitment and progression. This can create operational, and even policy complexities, which have to be managed at both unit/department and institutional levels. There may, for instance, be implications for workload models and promotion criteria.

The changing psychological contract, therefore, increasingly involves a partnership between employers and employees, understandings of which are not necessarily fixed or stable. A ‘push’ from those with responsibilities for shaping institutional activities and aspirations is likely to be balanced by a ‘pull’ from those whose activities contribute to an institution’s specific mission. This is an ongoing and iterative process, the outcome of which accounts for an institution’s precise character and shape at any one time. Thus, while institutions are subject to pressures from governments and markets, individuals are subject to a matrix of relationships and cross cutting strands, at the same time interpreting, yet seeking to influence, the demands being made on them. Senior managers interpret external requirements as they shape the internal operating environment, and line managers interpret, and also seek to influence, the cultures and strategies of their institutions.

A trend towards devolved management (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2008), particularly in large institutions with a well-developed ‘periphery’ (Clark, 1998), has resulted in more individuals having ‘people’ responsibilities, whether as heads of academic or functional departments, or as team or project leaders. Furthermore, there is a tendency for management and leadership skills to
be required at an earlier stage in people’s careers, so that they are not confined to the most senior levels of staff, and ‘management’ is no longer something that is undertaken solely by a minority of people. It may also occur laterally among peers, so that one person may be leading a team in one setting, but be ‘managed’ by another member of that team in another setting. In such conditions, there may be a ‘cascade’ effect, whereby ‘management’ capacity, including self-management, is spread laterally across an institution. It therefore becomes integral to the work of a range of people, including ‘rank-and-file’ academic faculty. Thus it would appear that clear distinctions between ‘managers’ and ‘managed’ are increasingly difficult to maintain, reflecting Kolsaker’s suggestion that “dichotomous analyses of managerialism and professionalism are now outmoded” (Kolsaker, 2008: 523).

On the one hand, it would seem that the need for management and leadership capability is unlikely to diminish in a world that is not only less certain, but also more risk-laden. On the other hand, whether or not such activities are given the labels of ‘management’ or ‘leadership’, the opportunity to take responsibility for, for instance, elements of a research project, is likely to be valued as an opportunity for development. Thus, a relatively junior member of a self-managing team might take on responsibility for the health and safety aspects of work in a specific laboratory. As a result, demand for management development programmes dedicated to managers from both academic and professional backgrounds is likely to continue.

**Possible futures**

From the narratives of twelve contributing authors, it would appear that, notwithstanding the specifics of individual systems and institutions, forces for both continuity and change continue to co-exist in higher education. Challenges therefore arise from the inherent tensions traditionally associated with institutional ‘complexity’ (Barnett, 2000) including, for instance:

- Allegiance to a discipline through which it is anticipated an academic reputation will be built vs becoming a ‘good citizen’ at institutional level.
- Reward structures that may or may not incentivise academic faculty via, for instance, return of overhead income to fund conference attendance.
- Increased functional specialisation alongside the emergence of team and project working.
- The balance of research and teaching activity, particularly with the introduction of workload models (Barrett and Barrett, 2007).
- Making the case for promotion on the basis of teaching, as well as research, activity.

Furthermore, new dynamics are arising within changing institutional communities. While these may, on the one hand, be developmental, they may also, on the other hand, foster tension or dissonance. Nevertheless they are at the heart of the management challenge for institutions and their leaders, and include, for instance:

- Imperatives for continuity, adaptation and change.
- Lateral relationships and networks that overlay more formal and hierarchical structures.
- Pressures for both inclusivity and separation of different professional groups.
- Understandings in relation to Mode 1, Mode 2 and research consultancy activity.
- Multiple understandings of management including direction, facilitation, conciliation, negotiation, and/or partnership.

These dynamics do not necessarily present themselves as dualities, and are likely to involve multiple strands. Change may occur at different speeds across different dimensions and across various locales, and institutions find themselves having to manage these differentials. In turn, this can lead to issues of consistency and comparability, for instance, in relation to rewards and incentives across different disciplines or departments. Managers need to be able to accommodate this, and also recognize when to change gear and progress new initiatives as appropriate. Further
challenges arise from the fact that these phenomena occur concurrently, and alongside each other.

Arising from the narratives in the monograph, therefore, critical elements for contemporary leaders and managers would seem to be:

- How far change might be allowed to occur incrementally, and when to stimulate a major shift in approach.
- Management strategies that might be adopted in response to pressures from local and global environments, and/or whether these might be pre-empted.
- How new spaces and legitimacies in the university might be accommodated.
- The degree of legitimacy (and indeed respect) that might accorded to new forms of academic and professional identity, and associated activity.

Rhoades’ ‘invisible workforce’ (Rhoades, 2009, forthcoming), comprising academic staff on time-limited contracts and also professional staff, are under-represented in research on identities in higher education. Identifying such staff would be a helpful step towards enhancing understandings of their roles and contributions, and of opening improved career pathways. ‘One size fits all solutions’ are unlikely to satisfy the expectations of individuals, or the evolving needs of institutions. Movements in academic and professional identities are, therefore, complex, varied and contested, raising a key question for managers and leaders as to how the university can become a place where all roles and identities are valued in adding to the achievement of the reputation and success of the institution.

Rather than describing an increasingly diverse workforce solely in terms of organisational structures, be they hierarchical or matrix in form, it may be helpful to think in terms of the relationship between the institution, the cultures of its increasingly diverse components, and the individual. To this end, a model of possible institutional environments, adapted from a report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, is offered in Table 1. Such environments may well co-exist, and need not be mutually exclusive.
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‘Blue World’
Corporate Capitalism
(cf ‘managerialism’)

‘Green World’
Social Responsibility
(cf ‘collegiality’; ‘ethical leadership’)

‘Orange World’
Collaborative Networks
(cf ‘Third Space’)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach to people management function</th>
<th>‘People and Performance’ ('a hard business discipline’)</th>
<th>‘People and Society’ ('innovative solutions’ eg secondments in a downturn)</th>
<th>‘People Sourcing’ ('a flexible workforce')</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisational challenges</td>
<td>Maximising human capital Performance management</td>
<td>Risk of non-socially responsible behaviour Sustainability</td>
<td>Lack of organizational infrastructure Based on social capital Multiple contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People profile</td>
<td>Individuals negotiate their roles on basis of their value as human capital</td>
<td>Socially engaged Value placed on overall employment package</td>
<td>Fluid roles Portfolio careers Skill and knowledge networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Approaches to People Management (adapted from PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2007)

As with all such models, this one is intended as a conceptual tool to assist with thinking about organisational cultures, what might be occurring, and what might be appropriate in a specific institution or institutional segment. In the context of higher education, this model also maps on to existing conceptualisations. Thus, the Blue World might be seen as reflecting ‘managerial’ approaches, in which individuals are regarded as a resource, in same way as other resources, and there is a focus on performance management. In this scenario, individuals adopt a negotiating position in relation to their roles and careers on the basis of their perceived value. The Green World might be seen as reflecting traditional ideas of collegiality, and also as incorporating concepts of ‘democratic professionalism’ (Whitty, 2008) and ‘ethical leadership’ (Mendonco and Kanungo, 2007). The Orange World reflects ideas about the ‘casualization’ of the workforce (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), and the emergence of project and portfolio working in “Third Space” (Whitchurch, 2008a).

Although it is not possible to predict the way that higher education systems will evolve, it could be that one response to increased financial stringency will be a stronger steer from the corporate centre in a Blue World, at the same time as further casualisation of the workforce fosters ways of working characteristic of the Orange World. Such a scenario would create further institutional dynamics, and could also have the effect of squeezing opportunities to develop more sustainable and ethical forms of activity in a Green World. However, whatever transpires, it seems likely that tension between pressure for a more controlled operating environment, and one that is more fluid and networked, will be a challenge for the higher education sector and people working in it, particularly if this tension is to be used to positive effect. Nevertheless, those with responsibilities for people are likely to seek the spaces and flexibility to develop approaches that are appropriate
to their locale in relation to, for instance, workloads and schemes of recognition and reward. This is likely to involve not only the creative use of existing mechanisms, but also a search for opportunities that assist individuals in extending their reach for the future.

**Concluding remarks**

The contributions to the monograph also raise a number of questions such as: how might perceived changes to academic and professional identities be characterised? Are they akin to global warming and identifiable by comparatively small but crucial changes in key indicators and relationships? Are they comparable to the creation and erosion of sand and pebble beaches, constantly rubbed, sorted and sifted by the daily ebb and flow of the tide, but more strikingly altered by occasional storms? Or is the appropriate metaphor one of a modifying and adapting living organism, which can adjust to alterations to habitat? Becher and Trowler (2001) articulate the continuing, though evolving, significance of academic tribes and territories in higher education. It would appear from the case material that evolution continues and may be accelerating. Notwithstanding national differences, there appear to be common issues with respect to, for instance, a diversification of institutional communities to accommodate more recent entrants such as colleagues from the practice-based disciplines, staff recognition and reward mechanisms, and the changing expectations of younger generations. Stable understandings about professional identities and career paths are likely to be increasingly difficult to sustain, and higher education institutions are accommodating to systemic change at local level by, for instance, offering flexible employment packages, developing enabling frameworks such as workload models, and finding innovative opportunities in relation to career development.

Thus, diversification gives rise to further complexities, including:

- Multiple institutional agendas, for instance in relation to professional education and new forms of applied research, alongside traditional teaching and research in mainstream disciplines.
- Less commonality around professional understandings and histories.
- A broadening base of institutional activity, interest groups and networks.
- Interest groups that may compete as well as rely on each other.
- Less clarity about the boundaries between such groups.
- Higher levels of political activity with respect to goals, and means of achieving them.
- New influences exerted by external agendas and collaborations.

Diversification also carries with it the potential for extension and enhancement of academic and institutional activity through, for instance, external links and partnerships, at the same time as higher levels of risk from an increasing spread of activities, interests and stakeholders. All this raises the game for those in universities with people responsibilities in their endeavours to engage and motivate their colleagues.

Many of these changes are happening in parallel, producing multiple frames in which day-to-day activity occurs. While formal organisation charts, hierarchies, and line management relationships continue to exist, these are likely to be overlaid with lateral forms of working. Since it is often not possible to change or adapt structures sufficiently quickly, ‘management’ may be a question of being creative with existing mechanisms, and/or bringing local practice and formal frameworks into accommodation. In this situation, ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ might be seen more as a joint enterprise among colleagues. It may also be that understandings of professionalism drawn from sets of competencies and behaviours will be increasingly complemented by ideas about
generic ‘people’ skills.

Structures and processes may lag behind practice as individuals make their own decisions about their futures. Institutions may, therefore, wish to consider how they might, through local initiatives, increase awareness amongst their staff of opportunities that exist to influence these structures and processes. On the one hand, the diversification of the workforce has the potential to add value both in relation to the lateral reach of staff inside and outside the university, and also in relation to the experience available at different levels of disciplinary and institutional hierarchies. On the other hand, as noted above, this can increase the potential for risk, not least because of a multiplication of interest groups who may create additional synergy, but may also pull in different directions.

It may well be that the implications of the global economic downturn will cause some of the phenomena that have been observed, such as the casualisation of the workforce (Rhoades, 2009, forthcoming), to gather pace. What seems clear is that financial levers for attracting and rewarding staff are likely to be increasingly scarce in the foreseeable future, and that other aspects of the employment ‘package’ will continue to assume importance, for instance, opportunities for career development, conference attendance, secondments, coaching and mentoring, or responsibility at local level for, say, teaching and learning. There is evidence of a freeze on faculty salaries and early retirement schemes in the US (Smith, 2009), at the same time as calls for government to undertake “sustained, systematic investment” (Rhoades, 2009) in higher education, not only as part of a stimulus for economic recovery, but also to encourage “social innovation” and “[expand] the capacity of our intellectual capital”. However the current signs are that, despite increased demand for student places as a result of the downturn, governments have so far been unwilling to absorb the additional costs. At the same time, tuition fees in private institutions in the US have risen (Gill, 2009). Even if additional public investment takes place in one form or another, ongoing pressures on the higher education workforce, including casualisation involving part-time and fixed term labour, seem likely, as institutions seek the flexibility to deal with increasingly uncertain levels of funding. This will in turn engender renewed focus by managers, and those involved in their professional development, on issues around motivations, rewards and incentives, and the means by which individual aspirations might be met.

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