The unbundled academic: How academic life is being hollowed out

Bruce Macfarlane
University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, United Kingdom
bruce.macfarlane@port.ac.uk

Academic practice is rapidly disaggregating, or ‘unbundling’, as a result of the massification of national systems, the application of technology in teaching, and increasing specialisation of academic roles to promote a managerialist and performative culture. This is undermining the integrative nature of academic practice based on the three core elements of teaching, research and service. This paper will present an analysis of the way that academic practice is unbundling leading to the emergence of the ‘para-academics’ who specialise in one element of academic practice. Examples are drawn from the UK and Australia. The adverse effect of this change on the student experience and academic citizenship is considered.

Keywords: academic practice, unbundling, para-academic

Introduction

The tripartite role of academics in teaching, research and service activities is a cornerstone of conventional assumptions about higher education (Cummings, 1998). Employment patterns and reward and recognition systems continue to broadly reflect this division of responsibilities within the synoptic academic role. However, there is increasing evidence that this holistic concept of ‘academic practice’ is disaggregating. ‘Academics’ expected to perform all elements of academic practice are being displaced by ‘para-academics’, such as student skills advisors, educational developers, learning technologists and research management staff, who specialise in one element of academic practice. Academics are disappearing to be replaced by para-academics in what has been described as a ‘silent’ revolution (Finklestein & Schuster, 2001).

This short paper will explore the emergence of the para-academic and the impact of the disaggregation of the academic role. It will be argued that disaggregation or ‘unbundling’ (Kinser, 1998) is connected to the ‘hollowing out’ (Massy, Wilger & Colbeck, 1994) of academic life and damaging academic citizenship in the process (Shils, 1997; Macfarlane, 2007). Such activities are critical to maintaining the infrastructure of the academy and the quality of the student experience but go largely unrewarded and unrecognised in a performative university environment where the academic role has ‘unbundled’.

The para-academic

The language of higher education is still dominated by the notion of ‘the academic’ as an ‘all-rounder’ – someone who teaches, researches and performs a variety of service or administrative tasks such as leading a department or working as a student advisor. In the popular image, universities are populated by academics who teach students and also carry out research. However, it is increasingly clear that this conventional understanding of academic
life is out of kilter with a new, emerging reality. This reality is that fewer and fewer staff working in contemporary higher education can be classified as ‘all round’ academics. Rather, the holistic academic function is ‘unbundling’, a term which refers to the way that academic work is being sub-divided into specialist functions (see Kinser, 1998). Indicative of this, in the UK, the most recent figures indicate that only just over a half of those employed on academic contracts (ie 51.5% in 2008/09) have a ‘teaching and research’ function (HESA, 2010). In the United States, over half of full-time appointments of new faculty in the 1990s were to non-tenured and fixed term contracts (Finkelstein & Schuster, 2001). A quiet ‘morphing’ of the academic profession is taking place.

Academic functions are being sub-contracted to a growing army of para-academics, individuals who specialise in one element of academic life. A plethora of ‘para-academic’ roles now exist connected with the devolution of responsibilities (Coaldrake, 2001). Examples include student experience officers, educational developers, academic skills advisors, research contracts officers, research professors, (permanent) heads of department and learning technologists. The term ‘para-academic’ may also be found in Canadian and US institutions used to refer mainly to administrative units associated with the enhancement of learning and teaching processes, such as centres for faculty or academic development. Para academics perform functions of teaching, research and service and also include doctoral students with teaching responsibilities and faculty employed on a part-time or ‘casual’ basis (see Figure 1).

There are two types of para-academic: de jure and de facto. De jure para-academics are those whose formal job description reflects the reality of their role as a specialist in one aspect of academic practice such as a learning technologist. Others are essentially de facto para-academics who, while formally employed as an ‘all-round’ academic, effectively focus on just
one element of academic practice. An example of a *de facto* para-academic is a lecturer who, while formally employed to conduct teaching, research and service, is research inactive and performs very few service functions relying instead on referral to other para-academics (eg specialist personal tutors, educational developers, careers advisors). This type of academic is, in effect, ‘just’ a teacher. Similarly, many academics who are appointed to managerial roles (eg head of department or Dean) relinquish teaching and research work as a result, becoming a *de facto* para-academic but retains an academic contract of employment for ‘teaching and research’ connected with pension provision.

**Changing identities**

Para-academics are being created from two different directions within the university as an organisation. Firstly, an increasing number of administrative and professional support staff have seen their roles gradually shift to incorporate a stronger element of direct student support and involvement in ‘learning and teaching’. It may be explained, in part, by the shift in emphasis in higher education from teaching students to supporting their learning more broadly with the associated use of information technology. This trend was noted by the Dearing Report on higher education in the United Kingdom (NCIHE, 1997: 217, para.14.10).

> Administrative and support staff report a growing involvement in learning and teaching functions, for example, in preparing materials for self-directed learning, and training students to use new equipment or data sources. The task of ‘teaching students how to learn’ was one they had previously seen as being the responsibility of academics.

This shifting emphasis has resulted in the ‘up-skilling’ of librarians into student skills advisors and information technology support workers into learning technologists. At the same time, a large body of faculty have seen their role ‘de-skilled’ from all-round academics into para-academic roles such as quality assurance advisors, departmental heads or educational developers. This means it is common to find individuals with a professional support background and others with an academic background populating many of the new para-academic professions (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Source/origin for para-academics](image)

The use of technology in the design of teaching materials and the facilitation of student learning online is creating specialist roles indicative of the two-directional flow of professional support and academic staff into new para-academic roles. Learning technologists and online tutors have been created by the shift to e-learning as a delivery mechanism in...
university learning. Here, a combination of pedagogic and technical skills are needs in order to maximise the potential of virtual learning environments for students.

Boundaries between ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ identities in higher education are becoming increasingly blurred but also more fluid, producing emerging communities of practice as a consequence (Whitchurch, 2008). Indeed, it could be argued that traditional distinctions between ‘academics’ and other professional support groups is becoming increasingly irrelevant across functions (Coaldrake, 2001). Yet, the academic identity of para-academics is a source of ambiguity. Some continue to work on academic contracts in academic settings. Others, such as educational developers or quality assurance officers, are more likely to be found in central support units disconnected from the academic infrastructure. Yet, a large proportion of these individuals have a background or carry an identity as an academic. Many educational developers have moved from an academic contract onto an ‘academic-related’ contract, particularly in pre-1992 UK universities (Gosling, 2001).

Hence, it is common for para-academics to be former all-round academics who have found themselves moved into a more specialist niche.

Academic identity, and status, is closely related to research and scholarly activities. However, the evidence indicates that it is not safe to assume that staff employed on academic contracts are necessarily engaged in research and publication work. The (low) proportion of staff returned in successive research assessment exercises by many post-1992 UK universities indicates that many ‘academics’ are principally teachers rather than all-round academics. The same pattern may be observed in Australia where universities which have comparatively modest research activity among faculty (eg Victoria University) still retain the overwhelming majority of academic staff on ‘teaching and research’ contracts while Group of 8 universities (eg University of Melbourne) tend to have a more even split between academic staff on ‘teaching and research’ and ‘research only’ contracts (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010).

Key factors contributing to change

Unbundling has been brought about by a variety of forces associated with modern higher education. It is, at least in part, the result in growth in student numbers and the massification of national systems. Another contributing factor has been the increasing casualisation of the academic profession. This casualisation is partly related to the growth of untenured positions in the US national context and non-professorial (ie full, associate or assistant) faculty positions. By 2007–08 almost 13.9% of faculty in US degree-granting institutions were employed as ‘instructors’ compared to just 7.7% in 1979–80 (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2010). The rank of ‘lecturer’ in a US context (implying a teacher not an ‘all round’ academic), little heard of in the late 1970s, has also grown to represent 5% of faculty (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2010). In Canada, it is argued that non-permanent faculty are used as a strategic resource designed to reduce overall labour costs (Webber, 2008). In the UK, over 35% of academic staff are part time (HESA, 2010). This figure varies widely by institution with research-intensive universities tending to have the fewest faculty on open-ended or permanent contracts. The phrase ‘contingent faculty’ has been used as describing both part-time instructors and those in untenured positions in the United States or Canada (Webber, 2008). Whatever the formal nature of the contract of employment, contingent faculty are, in practice, far less likely to be able or expected to perform across all areas of academic practice.
Institutional responses to national and international trends in higher education have led to the expansion of support functions employing para-academics. Disability units were established in response to legislation protecting the rights of disabled people, including students. Many educational development centres in the UK were created in the wake of the emphasis given to raising the status of teaching captured in the Dearing Report on higher education (NCIHE, 1997) and through funding priorities thereafter managed by the various UK funding councils. A similar pattern may be observed in other national contexts, such as Australia.

Unbundling in relation to the teaching role is firmly related to the growth of online technology and the emergence of private, largely online universities, such as the University of Phoenix. At these institutions the role of the ‘academic’ is essentially that of a tutor or teacher rather than as an ‘all-round’ academic. Such institutions are committed to teaching a centralised and tightly quality controlled curriculum. Their teaching mission excludes research and demonstrates how the vertical disintegration of production operates in a service industry. Aside from a centrally controlled curriculum, private for-profit universities tend to have compulsory teacher training and a strong emphasis on performance monitoring. The teachers or facilitators in such institutions are more likely to possess a masters degree and some practical work-related experience rather than a doctorate (Coaldrake, 2001).

Moreover, the audit of research activity conducted in the UK and Australia has encouraged a growth in roles related to research and research management and impacted substantially on teaching through the increased use of graduate students and part-time faculty as teachers releasing academics to pursue publication targets. University reward and recognition systems conventionally focus on the holistic academic role and the extent to which individuals have demonstrated excellence in one or more element of academic practice (ie teaching, research and service). There are signs though, that some universities are beginning to re-structure their reward systems around para-academic career paths. At Edith Cowan University (Australia), for example, there are four career paths identified in addition to the conventional ‘teaching and research scholar’, these include teaching and learning, research and creativity, service to and enterprise on behalf of the university and engagement. (Edith Cowan University, 2010). Similarly in the UK, many institutions are re-structuring their promotion systems around a series of three or four ‘job families’ related to specialist tracks in teaching or research or management.

**How academic life is ‘hollowing out’**

Does it matter that the academic role is increasingly disaggregating? Is it not promoting efficiency gains for universities and benefits for students through increased access to specialists rather than ‘all rounders’?

Undoubtedly, these services do offer professional expertise but their establishment has also brought about a ‘hollowing out’ of what it means to be an academic. Despite the rhetoric, there is, in reality, little collegiality with respect to ‘faculty engagement with issues of curricular structure, pedagogical alternatives, and student assessment’ (Massy, Wilger & Colbeck, 1994:19). ‘Hollowing out’ is also occurring more broadly in the way that managerial processes have largely supplanted the direct influence of academics in respect to university decision-making even though faculty continue to hold positions that hold the vestiges of power (Harloe & Perry, 2005). Power has shifted in academic life away from the ‘all round’ academic to the specialist professional with specialisation, rather than being an ‘all rounder’, now being the key to career success (Massy, Wilger & Colbeck, 1994). The demands of...
engagement mean that academics are no longer seen as capable of initiating and delivering change but as increasingly dependent on other professionals (Harloe & Perry, 2005). While the effect of unbundling may appear to offer efficiency gains in a more competitive higher education environment, there are adverse consequences. It is sometimes claimed, for example, that the student experience is being enhanced through the provision of specialist support services such as counselling, academic skills, dyslexia advisors and so forth. Rather than taking responsibility for the learning and development of their own students, contemporary academics are being encouraged to restrict their involvement on the grounds that they neither have the time nor the specialist skills to support students outside the lecture theatre or seminar room. A study of Scottish universities, found that only a minority of students now turn to academics for help when they encounter academic, social and financial problems (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004).

The notion of the academic as a personal tutor has withered and many now see their role as little more than referral agents for para-academic service providers such as counsellors or academic skills advisors encouraged by university policy. The referral culture is also justified on the grounds of student vulnerability and the problematisation of normal human interaction in a therapeutic society (Furedi, 2003). However, evidence indicates that the referral culture, far from supporting student retention, does precisely the opposite and makes it more likely that students will drop out. The academic tutor is still the most important ‘actor’ in influencing student retention (Gibbs, 2004) and the impersonal nature of the first year undergraduate experience in the modern university, devoid of any real personal tutoring, contributes to the likelihood of drop-out (Barefoot, 2004). Despite the evidence, the culture of university life, including the emphasis on research and research audit, now encourages faculty to keep their ‘distance’ from students (Brown, 2002).

Unbundling resulting from attempts to release academics from teaching responsibilities to focus on research and publication is also having other adverse effects on students. This trend means that there is increased use of graduate students and part-time faculty as seminar and tutorial leaders and assessors of student work. Hence, while students (and their parents) may be attracted by the reputation of an institution based, at least in part, on a ‘league table’ culture, the reality is that undergraduates at elite universities are more likely to find their education and care sub-contracted to staff (and students) with limited teaching and research experience or expertise.

Finally, the disaggregation of the academic role is having a notable effect in the realm of service to the university and wider society. These are activities, both internal and external to a university, that sustain support for students, colleagues, institutions, disciplines and professions as well as the wider public. They include student advising, giving feedback, mentoring peers, serving on committees, leading others, working as a peer reviewer or editor for a journal, and trying to promote public understanding of an academic specialism through various forms of public engagement (Macfarlane, 2007). Academic citizenship is based on the idea of the University as an intellectual collective sustained by individuals with a commitment to service (Shils, 1997). However, academic citizenship offered by ‘all round’ academics does not fit comfortably in a higher education environment of para-academic specialists with clearly defined boundaries and performative pressures that do not reward activities which cannot be evidenced as ‘outputs’ (such as refereed papers or research grants).
Conclusion

Unbundling in higher education has begun to lead to the stealthy displacement of the ‘all round’ academic with specialist para-academics. It is a trend that mirrors patterns which can be observed in other public sector and professional service orientated occupations where specialist roles have been created based on a more limited set of skills and responsibilities. In the UK, there are community support officers in front line policing, teaching assistants in schools, and a plethora of health para-academics undertaking roles sub-contracted by doctors and nurses. These are examples of this broader trend. As in these other professions, the unbundling process runs the risk that the holistic nature of professional identity is undermined and reward systems encourage a strategic disengagement from broader elements of occupational responsibility in favour of specialisation.

Does unbundling signal the demise of academic practice? This trend has certainly led to a hollowing out of the concept of what it means (or, rather, formerly meant) to be an academic. New career pathways encourage specialisation, principally in management or research with teaching remaining as a Cinderella activity, rewarded through tokenistic prizes and ‘fellowships’ rather than attracting mainstream kudos despite institutional rhetoric. The division of responsibilities and performative targets in the modern university leaves little room for pro bono type activities, such as student advising or developing colleagues. If not dead, the modern academic role is certainly being hollowed out. Centralising and subcontracting so many core tasks risks eroding the academic profession’s collective memory about its key purpose: namely to support and nurture the next generation of scholars and citizens.

References


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