Rebundling higher educational research, teaching and service

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Higher educational research has been bashed for its aloofness and isolation as individuals question its impact and its worth. This essay aims to highlight how the unbundling of academia, where research has become separate from teaching and service, has left a reduced conception of educational identity in the higher education sector. In becoming isolated, research has become an easier target. Instead, it is proposed that rebundling the three core aspects of higher education - research, teaching and service – would allow for a more holistic conception of academic identity where the various components work together to offer a more robust, and less 'bashable', academic identity.

Introduction

The relationship between higher education and society at large is such that a perceived aloofness[1] and isolation[2] has the potential to leave higher education in a precarious position. Higher education institutions might view themselves as central to civil society and feel that their outputs "contribute to the cultural and political life

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[1] Trow, 2007.
[2] Delbanco, 2012.

of modern society"[3] but the relationship between higher education and society is becoming increasingly contested.[4] The different perspectives of those within and without higher education create friction and current trends in higher education further exacerbate this. In such a situation the outcomes of academic work become open to debate and higher education research can find itself in a rather bashable position.

Traditionally, higher education involved lecturers who undertook teaching, research and service.[5] Teaching focussed on initiating students into the mastery of knowledge and understanding; research examined new ideas, new techniques and new possibilities, and service involved administration, customer service, mentorship, civic duty, consultancy and business links.[6] One of the ways that higher education and higher education research has become a more vulnerable target is the current trend towards the 'unbundling' of these three academic roles. Where academic identity was once blended, new roles have appeared that leave the higher education workforce fragmented - such that higher education is not only reliant on lecturers but also on those employed in positions such as research fellow, teaching fellow, graduate teaching assistant, tutorial supervisor and instructor. The existing academic tension between research and teaching, and the lowly status of administrative, managerial and organisational tasks have been further exacerbated as constructions of academic roles start to simultaneously fragment and, in places, overlap.

Higher education aims to support student learning through offering an environment that is rich in research, teaching and service. But under each of these headings lie a multitude of tasks[7] that drag academic staff in various directions. Such a breadth of activity means that it has always been hard for one academic to

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[3] Altbach, 2015a.
[4] Altbach, 2015b.
[5] Knight, 2002.
[6] Macfarlane, 2005.
[7] Coaldrake, 2000; McInnis, 2010.

truly understand their role[8] – let alone for there to be a common conception of academic identity.[9] Trying to get a handle on what might be 'academic identity' has, over time, become more difficult and, in recent years, conceptions of academic identities have become more complex[10], more ambiguous[11] and "progressively fragmented".[12] The danger in such an environment is that academics are drawn to one particular aspect of practice and this might be to the detriment of student learning. We are already familiar with shorthand labels such as 'research-intensive' and 'teaching intensive' higher education institutions but there needs to be further problematisation of what this means in relation to learning within such environments.

There is now a greater differentiation of academic roles[13] and new roles have arisen in response to the challenges of contemporary higher education. Brew, Lucas, Boud and Crawford[14] argue that these 'new' academics are not highly productive in terms of research but that they are essential to keeping the university going. In this context, colleagues whose focus is on research might be seen by others as elitist; whilst colleagues with a focus on teaching and service might be thought to be more socially conscious, more student-centred, and, perhaps less demanding. These assumptions are not necessarily true but these new 'stranded' identities can become more open to characterisation and, with this, become more vulnerable to government reforms, media attacks and institutional changes. The literature suggests that such trends are most evident in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and parts of Europe [15] but there is also some evidence of

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[8] Whitchurch, 2008.
[9] Archer, 2008.
[10] Clegg, 2008.
[11] Henkel, 2005.
[12] Elkington and Lawrence, 2012, p.51.
[13] Locke, 2014; Locke, Whitchurch, Smith and Mazenod, 2016; Knight, 2013.
[14] Brew, Boud, Lucas and Crawford, 2016.
[15] Price and Cotten, 2006; Macfarlane, 2012; Clegg, 2008; Leisyte and Hosch-Dayican, 2014; Coates and Goedegebuure, 2014.

unbundling in other contexts. [16] Here it is proposed that a reimagining of research, teaching and service could lead to a rebundling of academic identity where all requirements of higher education can be better met. This rebundled academic identity would then lead to a more resilient sense of academic self; a more holistic concept of higher education, and a less bashable higher education research psyche.

Kinse [17] discusses how the various aspects that make up the 'traditional' academic role have been 'unbundled' in the modern university, so that tasks that once belonged together and were the responsibility of one academic have now been split up and passed out to people who have more expertise in a particular domain. Among the drivers of this fragmentation are the rapidly-changing workforce demographics; the repurposing of certain higher education institutions, and a movement to more hybrid forms of teaching, learning and research.[18] Unbundling need not have a negative impact on students but "historically it has been implemented without being carefully designed and considered in conjunction with the learning process".[19] Such unproblematised implementation can mean that unbundling can lack a robust rationale or justification and each member of the fragmented workforce can find it hard to defend their role in the organisation. Here we see two reasons why the unbundled higher education institution might find itself less able to offer a defence as the division of roles leaves a fragmented workforce and the justification for certain roles might be weak.

For some, navigating the trinity of research, teaching and service was always a matter of tension[20] as they tried to traverse three positions that they did not feel equally comfortable in and the segregation of role has allowed them to focus on areas of particular strength. For others, this division has been seen as a

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[16] Macfarlane, 2005; Nyhagen and Baschung, 2013.
[17] Kinser, 2015.
[18] Coates and Goedegbuure, 2012.
[19] American Council on Education, 2014.
[20] Brew, 2001; Ylijoki, 2013.

weakening of their academic autonomy[21] and with weakened autonomy there is greater potential for critique to do real harm. There is an argument that specialization can be a strength as it allows an individual to be a central expert in their domain; however, specialization is dependent on context. In the biological sense, specialist species thrive in a narrow range of conditions and tend to be more effective in their environment than generalists. But, when environmental conditions change, specialists can find it harder to adapt and generalists thrive.[22] The higher education environment is in constant flux[23] which means that the justification for an organisation needing an individual who teaches specific study skills might become stronger or weaker over time and a higher education researcher who is unbashable one year becomes very bashable the next.

Higher education research has often been questioned in regards to its utility but one of the defences against such critique has been that learning in a research-rich environment is to the benefit of the student body. This defence is in danger of being breached if the learning experience of students becomes segregated from the research experience of academics. The role of the academic itself has now started to be constructed in different ways with university job postings now specifically calling for applications to jobs with titles such as 'Lecturer (teaching)'; 'Lecturer (research)', and 'Lecturer (scholarship)'. These stranded lecturing roles are often the product of political and ideological governmental drives[24]; funding body requirements[25]; demands on efficiency and performance[26] and institutional income generation.[27] In such a splintered environment, where academic identity is interpreted at the individual level and higher education institutions segregate their workforce, research, teaching and service each become

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[21] Locke, 2014.
[22] Ali and Agrawal, 2012; Dennis, Dapparto, Fattorinin and Cook, 2011.
[23] Carr, 2009; Silver, 2007.
[24] McInnis, 2010; Coates and Goedegbuure, 2012.
[25] Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999; McArthur, 2011; Sutton, 2015.
[26] Liudvika and Hosch-Dayican, 2014.
[27] Brew, Boud, Lucas and Crawford, 2016.

possible targets to be bashed and the learning experience is likely to be impoverished.

Research, teaching and service

For many academics, the desire to progress within academia continues to be underscored by an emphasis on scholarly publication. This desire, however, is set against the backdrop of university requirements to teach and provide additional services to students[28], the institution and the wider community.[29] Despite attempts to outline clear demarcations at the institutional level, there continues to be role overlaps warranting a redefinition or reimagining of academic territory. What is evidenced here is Kogan, Moses and El-Khawas'[30] description of the shifting balances and rigidities among research, teaching and service responsibilities. Throughout all this the 'reality' of what it is to work in higher education is reduced to an either/or debate between research and teaching – thus the quality of the learning experience is subservient to the choices that lecturers make.

There is much literature on how to teach in higher education but very little on the realities of teaching or how those in higher education institutions actually conceptualise themselves as teachers.[31] Teaching in higher education has traditionally been seen as a low status activity[32] and Young[33] reports that "teaching is an activity which has a number of more successful rivals in the university reward system". While there are signs that teaching is improving its standing in higher education, the rewards for excellence are mainly limited to awards for teaching rather than institutional advancement.[34] Whilst teaching is "accorded a decent

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[28] Ylijoki, 2013.
[29] Jawitz, 2009.
[30] Kogan, Moses and El-Khawas, 1994.
[31] Fitzmaurice, 2010; Åkerlind, 2004.
[32] Brew, 2001; McInnis, 2000.
[33] Young, 2006, p.194.
[34] Chalmers, 2011.

second place" to research [35] the concept of teaching is itself contested. There are differences between various higher education teaching roles and instances exist where these become blurred or underscored by academic identity schisms.[36] Further schisms are formed in relation to the teaching-research link where those who are actively involved in research bring their project outcomes into the teaching environment. With an institutional focus on research as a means of advancement[37] one particular academic 'identity' may become entrenched and the cross-over from research into the classroom may be less likely. Interestingly the third strand of traditional academia, service, is rather sparsely represented in the literature and where it is addressed it is often perceived as a distraction.[38] No one group seems to have a clear understanding of what 'service' might mean and while notions of service seem to be personally negotiated most definitions seem to lack status[39]. Service tends to be conceptualised as an introspective activity for the benefit of the academic institution and often has no relationship with the wider community.[40] If teaching is perceived to be the poor relation of research then service is a distant, and often ignored, cousin.

Rebundling

Higher education is not one unified body, rather it is made up of academic tribes and territories.[41] However the fragmentation of focus means that there is simultaneously a division of function and an overlap of professional identity. [42] Clegg [43] points to the porousness of higher education boundaries and the flexibility of

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[35] Davidovitch, Soen and Sinuani-Stern, 2011, p.369.
[36] Winter, 2009.
[37] Young, 2006; Chalmers, 2011.
[38] Moore and Ward, 2010.
[39] Macfarlane, 2005.
[40] Ward, 2003; 2005.
[41] Mears and Harrison, 2014.
[42] Whitchurch, 2007.
[43] Clegg, 2008.

academic identities - in such an environment, tribal territory is disputed and academic identity is contested rather than affixed. With the proliferation of roles and the contestation of identity, academic tribes now find themselves in a "third space" between professional and academic domains".[44] In this regard the unbundling of academic identity has left individuals conceptualising their role in response to others. Such a reactive approach to academic identity has ontological implications as unbundled identities are in contestation and no individual can be secure in their position. Quigley[45] suggests that academic identity is drawn from how an academic considers themselves and their role (their ontological perspective) and how they come to know the processes of their role (their epistemologicial perspective). The day-to-day functions of academic practice are then produced through the interplay of an individual's understanding of what it is to be an academic alongside their understanding of how to enact their academic role. This leads to the development of a fuzzy identity as each individual works to balance their personal biases.

This contestation of identity exists against a backdrop of learning. If higher education institutions were only research organisations then they would have little need for students but, as it stands, teaching and learning are still core components of university life. While universities produce knowledge through research they also instil and produce knowledge through teaching students. Macfarlane[46] argues that this morphing of identity has reduced academic life and has created a chasm between teachers and their students. In this instance, unbundling has led to the creation of some higher education staff who have no connection with students at all.

Academic identity is shaped by socio-historical shifts such that it "entails various layers, combining old and new elements and balancing between continuity and change".[47] With increased

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[44] Whitchurch, 2007, p.394: original emphasis; Bhabha, 2004
[45] Quigley, 2011.
[46] Macfarlane, 2011.
[47] Ylijoki, 2013, p.253.

tribalism; a constant movement of identity in relation to socio-cultural trends, and pre-existing tensions between research and teaching, individuals working within the higher education space finds themselves in a state of flux that may limit their capacity to fulfil key roles. With the separation of roles the ability of those within higher education to call themselves 'academic' becomes questionable. If those who teach in higher education wish to be the creators of knowledge and not just the conduits of knowledge, the effective higher education institution needs to find a way of focussing the many individuals with lecturing roles (de jure or de facto) on the three core academic outcomes.

Higher education is increasingly driven by market forces[48] that have divided the workforce; 'hollowed out' academic identity[49] and created pressure on individuals.[50] Where lecturers were once expected to perform all aspects of academic practice, there has now been a movement to displace these all-rounders with specific staff who specialise in a particular aspect of the academic role.[51] If the future of higher education is simply left to the market then "academic values of professional autonomy and collective ideals [will become] squeezed out and marginalised".[52] The classic trinity of research, teaching and service has never really held. The division of roles alongside the hierarchical bias of research over teaching over service further fragments academic identity as higher education institutions chase excellence in both teaching and research (but not yet in service). As many strands chase many targets it is likely that there will be further unbundling until constituent parts no longer recognise that they are actually part of a whole body.

When a loose thread on a woollen cardigan is tugged the item of clothing will initially stay recognisable. But if the thread is continually tugged, the integrity of the cardigan is reduced until,

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[48] Sutton, 2015.
[49] Massy, Wilger and Colbeck, 1994.
[50] Winter and O'Donohue, 2012; Billot, 2010.
[51] Macfarlane, 2011.
[52] Winter, 2009, p.243.

eventually, all that is left is a pile of wool. The unbundling of academic identity is currently at a place where things can still be repaired. But with further unravelling we may reach a point where putting academic identity back together will be a very difficult task. The unbundled academic identity allows for bashable teaching, bashable service provision and bashable higher education research. The time then seems right for a rebundling of academic identity – where the many parts orchestrate into one holistic entity. The object in need of change is the individual but this can only occur at the institutional level where job roles are defined. Moving from silos and hierarchies to a more connected higher education institution should not be seen as a 'back-to-basics' manoeuvre – as the basic trinity was never fully formed nor fully functioning. Instead, the rebundling of academic identity would involve a reconceptualization in three parts. Firstly, the conceptualisation of what counts as research needs to be widened. Secondly, there needs to be an increased respect for teaching in higher education. Thirdly, notions of service need to be revisited and brought into the core of job roles.

The conceptualisation of what counts as research needs to be widened. There is snobbery in higher education research and everyone knows it. Beyond the old paradigm wars of positivism versus post-positivism and beyond the qualitative/quantitative dynamic we find hugely varying research approaches treated to the same tacitly held normative standard. In such a world, randomised controlled trials vie against case studies; SPSS battles with NVivo; subjects are pitted against participants, and outcomes are measured against Impact Factors. The problem seems to be in the norm-referencing of research and the one-upmanship this brings. A reconceptualization of research should start from the position that scholarly activity is broad-based; that no one approach is 'best'; that academic fields are not in conflict; that an individual's understanding of their own academic identity should not be tested against another's, and there should be "acceptance that we judge the level of 'discipline' for its own sake".[53] In realising that theoretical research is not in competition with applied research,

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[53] Salmon, 2003, p.26.

each academic can begin to concentrate on doing the work that they feel obliged to do. Perspectives on what is worthy research are not generalizable and a reframing of what 'counts' as research would start by realising that the quasi-competition across fields is mere snobbery and should be seen as a distraction from developing a holistic academic identity. Further, in adopting a more thoughtful rebundling of academic roles, academics can begin to see that their research is not in competition with their teaching or service commitments and that the interdependency of each facet of academic life makes academic identity overall more robust.

A reconceptualization of what counts as research would allow each individual to examine their own work, so that what 'counts' as research is locally defined and individuals can "contest [the] tyranny of a single definition of research".[54] This framing of research as non-competitive would mean a reduction in needless inter-research pettiness and, instead, academics can move to an intra-research modality – where each researcher tries to do their best research in relation to their own abilities, resources, talents and tenacity. The phantom question that divides academia seeks to find out if my research is better than yours, a better question would be for academics to ask, "Is my research better than my previous research?" Through widening the conceptualisation of what counts as research, academics can move away from inter-field competition; they can begin to pull together the various strands of their own identities and, with this, become more resilient to external challenge.

An increased respect for teaching in higher education

Teaching in higher education is not necessarily easy and for some its relatively low status can make it an unattractive option.[55] Such thinking can lead to a vicious cycle. Because of this relegation of teaching as a worthy academic activity, the current 'assumed' model across higher education sees the least experienced

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[54] Reicher, 2000, p.3.
[55] Brew, 2001.

individuals take on the greatest teaching load.[56] The hierarchy of academia also sees the least experienced academics teach the newest members of the student body and the most experienced teach the postgraduates. This conceptualisation seems topsy-turvy. University students learn within departments with some of the best minds in their field yet they have very little access to them. Students arrive at university eager to learn yet they are denied contact with those whose thinking is at the cutting edge - thus the perceived aloofness of higher education is reinforced and some students leave with a chip on their shoulder. These students then take up roles in newspapers, government agencies and think tanks primed to be the future bashers of higher education.

Teaching is a pathway to learning but if academics also considered the secondary outcome of teaching as the development of their own structured thinking then individuals could see how teaching would allow them to flex their minds for themselves as well as for their students. An increased conceptual understanding of teaching as a core component of academic identity (rather than the traditional, short-sighted perspective) would lead to academics gaining an increased level of satisfaction and an enhanced level of content knowledge.[57] Good teachers can take difficult ideas and make them accessible and the skillset involved in doing so is not unlike the skillset for writing academic papers; therefore, an increased engagement with teaching and the resultant increased respect would also lead to an enhanced framing of academic ideas. This increased engagement would have the knock-on effect that students would be well-taught by research-active professionals, so that, when the students leave they feel satisfied. Fitzmaurice[58] calls for academics to move "beyond [the] narrow and mechanistic view of teaching" and see teaching as a multifaceted practice. An increased respect for teaching, where the role of the educator is seen as altruistic yet self-developmental would move away from the either/or conceptions of the components of the academic

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[56] Heller, 2012.
[57] Åkerlind, 2004; McArthur, 2011; McInnis, 2000.
[58] Fitzmaurice, 2010, p.54.

identity towards a virtuous cycle around the teaching-research nexus.

Notions of service need to be revisited

Service is the third component of academic identity and the one most easily overlooked. This might be because of a lack of understanding as to what 'service' actually means[59] and it might be to do with the way that service is institutionally ignored because of its lack of worth in regard to advancement.[60] In order to have a more cohesive, rebundled, academic identity, notions of service need to be revisited. Service seems to cover a multitude of things – service to student well-being; service to the curriculum; service to the institution; service to the community, and service to the academy at large.[61] Throughout all this, service is perceived to be a bolt-on third leg rather than an integrated activity.[62] Instead of service being an add-on to be considered once yearly before performance review meetings, service should be locally defined, individually refined and institutionally rewarded.

Attending meetings and committees is not for everyone but those who do so should be thanked for their service. For others, service is a way for academic expertise to be applied to the wider community. Others may meet their service requirements through engagement with Government bodies. In the same way that research should be considered to be an individual endeavour, service should be seen as something that is constructed individually and individuals should feel that it is valued. Competition within higher education has set colleagues against colleague and has led to the prioritisation of research over teaching and the snubbing of service. The rebundling of academic identity involves a movement towards better collegiate understanding. Not only should service

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[59] Macfarlane, 2005; Karlsson, 2007.
[60] Price and Cotten, 2006.
[61] Jackson, 2004.
[62] Ward, 2005.

be seen as the 'right thing to do'[63] but service should be seen as a central tenet of academia.

Conclusion

The traditional linkages of higher education have become challenged [64] and new roles have arisen in response. [65] This stratification is concerning as academic identity was traditionally built around the individual exercise of a large variety of tasks.[66] Like many institutions, higher education is influenced by current trends and expectations but those within higher education are limited in their capacity to change these factors. Instead of waiting for the right set of wider societal conditions a more productive approach would be for higher education institutions to reconsider how they construct job roles so that their institution can become more robust and less likely to fall victim to changes in circumstance. The current model is one of further separation and with this there is the chance that each aspect of academic identity can become an easier target for external critique. Rebundling academic identity means a movement from inter- to intra-: where the dynamic between the institution and the individual is clarified and the individual is then able to self-actualise. If higher education institutions were to rebundle academic roles then individual academics would be able to conceptualise a more constituted academic identity. A more thoughtful respect for the roles of all involved in higher education; a reimagining of research, teaching and service; the removal of the false divides and false hierarchies, and an emphasis on the common good rather than petty competition could lead to a rebundling of the academic identity where all constituent parts of higher education can be valued. Where research, teaching and service are divided there is the chance that isolation will bring a reduction in identity and each might fall victim to some level of bashing. Instead it is argued that

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[63] Macfarlane, 2005.
[64] Liudvika and Hosch-Dayican, 2014.
[65] Brew, Boud, Lucas and Crawford, 2016.
[66] Nyhagen, Mathisen and Baschung 2013

a holistic, rebundled interpretation of academic identity is likely to lead to an enriched higher education environment where academic staff can draw strength from the various intertwined roles that each academic undertakes.

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