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Leadership In The Academy – Collegiate Methods To Achieve Corporate Goals

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Abstract

As academic work practices become increasingly focussed on measurable outcomes, the ‘home’ academic work unit, where performance is managed, can represent tightly constructed work environments. These influences have the effect of aligning academic loyalties with micro work units rather than institutional aims and objectives. The emergent popularity of communities of practice (COP) in Australian higher education can be construed as a response to this phenomenon by enabling collegiate interactions that are decoupled and liberating from the pressures of accountability in work units. As voluntary non-hierarchical structures, COPs can reach across discipline silos and boundaries and encourage collaborations to share practice and build new knowledge in ways traditionally associated with collegiality. This paper will consider how academic workloads in Australia have increased in response to global factors and suggest how collegiality fostered through COPs, have the capacity to inspire personal academic motivation and provide a context for achieving broader institutional imperatives.

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1. Introduction

The role of universities in society has changed with consequent impacts on the work practices of academics. There has been much literature over time devoted to the role/place of universities within society (most notably Ashby, 1944 and Aristotle, 1950) and conceptions have only become more complex. Ashby noted that “being concerned with an earthly, not heavenly kingdom, the universities have had to shape themselves to a changing

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society” (Ashby 1944, p.7). The challenges faced by academics globally in the evolving higher education sector are well documented in *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society* (OECD, 2008). The challenges are broadly identified as

- Expansion of tertiary education incorporating numbers of students, greater diversity of students taking part in higher education, and learning choices available to students
- Reduced public funding for higher education promoting a greater focus on performance and accountability and creating a need for industry collaborations to secure alternative revenue streams and to ensure that graduates secure employment.

The impact of external forces on universities has led to universities playing the role of brokers in distributed knowledge systems. Universities have tended to concentrate attention (through funding, industry and professional alignment and the need to be profitable) on disciplines that foster links with employability rather than knowledge for the sake of learning. There has been a shift away from the divided viewpoint expressed by Aristotle.

At present opinion is divided about the proper tasks to be set; for all peoples do not agree as to the things that the young ought learn, either with a view to virtue or with a view to the best life ... and it is not clear whether pupils should practice pursuits that are practically useful, or morally edifying or higher accomplishments (Aristotle 1950, Book VIII, Part 2: 637).

Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) also point to a juxtaposition of new student expectations for professional training and transportable career credentials with traditional academic values of critical thinking and disciplinary study. Nonetheless, universities operate on business-like principles and where class sizes are uneconomic due to low demand, they are removed from offerings.

Within this context Australian universities have effectively ‘done more with less’ signifying productivity enhancements. There is little evidence, for example, of any decline in the quality of teaching and learning despite the rise in the student-staff ratio. Equally, on the research front, Australian universities seem to have maintained high quality output. For example, they appear to have held their own overall, if not advanced, in some of the international research ranking schema, putting aside the imperfections of the metrics used. Australian universities have been steadily moving up. For example, the Shanghai Jaio Tong University’s Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) shows that 19 Australian universities were in the top 500 universities in 2013. However, these achievements have been on the back of changes in academic work practices with the capacity for long-term contributions to teaching and research requiring closer examination; particularly in the context of an aging workforce.

While these forces have had both enabling and challenging aspects for academics, this paper focusses on how the macro forces of the ‘business of education’ impact academic collegiality and workloads.

2. Academic workloads and collegiality

There is evidence that many academics in mainstream teaching and research positions are overwhelmed by their workloads and the range of their responsibilities. Coates and Goedegebuure (2010) confirm that in Australia government funding per student has declined radically over the past twenty years, and that a sharp increase in the number of students has occurred without a matching increase in teaching staff (p. 384). Although there has been a doubling of student numbers, teaching staff numbers have only increased by about one-third overall. In addition to rising staff to student ratios, the following have also added pressures to academic workloads:

- increasing student diversity resulting from equity and diversity policies;
- the special needs of growing cohorts of international students;
- the need to inculcate graduate attributes in courses and units of study;
- increasing flexibility for both learners and learning through enabling technologies;
- increasing administrative and management responsibilities managing casual teaching staff; and

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