

The Morphing of Academic Practice: Unbundling and the Rise of the Para-academic

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Abstract

Teaching, research and service are the three conventional elements of academic practice, recognised on an international basis. However, evidence suggests that academic practice is rapidly disaggregating, or 'unbundling', as a result of a variety of forces including the massification of national systems, the application of technology in teaching and increasing specialisation of academic roles to support a more centralised and performative culture. This article will present an analysis of these changes linked to the emergence of the 'para-academic': staff who specialise in one element of academic practice. This includes the 'up-skilling' of professional support staff and the 'deskilling' of academic staff. The implications of this change for the quality of the student experience and the sustainability of academic citizenship are considered.

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 broadly to reflect this division of responsibilities within the synoptic academic role. However, there is increasing evidence that this holistic concept of 'academic practice' is disaggregating or 'unbundling', a term that refers to the way that academic work is being subdivided into specialist functions (Kinser, 2002). 'Academics' expected to perform all elements of academic practice are being displaced by 'para-academics', such as student skills advisers, educational developers, learning technologists and research management staff, who specialise in one element of the tripartite academic role. 'All-round' academics are fast disappearing to be replaced by para-academics in what has been described as a 'silent' revolution (Finkelstein and Schuster, 2001).

The emergence of the para-academic is a trend that mirrors patterns that can be observed in other public sector and professional service-

oriented 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. As in these other professions, the unbundling process runs the risk of undermining the holistic nature of professional identity with reward systems encouraging a strategic disengagement from broader elements of occupational responsibility in favour of specialisation.

This article will analyse 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, 2002) is connected to the ‘hollowing out’ (Massy *et al.*, 1994) of academic life and is 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’.

Unbundling

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 adviser. In the popular public 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 that fewer and fewer staff working in contemporary higher education can be classified as ‘all-round’ academics. Rather, the holistic academic function is ‘unbundling’. In the UK, the most recent figures indicate that in 2008–2009, 51.5 per cent of those employed on academic contracts have a ‘teaching and research’ function (HESA, 2010). In the US, over half of full-time appointments of new academic staff in the 1990s were to non-tenured and fixed-term contracts (Finkelstein and Schuster, 2001). A ‘morphing’ of the academic profession is taking place.

Academic functions are being subcontracted 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 this devolution of responsibilities (Coaldrake, 2001). Para-academics perform specialist functions in relation to either teaching, research or

service and also include doctoral students with teaching responsibilities and faculty employed on a part-time, ‘portfolio’ (Brown and Gold, 2007) or ‘casual’ basis (Figure 1).

Here it is important to understand that being a para-academic is not exclusively connected to professional support roles. Para-academics are being created via research specialisation among (full) professors and the creation of managerial career tracks. While there is clearly a difference in academic prestige between, for example, a learning technologist and a research professor, they are both specialist professionals rather than ‘all-rounders’. There is a divergence taking place between the *identity* of many of those working in higher education and their *role*. The identity of a research professor is likely to be

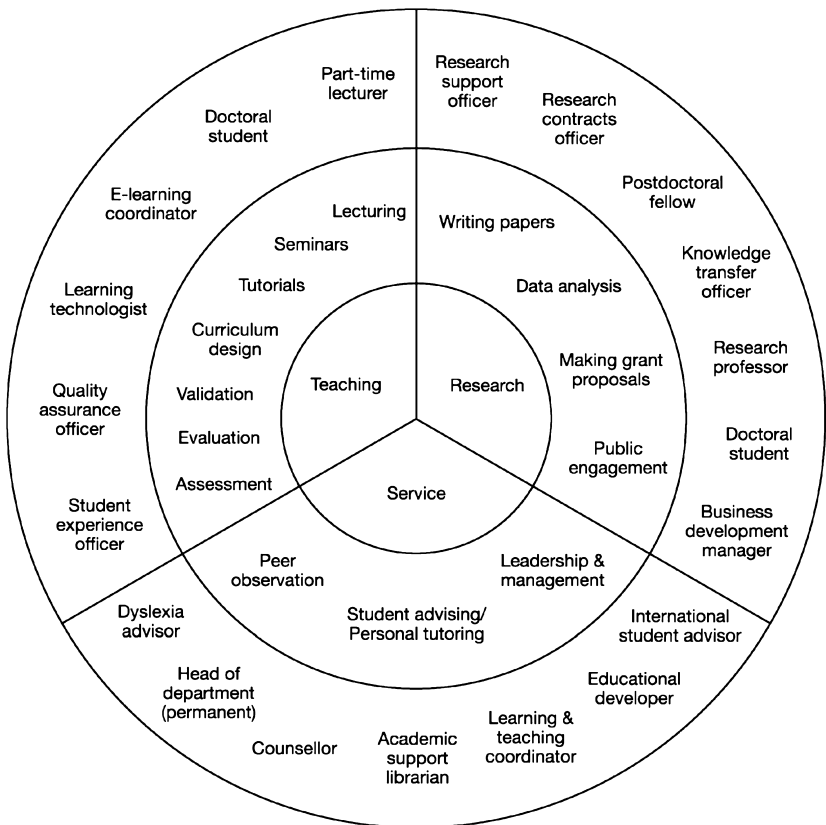


Figure 1 The disaggregation of academic practice

steeped in the conventions of their discipline with a predominant concern for knowledge production and communication. Yet their academic role has been narrowed in practice by a range of system-wide forces leading to a diminution of their teaching and administrative functions. Others with academic identities have seen their research role wither as they are driven into specialist functions as ‘teachers’ or ‘managers’.

There is growing usage of ‘para-academic’ in university parlance and the term may be found especially in Canadian and US institutions where it is employed to refer mainly to administrative units associated with the enhancement of learning and teaching processes, such as centres for faculty or academic development. However, the extent to which this term is used and applied in university organisations belies the increasing specialisation of academic roles. The usage tends to apply to a limited number of staff who are what may be referred to as *de jure* para-academics, 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 (for example, specialist personal tutors, educational developers, careers advisers). This type of academic is, in effect ‘just’ a teacher. Similarly, many academics who are appointed to managerial roles relinquish teaching and research work as a result, becoming *de facto* para-academics but retain an academic contract of employment for ‘teaching and research’ connected with pension provision. They are in practice ‘just’ managers. This scenario applies especially to those who are appointed to permanent rather than rotating managerial roles as, for example, a head of department or dean of faculty and to a number of other more senior management positions: a pattern most commonly found in post-1992 English universities.

Up-skilling, deskilling and academic identity

Para-academics are being created from two different directions within the university. First, 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'. This occurrence 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. The trend was noted in the 1990s by the UK Dearing Report on higher education (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 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 advisers and of information technology support workers into learning technologists. At the same time, many staff have seen their role 'deskilled' from all-round academics into para-academic roles such as quality assurance advisers, departmental heads or educational developers. Deskilling involves a fragmentation of formerly comprehensive skill sets and the displacement of skilled labour ('all-round' academics in my application of this term) by semi-skilled or unskilled workers (semi-skilled para-academics). While this term was first applied in relation to an industrial blue-collar context (Braverman, 1974), deskilling of academic staff in higher education follows a similar pattern designed to lower the costs of a university education and obtain better 'productivity' from those working to deliver it. The nature of this deskilling is in relation to areas of academic work that are jettisoned as a result of this increased specialisation. This does not preclude up-skilling in relation to the one area of academic work in which a person so affected will now specialise. Up-skilling and deskilling mean 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 (Figure 2).

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. Here, a combination of pedagogic and technical skills is needed to maximise the potential of virtual learning environments for students. Learning technologists and online tutors have been created by the shift to e-learning as a delivery mechanism in university teaching. Information technology specialists have been 'up-skilled' into learning technologists, taking increasing responsibility for

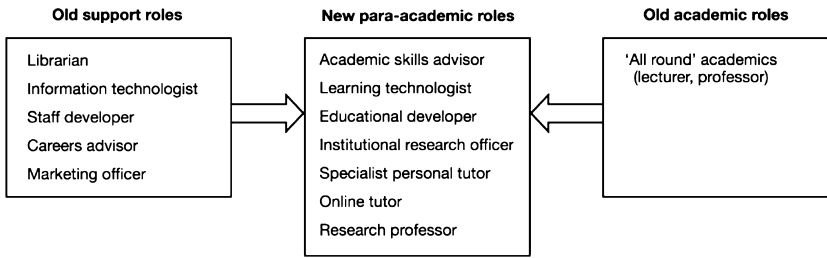


Figure 2 The origins of the para-academic

the design of the academic curriculum, while some academics have seen their roles shrink with respect to research and broader face-to-face engagement with students by becoming online tutors.

Academic identity and status are closely related to research and scholarly activities. However, the evidence indicates that it is unsafe to assume that staff employed on academic contracts are necessarily engaged in research and publication work. While many academic staff may be engaged in broadly defined scholarly activities, such as updating their professional or propositional knowledge base via development activities, this is not necessarily equivalent to a narrower but more performance and quality audit-driven definition of research focusing on obtaining grants and publishing in peer-reviewed outlets. The low proportion of staff returned in successive research assessment exercises by a large number of UK universities indicates that many ‘academics’ are principally teachers rather than all-round academics. The same pattern may be observed in Australia where universities that have comparatively modest research activity among academic staff (for example, Victoria University) still retain the overwhelming majority of academic staff on ‘teaching and research’ contracts while Group of 8 universities (for example, 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).

However, it is important to acknowledge that research activity, as defined in more narrowly performative terms, was never an established part of the academic tradition of the former UK polytechnics or many of the older universities either. To a large extent this ‘tradition’ has been imported through the growing influence of the German model of higher education and the doctoral degree as a qualification for academic staff over the last 30 years. Hence, it is with respect to service work, especially

the concept of the lecturer as a personal and moral tutor as found in the older English universities (Robbins, 1963), that the academic role has most notably unbundled.

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 are becoming increasingly irrelevant across functions (Coaldrake, 2001). However, this means that the academic identity of para-academics is a source of ambiguity. Some continue to work on academic contracts in academic settings. Their identity, after all, has been shaped by the discipline or profession to which they belong. They may consider themselves to be 'an academic' even though in practice broader elements of their role have been subcontracted. This point is illustrated by reference to educational developers, who are more likely to be found in central support units disconnected from the academic infrastructure. Despite this institutional location, a large proportion of these para-academics come from a background that may still carry an identity as an 'academic'. Many educational developers have moved from an academic contract to 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.

Whitchurch (2008) has developed the concept of 'third space' to describe how the blurring of boundaries between academics and professional support staff has opened up a new territory occupied by 'unbounded' and 'blended' professionals. Blended professionals are individuals who are appointed to roles that span professional and academic domains while unbounded professionals use institutional-wide projects and development opportunities to traverse self-confidently the conventional borders between academia and administration and management. While Whitchurch's analysis focuses on professional support staff, para-academics operate in this third space drawn from both an administrative and an academic background. The space represents a coming together of different cultures, languages and assumptions about higher education tensions. 'Appreciating the disinterested nature of academic debate' and 'being able to hold one's own in this arena' are examples given by Whitchurch (2008, p. 4) that are indicative of the challenges facing professional support staff moving into third space. Shelley (2010, p. 439) has identified a similar set of tensions connected with the role of research

management staff in what she refers to as a 'shifting arena' when these para-academics cross into academic territory as a consequence of their role. Despite such tensions, the emergence of third space has implications for team working practices that might also be positively characterised as promoting a higher degree of inter-professional respect between support staff and academics. Promotion systems and the informal formation of social capital in academic life (Salaran, 2010) reward individualism rather than teamwork and are, hence, out of step with efforts to encourage a more collaborative ethic.

Finally, third space denotes the development of higher-level skills among professional support staff. Hence there are both negative and positive aspects of the emergence of para-academics. This mirrors the debate about the effects of deskilling and up-skilling more generally in capitalist societies (Heisig, 2009).

Forces of change

Unbundling has been brought about by a variety of forces associated with modern higher education. It is partly the result of growth in student numbers and the massification of national systems encouraging institutions to centralise and systematise to meet the needs of more students with diverse needs. 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 (that is, full, associate or assistant) faculty positions. By 2007–2008 almost 13.9 per cent of academics in US degree-granting institutions were employed as 'instructors' compared to just 7.7 per cent in 1979–1980 (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 per cent of academic staff (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2010). In the UK, over 35 per cent of academic staff are part-time (HESA, 2010). This figure varies widely by institution with research-intensive universities tending to have the fewest staff on open-ended or permanent contracts. Whatever the formal nature of the contract of employment, part-time staff are, in practice, far less likely to be able or expected to perform across all areas of academic practice. More part-time staff means that the diminishing number of full-time staff are placed under greater pressure to perform service work such as serving on committees and advising students (O'Brien, 2010).

Institutional responses to national and international trends in higher education have led to the expansion of support functions employing para-academics. This shift has been encouraged to a large extent at the policy level through attempts to systematise support for more diverse groups of students and rising levels of attrition. Strong student support services that are well integrated are seen as an essential element of a successful modern institution and a student entitlement (Universities UK, 2002; Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Disability units have been established in response to legislation protecting the rights of disabled people, including students. Student 'skills' centres have been set up in order to address the needs of increasing numbers of students entering higher education from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, providing greater support in the development of academic writing, study skills and numeracy. This 'bolt-on' approach, divorced from the academic curriculum, has become the dominant model despite its limitations (Wingate, 2006). In response to the perceived needs of academic staff for teaching development, many educational development centres in the UK were created in the wake of the Dearing Report on higher education (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 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.

The establishment of additional learning and teaching and student support services also represents a process of centralisation as 'academic rule' (Moodie, 1996) over the curriculum has declined. Academic autonomy and control of the curriculum at a local level has been supplanted by a focus on a more collective and institutional focus (Coaldrake, 2001, p. 16). This is driven by a heightened sensitivity about quality assurance and institutional reputation.

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 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 than a doctorate (Coaldrake, 2001).

Unbundling is closely connected with the economics of higher education. Elements of conventional academic practice, such as personal tutoring and assessment, are time-consuming activities. Getting para-academics to perform such work makes financial sense if academic staff can, in the process, be released to pursue work that is considered more 'productive' defined in terms of performativity and income generation. The audit of research activity conducted in the UK and Australia has encouraged a growth in roles related to research and research management and has impacted substantially on teaching through the increased use of graduate students and part-time faculty as teachers, releasing academics to pursue publication and grant-getting 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 (teaching, research and service). There are signs though that some universities are beginning to restructure their reward systems around para-academic or specialist professional career paths.

Unbundling is occurring in several different national contexts and is particularly noticeable in the UK and Australia where national research audit exercises have begun significantly to reshape academic career paths. At Edith Cowan University (Australia), for example, there are five career paths identified in addition to the conventional 'teaching and research scholar' (Edith Cowan University, 2010). Other universities are also creating two or often three career tracks, reflecting a specialist role in teaching or research or management (Macfarlane, 2007). This trend may be closely connected to performance-based audits of research quality. The emergence of para-academic career tracks belatedly represents the unbundling of academic practice exacerbated by successive research assessment exercises (RAE) in the UK in particular. The RAE has led to an increasing polarisation between 'researchers', 'teachers' and 'administrators' with status and resources being attached to those deemed research active (Sikes, 2006). This has further widened the gap between the 'haves' (the researchers) and 'have nots' (the teachers and the administrators) in the brave new world of research performativity. The apparent complicity of the academic community in these exercises (Nixon, 2010) may be partly explained by the manner in which they appear to evaluate the established social capital of academic life: contribution to knowledge formation centred on the disciplines.

Does it matter? The 'hollowing out' of academic life

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 para-academic 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 in reality there is little collegiality with respect to 'faculty engagement with issues of curricular structure, pedagogical alternatives and student assessment' (Massy *et al.*, 1994, p. 19). 'Hollowing out' is also occurring more broadly in the way that managerial processes have largely supplanted the direct influence of academics with respect to university decision making, even though academics continue to hold positions that formally confer the vestiges of power (Harloe and Perry, 2005). Power has shifted in academic life away from the 'all-round' academic to the specialist professional. Specialisation, rather than being an 'all-rounder', has become the key to career success (Massy *et al.*, 1994). The demands of engagement with mode 2 knowledge developed in the context of application mean that academics are no longer seen as capable of initiating and delivering change but as increasingly dependent on other professionals (Harloe and 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 advisers 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 have neither the time nor the specialist skills to support students outside the lecture theatre or seminar room. On the basis of a study of Scottish universities, it was found that only a minority of students now turn to academics for help when they encounter academic, social or financial problems (Christie *et al.*, 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 advisers, encouraged by university policy. Increasing academic workloads (Tight, 2010), associated role overload and a lack of resources have contributed to changing attitudes towards personal tutoring, now seen as an increas-

ingly unsustainable part of the academic role (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). The referral culture is sometimes justified on the grounds of student vulnerability and the problematisation of normal human interaction in a therapeutic society (Furedi, 2003). Bartram (2009, pp. 310–311) argued that there is a contrast between a humanistic view of student support, which attaches greater importance to the pastoral role of tutors as the main ‘support agents’, and an instrumental view where student support is interpreted as ‘a contractual obligation between consumers and service providers’. Allied to this instrumental view is a deficit model of diminished student capacity that often homogenises ‘non-traditional’ learners, in particular, as vulnerable as part of a therapeutic culture (Hayes, 2004). The dominance of the instrumental view appears to be reinforcing a separation between the professional and the personal and a more challenging environment for trying to be a ‘caring professor’ (O’Brien, 2010, p. 112).

Evidence indicates that the contemporary 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 academic staff to keep their ‘distance’ from students (Brown, 2002). This culture is supported by para-academics offering various types of specialist student support.

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 staff 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 subcontracted 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, which provide support for students, colleagues, institutions, disciplines and professions as well as the wider public. They include student advising, giving feed-

back, 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 collectivity 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 that cannot be evidenced as 'outputs' (such as refereed papers or research grants).

Being an academic in a public system of higher education used to imply a commitment to public service. The parallel 'hollowing out' of this concept (Marquand, 2004) means that an academic career is now seen as one that focuses on individual performance and achievement with less reference to a wider service ethic.

Conclusion

Unbundling in higher education has begun to lead to the stealthy displacement of the 'all-round' academic with specialist para-academics. Those that continue to try to perform all elements of academic practice find themselves under increasing work pressure and swimming against the tide of change, which rewards specialisation and legitimises a degree of disengagement, with para-academic services filling some of this void. Academic work has been 'stretched rather than adapted' (Coaldrake, 2001, p. 16) to this new reality, making the viability and wisdom of trying to be an all-rounder questionable.

Does unbundling signal the demise of academic practice as a holistic concept? Trends have 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. Centralising and subcontracting so many core tasks runs the risk of separating academic work from its underlying rationale and eroding the academic profession's collective memory about its key purpose.

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