Reconnecting relationships through technology

Changing dynamic of expectations for higher education academics

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Universities are undergoing significant change (Kaplan, 2021). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, external pressures meant that universities were adapting their research practices, their teaching and learning practices, and their external engagement. This research is concerned with how universities' employment practices might be altered to meet these changing needs. Drivers for this change included increasing access to technology, requirements for greater access, student variety, and a more challenging funding environment, as well as pressure from external providers (Bakhov et al., 2021).

There is diversity in how universities are addressing these demands. Some universities have invested in significant training to prepare staff to teach in blended or online environments (Llerena-Izquierdo & Ayala-Carabajo, 2021). Some universities have invested in centralized (Bearman et al., 2021), or faculty level teaching and learning units (or both), with a purview to assist academics in developing a better student experience. Another option has been the outsourcing of the design work to Online Program Managers (OPMs) who undertake the learning design work. In reality, the most common practice is a combination of different approaches, which can lead to, for example, learning designers training academics, as well as developing courses at a whole of university level, but also working at a faculty or school level. This approach has only further confused the question of the role of third space professionals such as learning designers.

This area, and the effect that it has had on employment practices in higher education is under-researched at the current time. This poster reports on a preliminary study of various higher education job advertisements, seeking to identify in what way employment practices are changing (if at all) to reflect the changing dynamics of higher education expectations of academic staff members. In doing so, it establishes a research agenda for future studies in this space.

Adopting a systems thinking approach to measure change
The experiences during the pandemic should provide lessons for future practices and research. In order to do so, it is necessary to consider the dynamic range of influences active in this space; for this reason, a systems thinking approach provides insight into this space. Current research that focused on educator's characteristics (professional knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes) found that the education sector struggled to provide satisfactory learning during this period. Educators are only one part of the story here; the other part is the role of institutions, the resources provided by governments, and the general population's expectations of the educator regardless of the challenges being experienced (Wright & Meadows, 2012; Stroh, 2015). Considered together, these elements offer insights into to how we support, assess and re-engineer our systems towards better educational outcomes (Senge, 1990). Education is a societal need and if society is not benefitting from all of the inputs, then changes should be implemented.

This poster provides a conceptual view of what these changes might look like at all levels. The role of the educator, as an embedded resource in a learning system, and what abilities are needed for the role or to support the role are also discussed.

Keywords: higher education, academics, expectation, skill, online, teaching, pandemic

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