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Personalising professional learning mobility in Higher Education

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The trends and impacts of digital technologies in the higher education sector mean that change is an ongoing, organic factor in response to the personalised nature in which society works, learns, lives, communicates, and connects. Such dynamic educational settings provide new environments for learning mobility that transcend boundaries of time, place, convention and learning community. This paper is fundamentally concerned with how educators, as adult learners, learn in a time when institutions, through their teaching staff, are attempting to address the fast pace innovations in learning and teaching. This paper describes a regional university's approach to reconceptualising a model of professional learning that offers personalised, collaborative, and transformative learning experiences for its educators. The aim is to develop professional learning initiatives that are responsive to the educator's learning mobility needs whilst also enriching the student learning experience and addressing institutional strategic priorities.

Keywords: learning mobility, professional learning, digital technologies

Introduction
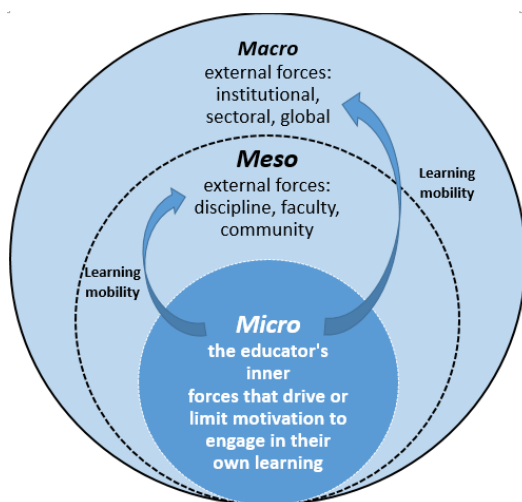
This paper is fundamentally concerned with how educators, as adult learners, learn. To give due attention to this, the investigation is approached from the higher education sector's ability to respond to the socio-technical forces of change at the institutional level, faculty level and individual level. For the purpose of this paper the institutional level is conceived as the macro-level consisting of high level external forces such as the institution (e.g. policy, strategic direction, organisational structure), the sector (e.g. deregulation, government funding), and global factors (e.g. increased competition from non-university higher education providers, and globalisation and casualization of the academic workforce). The faculty level is conceived as the meso-level consisting of external forces such as the faculty, discipline and community. The individual-level is conceived as the micro-level consisting of the inner forces that drive or limit the individual's motivation to engage in opportunities to change. The individual in this context is the higher education teacher, and their motivation to engage in change is concerned with those forces that drive or limit ways to deepen their understanding of their teaching practice. In addition to the use of the micro-, meso- and macro-level framework to examine the complexities of change in higher education, the paper also introduces the idea of the educator's learning mobility. For the purposes of this discussion, learning mobility relates to people choosing to learn, work, communicate, collaborate and connect in any configuration, across learning contexts and boundaries, for continuous professional and personal growth, rather than the scholarly discourse on mobile learning and digital technologies.

The paper explores the changing nature of higher education at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels, and the interconnectedness between the levels, through the lens of academic work and professional learning. Surfacing the complexities of change that may drive or limit the educator's learning mobility across the three levels is applied to describe a regional university's approach to reconceptualising a

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model of professional learning that offers personalised, collaborative, and transformative learning experiences for its educators.

Academic work: The complexities of change

The essence of higher education academic work has been captured by Debowski (2012) as "one of the most rewarding yet frustrating and challenging roles anyone could undertake. It is complex, dynamic and rapidly evolving to accommodate the expectations of its many stakeholders" (p. 3). As work gets more complex and informal learning emerges as an essential part of work, Boud and Brew (2012) emphasise a pragmatic approach where learning is viewed as a social process occurring within the context of practice which, in turn, leads to a fundamental shift to the perspective of academic work as professional learning.

Macro-level and meso-level:
The macro- and meso-levels have been combined for the purposes of this paper as the focus at this point is on the structures, conditions, and functions existing at the institutional and faculty levels embedded as top-down control that limit the ability organisationally to embrace change. For reconceptualised models of professional learning to have lasting impact, academics must feel confident, have a sense of control over their work, and professional self-efficacy and identity to assume personal responsibility in advancing their academic practice (Martin, McGill, & Sudweeks, 2013). This suggests attention needs to be given to the hierarchical structures at the macro- and meso-level when reconceptualising a whole-of-institution approach that fosters a bottom-up attitude where educators have a sense of agency in remodelling professional learning initiatives.

Micro level:
Learning mobility is much less concerned about specific structures, hierarchies, tasks and place. It shifts the fluidity of academic work to the activity of doing, being and acting in the world (crafting a sense of meaning and academic identity) that is not fixed by time, place and convention. A re-distribution of the function of academic work across networks, communities, and conversations shifts the responsibility to educator to personalise their own scholarly trajectory (Jewitt, 2009).

In summary, learning mobility plays an essential part in the changing nature of workplace learning to enable continuity across the boundaries of time, space and the activity of learning (Jarche, 2012a, 2013b). Learning mobility advocates the invisible nature of workplace learning. There are three particular elements of learning mobility that underwrite the notion of invisible learning yet provide links back to the foundations of workplace learning. Firstly, learning can be formal or informal; secondly, knowledge can be explicit or implicit and finally, value can be tangible or intangible (Jarche, 2013a).

Professional learning: The complexities of change

The expectation today is that modern university teachers fully utilise the capacity of digital technologies to design engaging, authentic and personalised learning activities to enrich the educational experience (Phillips, McNaught, & Kennedy, 2011). We support the view that teachers are the single most important learning resource available to most higher education students (Villar & Alegre, 2007) and the heartbeat of the institution (Debowski, 2012). Given that educators are the pivot point at the macro-, meso-, and micro-level, a holistic approach is needed to rethink institutional-led professional development to design personalised, collaborative and transformative learning experiences for educators as part of their continuous professional learning (Boud & Brew, 2012; King, 2005).

Macro-level:
As social, informal learning has become an important driver for academic work it offers new professional learning opportunities (de Laat & Schreurs, 2013). The challenge is two-fold at the macro-level: institutions can no longer leave the responsibility for the educator's engagement in their professional learning with their professional development department; and institutional structures need to adopt a wider, pragmatic, agile approach to professional learning practices to optimise the potential for individual and organisational learning (de Laat & Schreurs, 2013; Jarche, 2012a).

Meso-level:

The meso-level, often referred to by educators as their 'academic home'(Poole, 2009), can act as positive spaces to foster identity, opportunities for mutual support and collaboration, and generative sources of ideas; or they could serve to limit perspective and defend territories, and operate as places of resistance to change (Poole, 2009). The traditions of academe continue to challenge the value of university teaching as higher education teachers are 'trained' through the doctoral route and rewarded for research within their discipline field (Bates, 2015). There is no requirement to be qualified in teaching methods, or to engage in the learning and teaching discourse (Weimer, 2012). This creates tension when modern academic work requires highly qualified educators who are adaptive and responsive to discipline and pedagogical knowledge and skills in a changing higher education landscape.

Micro-level:

Steel (2004) concludes that many educators experience barriers that negate a sense of academic identity and institutional support to integrate innovations into their teaching practice. The barriers include time constraints, lack of resources, lack of understanding of educational theory and concepts, lack of knowledge of what is pedagogically possible, and lack of valuing learning and teaching. Furthermore, educators often view the traditions of institutionally-led professional development events as linear, out-of-step with personal needs, with limited effectiveness or relevance to immediate application to resolve their teaching challenge (Mitchell, 2015) rendering the event as ineffective or unappealing (Hart, 2015).

In summary, for models of professional learning to have traction, the focus must firmly shift to the educator as adult learner. This refocus recognises that educators come with their own unique set of experiences, background and intentions, and emphasise the need for learning flexibility and mobility, where educators can personalise their own learning within, between and outside the traditions of professional development.

An Institutional approach: Reconceptualising professional learning

The regional university is in the early-phase of reconceptualising a model of professional learning from the perspective of an educator's learning mobility. The revitalised model advocates that educators like to learn, work, communicate, collaborate and connect in any configuration, across learning contexts and boundaries, for continuous professional and personal growth. One of the biggest challenges to mainstreaming a personalising professional learning mobility mindset across the macro- (institution), meso- (faculty/school) and micro-levels (individual) is making it visible to the point that it advances professional recognition of university teaching. Designing a professional learning model that fosters an educator's learning mobility enables individuals to take responsibility and control for their own learning and offers unlimited access to resources through personal learning networks (Jarche, 2012b; Kolowich, 2014). The networks become the learning and this goes to the core in the ways people like to work in a mobile society: in the flow of work; continuously; immediately; socially; and autonomously (Hart, 2013). However, such professional learning activities are mostly implicit, ad hoc, spontaneous, and invisible to others (de Laat & Schreurs, 2013).

The development of the model acknowledges a whole-of-institution approach that fosters a bottom-up attitude to make professional learning visible. The model espouses a modularized approach, that is, scaffolded 'learning chunks'. A modularized approach offers the advantage of the flexibility of choice as to which 'bundle' of professional learning activities educators engage in to meet their professional learning needs whilst addressing the collective needs of the institution by:
- a systematic recognition of professional learning events completed within and outside the university that may be formal (e.g., completion of formal qualification within the domain of learning and teaching in higher education) or informal (e.g., active participation and collaboration within informal networks and communities to advance learning and teaching); an institutional initiative to advance the quality of university teaching (e.g. Foundations of University Teaching course, Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS)) or independent, self-discovery (e.g. participation in open access, collaborative and reflective learning activities to demonstrate advancement in teaching practice);
- a credentialing mechanism to demonstrate achievement of professional teaching standards that:
  - Enables educators to build their academic career and professional identity through the

recognition of their teaching in a transparent, seamless and supported way;

- o Enables the institution to reconceptualise a professional learning model that cultivates a quality, transparent approach to continuously advance the quality and standard of university teaching; and
- o Offers a whole-of-institution approach to make visible to students and other stakeholders the professionalism that the institution and its staff bring to teaching and support for student learning.

- a framework for sharing and collaborating across disciplinary thresholds of knowledge that enriches professional learning initiatives and creates opportunities for research partnership and networks that advances both the scholarship of learning and teaching, and disciplinary research (Weller, 2011);

- a distributed teaching leadership model. Through shared and active engagement, strengthened by a sense of professional self-efficacy, distributed leadership builds a culture of respect and acceptance of change resulting in the development of leadership capacity to sustain improvement in the quality of learning and teaching (Office for Learning and Teaching Project, 2005).

Next Stages

The university is moving forward in developing a whole-of-institution approach to the design of a professional learning model that fosters a supportive environment that makes the educator's learning mobility visible. The first stage is to advance the vision of change within the realms of the institutional level, faculty level, and possibly and most importantly, within the mindset of the individual. The bottom-up aspect of the model is fundamentally situated within the tenet of educator as adult learner and therefore asks the educator to take responsibility and being in control of their professional learning. From the authors' experience in facilitating professional learning activities we know it to be true that educators have an intrinsic motivation to take ownership of their learning.

The top-down aspect of the model is in shifting the locus of control in the constitution of professional learning events. Faculty level and institutional level structures need to provide pathways for, and recognition of, experience and expertise in university teaching. Currently the university is exploring partnership arrangements with other institutions driving sectoral change relating to professional recognition of university teaching, such as the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowship scheme. This, in turn, creates platforms for educators to shape, choose, direct and take responsibility for their learning. The visibility of the educator's learning mobility rewards the individual's true sense of meaning making and identity which manifests as rewarding autonomy, mastery and purpose, leading to the engagement in professional practice (Pink, 2011).

Creating an attitude of change that embraces a whole-of-institution mindset in partnership with a bottom-up approach to personalising professional learning means giving equal and due attention to academic work and professional learning activities that reward the educator's learning mobility where the value may be explicit or implicit, formal or informal, tangible or intangible at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels.

This paper recognises that higher education institutions serve many masters. Therefore the ongoing work in this area is to develop professional learning initiatives that are responsive to the educator's learning mobility needs whilst also enriching the student learning experience, addressing institutional strategic priorities, and accommodating the expectations of its many stakeholders.

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