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Critical issues in learning and teaching: the ideal academic and implications for leadership

Abstract:

In recent years, the mention of critical issues in learning and teaching in the creative arts has prompted discussion about widening participation, quality assurance, academic workloads and the research-driven higher education environment. While these critical issues are much discussed, they are rarely viewed through the lens of the practicing academic. This article considers what is required of the creative arts academic in order to meet the complex demands of the role. These demands most often include research, teaching, creative practice, service and administrative work, but may also include leadership. Drawing together current discourse on higher education learning and teaching, research, creative practice and policy, this article concludes by asking whether it is possible to fulfil the various demands made upon academics, or whether this ideal is a work of fiction.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

As higher education responds to the demands of government policy and the market, a focus on quality assurance has become a common concern for academics and academic leaders. Setting aside the vexing issue of how and why quality is measured, it is timely to consider what is expected of the academic staff whose performance largely determines the quality outcome.

Superficially, expectations in the creative arts can be defined quite simply as high-level teaching and research alongside important service and professional-level creative practice. This is misleading, yet to move forward requires a fresh look at the various discourses at play. Foucault wrote that ‘all manifest discourse is secretly based on an “already-said”’ (1969/2002: 27) and that this ‘already said’ is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a ‘never-said’ that undermines discourse and prevents it from moving to another track. Discourse, he suggested, ‘must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs’ (27). Bearing that in mind, the major part of this article brings together some of what has been already been said about critical issues in higher education learning and teaching, taking as its context the research-driven higher education environment, the changing academic workforce, and the creative arts. In bringing together what has already been said on these issues, the paper then attempts to move the discourse to another track, exploring disparity between the dominant, big-issue discourse and the possibly fictitious qualities of the ‘ideal’ academic.

The higher education environment

Marginson and van der Wende position higher education and research as fundamental components and agents in ‘the formation of the global environment, being foundational to knowledge, the take-up of technologies, cross-border association and sustaining complex communities’ (2007: 7). The global higher education environment thus described has brought about both economic and cultural change, including global competition and increased accountability. Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley add that the demands for accountability extend to learning and teaching (2009: 17). This compels institutions ‘to demonstrate that learning is taking place ... it is no longer sufficient to measure the “inputs”’. The increasingly diverse student population – the student inputs – greatly complicate the task of leading programs that demonstrate both indirect measures of quality such as student completions, and direct measures such as the student experience.

As discussed later, the higher education workforce has ‘one of the highest levels of precarious employment in Australia’ (NTEU 2012: 5). In 2010, less than 10 per cent of teaching-only academic staff (measured as FTE) were employed on a continuing basis, and 86.5 per cent of teaching-only academics were casual employees (May 2011). Casual academics currently perform over 50 per cent of all undergraduate teaching in Australia’s universities, and academics who do not hold full-time, permanent positions are increasingly employed in leadership roles. As such, casual and contracted academics are central to this discussion.

Evaluation and accountability

As discussed elsewhere in this special issue, quality assurance and standards underpin the assessment of achievement within higher education. Further, the positioning of the sector as a global change agent has led to complex expectations:

In addition to educating, tertiary-level institutions have assumed (and been assigned) a broader social role including resolving social inequities, providing appropriately trained labor, contributing to regional and national economic growth, and producing marketable research' (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009: 82).

Many of these social roles are aligned with learning and teaching, and the corresponding expectation is that teaching and learning leaders will factor them into course delivery.

The definition of quality and standards against which all of this is assessed remains the topic of much debate, not least because of the need for international agreement that can support the mobility of students and academics within the minefield of equivalence. Tight (2012) categorises quality into five areas: course (program) evaluation; grading and outcomes; national monitoring practices; league tables and system standards. If quality is the *process* of learning and standards are the *outcomes* of that process (Harvey & Stensaker 2007), both are the responsibility of teaching and learning leaders and the academics they lead. Already we can see that the expectations of the ideal academic are far more complex than at first they might appear.

The task of evaluating and rewarding higher education excellence has resulted in enhanced, and at times unhealthy, competition between Australian institutions, sectoral groups, academic departments and individuals. Noting increased competition on a global level during the decade to 2009, Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009: 60) warn that it also has a cultural impact:

the pressures of accountability and the desire of university leadership for excellence have in many cases pitted one department or faculty against another as they position themselves to acquire limited resources and academic staff. ... Competition has always been a force in academe ... but it can also undermine the sense of an academic community, a mission, and traditional values.

Levy (2006) links increased competition with research evaluation frameworks, and notes the consequential race towards the same goals. This 'race to sameness', driven by the instability and ambiguity of policy, sees higher education institutions struggle to respond to the incompatible goals of commercial viability, high rankings and compliance, and a genuine focus on quality improvement in learning, teaching and research. It is unsurprising that a typical institutional response is to analyse and emulate the characteristics of high-scoring institutions, particularly when simplistic league tables are publicly available. However, as Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley caution, 'this trend may undermine efforts to develop a system of institutions that is appropriately differentiated, based on the specific needs of a given system – with different goals and responsibilities, patterns of funding, admissions policies, and other characteristics' (2009: 18). The race towards sameness has obvious implications for staffing, as institutions strive to respond quickly and, at times, temporarily.

The myriad of public and private providers and the diverse population of students has led higher education institutions to be ‘encouraged (some might say forced) to become more entrepreneurial, to seek funding from a diversity of sources to make up for consistent reductions in public funding’ (Crisp 2010: 22). Nelles and Vorley describe this income-seeking engagement as a ‘third mission’ (2010: 162) that exists alongside the core missions of teaching and research. Whereas research income and publication outputs are assessed by both the Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) and the Excellence for Research in Australia framework (ERA), ‘the intrinsic quality of teaching and learning ... escapes market scrutiny’ (Marginson 2011: 26).

Another thing that escapes direct scrutiny at this point in time is the extent to which the outcomes of research are communicated beyond the academy. Despite agreement that ‘increasing the overall participation rate in higher education would be in the public good, as well as assisting in economic development’ (Crisp 2010: 25), the 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education (Commonwealth of Australia 2008) recommended against any separate funding for knowledge transfer or community engagement. Rather, these third stream activities need to form ‘an integral part of an institution’s teaching and research activities’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 111). The additional missions or streams influence how the institutions and communities of higher education operate at every level.

Purpose

Whilst learning and teaching was essentially the core function of universities prior to the creation of the German research university in the early 19th century, it now competes with a bewildering array of often conflicting priorities associated with massification and higher education’s alignment with innovation, research and economic development. Upholding the view that higher education ultimately serves students, Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley concede that ‘the role of the university has itself become more complex, and in some cases teaching and learning has moved from the center of academic life toward the margin’ (2009: 17).

Teaching and learning leaders recognise that when the sector is under pressure to measure and improve graduate outcomes and experience, one of the likely victims of the managed university is teaching itself. This can be particularly problematic where research evaluation frameworks exist. Hannis notes from the New Zealand experience that academics generally regard their national Performance-Based Research Fund to have ‘devalued teaching in favour of research’ (2010: 12, citing Hall & Morris Matthews 2006). Kroll recounts the same pressure among Canadian creative writing academics, one of whom reported: ‘I have to make a decision about how I invest my time, and I can’t do it all any more’ (2006: 7). This comment illustrates the level of stress experienced by academics. Whilst the ideal academic will have the time and security to invest energy in a variety of activities, the reality is a casualised, highly stressed, time-jealous workforce that has to strategically juggle multiple tasks (Bexley, James & Arkoudis 2011). The implications for leaders become clear when this is considered in the context of the changing academic workforce.

Vaguely familiar: the changing academic workforce

The competitive environment described earlier is a far cry from the more traditional view of higher education institutions as places of ‘learning, scholarship, identity formation and self-alteration’ (Marginson 2006: 44). Attention is often focused on the international, national or institutional implications of competition; however, the reporting of achievement has considerable implications for academic leaders. Academics are seeking to succeed within an environment that features increased accountability, fierce competition for funding, augmented administrative duties, increased staff-student ratios, concern about both individual track record and publicly displayed institutional achievement and decreased employment stability. This environment is predicted to have a dire impact on staff retention:

close to 40 per cent of academics under 30 years of age plan to leave Australian higher education in the next five to ten years, with 13 to 18 per cent intending to leave in the immediate future. Around one-third of staff aged 30-39 years intend to leave in the next five to ten years (Blexley, James & Arkoudis 2011: xii).

Moving the discussion to personal responsibility, Crisp asks:

In this environment, what is the responsibility of the discipline academic to align her or his academic practice with national priorities and the public good? What would an individual academic’s practice look like if it were directed towards the public good? (2010: 23).

It may be more realistic to ask whether such an alignment would be valued or rewarded. Barnett’s (1990) argument for critical self-reflection, open learning, interdisciplinarity and the inclusion of philosophical and sociological perspectives is likely to align with the philosophical position of many academics. However, it does not align with the criteria on which academic appointments are made. The leadership challenge is how to support a focus on quality teaching within an environment that does not do so.

The implications of instability

The concerns raised above feature strongly in recent studies of the academic workforce and the workforce more generally. Academics are among a growing sector of the workforce within which casualisation and multiple roles are rife. These are characteristics more traditionally associated with a career in the arts than in academia (Wright, Bennett & Blom 2010), and they are particularly prevalent in many creative arts faculties. Drawing on casual employment figures from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) select statistics, Edwards, Bexley & Richardson found that approximately 30 per cent of academic staff in the disciplines of creative arts, architecture and education hold casual contracts. This is the highest reported level across all disciplines.

The DEEWR data exclude people employed as sub-contractors and they report staffing in terms of full-time equivalence rather than by person count (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010), which means that the correct figures are almost certainly higher

than reported. Seeking a more complete picture, Welch drew on the work of Percy et al. (2008) who suggest that:

Sessional teachers are the hidden part of massification that has taken place in Higher Education in Australia over the last 30 years ... Between 40 and 50 per cent of teaching in Australian higher education is currently done by sessional staff. This has been largely unacknowledged (Welch 2012: 67).

Welch describes this as a new underclass of teaching-only, cost-saving academics. Similar trends are seen elsewhere: for example, Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009) report that only half of new academic appointments in the USA are tenure-track positions, and Bousquet (2008) asserts that contracted academics, including graduate students, deliver almost 75 per cent of teaching within American universities. Ironically, McKay and Brass compare the 'invisible or rootless experience of the casual academic' (2011: 154) to the 'unplugging' of students from university life and face-to-face contact. This student disengagement is just one aspect of the changes to study patterns, all of which influence pedagogy and course design (Grattan Institute 2012).

Attrition from the sector was mentioned earlier within the context of heavy workloads and precarious employment. Australia's ageing academic workforce is another factor in the imminent shortage of academics (Hugo & Morriss 2010). One-quarter of Australian academics are aged 55 or over, and the number of academics under 40 is declining in the face of uncertain employment prospects. As Edwards, Bexley & Richardson point out the ageing academic workforce carries a high financial cost:

the composition of the academic workforce toward the more senior of the classifications also has implications for institutional budgets, as wages at the most senior levels are around twice those of a Level A staff member, reducing the financial base on which to employ more junior staff (2011: 7).

Cost is certainly a consideration when leaders replace senior, tenured staff with more affordable, flexible labour. This, however, contributes to the shift from the ideal of full-time, supported, on-site academics to the reality of multi-tasking, multi-focused academics who are less likely to spend time on campus, come to meetings, attend professional learning, and form part of the academic community. The same factors are seen to signal a critical shortage of future leaders, with fewer 'qualified and interested leadership candidates existing within higher education' (Luna 2012: 57).

Whilst precarious employment is acknowledged as a source of stress among academic staff, leaders also encounter the stress of academics who are under pressure to attract external funding and produce measureable research outputs, coupled with heavy teaching and administrative loads. The growth in student numbers is a factor outlined by Welch (2012), who notes that in 1939 just 0.2 per cent of the Australian population attended university. Student numbers have doubled over the past twenty years and currently stand at just over one million at the 39 universities.

Funding levels are another factor in the rapid rate of change. In 1996, Australian state and federal governments provided approximately 58 per cent of all funds to universities with the remainder coming from fees, charges, bequests, research income

and other sources. By 2005, government funding was reduced to 40 per cent (Universities Australia 2009) and it has since decreased further. Between 1989 and 2007, staff-student ratios declined over 60 per cent from 1:13.41 to 1:21.67 (Coates et al. 2009: 5, ctd in Welch 2012: 62). Higher education income derived from international students, which stood at 15 per cent in 2010, has deteriorated in the wake of negative publicity following violence against South Asian students and as a result of revised immigration policy and increased competition (Marginson 2011). Finally, as the federal government outlined in its vision for *Transforming Australia's Higher Education* (Commonwealth of Australia 2009), 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year-olds will have completed a qualification at bachelor's degree level or above by 2025: an additional 217,000 graduates. Within this cohort, the representation of students from low socio-economic groups is targeted to be at 20 per cent.

Boyd et al.'s (2011) longitudinal study of Australian academics (conducted from 2000-03) identified a mediated relationship between psychological strain, demands and resources. The authors also suggested that 'perceived high workload and work pressure ... fuels a sense of injustice and erodes perceptions of autonomy' (2011: 132). Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley (2009) related increased stress with decreased autonomy, and they found an additional link between stress and increased accountability and bureaucracy. Curtis & Matthewman argue that this is the result of what they call the managed university, which 'typically entails an emphasis on research as a form of revenue generation, the downgrading of academic autonomy, the separation of teaching and research, and the demotion of the former' (2005: 1).

Australia has one of the lowest levels of satisfaction among the world's academics (Coates 2009), and casualisation has been identified as one of the key causes (Coates et al. 2009). The reasons for this are highlighted by McKay and Brass (2011: 159), who suggest that casual academics 'are disempowered by their identity as contingent labour, which disables any attempt to carve a career trajectory or pursue a line of expertise, their transience within the tertiary environment, and their own economic subjectivities'. Widespread changes including casualisation and shifting time priorities have similarly altered the shape of teaching and learning leadership. Academics at every level now manage casual staff brought in to undertake specific teaching, research or administrative tasks. As Nagy points out, this dispersed model of leadership 'represents the frontline of a move towards increasingly distributed forms of leading and learning' (2012: 169). As such, discussions of leadership need to ask *who* is leading. Also, particularly where leaders are appointed on the basis of academic expertise rather than managerial experience (Ngambi 2011), with what authority, support and leadership abilities they do so.

One of the implications for leaders is the need to adopt an inclusive approach that enables professional, academic and executive staff to work together. Jones, Lefor, Harvey and Ryland (2012) recognise this combination as the most crucial factor in establishing effective distributed leadership. Given the highly disbursed nature of learning and teaching, the distributed leadership model is feasible but difficult. It is likely, for example, that casual staff will find it particularly difficult to establish the necessary networks and coalitions, bringing to the fore the need for leaders to find ways of developing community.

Marshall et al. asked academics to define what they thought of as higher education leadership and management. They found these definitions to be at odds with higher education systems and policies, particularly with reference to learning and teaching. The authors argue that current human resources systems and policies need to change if they are ‘to effectively develop, support and recognize effective leadership and management practices as they relate to learning and teaching’ (2011: 87). There is an associated risk that institutional governance may be out of line with current employment and resourcing practices. The disparity is particularly important because of the growing tendency to make time for research by outsourcing myriad tasks including teaching and marking, whilst tasks such as administrative work are assigned the bare minimum of time required to get the job done. This is not a criticism of academics’ decision making: research is the established path to promotion and appointment. As Hey explains, ‘apportioning, measuring, stealing, subcontracting, bartering, stretching and modularising, managing, as well as finding time, constitute one of the major preoccupations of surviving’ (2001: 67). This situation is problematic for teaching and learning leaders, not only in terms of supporting academics to fulfil their leadership roles but also to ensure quality in their classes. It raises once more the troubling issue of casualised teachers, casualised researchers and casualised leadership, all of which is frequently employed on an as-needs basis and with little or no access to training, support, resources or collegial interaction.

Leadership challenges in the new creative ERA

During the decade or so prior to the Excellence of Research in Australia (ERA) initiative there was relatively little pressure for creative arts academics to position their creative practice within their institution. The inclusion of creative research within the ERA changed all of that overnight. O’Toole and Beckett (2010: 204) label creative research and its reporting for assessment as a subject of ‘acute contemporary interests and debate’ about which ‘the university sector is quite perplexed’. Academic leaders, including program directors, heads of school, associate deans (academic) or associate deans (research), faculty deans, and those working in central learning and teaching units within universities, must now report on the long-ignored creative activities of academics. Amid the positive sides of ERA inclusion, Bennett notes the potential to promote stronger links between creative practice, learning and teaching, and research; to promote critical self-reflection and to enhance the ability and confidence of creative arts academics to apply for promotion and funding. She also notes the potential to communicate innovative approaches to the broader academy: ‘communicating elements of the artist experience known only to the artist will undoubtedly reveal innovative methodologies and new forms of knowledge’ (2011: 32).

The immediate institutional impact of amassing and assessing creative research evidence within the ERA placed most leaders in one of two distinct situations. The least desirable of these was found within institutions that had not previously recognised creative research, and where academics described being ‘completely demoralised by the many years of non-recognition of creative outputs’ (Bennett 2011:

9). This often resulted in a creative practice separate from academic life or to the abandonment of creative practice altogether. It also promoted a less positive relationship with the institution and a conflicted professional identity. Long-term lack of recognition often meant there was no system for collecting the types of complex evidence required for the ERA. This placed enormous pressure on academics, leaders and institutions. Other leaders found themselves in institutions that had recognised creative research despite its exclusion from the national research agenda. The benefits for these leaders were twofold. Some of the evidence required for the initial ERA submissions was already available, and the longer-term recognition had encouraged more academics to invest time on their creative practice as an intrinsic component of their academic work.

As de la Harpe, Mason & Peterson argue, the creative arts disciplines:

face a number of unique and specific issues that require strong learning and teaching leadership, including, for example, sustaining the studio mode of learning and teaching with reduced budgets; advancing assessment of creative work; and increasing the scholarship of learning and teaching based on studio practice (2011: 1).

Studios, residencies and one-on-one tuition are among many aspects of arts delivery that suffered enormously after the implementation of the unified national system in the 1990s, and leadership of these important activities often necessitates a range of financial, pedagogical and structural actions. Given that research is an integral part of an academic's responsibility and appointment, an emerging leadership challenge is to equip current and future academics with the capacity 'to translate the research skills that stand behind artistic accomplishment into a form valued in the university environment' (Wright, Bennett & Blom 2010: 462). A common dilemma for academics is that creative research tends to be led by an enthusiasm of practice rather than a sense of problem. As a result, researchers may 'eschew the constraints of narrow problem solving and rigorous methodological requirements at the outset of a project' (Haseman 2006: 4). This presents a challenge when there is the need to translate creative research into academic language appropriate for research assessment, or for promotion or funding applications reviewed by inter-disciplinary panels.

The production of written research statements for the ERA is also a challenge. Whilst the benefits of looking in on one's own creative work from a different perspective can be communicated to academic staff, the reality is that these statements are likely to be written (or massaged) by a team of people. Few would argue that this reality is sufficiently within the practice to present an accurate reflection of the work's background, process and contribution. As such, it is unlikely that a statement written by someone external to the practice will reflect the true process and meaning in the work being assessed. Academics need to be able to articulate creative research in these terms, not only for their own benefit but to ensure that this knowledge and insight flows into their teaching.

Many academics are only just starting to understand the enormous impact of the ERA on their creative practice, their research and their career progression. This understanding can be impeded by inconsistent advice about fields of research (FoR)

codes. It can also be impacted by pressure to publish within the FoR codes associated with an academic's school or department (Bennett, Genoni & Haddow 2011). Still reeling from the legacy of journal rankings, which were heralded as yet another example of the potential for the ERA mechanisms to disrupt the healthy exchange of research (Cooper & Poletti 2011), many academics appear to be floundering to make sense of the research-driven environment (Watson 2011).

Leaders continue to ponder the common and prevailing challenges associated with research in all its forms. These include questions about the need to justify creative practice as equivalent to traditional scientific research, rather than being recognised in its own right; a reluctance to over-analyse the creative process; and, from some, a reluctance to frame their practice as research at all. There also remain the conceptual and philosophical challenges of peer review, alongside the question of who will determine the effectiveness of each articulation. Whilst solutions to these challenges are not offered here, the presence of lively and open debate suggests that shared solutions may indeed be possible. In this instance, competition may be set aside in favour of tackling a shared dilemma.

A work of fiction?

This paper began by asking what is expected of creative arts academics and noting the key elements of teaching, research and service. As observed, however, this superficial view is highly problematic. Students, for example, expect competent instruction by engaged academics whose disciplinary and sectoral knowledge is current and who are able to deliver in a number of formats, including online. Leaders expect high standards of teaching, measurable research outputs, participation in service roles, and high-level organisational and communication skills. Institutions expect high teaching standards that meet quality assurance indicators. They also expect research outputs and external funding that meet HERDC specifications, and service on university committees and to university life in general, and high-level organisational and communication skills. Industry expects direct engagement including communication in non-HERDC measurable forms of output. It also expects high teaching standards leading to informed, career-ready graduates, preferably with practical experience. In the case of creative arts academics, industry expectations may include a high-level creative practice. The general community expects competent delivery of programs that are cost-effective, equitable, tailored, informed, relevant and responsive to needs. To achieve all of this, academics need support, resources and time. They also need a sense of community, collegiality, autonomy and respect. Academic leaders are variously responsible to, and for, it all.

Perhaps Foucault was right what he suggested that in order for discourse to move to another track it has to be 'treated as and when it occurs' (Foucault 1969/2002: 27). With this in mind, analysis of some of the critical issues in higher education learning and teaching will allow the implications for leaders to be considered in a new light. The ability for traditional, hierarchical structures to meet the needs of specific disciplines and student cohorts has come under scrutiny as institutional and academic autonomy has been reduced and responsibility has shifted from centralised offices to

schools and faculties. Given that the challenge for academic leaders, at every level, is the ability to ensure quality learning and teaching, it is entirely possible that the models, structures and sources of leadership need to be revisited.

Leadership roles are often poorly rewarded, and the lack of research during periods of leadership is difficult to recover. Whilst Macfarlane (2012) asserts that professors are marginalised, narrowly defined knowledge entrepreneurs whose potential leadership capacities are rarely exploited, the research demands and focus of senior academics are not easily overcome. As such the leadership dilemma is unlikely to be resolved by simply exploiting the experience of the professoriate, and a professorial position is no guarantee of leadership ability. Even if it was, Jones et al. (2012) argue that effective change must involve new models of leadership rather than just new leaders. Given that leadership forms a component of the work of many academics, it would be logical for advocates of distributed, diversified and/or intellectual leadership models to address the disparity between the more traditional roles of the university and the demands of the corporatised environment. This is perhaps where higher education leadership is most problematic.

One of the areas in which collective leadership may have a crucial role to play is in advocating for difference. Pason submits that current conditions are the result of academia having accepted them 'as a reality to be adapted to rather than problematic practices that should be changed' (2011: 4). This history of quasi-compliance is longer than is often assumed. Hey presented a similar argument a full decade earlier, proposing that 'until we can bring to the surface and publicly discuss the conditions under which people are hired, given tenure, published, awarded grants and feted, "real" reflexivity will remain a dream' (2001: 67). Sadly, Rabinow's 1986 observation that 'reflection upon our own social, political, economic and cultural locations within the academy is one of the greatest taboos' (1986: 225) indicates an even longer period during which simply adapting to the status quo has radically transformed academic life. A related issue is that of the powerful positive marketing activities of institutions vying for students and funding opportunities. In essence, the message that institutions are better than ever gives little cause for concern at the policy level. This could be challenged collectively. Increased inter- and intra-institutional competition is also relevant here, particularly within more vulnerable areas such as the creative arts.

Is it possible, then, to fulfil the various demands made upon academics? As shown above, today in Australia, the average academic is over 55 years of age, and this is likely to increase as people under 40 rethink the desirability of an academic career. The average academic is likely to be employed on a part-time or casual basis and in more than one capacity. The average academic has limited access to a workspace, a scholarly community or paid professional learning, and yet is increasingly likely to be involved in some form of leadership activity. The average creative arts academic juggles teaching, research, his or her creative practice, administration and other employment. This academic is unlikely to achieve a promotion or less tenuous employment unless research outputs are given priority. The average academic submits grant proposals with little hope of them being successful. The average academic deals on a daily basis with casual work, casual technology, casual support and casual

students. The ‘ideal’ academic is a great teacher who is available on-demand, research active, happy with instability, able to lead, efficient, collegial, part of the academic community, keen to learn, cognisant of the nexus between teaching, research and creative practice, happy not to have physical office space, independent, reliable, efficient, committed, unlikely to move, and proficient at academic and grant writing. And the ideal leader is able to transform the average into the ideal. The evidence suggests that it will take a collective effort to resolve some of the most problematic issues in higher education. Until then, the ideal academic could well be a work of fiction.

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