

Towards a culture of scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions

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Abstract

The nature of 'scholarship' has emerged as a 'hot spot' in VET institutions that have extended their programming to include higher education provision (mixed sector institutions). This is both a consequence and an expression of the institutionalised 'sectoral distinctions and cultural hierarchies' in higher and vocational education (Wheelahan et al 2012, p. 33). These divisions are evident across mixed sector institutions but are reported to be less significant in private mixed sector providers (Moodie 2010; Wheelahan et al 2012).

A consortium led by The TAFE Development Centre has been successful in obtaining NCVET funding for a research project exploring how scholarship is understood and practised across the Australian tertiary sector (higher education, mixed sector and VET) as a means of better understanding and supporting scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions.

This paper proposes a definitional framework for 'scholarship' that takes account of the distinctive character of mixed sector provision and reports on the preliminary findings of a textual analysis of three cases of scholarly practice (one from each location in the tertiary sector) commissioned as part of the project. The analysis uses selected literature to tease out the features of quality scholarly practice in Australian tertiary education.

The paper concludes with some observations about the nature of quality scholarly practice arising from the analysis of the cases and raises questions about the implications for scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions.

Introduction

Some TAFE institutes have now been developing and delivering higher education courses for several years. Yet recent research findings and audit reports indicate that the scholarly culture required to support their higher education provision is still at an embryonic stage of development (AUQA 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Goulding & Seddon 2011; Wheelahan et al 2009b). Thus, as sectoral boundaries continue to blur in the emerging 'tertiary education' sector, scholarship has surfaced as a 'hot spot' of reform. This is particularly evident in mixed sector VET institutions where the dominant legacy of VET culture and practice confronts new expectations about scholarly practice rooted in higher education traditions.

To date there has been little attempt to generate shared understandings of what is meant by 'scholarship', 'research', and 'scholarly culture' in the emerging tertiary education sector. In particular, there has been limited investigation of mixed sector institutions that are developing scholarly practice based on inputs, such as AUQA reports and regulatory documentation such as the *National Protocols for Higher Education Approvals Processes* (MCEETYA 2007). These inputs draw on higher education norms of scholarship with roots in university traditions and organisational structures. They do not capture the applied orientation of higher education courses in TAFE, which is framed by VET cultures that

already have established traditions and understandings of good practice in knowledge building. This applied approach has been identified as a 'distinctive, although not unique', feature of courses (Wheelahan et al 2009b, p.3) and the approach to teaching and scholarship in mixed sector institutions (Goulding & Seddon 2011; Pardy & Seddon 2011).

Scholarly practice is developing in mixed sector institutions at the interface between higher and vocational education traditions (Goulding & Seddon 2011). Understanding the nature of these emerging scholarly practices and their affiliations with both higher and vocational education traditions and innovations warrants research. It is an opportunity to examine shared understandings of 'scholarship' and identify the distinctive features of 'quality scholarly practice' that are developing across the three locations that make up Australia's emerging tertiary education sector. Investigating the implications of emerging scholarly practices for teaching and learning, and other institutional activities (Brew 2003), will also inform more detailed discussions about ways of supporting and enhancing scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions and its implications for professional and occupational knowledge and practice.

Methodology

This project uses a four-step research design to investigate the nature of 'scholarship' and strategies to support quality scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions.

Step 1: Literature review

Three strands of literature were reviewed. First, we drew on literature relating to the nature of scholarship and indicators of 'quality scholarly practice' to clarify and codify existing definitions and understandings (Boyer 1990; Glassick, Huber & Maeroff 1997; Schön 1995; Badley 2003). Second, we extended these concepts by thinking about scholarship as a form of 'scholarly practice' that rests on intellectual work, which builds knowledge in particular ways and settings (Connell 2007; Gibbons et al 1994; Seddon & Clemans 1999). Finally, we reviewed Australian and UK research that had investigated the empirical development of scholarship at the interface between higher and vocational education, in for instance higher education in further education (HE in FE) settings (Young 2002) and in Australian VET providers (Wheelahan et al 2009a; Wheelahan et al 2009b; Wheelahan et al 2012). These literatures provided a terminology for talking about scholarship and enabled us to think about 'scholarly practice' as a particular form of labour conducted within specific terms and conditions of work.

Step 2: Narratives of scholarly practice

A practitioner working in a higher, vocational and mixed sector institution was approached to write a narrative that describes the ways they are engaged in building knowledge about teaching and learning. These examples were not sought as being representative of scholarly practice in those sectors but are particular illustrations of the way scholarship is enacted and understood in each. We deliberately asked the narrative writers to write about their scholarship in teaching and learning because this type of scholarly practice is recognised in each sector. Focusing the cases on teaching and learning is a form of sampling. It provides a window on a particular form of scholarship that clarifies the meaning of 'scholarly practice',

which can then be used and elaborated to understand other forms of scholarship, such as the scholarship of discovery, integration and application (Boyer, 1990).

Narrative writers were identified through our professional networks. They are all recognised for their contributions to their sectors, are reflective about their scholarly practice, and could effectively capture their work experience in writing. The narratives contained two parts: a story about a specific instance in which they built knowledge about teaching and learning and a response to structured questions that probed the way they went about the case they described. Their similarities and differences provoke reflections on the nature of scholarship across the sectors and across other forms of knowledge building.

Step 3: Textual analysis of narratives

The research team analysed the three cases and the narrative writers' reflective commentaries in order to capture similarities and differences between the three. We used discourse analysis strategies to interpret these texts and refine our literature-based understandings of 'scholarship' and 'quality scholarly practice'. Other important issues concerned with the dynamics between scholarly practice, identity and values, and the institutional terms and conditions that shape them also arose in the narratives and the literature but owing to space constraints, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Step 4: A forum for dialogical knowledge building

An invitational forum drawing together practitioners from all three locations in the tertiary sector and other stakeholders with interests in tertiary education has been scheduled. It is designed as a dialogical knowledge-building event. Insights about the three narratives and everyday experience of scholarly practice across the three locations will be shared in order to refine and elaborate mutual understandings about the nature of scholarship, indicators that distinguish 'quality scholarly practice', and strategies that will further develop scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions. At the time of writing the forum had not yet taken place. This paper is therefore confined to discussion of the first three steps and in this respect represents the preliminary findings of the project.

Defining scholarship

Brew (2010) observes that there have been many attempts to define the nature of scholarship in general and disciplinary terms, but notes that much of this literature positions scholarship as a set of activities of particular kinds. She contends that Ernest Boyer advanced the most notable redefinition of the concept of scholarship by conceiving four 'separate, yet overlapping, functions' (Boyer 1990, p.16): discovery, integration, application and teaching. This broader meaning of scholarship brings legitimacy to the full range of work performed by academic staff in higher education institutions and also sees the four scholarly functions as being 'tied inseparably to each other' (Boyer 1990, p. 25). It positions research as one subset of knowledge building within a larger construct of scholarship. Table 1 summarises the key aspects of each function proposed by Boyer.

Scholarship	Purpose
Discovery (pp. 17 -18)	To contribute to the stock of human knowledge and the intellectual climate of a college or university.

Scholarship	Purpose
Integration (pp.18-21)	To interpret, draw together and bring new insight to original research. To locate research in larger intellectual patterns. To make connections across disciplines, interpreting data and educating non-specialists.
Application (pp. 21-23)	To apply knowledge dynamically thereby creating new understandings. To engage with the larger community through service activities that are tied directly to a professional field of knowledge. To both apply and contribute to human knowledge.
Teaching (pp. 23-24)	To be well informed, steeped in disciplinary knowledge and intellectually engaged and to transform and extend that knowledge through teaching.

Table 1 – professorial work functions proposed by Ernest Boyer (1990)

The *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* (MCEETYA 2007) forms the basis of the regulatory requirements for Australian higher education provision. The protocols offer separate definitions of research and scholarship. The meaning given to research follows the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition and is premised on the notion of systematic original investigation to increase and apply knowledge. Scholarship is narrowly defined, solely in relation to learning and teaching and is characterised by a set of activities such as keeping abreast of the literature, maintaining currency of subject knowledge and engaging in professional practice. The definition of scholarship provided by the National Protocols has been extremely influential in shaping conceptions of scholarship in mixed sector institutions; however it is limiting in that it:

- Fails to endorse forms of scholarship other than that relating to learning and teaching
- Conceptualises scholarship in terms of activities rather than as an approach or way of practising, which makes it possible to separate scholarship out from daily practice
- Focuses on the dissemination of existing knowledge not the generation of new knowledge, which arguably locks mixed sector higher education teachers out of investigative and leadership roles within the academic community
- Is silent on the quality of scholarly work and fails to convey any sense of criticality in engagement with knowledge, peers or one’s own practice.

An expanded notion of scholarship as ‘contextualised knowledge building’ emerges when Boyer’s four forms of scholarship are used to address the limitations in regulatory definitions. Boyer (1990) references knowledge generation, advancement and application throughout his descriptions of the four functions of scholarly work. In fact, his advocacy of a more flexible conception of scholarship is rooted in his belief that knowledge is not necessarily developed in a linear manner commencing with basic research activities then flowing into teaching and application functions (p. 15). He contends that a more inclusive view is needed that recognises ‘that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice and through teaching’ (p. 24).

This perspective on scholarship as ‘contextualised knowledge building’ recognises that communities in different situations produce ‘social thought’ that helps them understand and act in the world but, because they inhabit different ground, the ‘form of theorising is often different too’ (Connell 2007, p. xii). Understanding ‘scholarship’ in this way offers a means of moving beyond sectoral divisions and historically loaded terminology. It is a

perspective that recognises that each location of the tertiary education sector engages in contextualised knowledge building.

This way of understanding scholarship informs our investigation of scholarly practice in tertiary education. It is a framework for conceiving scholarship that:

- Recognises the forms and practices of knowledge building that produces knowledge which is made public so that it can be ‘critiqued, reviewed, built upon and improved’ (Huber 2001, p. 22).
- Approaches scholarly practice as a type of work that is contextualised differently by the structures and cultures of higher education, VET and mixed sector institutions.
- Emphasises a qualitative approach that highlights the characteristics that make a work scholarly rather than a set of activities, which may be used as indicators to guide and evaluate scholarly work.
- Can grasp the distinctiveness of scholarly practice that reflects the applied orientation of mixed sector provision and enhances its emphasis on the relationship between theory and practice.

Quality in scholarly practice

The regulatory documentation that is currently driving the development of scholarship in mixed sector institutions is couched in terms of ‘activities’. It emphasises ‘what’ practitioners should do when they engage in scholarly practice, but not ‘how’ they do it. This focus provides little basis for evaluating or improving that scholarship. To start to integrate a qualitative dimension into our understanding of scholarship as contextualised knowledge building, we drew primarily on the work of Charles Glassick and his colleagues. Glassick, Huber & Maeroff (1997) furthered Boyer’s work and presented six standards by which the quality of scholarship can be measured across all four scholarly functions. These standards were developed based on their analysis of documents such as institutional guidelines on hiring, promotion and tenure, the standards used by academic publishers and granting agencies to determine the scholarly merit of manuscripts and proposals, and forms used by students and peers to evaluate teaching. A summary of the six standards is presented in Table 2.

Standard	
Clear goals	Does the scholar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • state the basic purpose of his or her work clearly? • define objectives that are realistic and achievable? • identify important questions in the field?
Adequate preparation	Does the scholar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show an understanding of existing scholarship in their field? • bring the necessary skills to his or her work? • bring together the resources necessary to move the project forward?
Appropriate methods	Does the scholar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use methods appropriate to the goals? • apply effectively the methods selected? • modify procedures in response to the changing circumstances?

Standard	
Significant results	Does the scholar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achieve the results? • add to the field? • open additional areas for further exploration?
Effective presentation	Does the scholar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use a suitable style and effective organisation to present his or her work? • use appropriate forums for communicating the work to its intended audiences? • present his or her message with clarity and integrity?
Reflective critique	Does the scholar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • critically evaluate his or her own work? • bring an appropriate breadth of evidence to his or her critique? • use evaluation to improve the quality of future work?

Table 2 – scholarship standards proposed by Glassick, Huber & Maeroff (1997)

The research team used these standards and our literature review to analyse the three narratives commissioned for this project about how knowledge of teaching and learning is built in the tertiary sector. We identified further features that seemed significant in distinguishing good scholarly practice. Some of these features include notions of scholarship as: a dynamic intersection between knowledge and practice, in which practice is informed by theory and new understandings arise out of practice; socially constructed and co-produced work; learning, where scholars become self-critical inquirers; and needing to be made public, with scholars accountable to their peers. The way in which the narratives reveal these features is summarised below.

A dynamic intersection between knowledge and practice

While awareness of this dynamic interaction was evident in each sectoral narrative, they were manifested differently. In the VET case knowledge building was portrayed in procedural terms, emphasising the processes undertaken, with little information given about content or contextual knowledge. The text revealed the use of this procedural orientation as a way of claiming scholarship. In the mixed sector and HE narratives procedures were evident but less explicit. Knowledge was developed through reflective practices that acknowledged different ways of knowing and practising and through using literature and theory as explanatory tools to build new knowledge and reframe existing knowledge.

However, in the mixed sector case, the knowledge interacting with and informing the practice was pedagogical and the contextual information related to the political, economic and sectoral environment in which *higher education provision* takes place, with little reference to the narrator’s ‘industry discipline’. In contrast, while the higher education narrative also focuses on the scholarship of teaching and learning, it is clear that it takes place within, and is shaped distinctively by the industry discipline and the wider social and global context in which the *industry practice* occurs.

The VET case described scholarship undertaken as part of a 'special' project rather than a depiction of everyday practice. The narrator was given funded time away from her 'normal' job to participate in and document the project. In the mixed sector case the scholarship was undertaken in unpaid time. Conversely, in the higher education portrayal scholarly practice, though not detailed clearly, was embedded in the everyday practice of the narrator. The narrative indicates the procedures used but does not draw them out as an explicit methodological commentary. This everyday practice is alert to key concepts and the knowledge resources that frame the work. These knowledges are derived from the literature and through dialogue and are used to frame thinking, acting and knowing. They produced outcomes/products/artefacts, including new knowledge that can be conveyed through a particular way of using words. Hence this dynamic interaction between knowledge and practice is embedded in the way everyday academic work is done.

Socially constructed and co-produced work

The narratives emphasised different aspects of this way of conceiving scholarship. In taking problem based learning as its focus, the mixed sector narrative foregrounded Badley's (2003) notion of the co-production of knowledge between teacher and learner. However the building of knowledge about teaching and learning was portrayed in a highly individualised way. In contrast, in the VET and higher education narratives knowledge was produced in multi-disciplinary teams, following Schön's notion of 'communities of inquiry' (cited in Badley 2003, p.305). Both of these latter cases recognised the value of sharing knowledge in enhancing the quality of the scholarship, making wider resources available to the process of knowledge building. However, the collaboration described in the VET narrative was not characteristic of everyday practice: it was again the outcome of a specially funded project. The text discloses how prior to the project, Unit Coordinators had 'little interaction with others to validate or improve on their teaching and learning practices' and records the ongoing dilemma of how to extend collaborative knowledge building across discipline areas.

Knowledge building in the higher education narrative was public, dialogical and jointly produced – a consequence of interaction, not just the individual reflections that were emphasised in the mixed sector narrative. The reflective practitioner does not just generate ideas and reflections but must draw on and process other sources (via literature or conversations) in producing new interpretations that may be recognised as new knowledge.

Learning, where scholars become self critical inquirers

Once again, the narratives portrayed the learning aspect of scholarship in different ways. In the VET case, the project was scaffolded by a formal workforce capability development program for those involved in the project. Learning in the mixed sector narrative was depicted in terms of the educator as co-learner with students: a self-improvement and practice-improvement aspect which is acquired through reading literature, reflection and a heuristic orientation to teaching and learning practice (and to a lesser extent through sharing ideas with colleagues), and through the author's formal postgraduate study.

In the higher education narrative, learning was a collaborative process involving not only the teaching team but also senior academics who recognised the scholarly authority of the team and their own need to learn from and with them. This collaborative learning was reported

to challenge the scholar's own disciplinary assumptions 'providing critical insights to what I thought I knew'. The dialogue takes on an element of epistemological challenge and critique: as in the mixed sector portrayal, the contestability of knowledge and ways of knowing is understood. Evidence of this understanding is absent from the VET portrayal, where the tenor of the dialogue is one of guidance and support. Any sense of challenge or critique that might be inferred from references to 'frank and full discussions' or to reflection in the VET case appear to have applied to procedural matters, not to the knowledge used as an input resource or that being produced.

Needing to be made public, with scholars accountable to their peers

While the knowledge developed through the VET case was widely disseminated internally and in public forums, it is not clear that the primary intent was validating the knowledge building before peers. The authorising function seemed to reside in managers and external 'experts' in this case, rather than peers. For example, a senior manager 'allowed' a scholarly approach and 'recognised the potential of the knowledge', and the process was reviewed by 'expert researchers'.

The mixed sector case did not entail processes to make the knowledge building public. Judgements about one's own knowledge were made by the individual and new knowledge was also identified (claimed) in this way, rather than depending on the authority of others or responding to feedback (dialogue) from others. There was no explicit recognition that scholarship becomes knowledge by being made public and being recognised and endorsed by others.

The scholarly practice described in the HE narrative is quite the reverse, being embedded in a public dialogical process that engages iteratively with knowledge and everyday life. This interplay is the basis for interpretation and also a means of constructing knowledge resources for further dialogue/knowledge building. It means that scholarship is always subject to public scrutiny and refinement. This case was more explicit than the others about whose knowledge was being mobilised and therefore, whose knowledge was not used.

Conclusions

We conclude that quality scholarly practice entails:

- A set of procedures, which communicate the process of scholarship and therefore help to inform others of the character of the scholarly practice
- Individualised reflective practice, systematic inquiry and engagement with the world and the ways of capturing, representing and communicating about that world. This labour of intellectual work is fundamental to the process of working with and producing new knowledge (ie doing knowledge/intellectual work). It is an iterative process of taking up and using knowledge resources to reframe existing ways of knowing, interpreting and understanding the world.
- Processes of knowledge sharing, the critical co-production and refinement of knowledge, and the characteristic ways of making this knowledge public. This also recognises whose knowledge is being used and in what way. It includes building new ideas, concepts, problem definitions and solutions and also recognising, taking up and appropriating resources that endorse/authorise knowledge.

One of the starkest differences between the cases is the way these three dimensions are aggregated and disaggregated: in the higher education scholarly practice one person does them all in collaboration with others. In the VET case they are disaggregated – the narrator undertakes some aspects but part of the literature review, endorsement of the work, recognition of new knowledge and authorisation of that knowing practice – are delegated to different identities-actors, without also acknowledging who those different identities and what their different knowledges were. This disaggregation contributes to a sense of corporate ownership of the scholarly work rather than the individual authority of the scholar.

The mixed sector is more like the HE case, but with less confidence about taking on the identity and authority of ‘knower’ who does scholarship. It is also more narrowly framed as an individual narrative about knowing which does not make claims about the value of that knowing to others. This stance seems not to recognise fully the way that the process of knowing is embedded in relationships, communication patterns that are ‘knowledge-ful’, and organisational architectures that order knowledge and power.

Questions and issues arising from the findings

The analysis of the narratives raises questions that have implications for quality scholarly practice in mixed sector institutions. Some of these include the following:

1. Implicit in these statements is the understanding that scholarly practice is a social construction that exists as inter subjective meanings and understandings, and is therefore not the work of isolated individuals. Can there be ‘knowledge’ without public endorsement? Wheelahan *et al.* (2009a) make mention of the professional development arrangements to support HE provision in mixed sector institutes. In the absence of a public dimension, does this/should this form of learning ‘count’ as scholarship?
2. As mixed sector higher education teachers strive to find their place as scholars in the academic community, what are the implications of a relatively weak identification with the knowledge resources of their discipline? Given the vocationally applied orientation, already identified as a ‘distinctive though not unique’ feature of higher education provision in mixed sector institutions, are these scholars better placed to concentrate on industry/professional practice as the focus of their discipline-related scholarship? Might this applied, vocational orientation become a similarly distinctive feature of scholarly practice, while simultaneously presenting an opportunity to magnify this orientation into a distinctive identity for mixed sector institutions?
3. To what extent might the problem of separating scholarship ‘activities’ out from mainstream practice in VET and mixed sector providers be addressed by adopting a scholarly approach to everyday practice, such as that advocated in Glassick and his colleagues’ standards? Could these standards also inform other forms of knowledge building, such as how to make engagement with industry and professional practice a scholarly endeavour? To what extent might the adoption of such a framework of scholarly standards address the question of the status of mixed sector institutions?
4. And to what extent would adopting a conception of scholarly practice as ‘the forms and practices of knowledge building’ which produce knowledge that is made public serve to develop and enhance scholarly culture through this practice of sharing knowledge?

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