73 Imagined academic futures: connections and complexities in the move to online teaching

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper shares emerging findings from a 2023 study which has sought to understand what collective imaginaries may be shaping the move to online teaching in Australia and the United Kingdom, where universities have been subject to rapid changes in the use of learning technologies since the advent of the pandemic, and what future practices and policies may be produced by these imaginaries. Drawing on interviews with senior academics in both nations, the paper reinforces previous concerns about the impacts on academic practice, labour and identities of the rapid move to online teaching but it also reflects on its transformative potential and considers what investments may be needed to maximise this potential. In particular, it considers the possibilities, as described by the interviewees, for academics to act in connected and collective ways in the present to first imagine, or re-imagine, and then to construct desirable academic futures.

Full paper

Digital tools and educational technologies have brought new teaching practices and policies as well as 'rapidly expanding information and an increasingly dynamic view of knowledge' (Bearman et al. 2020:7). Their ubiquity within higher education has been heightened by institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and shows little signs of reversing. This is in turn associated with 'the potential to foment massive changes' in higher education teaching and learning (Guppy et al. 2022:1751).

The digitalisation of higher education may also be subject to a set of 'collective imaginaries or shared stories' (Bearman et al. 2022:3): sociotechnical (Matthews 2021) or 'educational imaginaries' (Rahm 2023:51) that shape and are shaped by the culture of the academy. This raises questions about what collective imaginaries may be shaping the move to online teaching in Australia and the United Kingdom, where universities have been subject to rapid changes in practice since the advent of the pandemic, and what educational practice and policy are produced by these imaginaries.

Recent studies have examined the move to online teaching from the perspectives of academics with a range of roles and positions (e.g. Fox et al. 2021; Naylor and Nyanjom 2021; Watermeyer et al. 2021). A smaller number of studies have explored this move from the perspectives of senior academics who are involved in the production of teaching practices and policies or otherwise positioned to influence the work of other academics at a pivotal time for the current and future academy (Ivancheva et al. 2020; Guppy et al. 2022).

This paper adds to the understanding of these perspectives by sharing emerging findings from 2023 interviews with senior Australian and United Kingdom academics conducted with funding by Deakin University's Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE). Drawing on the interview data, the paper reinforces previous concerns that 'technology has dominated discourse on the future university' (Matthews 2021:204) but it also reflects on its transformative potential. It considers what investments may be needed to maximise this potential and to support academics in navigating increasingly complex forms of labour. It considers the possibilities, as described by interviewees, for academics to act in connected and collective ways in the present to construct desirable academic futures. It also reflects on the conditions that might support what Eringfeld calls 'imaginative storytelling around possible futures' for higher education (2021:147) and the 'productive force of imagination' and 're-imagination' in shaping those possible futures (148).

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