The emerging role of Scholar-Practitioner

Response to the draft “Work Focus Categorisation Policy”

Introduction

The draft Work Focus Categorisation Policy identifies four types of academic work. This submission proposes a related fifth category, that of the scholar-practitioner, a member of the professional staff who undertakes scholarly work as a normal part of her or his role.

Background

In 2008 the Information Futures Commission alluded to an emerging professional role, that of the scholar-librarian who provides specialist support for research and teaching activities:

“To support research, the concept of creating a cadre of 'information professional' staff found some support. These specialists would have expertise in various aspects of research-related information management and could work in partnership with researchers to provide professional expertise. This included location and synthesis of relevant research information; and the management, storage and dissemination of data and information produced by research activities. Such a view was expressed in several faculty submissions and through comments in workshops, interviews and the survey. Some written submissions described the role of 'information professionals' in providing links in a world where research is increasingly conducted across disciplines.” (O’Brien et al, 2008a)

Written responses to the Commission described different emphases for these roles, depending on academic discipline and organisational context.

While the scholar-librarian model is emerging in academic libraries and research centres worldwide, the roles of educational technologist, courseware developer and curriculum designer are already well established in the higher education sector. These specialists often start with professional qualifications in one field, then develop expertise in another.

For example, a software engineer may apply her interest in games design to creating independent-learning modules that enhance student participation in a particular undergraduate subject. The results could include not only original creative work (the courseware modules), possibly with some commercial value, but a new contribution to the literature on pedagogy and student engagement.

Our concern is that current HR, intellectual property and other rules may not sufficiently recognise and acknowledge the scholarly contribution of such individuals.

“It is timely to consider how we structure our workforce, whether the binary classification of academic and professional staff is effective, and how we can improve it to support our vision more effectively.” (Office of the Vice-Chancellor, 2009, p53)
Some recent examples

The success of the Law Research Support service introduced in 2010 (which won a Vice-Chancellor’s Excellence Award) indicates the value a small team of scholar-librarians can add to the academic output of an individual discipline.

Roles in the eScholarship Research Centre are in the process of being redesigned (with Human Resources input) as ‘research archivist’ positions, emphasising their scholarly contributions to faculty-led projects in the digital humanities as well as their potential to add new knowledge to fields such as information science, archiving and museum studies.

In January 2011 the University of Melbourne called for expressions of interest from “bioinformaticians, computational biologists, computer scientists, mathematicians and statisticians, and other bioinformatics-related professionals” interested in working at the Life Sciences Computation Centre.

At around the same time, the Director of eResearch advertised vacancies for “software developer (e-enabler)” roles in biomedical and multidisciplinary research teams. These IT specialists are expected to design and create innovative, original computing systems for use in specific research projects, and to write or co-author (with the domain scientists) research papers about those projects.

Meanwhile the Australian Academy for the Humanities has awarded seed money to Dr Craig Bellamy (VeRSI) and Dr Paul Arthur (Australian Dictionary of Biography, ANU) to explore the viability of a new professional society for people who work in the field of digital humanities research, including those who are not employed as academic researchers.

We are also aware of some professional staff members who are leaders in their chosen fields, who hold PhDs and contribute to the advancement of others in their fields, who serve on national and international committees that develop and regulate their professions. This type of practitioner would typically be employed as a practice leader or senior manager among the University’s professional staff. They have the potential to attract income to the University through consultancy and project work, and to engage in scholarly discourse within their fields of professional expertise.

The roles outlined above could all be described as “scholar-practitioners” – people who undertake original intellectual work in research or teaching but have taken a non-academic pathway in their employment. The scholar-practitioner brings sophisticated theoretical and practical knowledge to the academic arena; works with domain scientists or researchers to find innovative, effective solutions to problems; is often a leader in her field of practice; and contributes creativity and original ideas to the research or teaching team.

Typically these multidisciplinary, multi-skilled individuals hold more than one qualification. At the University of Melbourne we know of several scholar-practitioners who are employed as professional staff in the HEW 7-9 range, roughly equivalent to academic staff at (high) A to (low) C levels; a smaller number are in the HEW 10 range.
The international context

In the USA the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) is leading the development of an e-science capability in institutional libraries. Part of this agenda involves developing roles for specialist data-management librarians and archivists who also have an understanding of the scientific domains in which e-research is conducted. For the ARL members, the focus of these scholar-librarian roles is on working within research teams to capture, organise and preserve scientific datasets for future discovery and re-use.

In 2010 the Research Councils UK (RCUK) noted a national “need to increase capacity to develop and not just exploit e-infrastructure” for research:

[It is] “vital to create and maintain a professional career structure for research technologists within the research organisations. Currently these critical, but often under-rated, staff survive on short-term research contracts. This fundamentally undermines the capacity to build a stable cadre of skilled research technologists who can share their expertise and experience, promote good practice and avoid duplication of effort through the use or re-purposing of existing e-infrastructure.” (Research Councils UK, 2010)

The RCUK report recommended embedding “well-trained data producers and users” in research teams, and ensuring that these skills are taught to young and mid-career researchers. In the UK, as in Australia, such roles are often filled by professional staff like those described in the previous section.

Projects and initiatives relating to the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) are working to develop and disseminate e-research and data management skills as an essential part of research teams; however our observation is that these emerging professional roles tend not to be formalised in HR management frameworks.

Attribution and recognition

“Recognising that the University relies heavily on the expertise and professionalism of its non-academic staff, what kinds of conditions are needed to attract and value them? Is there scope for a more encompassing collegiality in the way our scholars and non-academics work with each other?” (Sharrock and Davis, 2005, p31)

Dr Bethany Nowviskie of the University of Virginia is a leader in the field of digital humanities. In a guest lecture at the University of Melbourne (December 2010) she noted that scholar-practitioners in the digital humanities often do not receive appropriate recognition for their original contributions to research. In particular, Nowviskie identifies policy issues related to institutional and academic status.
At the University of Melbourne such issues may include:

- Inequitable treatment under the University’s intellectual property rules
- Not recognising income from consultancy and competitive-tender projects as ‘research’ income where those projects are led by professional staff (and discouraging suitably qualified professional staff from leading such projects)
- Lack of recognition for scholarly work in the position classification scheme and the Performance Development Framework applying to professional staff

These issues are, says Nowviskie, “so uncomfortable that they tend to make good-hearted, collaborative folks ... behave as if they can be wished away... But here, as in other areas of the academy, benign neglect is bad behavior. Consciously ignoring disparities in the institutional status of your collaborators is just as bad as being unthinkingly complicit in the problems these disparities create.” (Nowviskie, 2009-10, original emphasis)

Though Nowviskie is commenting specifically on the digital humanities, it is not difficult to see similar situations in other fields. Research and development teams increasingly cross departmental boundaries and may include undergraduate and graduate students, designers, programmers, computer system administrators, financial advisers, professional librarians or archivists and other information specialists. In curriculum development and teaching, the team might include interaction designers, instructional technologists, web and application developers, experts in assessment and evaluation, courseware developers and information literacy specialists.

In such a heterogeneous team structure, says Nowviskie, “Policies about intellectual property and open source impinge differently on the rights and responsibilities of teaching faculty, research faculty, students-as-students, students-as-employees, and staff members of all kinds. These groups may have differing career arcs and intellectual agendas, and their participation in projects is often understood and evaluated differently within their professions and disciplines.” (Nowviskie, 2009-10)

The constraints of existing intellectual property policies, HR policies on promotions and classification of positions, and traditions surrounding acknowledgement in academic publications become obvious when considered in this context.

“The profile of non-academic work has risen as institutions grow more complex, technologies more pervasive, funding sources more diverse, planning and managing more demanding, and external reporting more onerous. In some areas, such as electronic delivery of course material, teams of academic and non-academic partners are essential. Perhaps our traditional image of a ‘community of scholars’ is giving way to a more complex image of diverse networks of ‘communities of contributors’ or ‘knowledge professionals’.”(Sharrock and Davis, 2005, pp7-8)
Our scholarly information future

In 2008 the University adopted “Melbourne’s Scholarly Information Future: a ten-year strategy” as part of its *Growing Esteem* suite of aspirations and values.

The Scholarly Information Future strategy proposes:

“…to position Melbourne as a thought leader in scholarly information practice we will develop a centre of excellence that explores emerging trends, new information frameworks, business models and tools for the creation, dissemination, access, collection and preservation of scholarly information. The institute will link existing initiatives across the university to capitalise on our collective expertise and innovative ideas. What we learn from this research will be applied in practice -- to develop and support policy, training and collaboration around scholarly information and e-research, and to contribute to campus planning and collection management.” (O’Brien *et al*, 2008b)

Recognising the contribution of scholar-practitioners is a practical step towards realising this aspiration. Such recognition could include:

- Formally defining the role of scholar-practitioner as a category of professional work focus within the HR Framework
- Exploring opportunities to provide a structure and criteria for career advancement by scholar-practitioners (particularly those who might otherwise be employed only on a project or contract basis)
- Reviewing intellectual property, Open Access, licensing, copyright and other policies that may hinder appropriate recognition and attribution of scholar-practitioners’ original academic and intellectual work

This is a new paradigm for thinking about the value of academic and professional work and about relationships between those two areas of activity.

“The University performs at its best when there is close collaboration between academic and professional staff (including shared power and mutual respect). This requires continuing evolution of the Melbourne culture, as well as attention to issues of structure and process.” (Office of the Vice-Chancellor, 2009, p52)

With the current review of HR policies and a forthcoming review of staff classifications, the University of Melbourne has a timely opportunity to reinforce its position as a leader and innovator among Australian higher education institutions.

Philip G Kent
University Librarian

Jenny Ellis
Deputy University Librarian
and Director Scholarly Information

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University Library

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