

Academic Identities for ‘Wicked’ Problems: Braving Transformative Work in the Face of the ‘Competition Fetish’ in Higher Education

Vel McCune and Jenny Scoles

Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh, velda.mccune@ed.ac.uk, jenny.scoles@ed.ac.uk

Sharon Boyd

Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh, sharon.boyd@ed.ac.uk

Andy Cross

School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, andrew.cross@ed.ac.uk

Rebekah Tauritz

Education and Learning Sciences, Wageningen University and Research, rebekah.tauritz@wur.nl

Abstract

This presentation is based on a project that explored how academics across a research-intensive university worked with students as they learned about wicked problems and how they developed as academics willing to engage with wicked problems. Wicked problems are complex and bring together stakeholders with diverse and often contradictory perspectives. These problems tend to be messy and lack clear definitions and boundaries. Attempts to solve wicked problems may lead to unforeseen outcomes. Examples of wicked problems include the climate and biodiversity emergencies, health inequality and conflict.

This paper response to the think pieces by Phipps and Naidoo (the latter from the postponed HECU conference). Naidoo identified one of the key barriers to academics engaging with the social purposes of higher education as being the ‘competition fetish’ in higher education. Phipp’s evocative think piece focuses on the devastating impact of sudden funding cuts to crucial social research focused on wicked problems, such as conflict and trauma. This paper asks, who becomes the kind of academic who will work with wicked problems in the context of the competition fetish and broken funding systems?

The objective of the narrative analysis presented is to illuminate what kinds of academic identities underpin the will and capacity to research and teach about ‘wicked’ problems in higher education and how these identities can be supported. Twenty of our semi-structured interview participants had practices centred on wicked problems. We also interviewed fifteen academics for our comparison group who were not focusing on wicked problems. The findings draw out how academic identities that cohere around wicked problems – rather than around disciplinary or traditional researcher identities - can underpin the will and capacity to work with wicked problems in contexts where this may not be fully supported.

The conclusions of the paper point to the value of narrative perspectives on identities to underpin critical analyses of how academics can thrive while working on challenging topics in contemporary higher education. Implications for policy makers include the importance of challenging the competition fetish and broken funding systems and of providing role models, drivers and opportunities for academics to explore their roles as activists, change agents and educators.

Keywords

Wicked problems, academic identities, competition fetish, Higher Education funding