

# Chapter 23

## New Frontiers: The ‘E-Academic’ in Higher Education



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**Abstract** A decade ago, tertiary academics who combined traditional campus-based and online deliveries were described as ‘early adopters’ (McShane, 2004). With considerable growth in the new frontier of online teaching, these early adopters have embraced changing roles and competencies to now engage only in online delivery. Whilst a sizeable body of research has detailed the learning styles, needs and successes of online students, a comparable paucity of research details the experiences of online academics. Via research, practice reflections and personal accounts, this chapter illuminates the life of the ‘e-academic’ who specialises in the online development and delivery of educational materials. Predictors of strong performance, role satisfaction and wellbeing in e-academia are examined in considering what makes a good online academic. First-hand accounts of the e-academic will be offered that illuminate the e-academic as an author, designer, navigator, motivator, catalyst, technician and advocate. In addition to looking inwards at e-academics, this chapter looks outwards to consider where online academics fit in traditional tertiary settings. The portrayal of e-academics as “outcasts on the inside” (Costa, 2015) will be considered in examining juxtapositions between online and traditional roles. With research suggesting academics feel ill-equipped to perform online roles, practice-based tips will be offered to support successful transitions between traditional and online education.

### 23.1 Introduction

Consider the traditional academic: A learned person, a respected expert in their field. A person who manages quality teaching, research and community endeavours. A person who balances responsibility to students, institution, profession and community. All within a building at an institute of higher education.

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Now consider the new academic—the e-academic: A learned person, a respected expert in the field. A person who manages quality teaching, research and community endeavours. A person who balances responsibility to students, institution, profession and community. All via electronic means at an institute of higher education.

Fifteen years ago, academics who combined traditional campus-based and online deliveries were labelled ‘early adopters’ (McShane, 2004). With considerable growth in the new frontier of online teaching, some of these early adopters have embraced changing roles and competencies to now engage solely in online delivery. This chapter enlivens the experiences of a campus-based academic turned e-academic. Via research, practice reflections and personal reflections, this chapter illuminates the life of the teaching-focused e-academic.

## 23.2 The E-Academic as an Educator

Be it campus-based or electronic, the role of an academic as an educator remains the same—to impart knowledge, facilitate learning and promote student application of contextual knowledge. However, significant differences lie between campus-based and e-academics in the primacy of technology.

Digital natives are comfortable with and attracted to working with technology (Stockham & Lind, 2018). For digital immigrants, including this author, e-academia represents a new frontier. Working in my first role as a traditional campus-based academic in the 1990s, one’s greatest technology fear was a blown overhead projector globe that would prevent sharing of neatly hand-written overhead transparencies to a lecture theatre of hundreds of students. Now we have all been required to upskill and present educational materials with technological expertise.

Being an e-academic requires a high degree of technological skill such as hypertext markup language, teaching platforms, and software and hardware troubleshooting. The primacy of technology for e-academics means that delivering a single unit within a degree or diploma involves:

- Electronic presentation of course materials typically via a learning management system (LMS) such as Moodle.
- Development of student activities to promote electronic engagement and completion.
- Engagement and support of enrolled students via electronic means, such as discussion boards.
- Publication of online library reading lists to facilitate student learning.
- Creation of office-hours, akin to open-door physical office spaces where students are welcome to engage with academics.
- Engagement and support of staff via electronic means, such as discussion boards, electronic instructor guides and shared drives of electronic class resources.
- Presentation of classes via stable teaching software such as Blackboard Collaborate.

- Management of online staff meetings in software via organisational software such as Zoom.
- Development and delivery of electronic-friendly assignments.
- Facilitation of staff marking processes via electronic platforms.
- Development of student examinations to be completed online under examination conditions, and invigilation of student examinations.
- Gathering of quality assurance data with regards to teaching and unit materials.

Although invariably engaging with technology to prepare and deliver a unit, excessive engagement with technology troubleshooting adds workload pressure and detracts attention from the e-academic's primary role of education. To successfully prepare and deliver a unit, the e-academic's role must be supported via technology support services for both staff and students. This may take the form of an assistant whose role focuses on student support or the institution's technology support department.

It remains that some academics report feeling uncomfortable with technology and report lacking the educational design skills needed to develop electronic resources (Conole & McAndrew, 2010; Longman & Green, 2011). Those academics transitioning from campus-based models to e-academia require support to transition and develop technological skills that complement their existing educational skills (Briggs, 2005). Rather than daunting, the e-academic can feel excited by the opportunities presented by this. Transformation of a hands-on tutorial or laboratory activity from traditional to online campus is not a limitation (Considine, Nafalski, & Nedic, 2017). A healthy dose of creativity required in e-academia, with autonomy and innovation marked features of the role. Technology also offers greater opportunity for more specific metrics on student engagement. Software records elements of student participation and engagement, thus presenting strong opportunities for ongoing improvement and student feedback (Fenley, 2010).

Having fulfilled both campus-based and e-academic roles, I have observed no difference in student attendance though I have observed a difference in student engagement in synchronous activities such as classes. As highlighted by Bender (2012), the virtual classroom is characterised by students who enter the room early, students who enter the room punctually, and students who enter the room late for various technological, time-zone or personal reasons. Staggered entrances have a negative impact on class flow, learning opportunities and conduct of group activities. Like campus-based classes, there is also the tendency for largest student numbers to appear in the first few weeks, trailing off as the teaching period continues. In a campus-based lecture theatre, there will be students with pens eagerly poised in the front row and there will be students poised to sleep in the back row. For e-academics, this takes the form of students with videos and microphones actively on as well as students who choose to be present but not activate their videos and/or microphones thus remaining anonymous. Despite various initiatives to encourage students to attend classes with active video and audio including making this compulsory as part of student enrolment, a proportion of students elect not to activate video in particular. This remains a challenge for online courses to address, with research

linking regular attendance and engagement to better student outcomes (Crede, Roch, & Kieszczyka, 2010; Sharma, Mendez, & O'Byrne, 2005; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Thus, to ensure student success in study and positive staff workplace experiences, the e-academic is required to have strong skills in engagement and motivation. Additional to one's skills is one's opportunities. The lack of opportunity for e-academics to engage in course- or career-based hallway conversation with students as one moves about the campus is noted. The e-academic does not have the opportunity to encounter a student whilst ordering morning coffee, thus limiting the student's casual opportunities to seek guidance and the e-academic's casual opportunities to provide guidance. Hence, it is recommended that analogous cyber-coffee opportunities be presented for e-academics to engage with students.

Similarly, it is important to provide staff formal and informal opportunities for collegial engagement to thus promote staff well-being, identity and pride. So as the literal water cooler serves as a central point for academics to gather and share information, e-academics benefit from a metaphorical water cooler to provide opportunity for unsolicited discourse.

### **23.3 The E-Academic as an Administrator**

Along with the delivery of online education representing new frontiers, the administration of online courses represents new frontiers. Developing and managing an online tertiary course requires significant investments of time, capital and resources. One model potentially relevant to e-academia is public-private partnerships (PPPs). Employed widely in transport, energy, telecommunications, water, sewerage and healthcare services, PPPs involve formal cooperation between the private sector and local governments to develop infrastructure and services. This model of cooperation between sectors can be extended to education, particularly for infrastructure or vocational education (Gideon & Unterhalter, 2017; Pillay, Watters, & Hoff, 2013; Vertakova & Plotnikov, 2014). Cooperative partnerships allow each agency to achieve complementary yet independent goals whilst sharing and saving resources. Cooperative partnership appears particularly suitable for e-academia, with universities able to partner with invested parties to develop and manage not just individual online courses, but to develop and manage fully immersive online campuses for staff and students.

A beneficial enterprise would see one aligned sector developing and maintaining the administrative elements of an online course such as enrolments, pastoral care or graduation, with the academic sector focusing solely on managing the academic elements of that online course. This premise alone is appealing for academics whose passion is education rather than administration. A further benefit of sector partnerships in unstable political climates is more stable funding arrangements. However, partnerships present challenges including increased numbers at the policy and stakeholder table. Principles of effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, equity and beneficiaries are more complex in partnerships (Pillay et al., 2013), with criticism that for-profit private university arrangements represent an attack to traditional universities as centres of learning (Chibber, 2010).

## 23.4 The E-Academic as a Faculty Member

E-academia presents the best of both worlds for professional and personal identity. Whilst maintaining professional identity as a faculty member of an esteemed institution, the e-academic also has the freedom of working away from the campus. E-academics typically work from home, with some electing to work in a library or hot-desking in community co-working spaces. Some e-academics find the role convenient as they balance family life, hobbies or travel with work, with the only e-academic requirements being time and a reliable Internet connection (Chiew, Hwa, & Teh, 2018).

In addition to looking inwards towards the experience of being an e-academic, it is important to look outwards to consider the fit between e-academics and traditional campus faculties. One area of faculty difference is staffing profiles between e-academic and campus-based departments. Despite holding doctorates and profiles as established experts in their fields, e-academics performing coordination roles have typically been employed as Level A ('Assistant Lecturer') academics. This is contrasted with the typical profile of campus-based academic where a Level A academic is new to the field and/or without a doctorate. Promotion opportunities for e-academics can be more limited due to the greater challenge in meeting promotion criteria that more amenable represents campus-based academic work. There has been concern that the quality of research produced by e-academics is not as reputable, with e-courses being characterised a source of revenue rather than a legitimate academic endeavour and thus relegating e-academia to the role of 'little sister' of the academic family. Costa (2015) describes an apparent clash between the freedom associated with technology and conservative academic values, resulting in e-academics being 'outcasts on the inside' (p. 194). Until this discrepancy is resolved, it will remain a challenge for online departments to recruit and retain staff.

## 23.5 Reflections and Recommendations

In addition to being a learned expert and a person who manages quality teaching, research and community endeavours, the e-academic is also an author, educational designer, technician, navigator, motivator, entrepreneur, catalyst and advocate. Whilst a sizable body of research has detailed the experiences of campus-based academics, a paucity of research details experiences of e-academics. Research is needed to elucidate predictors of performance, role satisfaction, and well-being in e-academia, culminating in an enhanced understanding of what makes a good e-academic.

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