

Book Review

Review of Mark Sterling, Lia Blaj-Ward and Karin Crawford's *Redeveloping Academic Career Frameworks for Twenty-First Century Higher Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023

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I fully appreciated the value of a doctoral research and training experience which placed engagement at its core.

Engagement was present in many forms – I was supported to collaborate with industry to shape research projects of immediate value to society, encouraged to collaborate with industry when supervising taught students, or to contribute to outreach activities and communicating research insights more widely.

I was aware however, from conversations with peers, of the risk that engagement could become less of a priority in the transition phase from

doctoral researcher to full-fledged academic. *Redeveloping Academic Career Frameworks for Twenty-First Century Higher Education* offers reassurance that universities across the world are actively considering that risk and are redesigning the way they recognise and reward academic work with engagement in mind, consistently so across the full range of disciplines.

The book has equal value for institutions and individuals. The value to the institutions is highlighted in the endorsement statements with which the book opens. These reflect the experiences of senior colleagues who have led change projects on career frameworks and policies in higher education. My reading of the book is from the perspective of an early

career academic, keen to develop professionally in a context where academic and industry strengths are appropriately valued, and economic benefits are not prioritised at the expense of other societal needs. I am also aware that not all colleagues are inducted into their academic careers through doctoral training; the vignettes in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3) offer a range of scenarios. Readers in an early career position – bearing in mind that 'early career' can be defined in different ways, as the authors usefully note (p. 110) – could enter the book at that point, then work their way back to Chapter 2 ('Academic Roles, Identities, and Career Frameworks'), which provides theoretical background into how academic roles and identities have been

traditionally experienced and how these experiences have changed over time.

The authors of the book 'spotlight newer pathways with a substantive focus on education, professional practice, enterprise, public engagement and knowledge exchange' (Sterling

"practice/entrepreneurship pathways" as an umbrella term for convenience but acknowledge the nuance and complexity of activity gathered under it' (p. 84). The book makes it clear, however, that careers should not be viewed as rigid tracks; engagement

Chapter 6 ('Guidelines for Pathway Redesign and Implementation') lays out principles for framework redesign, as well as considering the practicalities involved in rolling out new frameworks, such as decision-making panels in applications for promotion. Reading

these chapters made me reflect that while early career academics – which I consider myself to be – would not be expected to lead institution-wide career redesign projects, they would have an important part to play in the redesign process as they are the ones who will be enacting the academic roles that the frameworks map out. The book helps make the redesign process transparent so that early career academics can take part in the redesign conversations from an



and Blaj-Ward, 2023). Education-focused pathways and ones that dual professionals with experience from outside academia might take are mapped out in Chapter 4 ('New Pathways in Redesigned Academic Career Frameworks'). The latter pathways, which lie 'at the interface between universities and other employment sectors' (Sterling et al., 2023, p. 84) may be of more immediate interest to the Engagement Australia community. The authors 'use the label

should be deeply embedded in all pathways, regardless of their title and substantive focus.

Chapter 5 ('Career Frameworks and Development: The Institutional Context') discusses aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion that need to be considered when institutions are designing career frameworks, as well as professional development to wrap around new career pathways so that redesigned frameworks achieve their intended impact.

informed position.

Chapter 7 ('Provisional Wrap-Up and an Invitation to Continue the Academic Pathways Conversation') revisits the scenarios of individual academics' journeys introduced earlier in the book. It reflects on academic careers in transnational contexts and on the value that dual professionals who cross national boundaries bring to the learning experiences of students in transnational higher education settings. It also puts forward a set of questions

to help evaluate the extent to which newly designed frameworks achieve their impact. The question that most resonates with me is,

"In what ways has the introduction of redesigned academic career pathways led to more effective ways of connecting different functional areas within the university which are responsible for building relationships with internal and external stakeholders?" (Sterling et al., 2023, p. 167).

As engaged work becomes more visible in academic career frameworks, so does – and should – the contribution that colleagues in other functional areas of a university bring to this.

While reading the book, I developed a greater awareness of the conversations I need to have with colleagues in a position to support me so that I fulfil my potential as an engaged academic. The book has inspired me to think back to how I have been supported professionally and think forward to how I can do the same for others. My field is one in which collaboration and engagement with external communities and partners are fundamental. Collaborations bring together colleagues with different kinds of academic expertise who may have different understandings of engagement and different ways of evidencing, valuing and evaluating what counts as societally engaged academic

work. Shared understanding can be achieved during the career framework redesign process, which 'in itself builds bridges between different stakeholder categories who may appear to have competing agendas' (Sterling et al., 2023, pp. 173-174).

The previous issue of Transform is titled *"Engagement: The Next Twenty Years are Crucial!"*. Equally crucial for the next twenty years is that universities re-assess how they achieve their purpose in society through the way they define academic roles and the place of engagement – in its manifold forms – within these. Professor Barney Glover, former vice-chancellor of a university which pays utmost attention to its social responsibility mission, notes in Transform:

"The cliché of the ivory tower no longer fits the purpose of a university, particularly in a country like Australia where campuses are increasingly porous, and university acts set out clear obligations to the communities universities are embedded within." (Glover, 2023, p. 27).

The same holds for all national higher education contexts. Redeveloping Academic Career Frameworks makes a valuable contribution to re-assessing the academic role descriptions that align with the ivory tower cliché and rewriting these for the 21st century.

As someone whose current academic commitments draw substantially on the experience of working in different countries and being part of an international network of professionals within and beyond academia, I am all too aware of the value of conversations that cross national and professional boundaries. Redeveloping Academic Career Frameworks can be described as a set of prompts to engage in fruitful conversations – across national higher education systems and with professionals from a range of sectors – about how universities frame their engagement with society as a meaningful, mutually beneficial, long-term relationship.

References

Sterling, M., & Blaj-Ward, L. (2023). Redeveloping Academic Career Frameworks for Twenty-First Century: Why on Earth do we need another academic career pathway? <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/11/01/redeveloping-academic-career-frameworks-for-twenty-first-century-why-on-earth-do-we-need-another-academic-career-pathway/>

Glover, B. (2023). Reimagining the Public Role of Universities. Transform (pp. 27-31). <https://engagementaustralia.org.au/transform-issue-7-2023-engagement-the-next-twenty-years-are-crucial/>