

INDIVIDUAL PAPER

TITLE OF PAPER: What will become of us?

AUTHORS: David Grantham, National Teaching Fellow

INSTITUTION: Coventry University

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NAME AND ADDRESS OF CONTACT PERSON: David Grantham, School of International Studies and Law, George Eliot Building, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV32 7UF

TELEPHONE: 024 76888691

EMAIL: d.grantham@coventry.ac.uk

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PROPOSAL:

At a time when technology continues to attract the attention of those who wish to widen participation in higher education the teaching role of a number of academics who are working in the field is undergoing considerable change. The sheer range, though not necessarily the quality, of available information in any discipline increases daily and exponentially. As more higher education institutions decide to adopt particular electronic learning environments such as Blackboard or Web CT then harnessing growing information resources to enhance student learning is forcing itself upon the learning and teaching agenda. Features of these environments, such as discussion forum or chat rooms, open up new possibilities for networked learning for students who cannot be, or do not need to be, on campus.

Though the pace and extent of this shift is uneven it is likely that, over time, all practitioners in higher education institutions will be affected. So, what will the teaching and learning the work of the academic look like in the future? This paper examines the nature of these changes, first in the context of how informed opinion sees the various alternative futures for higher education, and second in applying the principles of role theory. It will interrogate the degree to which an understanding and application of such theory can help to make sense of both the forces of change and the resistance to it. Perspectives from academics in a variety of disciplines and who have been directly involved in change driven by ICT will be examined. There will be a particular focus on the potential reasons for 'role ambiguity' and 'role stress' and how ICT can act as a catalyst for academic debate about the nature of learning and teaching. Another emerging issue which the paper will address is the degree to which academics are equipped to cope with the new number of demands made upon them by students who have increasing expectations of ICT learning environments.

The author has considerable experience of the design and implementation of electronic learning environments and how students respond to them. Drawing on this experience and upon qualitative research into the management of change, this paper will consider whether networked learning will require similar or different qualities from higher education practitioners to those needed in traditional settings.