Research in progress: Mapping the terrain of two applied institutional research cultures

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Introduction

This paper introduces and backgrounds a research project that is in progress in two tertiary institutions in Auckland, New Zealand. Both institutions are trying to raise their research profile in response to the changing external policy demands in the higher education (HE) sector. There have been a number of these policy changes in recent years, with the result that institutions have had to react to meet the increasing tensions between supporting research and the demands of teaching and learning. In particular, the newly introduced funding regime, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) that assesses research outcomes, has altered institutional expectations and accountabilities (Ashcroft, 2005). There is now internal pressure within institutions for staff to be more research ‘active’ and productive, influencing both their priorities and academic identity (Codd, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Middleton, 2005, 2006; Smith & Jesson, 2005a, 2005b). We argue that in the current dynamic tertiary context, the working environment that supports teaching and enhances staff research is critical to enabling positive outcomes.

Whilst acknowledging the impact of policy imperatives on the teaching environment, this paper focuses on the changing research environment. Firstly, the tertiary context for this project will be outlined and the current educational policy structure will be stated. The tensions between teaching and research responsibilities are noted and the impact on academic staff identified. Finally, we outline the research project and possible implications that the findings may have for institutional strategy and academic identity.

The New Zealand tertiary context

The HE sector, internationally, has undergone significant change in the last two decades and this has resulted in both a change in the policy and funding context for institutions and a subsequent and allied change to the internal environment of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as they move to respond to external pressures. Within the UK and Europe, state policies have had a major impact on institutional focus, their basic intention being to provide tertiary education for increasing numbers in financially viable and capable units (Sjolund, 2002). Whilst this paper focuses upon issues related to research cultures within New Zealand, many of the issues arising from sector restructuring bear international comparison. In this section reference will be made to international examples of the changing tertiary sector, followed by an examination of the characteristics of the New Zealand context. Finally, the relationship between the sector structure and an institutional research culture will be introduced.

In the UK and Australia, re-regulation of the sector has meant that former polytechnics and institutes of technology have made the transition from vocationally-oriented training providers to research-based university-like institutions. The resultant change in institutional focus has meant institutional restructuring, with different demands being placed upon the nature of the work conducted and, just as importantly on those who work within them. In the UK there has been significant institutional restructuring and Pratt (1999) claims that the growth of the sector and the access to research funding has not occurred together, but rather has resulted in an informal stratification of the sector whereby new universities (previously polytechnics) are struggling to compete with the older established institutions.

Pratt’s assertions have resonance with the findings of Goedegebuure and Meek (1997), who identified the 1990s as having an increased focus on economic viability, resulting in institutional competition within a market-driven environment. In accord with the previous examples, Sjolund (2002) has noted that political
decisions play the major role in determining the structure of the tertiary sector. Although New Zealand has had a lesser degree of restructuring than some of its international counterparts, an arguable decrease in the diversity within the tertiary sector seems to have occurred through increased institutional autonomy and the ability of non-universities to offer degree course (Codling & Meek, 2003). The market-driven education sector, which was propelled by the economic policies of the Labour government in the 1980s and supported by the actions of the National Government of the 1990s, has caused increased tertiary competition. Whilst this has encouraged polytechnics and newer universities to emerge as stronger tertiary providers, (Pratt, 1999), they do so within an environment where older, established universities move to assert their sector dominance.

While changes to sector structure have occurred in varied ways and to differing degrees, there has been an associated shift in how academic research is facilitated and publicly funded. UK governments have adopted the Germanic model of ‘integrating research into universities rather than separate institutes’ (Grant & Edgar, 2003, p. 319), a model that New Zealand has now followed. This integration is aimed at increased coordination of academic research and has resulted in differing models whereby research may be separate from teaching departments, or undertaken on a contractual basis, with teaching time being bought to allow for research (Connell, 2004). The development of an effective institutional research culture thereby contributes to the achievement of policy-driven research outcomes.

Research culture

As political and policy-initiative demands are effectively increasing the emphasis on accountability and funding, institutions are being pressured to make strategic choices not only about organisational, human resource and funding structures and resource allocation, but also the teaching-research nexus (Hazelkorn, 2005). These choices have repercussions on the positioning and support of academic staff and so the resident ‘culture’ in which staff are situated, impacts upon their performance.

Hazelkorn (2005) observed, that alongside the governmental restructuring of the tertiary sector through policy revision and institutional funding, it is both the quality and quantity of HE research that determines the status and prestige of individual institutions. New Zealand institutions are recognising the need to reinforce their position in the changing sector and as we have observed in our own institutions, to do this involves strengthening their research capacity and capability This institutional focus has been seen as crucial for the survival of some HEIs in the restructured environment (Hazelkorn, 2005). In practical terms, it would appear logical that a research strategy is aligned with the structures for organisational management.

In New Zealand the government has separated HE funding between teaching and research activities, with the latter being contested among institutions that conduct research. Research funding from Government sources is based on the PBRF, whereby institutions receive income reflecting the PBRF graded status of their individual members. This is in contrast to the UK where departments within an institution are allocated a grade for funding (Blackmore & Wright, 2006; Lucas, 2006; Yates, 2006). The PBRF is effectively an outcomes-based model, where achievements rather than research inputs and related activities are recognised. Research funding via the PBRF mechanism is being progressively introduced from 2004 to 2008.

Findings from an Organisation for European Cooperation and Development (OECD) study of twenty-five HEIs across 17 OECD and Non-OECD countries provides us with insight into the characteristics of a research culture (Hazelkorn, 2005) The consensus was that a research culture comprises an environment in which research and teaching hold a significant inter-relationship. The characteristics vary in degree from being a culture where research underpins teaching, to one in which research enhances all areas within the institution. A further study conclusion identified that for any development of a research culture, there needs to be interaction within a critical mass of academic staff, research students and researchers who form a collaborative community of scholars. A smaller study in New Zealand, involved a case study of the development of a research culture in the School of Management Studies at the University of Waikato (Pratt, Margaritis & Coy, 1999). It was found that progress on developing a research culture was related to a decentralised management structure which enabled the school to direct its own resources to that goal.
It appears that any move to enhance a research culture requires an understanding of the multi-dimensional academic role and the multiplicity of ways in which different academic staff need to be utilised and managed, elements of which are now discussed.

**Teaching and research responsibilities and academic identity**

New Zealand has historically had a climate that is less supportive of research. The tension between the push for increased full time equivalent students (FTEs) and research is an obvious one, when FTEs have tended to count for more than research achievements and research outputs (Elliott, 1996). Yet, more recent changes to the HE sector that seek to increase the emphasis on research, inevitably pressures staff to re-prioritise the demands of teaching, administration and research.

Whilst policy drives much of institutional strategy, staff indicate that at a ‘more personal level’ they are being influenced by the PBRF to re-evaluate ‘their future goals, strategies and priorities’ (Middleton, 2005, p. 147). Research studies undertaken at Victoria University (Wellington) by Hall, Morris Matthews and Sawicka (2004) and Hall and Morris Matthews (2006) are instructive. In both studies, it was noted that the teaching commitments, service components and increasingly administrative duties associated with academic labour have been shaped by the demands of the PBRF. This has also been reported in other New Zealand small scale studies conducted by Middleton (2005, 2006) at Waikato University and Ashcroft (2006) at the University of Otago.

 Whilst there is argument that there is no single academic identity shared by all academic staff (Churchman, 2006) there is also an acknowledgement that academic staff do struggle in these times to ‘define their identity and those of their colleagues’ (ibid, p. 5). Recent studies undertaken in New Zealand on the impact of the PBRF on academic identities and academic staff morale parallel the ones undertaken in the UK about the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). In the UK context which has had five rounds of the RAE there has been considerable literature and critique (see Furlong and Oancea, 2006; Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2005; Lucas, 2006; McNay, 2003; Pritchard, 2000; and Sikes, 2006). Many of these studies and others have influenced those undertaken in New Zealand about the effects of the PBRF including Ashcroft & Nairn, 2004; Ashcroft, 2005, 2006; Codd, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Hall, et al., 2004; Hall & Morris Matthews, 2006; Middleton, 2005, 2006; Roberts, 2006; and Smith & Jesson, 2005a, 2005b. All of these authors argue that the PBRF regime is shaping academic identity and that in these environments the old adage ‘publish or perish’ has intensified.

**The research project**

In light of the complexities surrounding what comprises a ‘research culture’ we initiated a research project in 2007, within two Auckland tertiary institutions, one a polytechnic (Institute of Technology) aiming for university status, and the other, a more recently designated university. The selection of these institutions is no coincidence, as we work as academic staff members within them and they provide examples of tertiary providers aspiring to increased status. The project’s primary aim is to examine staff perceptions of the research funding regime of the PBRF and its impact on their professional identity and research productivity. It is not the intention to compare the findings with a more established university, but rather examine how these institutions experience a working research culture. Three case studies were selected for the project’s sample, namely the Schools of Education, Design and Nursing; these permit a comparison across differing disciplines and between the two HEIs.

The research design includes initial interviewing (Dick, 1990) with the two institutional heads of research, followed by a survey of all staff in the sample (about 240), using an online questionnaire through SurveyMonkey. (A similar survey coincidentally occurred at the University of Auckland, see Waayer & Hattie, 2007)) Semi-structured interviews with about 30 staff across both institutions provide further in-depth data for the findings. These findings are still being analysed, but at this stage, early assessment indicates some interesting observations. Preliminary analysis suggests that for *some* staff in *both* institutions and across all three disciplines (Design, Education and Nursing) the imposition of the PBRF and internal drivers to undertake research and to publish are resulting in a significant shift in academic roles and responsibilities.
Implications for institutional strategy and academic identity

The evolving HE landscape has implications for both institutional identity and individual progress and academic identity. While administration, teaching and research are all expected functions, staff research confers a higher status and enhances possibilities of professional rewards such as promotion (Goddard, Cranston & Billot, 2006; Greenbank, 2006). As every university (and increasingly other tertiary educational organisations such as Polytechnics, Institutes of Technology and Te Whare W nanga) has criteria that determine how staff are evaluated and provided with rewards (Meyer & Evans, 2003), the research culture in which the academic is positioned is crucial to their research development and career.

While national economic and social policies directly and indirectly affect the tertiary sector, the response by individual institutions may or may not be similar. Various types of tertiary providers will have differing capacities for change and their ability to reframe their structural responses to policies, indicate inequality across the sector. This inequality is particularly noticeable in New Zealand, between older established universities and newer polytechnics and institutes of technology. Whilst the policy demands will be similar for all providers, the different ways in which staff are supported to undertake research in the individual institutions, affect the sustainability of staff contributions to fulfilling their employing organisation’s responsibilities.

For HEIs the major imperative is raising the research output of staff which is particularly challenging in institutions that ‘have their origins within applied and vocational disciplines where there is a stronger focus on teaching than on research’ (Pratt, et al., 1999, p. 43). At the ‘national level, authorities are increasingly defining research priorities for the country as a whole’ resulting in a need for institutions to ‘reposition themselves within a fast evolving landscape’ (Connell, 2004, p. 25). So the ‘effective management of research has become a key contemporary issue for HEIs’ (ibid, p. 15).

Summary

Notionally, HE research cultures provide environments that support, nurture and enhance the research activities of academics. An effective culture needs alignment at all levels, to ensure relevant and appropriate facilitation of initiatives that link teaching and research. If both are not carefully coordinated, then academic staff may experience role conflict, which in turn undermines staff satisfaction, student success and institutional health. In addition, academic staff assert the need for allocated research time so that it is not given a lower priority.

This in-progress research has reported on a number of inter-related issues in the domain of building research cultures in applied institutions, drawing upon data from the research-teaching nexus and the associated shifting academic roles and responsibilities (Churchman, 2006). We advocate for a greater understanding of what academic staff need to ensure stability of both institution and individual identity. Future research aims to explore with staff, the ways in which their research profiles and career trajectories may be enhanced.

References


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