Multicampus University in Operation: Perceptions of Staff and Students

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Abstract

This paper reports the views of staff and students at the University of Queensland on a number of issues related to the need to travel between campuses for work and study purposes. Results were based on two questionnaires administered to staff and students respectively. They indicate that there are some clear limitations to the operation of the current multicampus system. The findings identify a number of issues which are of relevance to university administration particularly in relation to apportioning time and costs, and being more responsive to the concerns of staff and students.

Introduction

The University of Queensland currently offers business degrees through Gatton College which are delivered across two campuses at Gatton and Ipswich. Staff are required to travel to deliver the same lectures at each campus as well as attend the main St Lucia campus for meetings on administrative and research matters. Students may also elect to study at more than one campus in order to include in their degree subjects not offered at their home campus. This paper reports the views of staff and students at the University of Queensland on a number of issues related to the offering of courses across different campuses and the need to travel between campuses for work and study purposes which this method of delivering courses entails. It has been developed in response to the changing institutional environment of the University of Queensland. The research sought to explore how work and study are perceived to be affected by the operation of this system for staff and students who are required to commute between campuses as part of their workload.

A multicampus institution can be defined as “...the grouping of individual campuses under a common framework of governance” (Lee et al 1971:1). These can take the form of institutions that operate entirely in metropolitan areas, or operate only in regional areas, or a combination of the two. The University of Queensland currently operates both regional, and metropolitan campuses, at Gatton, and Bremer Ipswich and St. Lucia, respectively. Added to this is the development of a fourth campus at Cotah Southbank and another campus at Ipswich planned to open in 1999.

Research into the development and operation of multicampus institutions has received little attention to date in the Australian literature. While Meek (1992) addresses rationale, issues of management, governance and authority and dis/advantages of the multicampus system, issues relating to the effects of multicampus work on performance are not discussed. While it has been noted that the development and maintenance of multicampus institutions has particular implications for staff in terms of retraining and new positions required, and students in terms of course accountability, there has been little mention of the need for staff and students to travel between different campuses and its subsequent effects on performance (see Maling and Keeps 1988). It has been noted that

...some of the challenges of multi-campus consolidations for staff need to be acknowledged, e.g., frequently academic and administrative staff are expected to travel between campuses. It is not easy for anyone to function effectively away from their immediate home base: away from their office, their files, their computer, and the staff room with which they are familiar... (Maling et al 1988:130)
Given the lack of available data, questions about how staff and students are responding to the exigencies of this environment will need to be addressed if appropriate management plans are to be developed.

**Purpose**

This paper reports the results of a pilot study conducted at the University of Queensland which attempted to explore how academic staff and students perceived the need to commute between campuses for work and study purposes. In particular, the study aimed to: (1) determine the time and costs associated with travel and their views on this; (2) to ascertain what, if any, measures were in place to accommodate this as part of their work/study loads; (3) identify any restrictions on work/study experienced in travelling; (4) highlight whether there were health and safety issues for staff and students, and (5) to identify issues which are perceived as necessary for the university to take into account to ensure the more effective and efficient operation of the system.

The findings identify a number of issues which are of relevance to university administration in relation to apportioning time and costs, and being more responsive to the concerns of staff and students. These findings emphasise the need for more careful monitoring of the operational aspects of the multicampus system and better planning in order to reduce the personal costs and implications for students and staff.

**Methodology**

The study was directed to staff and students of the University of Queensland who were required to travel between campuses to fulfil work and study obligations. Respondents were drawn primarily from the Gatton and Ipswich campuses. Attention was directed at those members of staff and students who are required to travel as part of their work and study commitment. Cost and time considerations made it impractical to attempt a large scale survey.

Surveys were conducted using fixed choice and open ended questionnaires. Given that some of the issues involved were different for staff to that of students, two separate questionnaires were developed. These are reported on below.

Academic and administrative staff were surveyed using a 6 page questionnaire. Thirty questionnaires were distributed. In all, 23 staff responded (a response rate of 77%) with 20 having their primary work location at the Gatton campus of the University of Queensland. Eighteen were academic staff and 5 general staff. Of those surveyed, 14 were women and 9 men. At the time the questionnaire was administered, all were, or had been, required to travel between campuses as part of their workload. Fourteen had to regularly travel to Ipswich for teaching, and most were required to travel between Gatton and St. Lucia for administration purposes.

Students were surveyed using a 5 page questionnaire. Ninety questionnaires were distributed. Forty students in total responded (a response rate of 44%). Of these, 37 were full time and 3 part time; 17 male and 23 female. Course enrolments included management, property studies, tourism, and education amongst others. In terms of the campuses on which they attend lectures and tutorials, 30 regularly attended at Ipswich, 27 at Gatton and 17 at St. Lucia. In terms of the campuses they were required to travel between as part of their average week, Ipswich-Gatton 16; Ipswich-St. Lucia 8; Gatton-St. Lucia 9; and between all Gatton-Ipswich-St. Lucia 7.

**Results**

**Costs Associated with Multicampus Operations**

(a) Staff

The mode of transport between campuses for all staff members was a car. This can, in part, be attributed to public transport arrangements which 14 respondents thought were inadequate. Six of the respondents
used a car provided by the university for most trips between campuses, while 17 regularly used their own.
On average, the number of trips per week were 1.1 for teaching, .83 for research, .61 for administration,
and for study and, for upgrading qualifications .35. Overall, staff spent on average 4.7 hours per week
commuting. This includes an estimated 2.9 hours road time and the other time required for activities such
as parking and walking to the office. The maximum time required for commuting was 8 hours. Costs per
week averaged at $20.60 in petrol, in parking $1.30 and in parking fines $2.50. However, staff were not
often fully reimbursed for these trips. In terms of the university fully reimbursing the costs, 6 answered
yes, 12 answered no, and 4 answered partially with 1 non-response.

(b) Students

Time lost and costs accrued, on average, were much greater for students. The majority of students most
frequently travelled by car, again as a result of their views on public transport arrangements. When asked
if the students’ felt public transport arrangements were adequate, only 3 answered yes, 22 no, and 13
unsure. What appeared to be the major concern is while buses travelled between Gatton and St Lucia,
none stopped at Ipswich. In addition to this, bus schedules were a problem in that there were only two
buses per day every four hours.

In total, students were estimated to have spent 6.5 hours per week in commuting. In terms of road time,
the students estimated that they would spend an average of 4.4 hours per week commuting between
campuses. This excludes other factors such as finding a parking spot. This is almost two hours longer than
staff respondents to the questionnaire. Estimated costs varied between $5.00 to $74.00. On average, the
costs of students travelling between campuses was $29.63. It could be anticipated that this is a particularly
important issue when incomes of students are examined. Eighteen earn less than $100 per week, 12 earn
$100-$150, 4 earn $150-$200, and only 6 earn over $200. When asked if the costs of travelling between
campuses had a negative effect on the amount of income reserved for general living expenses, 29 said yes,
only 2 said no and 9 were unsure.

Measures in place to accommodate multicampus factors in work/study loads

The study also questioned whether or not staff and students thought that the university was factoring in
the requirement to commute as part of their workloads. Of staff, when asked if the university recognise the
time required to travel in their overall workload, 17 responded no, 3 yes, and 3 were unsure. In terms of
whether the students thought that the university accommodated for travelling time, 23 thought that the
university did not, 5 were unsure and only 2 felt that the university did accommodate this, 10 did not
respond. These results indicate a need for the university to adequately apportion time and costs in
commuting between campuses.

When asked some of the ways in which the university could accommodate travelling time, comments
were made which inferred the need for the university to recognise the unique issues that are involved in
this sort of teaching and learning environment particularly in relation to timetabling and a number of
other issues highlighted in later sections.

Work/study Restrictions Experienced

(a) Staff

The study sought to ascertain what type of work/study activities, if any, are engaged in when travelling.
When staff were asked if they engaged in work related activities while travelling, 13 staff responded no, 4
yes, and 6 sometimes. When those who responded either yes or sometimes were asked what type of
activities they engaged in, the main response was that they conversed with colleagues, while others
suggested it provided “time to think”.

Given the amount of time required to commute between campuses, the question was raised as to whether
or not staff felt it had an effect on their work. In terms of how it impacted on work, all but 6 of the staff
respondents agreed that the need to travel did affect their work. Twenty-one rated it as having a negative
impact on work performance. When asked how to rate this on a score of 1 to 5, with 1 being a significant effect, of those who answered that travel had a negative impact on their work performance, the mean was 2.1. However, of the 2 respondents who said that commuting between campuses was positive, the effects were considered as being reasonably significant.

Of the positive affects noted, these included “networking, raises profile...”; “better use of full time staff”; “networking with staff from other departments/institutions, listen to the news on the radio.” However the negative effects noted far outweighed the positive. Sixteen respondents mentioned “time wasted and its effect on productivity” as being a major problem. Other comments centred around “lack of recognition of travel time by colleagues at St Lucia and St Lucia management”; “risk on the road”; “whole day wasted for half day activities”, “stress, time wasted, not on campus for meetings, administrative lack of facilities at remote campuses” and “servicing different campuses means I am difficult to contact which results in student dissatisfaction and poor teaching evaluations”.

(b) Students

For students, while some of the time engaged in travelling is utilised by discussing assignments and lectures, and revising notes, many spent the time listening to music and the radio. In total only 10 students sometimes engaged in study related activities. Students felt that commuting has an impact on their work performance. Of the 40 respondents, 32 said it affected their work performance. Of these, 31 felt that this was a negative effect. This was seen as having a moderate to a significant effect. Though some students found the effects to be positive in that it provided them with a greater choice of subjects, greater access to resources and the opportunity to meet people, this was by no means the view of the majority of respondents. Commuting was seen as negative, primarily in terms of time. Secondary issues included the costs involved and an increase in levels of stress.

The questionnaire also sought to address how staff felt students were affected by the need to commute as part of their study load. Of the 20 respondents, 15 felt students were affected. All but 1 respondent rated this as having a negative effect rated moderate to significant. Staff commented on costs and time involved but also indicated that students had a feeling of not belonging; and, for a lack of sense of “belonging to one campus, which undermines ‘esprit de corps’ and results in a loss of student identity”. However, it was felt that there were also some positive effects including: more subject choice; and, if the ‘home’ campus has limited facilities/social interaction other campuses open new opportunities. Further research needs to be conducted into the importance of campus identity for students and the necessity for social interaction with peers on a regular basis.

Health and Safety Issues

(a) Staff

The study also sought to investigate whether the staff felt there were any health and safety issues that arose as a result of multcampus involvement. When staff were asked about whether or not the need to commute increased stress levels, 14 responded yes, 6 no and 3 were unsure. The probability of having an accident was mentioned twelve times in the responses of staff but the issue of stress and fatigue was mentioned 20 times highlighting this as a major concern. One respondent seemed to sum up the feelings of most by commenting that multcampus travel resulted in “a lack of time for personal health and fitness”. A decrease in productive time to do research and other activities important to securing promotion and tenure also caused anxiety amongst staff who felt they were disadvantaged when compared to colleagues not involved in multcampus teaching and the same rules were applied to tenure and promotion across the university.

(b) Students

In terms of stress, students were asked whether or not they felt that commuting had an impact on their levels of stress. Thirty-two felt that commuting did increase their stress levels, 5 felt it did not and 3 were unsure. Most felt that this was a moderate to a significant effect. When asked to comment
on positive affects of commuting, there were few. Of comments made, students noted that they had learnt to be more organised and ensured that work was finished earlier. However, when asked what, if any, negative effects they felt commuting had on their performance, responses included “worry more”; “time wasted”, “too tired to study”, “health issues”; “panic attacks, headaches”; “stress not good for performance”, and “hate travelling, unable to cope”. When asked what they felt the university could do to accommodate these concerns, flexibility on the part of the university with respect to timetabling, increased offerings of subjects on multiple campuses and special consideration by academic staff when allocating tutorial group places were listed as important factors.

**Areas requiring immediate improvement**

The final part of the questionnaire addressed those issues that staff and students felt were most important for improving the operation of the multicampus system. Responses varied considerably. Amongst staff, the primary issues related to time lost and acknowledgment of the effects on productivity, inclusion of time for travelling in workloads and recognition of the health and safety issues involved. The following comments illustrate this:

“Significant decrease in opportunities for academic career/promotion/tenure”

“Compensation for time wasted”

“Travel time should be counted as part of workload...”

“The time involved/costs/stress”

“Travel does involve both a waste of time and a danger to like on main roads.”

“Duplication of lectures and consultation times at each campus - takes time- other colleagues not affected by this”.

Amongst students, the primary considerations again related to time, problems caused by timetabling and the prohibitive costs involved in travel with some students mentioning they had to miss classes as they were unable to afford to travel. Comments include:

“Time loss... Money spent on top of money already spent to attend the university.”

“Increased travelling expenses; reduced study time; reduced leisure time -> difficult to find employment around travel...”

“At some periods during the semesters the cost of travelling means I have to miss lectures.”

“The lack of transport, most people don’t have enough money to use this (public) transport and...they can’t get a part-time casual job as they are travelling all the time.”

“Timetable problems should be addressed...”.

**Discussion**

In order to discuss these results we will examine previous research into stress in the workplace and commuting. This will enable a consideration of some of the implications of the survey results. We argue that one of the most serious implications of the need to commute is increased stress. Studies of the reasons for, and outcomes of, stress on worklife has received increasing attention in the literature over the last few years. The primary reason for this is the potentially significant economic impact of stress on organisations through lowered retention rates and productivity, and lowered levels of emotional and physical health (Dua 1994:59). Stress, and its affects in academe has received considerable attention in the literature (see, for example, Baker et al 1995; Brown et al 1986; Dua 1994; Fisher 1994; Gmelch et al 1984;
Gmelch et al 1986; Greenburg 1981; Perlberg et al 1986; Sharpley et al 1996; Thorsen 1996). The university environment provides an interesting case, as it has traditionally been viewed as an occupation with low levels of stress, this being associated with academic freedom, tenure and networks of collegial support which have acted as a ‘buffer’ (Thorsen 1996). However, the conditions traditionally associated with university worklife are rapidly changing.

It has become increasingly clear that given the number of roles academic staff are expected to perform simultaneously (eg. teach, research, travel, advise students, write and publish, present conference papers, administer subjects etc.), the risk of role overload and role conflict leading to an increase in potentially negative levels of stress is high (Fisher 1994:53). In this context, the role of academics can be considered as not only pluralistic, but also increasingly fractioned in terms of task roles undertaken (Gmelch et al 1986).

Hence, the potential sources of stress are multifaceted, with our survey highlighting that commuting can be one of a plethora of potential stress causing activities.

Based on research indicating that occupational stress has negative consequences for productivity, performance, job satisfaction and health, Gmelch et al (1984) conducted a survey of the determinants and results of stress in American universities. Their findings indicate that academic staff reported 60 percent of their stress being derived directly from work activities. Many of the top stressors related to time and/or resource constraints. This is significant given the survey results.

This is supported by a similar study conducted by Perlberg and Keinan (1986), which indicates that the most serious levels of stress were associated with the lack of time to update professionally, self-imposed high expectations, preparing manuscripts and making presentations. In the Australian context, Thornsen’s (1996:471) study on stress in academe indicates that while teaching is the least stressful of all the work functions of academic activity, time constraints and the actual number of hours spent on the job were significant sources of stress.

Increased levels of stress has some potentially serious implications for the university. According to Sharpley et al (1996:84), high levels of job stress is significantly, and directly related to increased levels of absence due to illness, increases in levels of injuries, and accidents, thus affecting both organisational and personal productivity. In addition to this, a study conducted in relation to students showed that high levels of stress increased the risk of illnesses and susceptibility to disease (Greenburg 1981). Given the limitations of this pilot survey, further research needs to be conducted into whether or not this is the case for staff and students who are required to commute.

In light of the survey results, the need to commute for work/study related activities contributes significantly to the time spent in work related activities, and hence influence levels of stress experienced. This is highlighted in a study conducted by Seyfarth and Bost (1986) which examines the extent of teacher turnover and quality of worklife in schools. One of the most significant results of this study was the finding that teachers who had to commute long distances to and from work experienced much higher turnover rates than those who did not.

Analysing the effects of commuting stress on the perceived performance of staff and students requires an understanding that there are a number of elements that contribute to self perceived stress levels. Commuting stress needs to be seen not only under the rubric of general environmental stressors but also as containing a number of elements unique to this research area (Koslowsky et al 1995:108). These may include elements such as the choice or lack of choice in deciding the mode of transport; the costs involved, (particularly on students, many of whom have minimal income); traffic conditions; and distance and frequency of the need to travel. In addition to this, Beehr (1995:102) notes a range of other variables including:

- typical amount of traffic, unpredictability of traffic problems, reliability of public transport, reliability of one’s own personal vehicle, and predictability of weather problems that could interfere with travel.
In addition to this, commuting has potentially significant negative effects on health. In examining the role of commuting as a chronic daily stressor, a study conducted by Schaeffer et al (1988:953) indicates that:

...commuting to work can be a stressful daily occurrence; driving to work was associated with significant increases in systolic and diastolic blood pressure and decreases in behavioural performance among those with a high impedance route.

Their research also indicates that those who travel alone in cars suffer higher levels of stress than those who carpool. The particular mode of transport has also been shown to be a significant factor in levels of stress. For example, a study by Koslowsky et al (1993) indicates that users of private transport have higher levels of self reported stress than those who use public transport. In addition to this, it was found that commuting time was associated with an increase in stress, which can be argued to then affect employee attitudes. Stress associated with commuting was also shown to have different effects on women and men, with women experiencing higher levels (Koslowsky et al 1995:91-93).

According to Navaco et al (1979:376), transport conditions were seen to negatively affect commuters perceptions of stress, and task performance. However, their study also indicated that these perceptions were mediated by personality and psychological factors. In addition to this, Beehr (1995:103) argues that commuting is likely to be a moderating, as opposed to a main, effect. Stress associated with commuting needs to be considered in association with other factors such as personality, and coping methods, and other stressors outside the commuting experience, such as work and family life, state of health, time considerations.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

From previous research related to the operation of multicampus institutions, it can be predicted that knowledge of the factors that are involved can assist university administrators in creating a more desirable working climate facilitative of productivity and greater staff and student satisfaction. Identification of the concerns of key stakeholders who are involved in multicampus operations can be utilised in at least two important ways: first, through institutional and managerial action to provide a better workplace environment by developing policies and systems which incorporate the factors raised by staff and students; and second, through increasing individuals awareness of the situations causing concern and taking action to develop new strategies or coping techniques to reduce effects.

In reviewing the list of issues raised, this study indicates that for both sets of participants, the most often identified issues relate to wasted time, increased stress and cost. Lost time causes anxiety amongst both staff and students who perceive it as non productive i.e. it reduces time for research and for study resulting in a decrease in opportunities relating to tenure and promotion for staff and lower grades for students.

Stress was caused for both populations by a number of factors. The most common being timetabling problems which meant rushing from one campus to another increasing the risk of accidents and causing fatigue. For students, cost of travel was a major and prohibitive issue for attending classes in some cases. Whilst staff were concerned about being adequately compensated in monetary terms for travelling expenses, they were more concerned with the duplication of lectures, and associated duties, to large groups of students and the extra time associated with travelling and ensuring resources were available on each campus. Staff often felt powerless to overcome some of the resource problems experienced at regional campuses.

In this climate of declining institutional resources, multicampus operations offer Universities an avenue to increase enrolments and obtain territorial advantage by its presence in various communities. However university administrators involved in establishing and maintaining multicampus operations should be cognisant of their responsibility to provide an efficient system of operation which limits the need to travel between campuses where possible and provides a supportive working environment for staff and students. This study provides a basis for establishing more efficient systems of operation by highlighting the issues raised by staff and students involved.
Limitations of this Study

This study was only a pilot study and therefore sample size was limited. The study involved only a subset of the multicampus systems which operate within the university which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Further the study did not attempt to elicit from participants sufficient details about individual circumstances such as family life, location of residence which may have driven some of the responses.

Directions for future Research

In Australia there are a number of areas which require expansion through further study. This study could be replicated across a number of different universities across Australia. In this manner the effects of multicampus offerings of courses can be investigated for staff and students from a broader population. Second the study could be extended to tease out issues highlighted in this study relating to the importance of campus identity and social interaction for students in particular; the existence of differences between the cultures of each of the campuses which operate in multicampus systems; and the effect that stress caused by the need to commute has on the risk of illness and susceptibility to disease.

Bibliography


