

Rethinking university work*

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We are all aware that the university sector is leaving the twentieth century with a crisis of identity. This has been precipitated by the many pressures being brought to bear on higher education, most of which are in turn part of broader changes affecting society and the public sector in particular. The modern university is a far cry from the ideal of a community of scholars, governed by academic authority, free from external interference and dedicated to the pursuit, preservation and dissemination of disciplinary knowledge. The decay of such ideals has been in train for many years, certainly well before the appearance of the Dawkins reforms or the application of market-based mechanisms to the sector. The best way to preserve these ideals would be for a university to remain small, disconnected from the outside world and independently wealthy. However, this has not been an option for any Australian institution.

In part the problem has been that industry and government recognise the importance of higher education. They want the sector to be large and connected to the outside world. They have not, however, been prepared to accept that the values and practices that governed an elite system should carry through unchanged to a mass system. For many academics this meant that industry and government did not really understand higher education at all. Nevertheless, the massification of Australian higher education proceeded much as it did in other Western countries. With this expansion also came increasing complexity, for example, the student population is now broader and more diverse and so it is a more challenging task to provide university education.

To some, the advent of a mass system has meant that higher education has opened the gates to classes of people unsuited by inherent ability or inadequate preparation to take on university study. Others have been prepared to tackle differences in learning styles and to keep abreast of growing fields of research and practice that are elevating university teaching to new levels of professionalism and speciality. Such developments have, of course, also been fuelled by technological changes and an increasing focus on learning outcomes in the form of graduate attributes. Either way, the task of university teaching has been transformed.

This is only one example of the effect of external change on academic work. Before outlining the broader picture in a little more detail, it is necessary to comment on suggestions that somehow such change is optional, and that like the fairies in Peter Pan the drivers of external change will fade away if we refuse to believe in them. Proponents of this view believe that the principal task ahead for universities is to mobilise greater lobbying of politicians to persuade them of the value of traditional higher education values and to secure major increases in public funding.

Such suggestions greatly miscalculate external perceptions of the status of higher education. While undoubtedly the academic profession is less remote and less respected than formerly was the case, it is still seen as protected and privileged by many people in

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some of the themes touched on in this paper are the subject of more extensive consideration in a DETYA/EIP study co-authored with Lawrence Stedman, to be published shortly

the wider community. It is still seen, not necessarily correctly, as one of the last bastions of the permanent full-time job, where people have substantial freedom over their work and their working conditions. It is difficult to argue from this position that the sector should have the right of access to large amounts of public money but with relatively little accountability, and to do so at a time when there are many other pressing demands on government budgets. Our position is weakened further when universities substantially over-enrol students, award themselves large salary increases, continually add to their range of activities and yet loudly extol the quality and excellence of everything they do.

Moreover many of the forces behind the changes affecting higher education are not about higher education itself. Globalisation is not a phenomenon that can be reversed by disputing its impact on universities, nor can public sector management and financial reform be rolled back for higher education alone. The thrust of such reform has been to concentrate on linking the allocation of resources as efficiently as possible to the achievement of defined goals and outcomes, and governments, regardless of political persuasion or nationality, do not accept that the public good of higher education can only be defined by academics.

Where does this leave universities? Should they simply fall into line with government demands, reject all past practices and focus on meeting the demands of the multiple external stakeholders? Should they accept that public funding will continue to dwindle and do whatever it takes to earn income, even if it means becoming a vocational degree factory? Obviously not. There are prospects for arguing for better government support, and it should be apparent to anyone acquainted with higher education that there is more to be lost than gained by bending universities entirely to the will of students or industry. What it will take, however, is a repositioning of higher education which can show genuine engagement with the outside world and which does not insist on purely internal measures of quality and good practice. Some evidence of better potential prospects is shown by the willingness of the current government to provide a major increase in public funding for health and medical research following the Wills Review. The key to this was the presentation of a report from the Wills Committee which, unlike previous lobbying by researchers, did not argue for more money for "the system", but for a substantially new and more diverse system. Thus it emphasised the need for a balance between basic research and research which addressed policy needs, demonstrated pathways for engaging the private sector, and pointed to new ways of developing and applying knowledge to achieve public benefit.

It remains to be seen whether a similar approach will work for the wider university sector. There have been many calls for institutional diversity, often from vice-chancellors who want other universities to take on a reduced or more specialised role. Our experience in Australia is that most universities when newly-established make much of their intention to cut a new path in the sector, to challenge and redefine what a university can be. Over time this usually gives way to aspirations more in line with those of the more established players. There are many reasons for this, including the normative nature of the conditions attached to the majority of university funding. In Australia, for example, we have seen the impact of the Research Quantum on university research, which has preferentially rewarded basic scientific inquiry. The Quantum has had an effect disproportionate to its size in encouraging academics staff to publish more papers and supervise more students. Another factor which has led new universities to imitate those already established is the embracing by new academic staff of traditional conceptions of academic work. It is this aspect which will be addressed here.

The impact of change on academic work

In the main, academic work has stretched rather than adapted to meet the challenges posed by transformations of the higher education sector. The preference of many universities and academics is to allow accumulation and accretion rather than to undertake the more difficult and threatening task of making strategic choices and reconceptualising what it means to be an effective and productive academic.

The effect of this accumulation has been revealed by surveys of academic staff, which taken together show a consistent picture. Academics remain intrinsically motivated by their work, but many feel they are under growing pressure and disconnection from their universities. Many academic staff feel burdened by the increasing weight of expectations placed upon them, and increasingly subject to external interference or control.

Craig McInnis has compared cross-sectional surveys of Australian academics taken in 1977 and 1993. He has shown that over that time there has been some redistribution of workload and some increase in overall report of hours worked. Greater numbers of part-time and casual teachers have been employed to manage the increase in student numbers, and academic staff also reported a significant increase in administrative demands, particularly those arising from government or institutional demands for accountability. Such changes are clearly recognisable to those who work in universities, and it can be expected that the trends revealed in McInnis' survey will have reinforced over the past six years as the pressure on operating grants has increased.

Academic work is usually described under the banner of the triumvirate of teaching, research and service, all of which are expected to be part of the repertoire of each academic. Such headings do not, however, do justice to the variety and complexity of tasks that occupy most academics. Nor do they reflect either the staffing policies of most universities or the reality of individual academic work.

For many, the core of academic work is teaching and research. Other tasks, even those of course coordination or managing a department or school, are frequently relegated to the status of distractions. Until recently academic management and leadership tended to be decided on the basis of academic authority and, in some cases, rotating appointment. Such roles were considered a temporary period of service away from the real business of the university. Vice-chancellors were once looked upon primarily as revenue raisers, there to defend the university against the depredations of the outside world. As the tasks of management have grown more complex, such attitudes have proven unsustainable, although impediments remain to the transition to and from academic and management roles.

Full-time academic staff have usually been considered the essential core of the university. So much so that the review of efficiency and effectiveness of higher education, undertaken in 1985 by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, devoted an entire chapter to academic staffing but made no reference at all to non-academic staff and only passing reference to part-time academics.

The Dearing Inquiry into Higher Education in the UK noted that career opportunities for non-academic staff in higher education are widening in areas such as libraries, computer support, technical support and administration. To this list can be added a growing range of "para-academic" roles associated with equity units, staff development, learning

support, and instructional design. The Dearing Committee agreed with several submissions which suggested that “distinctions between staff groups (are) becoming increasingly irrelevant as staff move across functions.”

Universities are now large and complex organisations, many with thousands of staff and annual budgets measured in the hundreds of millions. If they are to prosper as professionally managed organisations, then they must recognise that there is a growing range of specialist tasks, which for too long were either undertaken in an amateur fashion by academics or considered unimportant to the “real” work of the university. Such tasks include human resource management, management of information technology, marketing, strategic planning, and financial and investment planning. These are all areas undertaken, outside the university world, by highly paid and skilled professionals.

Part-time and adjunct academics form another group of university staff frequently overlooked in discussions of policy and institutional strategy. Potentially, the use of such staff can add enormous practical value to university teaching, bringing in people who are practicing professionals to add an additional dimension to the learning experience of students. Yet in practice, many casual and part-time staff complain of being isolated from the university, being unable to participate in decision making, having no access to support facilities or development opportunities and being subject to arbitrary fluctuations in employment. Despite the HECE decision of the Industrial Relations Commission regulating the use of contract employment, part-time, casual and limited-term staff will continue to play an important role in higher education. This role, together with that of general staff (who usually comprise the majority of university employees) cannot be overlooked or isolated if universities are to make best use of the skills of the people who collectively are working to advance the institution.

Within the “core” of teaching and research, academic work has also become more specialised and demanding. The more we know of the nature of student learning, and the more we try to reposition teaching and learning around student learning and the outcomes of university education, the more professionally demanding university teaching becomes. Academics nowadays are asked to teach more diverse student groups, at more flexible times and locations, to master the use of information technology in teaching, to design curricula around learning outcomes and across disciplines, to teach in teams, to evaluate and improve their teaching, to improve assessment and feedback, to monitor and respond to the evaluations made by students and graduates, to meet employer needs, and to understand and use new theories of student learning. At the very least, these demands require a greater call on an individual’s time. Similarly, research demands are increasing, because of the need to improve postgraduate supervision, to publish or patent, to establish links with industry, and to prepare, submit or review grant applications.

In the face of an ever increasing array of expectations and growing complexity of work, it is inevitable that staff will have greater strengths in some areas than others, and that they will devote more attention to some aspects at particular times in their career. McInnis’ survey of Australian academic staff demonstrated this clearly; he noted that the observed patterns of change suggest “the possibility of internal restructuring of academic roles on the basis of performance; the potential for increasing status differentiation on the basis of teaching and research; and the already clear demand for collective effort to improve productivity and efficiency in teaching and research”.

In addition to the specialisation of traditional academic tasks, new categories of academic work are called for as universities are expected to play effective roles in “knowledge systems”. In such systems, knowledge is produced locally, nationally or internationally, inside or outside university settings, and one role for universities might be to act as a broker, intermediary and focus, to bring relevant knowledge to bear on particular problems in partnership with other stakeholders. Of course most universities already undertake such a role to a limited extent, through various activities in technology transfer, community service and continuing professional education. However the difference is that such activities are generally on the margin of university life. In addition, most university education programs are shaped by the interests of the academics employed by the institution. Indeed it is expected in the traditional framework of academic work that university teaching should be influenced by the research interests of individual staff.

To summarise the preceding observations, academic work is more complex and fragmented and resources and status have been shifting from full-time academic staff to the broader university community. This shift from local control and professorial authority to institutional focus is easy to deride as “managerialism”, and certainly the introduction in universities of versions of corporate practice and business lexicon has provided a visible target for academic discontent. However attention to institutional direction has been unavoidable. The point has long since passed when universities could be governed by professorial boards. Universities as institutions are often the locus of attention for external accountability. Calls for greater systemic diversity are usually phrased in terms of institutions developing niches, using corporate strategies instead of allowing academic organisational units to evolve in their own direction. In a more competitive environment, it is also the institution which often is the point of market differentiation and student attention. This corporate focus is reinforced by the impact of technology, which requires attention to cross-institutional systems, standards and cost-effectiveness.

At another level, the student-centred view of higher education is of courses of study rather than academic departments, and corporate and other clients will usually consider research and teaching from a multidisciplinary perspective. Even within departments and schools, academics are increasingly working in teams for both research and teaching.

Most universities now have detailed processes for the development of new courses and subjects, which require academics to provide unprecedented justification in terms of market demand and economic viability. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on the learning outcomes of courses is leading to a more “top down” approach to the development and design of component subjects and units.

All of these developments provide some inevitable tension with ideals of individual autonomy and academic freedom. Certainly no university can expect to operate strategically by demanding greater output and imposing unilateral inspection and control on its staff. On the other hand, it is wishful thinking to expect that some invisible hand will guide the path of individual academics into a strategic direction, or that effective change can only come about by academic introspection and reflection.

Academic freedom remains an important cornerstone of higher education. However, it has always been circumscribed, for example, by professional accreditation of courses and by the requirement to observe the law. As one eminent US scholar put it:

“academic freedom means a great deal, but it should not mean freedom from responsibility to students”. The challenge for universities is to develop mechanisms for negotiating the match between organisational goals and individual work, and allow substantial freedom for academic staff in contributing to those goals.

A particular challenge will be to incorporate some elements of demand-driven education alongside the supply-driven models that characterise higher education at present. Some universities have chosen to separate the former in commercial arms, covering continuing professional education, consultancy work and corporate education. Increasingly education and training are seen as necessary for corporate development. Yet universities are often described as unresponsive to the needs of external clients, preferring at best to offer samples in the form of units or short courses which happen to reflect the areas of interest of some academics within the institution.

Critics do not need to look far to find examples of new ways of harnessing higher education to external needs. In recent years we have seen a rapid rise in corporate, for-profit and virtual universities. Frequently these terms are rolled together, and the missions of the new providers are often poorly understood. QUT is involved in a research project to examine these new education providers, the project being supported by DETYA, and conducted in collaboration with the AVCC and its counterpart in the United Kingdom, the CVCP. Earlier findings were published in 1997 and showed that the higher education market around the world is fragmenting, with new players emerging to “cherry pick” the profitable areas of providing higher education to working adults and corporate clients. The current research is looking in more depth at the new operators, and some of the findings of the first phase of the research project will be presented at a workshop at QUT this week. It is not possible to go into detail on those findings here. However it is worth noting that perhaps the most distinguishing features of the new providers are not so much their use of the Internet as their capacity to respond to external demand and their disregard for the conventions of academic work. Many turn the conventional notion of a university on its head. Instead of the core of the university being full-time academic staff, the core of some of the new institutions is the full-time management and coordination group, while academic and professional expertise is contracted in as required, to design or deliver curricula. Research is usually viewed as an overhead for which they do not need to pay.

Traditional universities need to put the threats of these new players in perspective. The terms “virtual”, “corporate” and “university” are used ambiguously and loosely, and in many cases the new providers are not trespassing on the turf of traditional institutions. At present there is much experimentation and innovation, and new providers are seeking to minimise costs by radically changing the role of academic staff. Much of this activity will be influenced by market conditions. Currently corporate education is riding the economic wave, but it may be somewhat threatened if there is a substantial economic downturn in the western world and companies review their spending priorities. Furthermore, new providers are encountering barriers in the form of accreditation and licensing requirements which often do not accommodate some of the more cavalier approaches to staffing and structure. However some of the new higher education providers will continue to grow and extend their influence, and they exemplify the difficulty traditional universities will have if they wish to expand their own activities in the fields of corporate and adult education.

Reconceptualising academic work

The most well known reconceptualisation of academic work was provided by Ernest Boyer nearly a decade ago. In his book *Scholarship Reconsidered* he proposed four forms of scholarship. The scholarship of discovery encompassed the traditional view of research in uncovering new knowledge, although Boyer emphasised the process of discovery as much as the production of results. The scholarship of teaching was about transforming and extending knowledge through the interaction of the teacher's understanding and student learning. The scholarship of application covered what is usually known as "community service" but also included broader application of knowledge between the academy and the "real world". The scholarship of integration, the linking and synthesis of knowledge across the different disciplines, was viewed by Boyer as equally important but the most neglected of the four. Thus the terrain of academic work was marked by these four overlapping domains, rather than by the more discontinuous notions of teaching, research and service.

Boyer's formulation, however, is of limited value unless it can guide the work of academics in the real world. Academic staff are well aware of the expectations they must fulfil to advance their careers, and equally attuned to matters of status and income. The scholarship of discovery is still widely held to be dominant in these respects. Many institutions explicitly require their staff to be all-rounders, able to tick simultaneously the performance boxes marked "research", "teaching", "academic administration", and "professional leadership". Some universities allow flexibility in this, giving different weights to the various categories or allowing some variation over time. Many are making genuine efforts to develop ways of assessing good teaching, to lift the status of this form of scholarship. However few universities are genuinely tackling the possibility that some academics might specialise as teachers and devote the bulk of their scholarship to professional improvement as a teacher and to staying abreast of the area they teach rather than attempting to make original contributions to knowledge. While there are more research-only academic staff, who have minimal teaching loads restricted to postgraduate level, they are usually located within centres or institutes removed from academic departments, and their engagement depends on ongoing external funding.

The dominant paradigm holds that academics should be both teachers and active researchers, and only in this way can they truly deliver the quality necessary to university education. However this characterisation is, at best, only partially valid. Research has shown that many university academics, even in the older so-called research universities, produce little or no research output and supervise no research students over extended periods of time. Furthermore, an extensive body of research has attempted to find statistical correlations between measures of teaching and research. Meta-analyses have shown that there is little empirical evidence to support a close coupling of teaching and research. Some critics have pointed out that both teaching and research are multidimensional and one should not expect the relationship between the two to be straightforward, and so statistical correlations may mean little. Perhaps this is true. Nevertheless, the evidence suggesting that active researchers do not appear to be better teachers on any measure of good teaching seems significant, as does other evidence which suggests that many good university teachers are not active researchers.

Interestingly, the government has made no reference at all to the relationship between university teaching and research in its policy pronouncements on research funding. The Discussion Paper issued by the Commonwealth this month proposes policies which would separate further the funding for teaching and research, and argues that institutions

should develop policies of selectivity and concentration to make best use of public funding for research. Some institutions are already pursuing such policies, yet the wider implications for academic work have not been given close attention. It will be increasingly difficult for operating funds to support active research profiles for all academic staff, particularly as funding per student falls, the cost of technology increases and there is no supplementation available for salary increases. For pragmatic reasons alone it will be necessary for universities to confront this issue, otherwise genuine career advancement will only be available to a more select group of staff.

If universities are to become more selective at the institutional level, then they must find ways to reflect and support greater diversity of university work in their policies and practices. This imperative is reinforced by the pressures being felt by academics as their work becomes more complex and specialised and as fewer resources are available to support a range of activities. This will require not only management action, but also a renegotiation of the balance between institutional objectives and individual academic freedom, and a reconceptualisation of what comprises academic work.

There are several strands which need to be drawn together to achieve this:

- processes and systems which provide the frameworks for linking individual work to organisational strategic goals. The principal such systems are for comprehensive performance management, the outlines of which have been set out in the Hoare Report and elsewhere, and workforce planning. The latter involves a systematic forward-looking assessment of organisational direction and workload, then a forecast of staffing requirements to ensure that those workloads are met, and finally a linking of staffing policy from recruitment to retirement which is designed to achieve the desired workforce profile;
- staff management systems which recognise and coordinate the contribution to university objectives of the work undertaken by all groups of staff, not only full-time academics. Thus part-timers and general staff need to be involved in strategic developments and supported by the university;
- greater flexibility in criteria used to assess the performance and prospective work of academic staff. These criteria are now applied at the time of appointment and promotion, but should be part of a more seamless system of performance management which defines expectations for staff and provides feedback and development opportunities. As already mentioned, at present many universities require academics to be all-rounders, specialising in teaching, original research, professional activity and community service, or similar classifications. Some allow various degrees of flexibility, for example, by allocating percentage weighting to various components and allowing these to change over time. These aside, and notwithstanding the existence of small numbers of teaching-only and research-only academic staff, uniform expectations of performance are the norm. If universities are to reflect strategic missions in the work expectations of staff, then in future it should be possible for academic staff to advance by specialising in one or more areas of endeavour, or in new roles embodying broader notions of scholarship and interaction with the external world;
- in tandem with the flexibility outlined above, systems for determining workload need to be flexible and adapted to local conditions. New procedures for determining workload other than face-to-face teaching contact need to be put in place, and

staffing policies such as performance assessment and workload allocation will increasingly need to encompass team activities in teaching and research;

- institutions which claim to be “applied” in orientation will need to ensure significant ongoing contact between academic staff and relevant external organisations, and should have well developed adjunct appointment systems. The “streaming” of academic criteria mentioned above would be intended to achieve such flexibility and would also allow other groups of academic staff, in particular women, who may experience a hiatus in their careers, to return and focus their energies productively;
- improved capacity for collaboration among universities and between universities and external organisations. Such activities are well developed within specific contexts at present. For example, academic researchers frequently work with national and international academic collaborators within their area of study. Collaborative work needs to be widened, drawing in participants other than academic peers where appropriate, brought more into the mainstream of university activity, and made responsive to collective as well as individual goals; and
- capacity to recognise and reward performance in a more flexible and diverse environment. This might involve, for example, linking remuneration less tightly to academic rank and moderating it overtly in the light of market factors and personal performance. Already enterprise bargaining is leading to differential rates of pay among universities, and institutions which try to chase the highest rates and spread increases uniformly across all staff may find themselves in a precarious financial position.

Boyer’s reconceptualisation is a useful starting-point for characterising the broader perspectives that will be needed for academic work in the coming century. However it remains largely internal in its articulation. In research the notion of national innovation systems, linked to global traffic in knowledge, is becoming more important. In this framework, universities occupy a special place in relation to the development and dissemination of knowledge, but there is an emphasis on the linkages they form with each other and with external organisations and communities. Such notions carry through to broader conceptions of knowledge development and transfer, not just involving economic development but also knowledge that is necessary for social development and dealing with questions of health, environment and other areas of public interest. From such a viewpoint, academic work should be reconceptualised by its relationships with such knowledge systems, allowing and supporting the traditional notions of freedom to pursue development of knowledge within disciplinary frameworks, but also giving prominence to the formation of partnerships among academics and between academics and the outside world.