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Tensions and tendencies in the management of quality and autonomy in Australian higher education

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Individual academic staff members work within an institutional environment which reflects and responds to external demands and values in a specific way. The underlying assumption is that if the work environment of academic staff is enhanced and the ethos of the institution is pro-education, students will benefit. Enhancing quality is tension free if it is left to individual members of academic staff. Where the ethos of an institution expects, supports and rewards staff who continually strive to improve their teaching, courses and assessment practices we can be sure that the quality of students' learning environment is enhanced. However, with increasing emphasis on the whole question of public accountability by government and committees of enquiry, the assessment of quality is no longer left to the individual staff member. The compatibility of quality assurance with academic autonomy is a key question facing higher education systems everywhere.

Background

Assessment is one of the key processes in higher education. Much has been written about it, there is a lot of ignorance concerning appropriate assessment and criteria for assessment, yet it determines many of the educational processes. In terms of assessment of student learning and student quality, all academic staff assess, whether they are aware of the intricacies of assessment or not. Students sometimes complain, there is some education about assessment, but generally things go on as they always have and the system functions.

Assessment of quality of academic staff performance, indeed of departmental and institutional performance, and not least of management performance is newer. Over the past fifteen years the whole question of public accountability was given prominence by government and committees of enquiry. For over a decade reviews of faculties, departments, disciplines and programs pointed to shortcomings in the organisation and delivery of teaching and in institutional and departmental management.

Government intervened when in 1988 it abolished the binary line between the university sector and the advanced education sector and set in motion a series of amalgamations between colleges and institutes of technology, colleges and universities, and colleges and colleges to form new institutions. Amalgamation led to a dramatic decrease in the number of higher education institutions, with a corresponding increase in institutional size. All of these joined the 'Unified National System' - a higher education system publicly funded and working within a particular framework. This framework includes annual negotiated institutional profiles as to student enrolment, and adherence to a range of efficiency and equity initiatives. For the annual profile visits institutions have to prepare a research management plan which demonstrates that the institution is concentrating research expenditure to build up areas of excellence; a capital management plan; a financial plan; an equity plan which provides evidence of the institution's concern for access and progress of 'equity groups'; and a plan for promoting the admission and progress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The federal government steers higher education through a variety of funding mechanisms. First, growth in publicly funded places has to be negotiated. Second, through various funding schemes, institutions are invited to bid for money to improve their management, their communication, use of technology in teaching, academic staff development, and to develop innovative teaching projects. Third, from 1995 the research quantum, the government funding for research allocated to institutions as part of the operating grant, is based on performance indicators, both input and output ones.

Australian approach to quality assurance

While performance-based funding is becoming more common generally, so is quality assurance. The Australian development is firmly placed within the international movement towards quality assurance and assessment in higher education. But it is unique in that it provides rewards to those institutions which can demonstrate both excellent quality assurance processes and outcomes.

In 1993 the first round of Quality Reviews took place, conducted by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) and assisted by reviewers nominated from within the higher education system and selected from industry. Institutions were asked to submit a portfolio of 20 pages plus appendixes where they established their claim for excellence. All institutions were visited for one day; in the course of the day 60-70 people were interviewed; the visiting panel wrote a report, and in March 1994 the results were announced. Institutions were put into six groups; institutions in Group 1 were assessed as having excellent outcomes in research, teaching and learning and community services; and well developed planning processes which support the quality assurance processes; and evidence of international as well as national referencing. They received 3% of their operating grant as reward money which, in the case of a large university, might be $5-6 million.

Institutions in Group 5 received 1% of their operating grant for having sound outcomes in focused areas but less well developed processes; or improving outcomes supported by generally sound processes. Institutions in Group 6 (n=8) received consolation prizes.

The first round of the Committee's quality review was heavily criticised: the process for its lack of transparency and criteria for recognising excellence, and the outcome for its close correlation to income through external grants and also to institutional size.

In 1994 the focus was on teaching and learning. The Committee looked at:

- overall planning and management of the undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and learning program;

- curriculum design;

- delivery and assessment;

- evaluation, monitoring and review;

- learning outcomes;

* use of effective innovative teaching and learning methods;

* postgraduate supervision;

* student support services and other teaching support services such as library and computer services ; and

* staff recruitment, promotion and development.

The Committee analysed the institutional submissions by seeking answers to the following questions:

* What quality assurance policies and practices does the institution have in place or is developing for assuring the quality of its teaching and learning performance?

* How effective and how fully deployed are these?

* What processes does the institution have to evaluate and monitor the quality of its outcome?

* Which quality related indicators does the institution use and why?

* What are the institution's priorities for improvement?

* What quality initiatives has the institution undertaken since the 1993 review and what evidence of improved performance is there?

The Committee reported in February 1995, and this time placed institutions in 3 groups rather than the six bands used the pervious year. The Committee said that 'The three groupings that emerged represent levels of increasing improvement above what, in world terms, is already a very satisfactory level of performance in teaching and learning'. As with the first round, institutions were assessed in terms of both process and outcomes, though this time individual institution reward funding was based on equivalent full-time student units rather than operating grant. This meant that some of the larger institutions in group one received around $5 million, while only one institution in the group three category was barely able to top the $1 million mark.

In 1995, the Committee is looking at research and community service. Its review includes:

* research management process: the relationship of the research management plan to the university's strategic plan and the budget process; research management organisation; research training; the management and development of research infrastructure; commercialisation of research; ethics; and management of staff development, equity, and intellectual property.

* research outcomes: success in competitive grant schemes; funding of research by business and industry; research training; higher degree by research completions data; commercialisation of research processes and products; other cooperative activities with industry; patents, publications and citations; exhibitions and performances; external evaluation of contributions in research through, for example, international linkages, prestigious awards to staff and leadership in professional societies.

* research improvement: evidence of trend data in research process, practice and outcomes.

* community service - management, process and outcomes relating to the interactions between the university and its various communities - local, regional, national to international.

All Australian universities would claim that they have always been concerned about maintaining standards and improving the quality of teaching and courses, and indeed the government concedes that Australian universities adhere to high international standards. The emphasis in the quality assurance exercise in Australia is on what the *institution* does or has. But many of the areas examined depend on what *individuals* do. This leads to tensions. The government, and by voluntary adoption the institutional administrators, have one agenda, academic staff another. The remainder of this paper is devoted to an exploration of tensions and tendencies in the management of quality enhancement.

Autonomy

Institutional autonomy is variously defined in different countries. In Australia, institutions have complete autonomy in the staffing areas, unlike universities in many European countries.

The government espouses autonomy and diversity for the system. But, the government seriously impinges on institutional autonomy by:

* setting school-leaver intake targets at the expense of other categories of students to whom the institution might even have an obligation through articulation arrangements;

* setting targets for the postgraduate and overall student load, thus inhibiting institutions to develop freely according to their strategic plans;

* requiring institutions to have mission statements in line with the goals for the national system of higher education;

* requiring institutions to have research management plans with detailed strategies and targets, and evidence of concentration of research strengths;

* requiring institutions to have equity management plans; and

* requiring data of institutions in areas not funded by the government, i.e. on full-fee paying students.

The government purports to foster diversity, but fosters uniformity by:

* promoting 'best practice' in institutional management and the management of teaching and learning;

* evaluating universities' mission according to their scope and tying Quality money to it;

* publishing performance indicators and 'efficiency' tables without regard to disciplinary mix and level of studies; and

* using the rank ordering of the CQAHE as a performance indicator.

Assessment of institutions works like assessment of students - it drives the activities, whether this is ultimately productive or not.

Collegial vs managerial approach

In line with government expectations, prescriptions, incentives and rewards, administrators expect, prescribe, and reward. They respond to government by refining mission statements, instituting strategic planning processes and regular review processes, developing quality management plans with accountabilities, targets and performance indicators, performance based funding and performance reviews of individual academic staff. They believe that this will lead to:

* academic staff becoming excellent teachers who continually monitor and improve their teaching and programs, involving students and external stakeholders in revisions;

* academic staff becoming keen researchers who continually and successfully apply for research grants and publish the results of the research in internationally refereed journals; and

* academic staff fulfilling all those roles and representing all those values which the mission statement embodies.

There is no evidence that this has happened. Instead this process has led to alienation of many academic staff from their institution. There are two main reasons. The first is the lack of shared discourse. The second is the managerial approach to change.

Most academic staff still do not relate to concepts like performance indicators, quality assurance, total quality management, international standards, stakeholder, customer or client, input and output. The quality movement has built a superstructure of concepts and jargon which is derived from business and industry and dismissed by academic staff as such. University administrators and managers have neglected to translate these concepts into concepts which can be integrated into academics' value system. As there is no shared discourse, the very legitimate attempts to make academic staff more accountable towards their students, towards each other, the institution and the public are discredited.

The second reason for academic staff's alienation is the managerial approach to change. In response to government, institutions have adopted a management style borrowed from industry and have largely replaced the collegial model of decision making with a managerial one. A loose accountability arrangement has been replaced by clear line-management responsibilities of deans and heads of programs, staffing, and the largely devolved budget. All universities still operate within the academic sphere in largely a collegial way, but in resource allocation and many other areas of decision making collegial input, if sought at all, is advice only. Change was necessary, but the way changes are often introduced in the university, particularly in the rush to meet the perceived demands of the quality assessment, has alienated academic staff and made many quality assurance processes window dressing.

In the older Australian universities the ideal of a collegial culture is still strong. The collegial culture in higher education according to Bergquist (1992) is centred around the disciplines represented by academics. In this culture research and scholarship are most valued. There is agreement that the institution's purpose is the generation, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge and the development of specific values and qualities of character among young men and women who are future leaders of our society - an elite notion indeed. In this collegial culture peer review of research and publication is accepted but otherwise there is reluctance to formalise reviewing. The collegial culture is most purely found in the traditional German and British universities, in the research universities of the US and in the traditional Australian universities.

The managerial culture, in contrast, was already fostered in the former college system and is now prevalent throughout the higher education system. In the managerial culture work is directed toward specified goals and purposes and is organised, implemented and evaluated accordingly.

We see this very strongly in the Australian quality assurance movement which holds institutions to their mission statement and assesses how well the institution's work is organised, implemented and evaluated to ensure those goals.

In the managerial culture fiscal responsibility and effective supervisory skills are valued and it is assumed that goals and objectives can be clearly defined and measured. The institution's mission is understood to be the inculcation of specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes in students so that they might become successful and responsible citizens. Great store is set in instructional technologies which can assist students in achieving the desired learning outcomes.

Again, the thrust of the Australian quality initiatives are on clear goals, processes and measurable outcomes. Indeed, the recent compilation by the federal Department of Employment, Education and Training of a set of 'performance indicators' meant to demonstrate the diversity and performance of Australian universities, underlines this managerial view.

Complementing an analysis of institutional culture is one on individual orientation. Discipline oriented academics are often referred to as 'cosmopolitans', a phrase coined by Gouldner in the 1950s. This means that the orientation of academic staff, their loyalty, the group from whom they seek confirmation and feedback, the group who bestows esteem and status is international, cosmopolitan. Historians, physicists, medical researchers and so on have links to people working in their field all over the world, or at least with those with whom they can communicate. One can talk about an international community of scholars. Cosmopolitans were primarily found in the older, collegial universities with a strong disciplinary organisation and research culture.

Apart from 'cosmopolitans' there are 'locals'. Gouldner saw academics with a local orientation as those who identify with their institution and seek to serve the institution, the professions, the local community and/or the regions. The colleges in Australia were typically organisations which valued this service.

Administration and management is easier in a university where staff accept the specific mission of the organisation and the administrative structures which surround it. In a university which sees itself as traditional and collegial, most of the administrative work will only be valued if it is seen to be directly supporting individuals' or a department's academic work - and much of what is called 'quality assurance mechanisms' is not seen to do this. All other demands, including all demands for accountability, for following procedures, for being explicit, organised, etc are seen as bureaucratic and the whole discourse used by the administrators is alien and alienating. This means that in effect many decisions that are made by senior management about enhancing quality or affecting any other area will be ignored at the shop floor, as they were made without regard how they might be implemented and whether they fit institutional ethos and practices.

Within each institution type there is an institutional climate, a culture which veers more towards the managerial or the collegial model. But individuals also have values, and in each institutional type we will find people with values which are congruent with the managerial, and others which are compatible with the collegial culture and model.

Normally the academic staff do not have the overview or the interest to analyse the complexities within the institution, to examine the external demands and solve the problem of how to reconcile the various internal and external values. Clearly there are implications of this for the way institutions are managed. Demands made on academics are resisted if they are seen to threaten their core values.

Academic staff motivation

What are these core values? What motivates academics (the following is from Moses 1986)? Maslow's hierarchy of needs is commonly applied in work situations. His theory states that people need to satisfy a hierarchy of needs, and that lower-order needs must be at least partially satisfied before higher-level needs emerge and determine motivation. For academics generally, tenured and well paid employment provides satisfaction of the lower order needs; their prestigious and autonomous work enables them to a much larger extent than is possible for the general population, to fulfil both higher order needs, i.e. esteem needs and needs for self-actualisation. Recently, of course, the closing down of institutions and departments, attacks on tenure, and deteriorating economic conditions have meant that, though economic disaster has not yet struck, there is a fear of job loss for many untenured academics, and fulfilment of the lower order need for security is threatened.

Another model of motivation is provided by Herzberg's 'two factor' theory. The first group of factors are called 'dissatisfiers' or 'hygiene' factors, i.e. some conditions of work operate to dissatisfy people when they are not present or are inadequately managed; however, their presence does not build strong motivation. The second group of factors are those which when present in the job situation build a strong level of motivation and spurt the individual to superior performance. These are called 'motivators' or 'satisfiers'. Herzberg listed seven motivators, all of which are related to the nature of the work itself and to the rewards that flow from superior performance.

Within the academic profession and within the academic work context all seven motivators are potentially present: A sense of achievement (1) can be obtained through teaching well, seeing students become proficient and excel, through research and publication and involvement in policy and decision-making processes. Recognition (2) is often provided by being asked to peer review, to collaborate, to address conferences and meetings. The work itself (3) - teaching, research and service/administration - is demanding intellectually and can present continuing challenges. Indeed, as Finkelstein (1984) points out, academics' careers provide them with the opportunity to fulfil two innermost needs, the "need for autonomy and the use of intellect as a mode of mastering experience" (p.80). Autonomy is such that each academic is largely responsible (4) for the courses he/she teaches and for the research carried out. In addition, the timetabling of all the different activities is influenced by his/her preferences. Ad-

vancement (5) is possible by successful applications to positions at other universities and within the same institution through promotion. There is provision of growth opportunities (6) through special studies programs or sabbatical leave, through organised staff development activities and through the flexibility due to a relatively small amount of scheduled activities. Status (7) is conferred by virtue of being a member of the university staff, at whatever rank, and through awards conferred by learned societies in recognition of one's scholarship.

The two theories are quite complementary. Academics find their work intrinsically satisfying, they value the complexity of the work, their autonomy, the relationship with and responsibility for other persons. Extrinsic incentives such as salary raises increase competitiveness, and heavy emphasis on evaluation would result in performance which meets external requirements but does not go beyond them, with a resultant loss in efficiency. Some extrinsic rewards are needed to sustain staff motivation. But generally, studies have shown that academics' work satisfaction seems to be highly related to their perception of how much control they have over their work environment.

A crisis of confidence

The recent Carnegie Foundation Report on the Academic Profession (Boyer, Altbach and Whitelaw 1994) provides a snapshot of academic staff perceptions and experiences. Some of the data illustrate that there is a crisis of confidence in Australia - staff at the coalface do not believe that the government should define the goals for the higher education system yet they have been defined, and institutions are being evaluated in how their mission meets the national goals. After Korea, Australian academic staff most often agreed with the statement that there was too much government interference in important academic policies.

Academics believe that the university administration is in collusion with the government. Many academic staff see the administration as autocratic; more than half of them believe that communication between academics and the administration is poor; more than two thirds would regard the relationships between academic staff and administration as fair or poor.

Of interest is that in the academic sphere there is still much autonomy. Over 80 % of Australian respondents agreed that they could focus their research on any topic of special interest to them; and two thirds agreed that at their institution, they were fully free to determine the content of the courses they teach.

Both results are heartening. For the past few years research management plans have concentrated resources into areas of institutional strength. But individual researchers or research teams still have opportunities to apply for competitive research grants in areas of their individual expertise. In terms of course content one may have well expected that fewer academic staff would have felt that they had full freedom to determine course contents. Professional associations, for example, which accredit university awards exert a very strong influence on the curriculum indeed.

Even though academic staff feel alienated from their institution's administration, they do not feel disenfranchised in their academic work.

Introducing change

Many of the demands made on academic staff are about change. Academics are neither against change nor against enhancing quality. If we want to do more than establish a bureaucratic superstructure, we need to embed change in institutional culture and fabric.

From different theories of change one can abstract the following *desiderata* which enable us to introduce change into a university by addressing the complex and multifaceted reality:

1. The change to be introduced needs to be compatible with institutional traditions and personal values. It should be superior to ideas and practices it supersedes, its adoption should be rewarding and advantageous; its chances of adoption are increased if its complexity is low, if it can be divided into stages, and the effects are observable (Moses 1988, p 126).

For example, consider student evaluation of teaching. Unless there is already a culture of review and evaluation academic staff will reject it. But if a system is devised which gives academics feedback, which they can use for promotion, and which is easy to use, they are more likely to accept it.

2. Someone has to take initiative and responsibility for introducing the change. The innovator needs the support of the power elite and the trust of the members of the organisation where change is to be introduced; if change in personal values and attitudes is the target for change, the change agent has to serve as role model (*ibid.*).

Regardless what the quality assurance strategy is and in what terminology it is couched someone has to champion it and seek support for it. Personal credibility of the champion is most important.

3. Members of the system where the change is to be introduced need to be informed of the intended change and its effect on their life and work. They need to have influence on the development and some control over its use. They need to become aware of the innovation's advantage to them (*ibid.*).

Academic staff often feel powerless in the face of seemingly never-ending requests from the administration. Any initiatives to enhance quality need to be worked out collaboratively with the staff who are to implement them.

4. The organisation where change is to be introduced should be supportive and lend its authority or power to the change and provide adequate power, financial, human and technical resources (*ibid.*).

In Australia, and according to *The Times Higher Education Supplement* certainly also in the UK, the quality reviews have cost very large sums of money. There is no indication that they are cost-effective. Usually initiatives have to be implemented without extra funding. However, this breeds resentment and due to the additional work decreases the quality of academic activities.

5. If the external environment is exerting pressure on the organisation or parts of it, those pressures need to be considered (*ibid.*).

There is no doubt that the pressure through the impending quality review led to wholesale redevelopment and introduction of procedures in many institutions. But I still strongly believe that many of these features will disappear once the reviews have finished, unless the external agenda has become an internal one, supported by academic staff and administrators alike. Institutions need to highjack external agendas and make them internal ones - change efficiency agendas to educational ones.

Conclusion

The individual university teacher in his or her involvement with students has the most direct impact on the quality of student learning and educational experience. Academics work best in a stimulating, challenging but supportive environment, where they have a fair amount of autonomy and creative space. It goes without saying that the more basic needs mentioned earlier, like some sort of security and decent remuneration have to be met first.

Academics experience an impingement on their autonomy and creative space through performance reviews, student evaluations, accreditation, pressure for open consultation, pressure for inclusion of stakeholder views, pressure to obtain research grants, pressure to publish, pressure to plan, predict, perform according to negotiated standards - all of this with reduced funding.

These pressures, if not resolved, lead to:

- reactive curricula which prepare students for immediate employment but not for taking up leadership positions in society or showing the flexibility they need in a fast changing environment;

- a 'public servant mentality' where academic staff are not prepared to give their best but only what they are required to do;

- more and more research projects being undertaken because funding is available, not because the problem was worth solving or the researcher was driven by curiosity; and

- more and more publications, which no-one reads but the journal editor, thus adding to the information overload and wasting scarce resources.

Administrators/managers are pressured or perceive that they are pressured to follow government directives and hence pass on all requirements. For the Quality Audit and Assessment processes, quite a number of universities have tried to impose uniform regulations on all departments; quite a number have established quality committees (despite a committee structure which was meant to ensure quality education), and positions of Quality Manager or Pro Vice-Chancellor.

Much of this is unnecessary. Administrators/managers have choices they have not used enough:

- They can negotiate with academic staff a framework for quality enhancement and let faculties and departments work within that framework - a top-down and bottom-up approach.

- They can mediate between government demands and demands made by the nature of academic work and education itself to ensure that all quality enhancement strategies are internalised as part of academic work.

- They can translate the alienating jargon into an educational discourse so that academic staff will participate in discussion.

- They can use to the fullest the autonomy institutions have.

The tendency to slavishly and literally follow what government, sometimes quite tentatively, requests needs to be replaced by procedures which evolve from *within* the higher education system.

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