

**Voicing the tensions of implementing research strategies: Implications for
organisational leaders**

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Abstract

When higher education institutions seek to align their research goals with nationally driven imperatives, various members of the institutional community need to work in concert to achieve them. The identification of effective strategies and the development of a contextually appropriate research culture are fundamental elements to progressing institutional objectives and achieving planned performance outcomes. Since all parties frequently have differing motivations, there are obvious challenges for organisational leadership. This paper examines some of the issues facing academic leaders in the changing research environment within New Zealand and links them to a research study of efforts made in two differing tertiary institutions to enhance research productivity. Data indicates that there is great complexity in integrating organisational purpose with academic staff aspirations and endeavours. Of necessity, strategy and initiatives need to be contextually situated and leadership becomes a crucial mechanism for dovetailing the institutional agenda with individual enterprise.

Keywords: higher education research; research leadership; research culture.

Introduction

As shifts in governmental expectations and funding have introduced the need for greater control of performance and accountability within institutions (Mora, 2011), so the context in which academic staff function has become modified to accommodate increased management and bureaucracy (Debowksi, 2007; Salter & Tapper, 2002). The result is a change to the academic workplace, with potentially increased relational complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity (Harley, 2002). This paper draws on data from a New Zealand study which examined staff experiences of the research environments within two differing institutions. The reported research identifies the themes that emerged from a representative survey of staff perceptions and subsequent individual interviews, as against resting on a specific theoretical perspective. The tensions between institutional

and individual expectations reveal some implications for research leadership and management. We describe the New Zealand tertiary research context, in particular the way in which higher education institutions have had to plan strategically in order to meet government funding imperatives. These plans have resulted in a changed academic workplace that academic staff have not always experienced positively. Reference to the research project that investigated staff reactions to such change (Billot & Smith, 2008) provides the rationale for this paper. When the data collected from academic staff was re-analysed and grouped into themes, we identified a lack of alignment between the institutional implementation strategy and the engagement of staff. This divide has implications for achieving institutional objectives and we offer recommendations for research leaders based on the concerns voiced by academic staff.

Context and background

International research into the influence of tertiary sector policy and operations on institutional and individual performance has grown in recent years. Some examples include Deem and Lucas (2007) and Gordon (2003) in the UK, and Churchman (2006) and Duke (2003) who have commented on Australian contexts. The research context of New Zealand has its own distinctive characteristics that affect the way in which higher education is structured. Policy changes to the funding of universities and polytechnics through the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) has altered the academic research terrain, with a significant component of institutional funding being calculated through individual staff productivity. The PBRF has shifted institutional research funding from a degree enrolment input basis to a research performance output basis calculated on a six year assessment cycle. Middleton (2005) and Mapp (2009) have made comment on this process and examined resulting institutional strategies for increasing research productivity. They raise concerns on how the PBRF funding regime prescribes the way academic research is now assessed and valued and the implications for staff workload. While Marginson (2000) more generally asserted that there is a danger of research being policy-led, it seems as though in New Zealand the reality has occurred despite that warning. The emphasis on staff productivity has sharpened the focus of institutions on to those activities which contribute most to those aspects of research performance that

generate funding. From the perspective of the academic staff member, this has meant a subtle but fundamental shift from the notion of doing research to one of producing publications. Research, it seems, has become less about what you do than about what you produce.

Although the New Zealand tertiary sector has its own particular characteristics, it is facing similar pressures to those internationally (Wolmuther, 2008), with leaders at all levels strategising to address “contemporary performance pressures” (Mintrom, 2008, p. 231). Wolmuther refers to this need as an “increased compliance, an expectation of relevance from the funding agencies and the community, declining and uncertain public funding and internal pressures to be more effective in student life” (p. 336). In turn, academic staff are balancing the increased demands for research with those for teaching and service. Middleton (2005) has observed that New Zealand academics have been pressured to adjust to changing functions, particularly, as Winter (2009) maintains, work practices have been reshaped “around an idealised image of corporate efficiency (and) a strong managerial culture” (p. 121). This re-modelling of academic work has challenged individuals to reassess their priorities and responsibilities, which may now be at variance with their role values and beliefs. When staff remain confused about the rationale for change and the manner in which institutional change is implemented, and when discord occurs between management and staff, there may be reduced collegiality and participation (Billot & Codling, 2011). “Lamenting absence from the decision-making table” (Parmley, 2009, p. 73) is a common concern for academics and one that increases their sense of insecurity. These issues highlight the significance for aligning institutional and individual practices, as indicated by the research findings discussed below.

The institutional cases

Since perceptions are clearly related to context (Clegg, 2008), research that was undertaken in a large polytechnic and a newer university in New Zealand provides the underpinnings for our claims in this paper. The research study was initiated after academic staff in these institutions had experienced changes related to the PBRF (see Billot & Smith, 2008). In order to address the revised policy and greater research

productivity demands of the PBRF when it was introduced in 2003, the polytechnic had undergone revisioning and restructuring, while simultaneously aiming for university status. During the same period, the newer university adjusted its institutional objectives to procure an identity more fitting of an institution with a university title. Academic staff faced changed environments and expectations in both places.

The project was designed as a case study of academic staff across three disciplines common to both institutions, namely Design, Education and Nursing. These disciplines were selected as they had not performed as well as others in the first PBRF assessment round and the researchers were interested as to why this might have occurred and any possible impact on staff motivation and morale. The primary aim was to examine how staff had reacted to the introduction of the PBRF, its impact on their identity and their perceptions of institutional research demands and support.

The project methodology involved an analysis of strategic documents, an online survey of 106 academic staff (a response rate of 44%), an interview with each Head of Research to contextualise the strategic initiatives and subsequently, thirty academic staff interviews. Questions in the survey and interviews focused on staff perceptions of expectations placed upon them, how they might have modified their work practices to meet these increased responsibilities and the level of support that they had received.

Initial findings were illuminating, particularly with regard to the shift in professional roles and responsibilities. While participants provided varied perspectives on their experiences, it became apparent that there was a disjuncture between the pressure that they perceived was placed upon them and the resourcing and support that they perceived was available to them (for fuller project responses, see Billot, 2010). In addition there was concern expressed about the impact of institutional expectations on the participants' "sense of professional self" (Billot, 2010, p. 715). Since the initial completion of this project, the data has been re-analysed to identify the degree to which individual and institutional expectations aligned. This second phase of analysis has produced the findings that inform this paper.

Study findings

The findings of the study provided a comprehensive outline of staff involvement in research activity and assessment for the PBRF, the effectiveness of internal communication within their institution, and levels of transparency displayed within management processes. In both institutions, similar strategies for increasing institutional research performance were espoused. Central to these strategies was significant structural and management change, involving newly created roles and responsibilities, processes to monitor staff research activities and in-house activities that highlighted research as part of both performance and collaboration. Implementation of these practices was largely devolved to schools, so the degree of engagement and effectiveness varied.

In both institutions, during the initial (shorter) assessment period (2003-2006) when institutional leaders and staff were grappling with the PBRF requirements, each party had different priorities. While each institution aimed to meet its own performance indicators, staff were more concerned with the actual research and its resourcing. While some positive comments about the research environment were received, the majority (70%) of the survey participants believed that institutional support was far from sufficient in relation to the institutional expectations of the individual. They also claimed that continual restructuring tends to undermine or negate this provision.

Critically, the survey data suggest that there is a discernable divide between the institution's goals and resulting strategy, and the engagement of the academic staff through which strategy implementation is required. This divide is demonstrated by five areas of staff concern that emerged from the interview and survey data. It was apparent that these concerns affected staff engagement in the change process.

1. Clarity of roles in a restructured environment.

In order to enhance their research productivity to meet funding demands, institutions may implement varied forms of structural and management change which can be confusing to staff. In the two institutions, such changes included internal

restructuring, devolving accountability to faculties and schools and consequent alterations and additions to the roles and responsibilities of staff. Participants appeared unsure of their roles in the revised institutional framework, and their discomfort of unexplained role changes and expectations led to differing levels of resentment, resistance and discord, and, in some cases, rebellion.

2. *Clear expectations and communications from management to staff.*

For organisational change to be effective it needs to be supported by stalwart processes and procedures. Since devolution of responsibility requires an effective distribution of leadership, communication through the levels of accountability is paramount. Those surveyed indicated varying degrees of discomfort and uncertainty about the effectiveness of this communication, and the lack of transparency. For example, concern was expressed about the disparity between job descriptions that seemed to emphasise teaching, and a management expectation that emphasised research. To some, there appeared to be a communication divide between the staff and the institutional executive. For others, it seemed as though there was disgruntled acceptance, that, as individuals, they had little power to ameliorate the problems they identified as facing them.

3. *Management understanding of staff needs.*

The study findings indicate that if staff relations are not well managed then there is likely to be less staff engagement, with participants showing a frequent concern about the lack of understanding of their needs shown through the management levels. This was often perceived and referred to as a physical and psychological distance between management levels and other staff.

4. *Adequate support for staff to increase their research performance.*

Participants made it clear that, for research to flourish, time and resources are essential. Where staff felt unsupported, they tended to ascribe blame and criticism to their department or manager. Participants stated that in the institutional drive for increased research performance, many staff had been put under pressure to produce

more publications, without consideration of the additional support needed, such as the provision of advisory services and resourcing, and a lessening of teaching and administrative workloads.

5. *Adequate recognition and acknowledgement of staff achievement.*

The absence of meaningful recognition of staff performance by their institution, and of appropriate incentives, was a recurrent concern from those interviewed. Some individuals identified their personal uncertainty, and acknowledged a choice between meeting expectations and gaining promotion, a standard form of institutional recognition, or following their own values, which may not be recognised by the institution. In effect, it was identified that there was increased prescription of outputs which staff recognised as limiting their academic independence and ability to be innovative. Also, staff expressed concern that, while the institution as a whole gained significant financial benefit from enhanced research performance, this did not filter through the organisation to become direct benefits for the staff or departments responsible for this performance. This latter concern also reflected staff perceptions of inequity amongst different staff groups.

6. *A lack of an appropriate research culture.*

Staff from both institutions bemoaned the absence of a research culture that would foster the celebration of research performance, and the incentivisation of research as an institutional priority. In both institutions, participants felt that teaching was seen to be the priority activity for academic staff, followed by administration, and, if there was any time left over, then this could be used for research.

This summary of the major themes of staff response has some resonance with Trowler's (1998) categorisation of academics' responses. Individuals work within a narrower frame of reference than their institutional management teams. Some accept benignly the requirements of their employer; others manage proactively while a few manipulate for personal advantage.

Discussion

It is apparent that changing funding regimes are challenging New Zealand tertiary institutions to manage revised expectations. The project data provides some illumination for the way forward. Three major areas of concern that have implications for organisational leaders emerge:

1. The credibility gap: the perception of a discernable gap between what the institution says it is doing (its espoused objectives), and what it actually does (objectives in use).
2. Implementation inequities: the perception of inconsistency of implementation through variable delegation.
3. Communication clarity: the perception that management expectations of staff responsibility and performance do not necessarily align with those of the staff themselves.

First, the credibility gap: it is vital that what is espoused is mirrored by what actually happens. If restructuring is used to 'solve' problems then the systems and processes that follow must be linked to those solutions and not be seen as a different set of executive agendas. Where support and funding are promised they need to be delivered. The withdrawal of resourcing for staff research activities for example, should not be blamed on budgetary problems. Where budgetary cuts need to be made, they should be visible at all levels of the institution. If research mentoring is part of the plan for the enhancement of a research culture, then senior and experienced staff need to participate and contribute, rather than remain focused on their own performance.

Second, when institutional objectives are determined at the executive level, it is essential that they are implemented appropriately throughout the institutional structure.

Dissatisfaction was expressed by interviewees when they noticed possible inequities, especially when some colleagues (especially senior staff) appeared to be exempt from certain rules or funding restrictions. For expectations to be met, individuals appear to need consistency of their application, as well as support to alleviate the pressure that

comes with them. There was an acknowledgement however, that ‘one size does not fit all’ so variations will occur, especially between experienced and emerging researchers, but within that premise was the feeling that experience and expertise should be shared.

Third, communication must be clear and transparent. All of the efforts to develop and enhance a thriving research culture involve communication, which was viewed as an essential component of collective endeavours. Role changes that create revised responsibilities should always be clearly incorporated into position descriptions. The project participants often referred to extra responsibilities (often administrative) that they had to undertake that were not part of their specified portfolio. When managers provided recognition for their work (including non-specified work) staff members often expressed a positive reaction at being valued. This response was also identified when staff received a reward or an award.

Essentially, any process that entails adjusting personnel use to suit the needs of the organisation involves tension and has implications for collegiality and trust (Hardré & Cox, 2009). Where systems were unclear or lacked cohesion, staff felt frustrated and even angry at what they considered to be confusing or unfair practices. In these cases some individual responses verged on rebellion. Curri offers an “holistic approach to organisation change” (Curri 2002, p. 149) with a ‘primary triad model’ that dovetails restructuring, leadership and managing relationships (at both the individual and group level). Leadership then is challenged to consider carefully who controls the outcomes and how much subjectivity is enabled (Hardré & Cox, 2009).

Alongside the negative comments within the data, were more positive proposals from the interviewees and these usefully contribute to positive ways to facilitate change. In order to build research capacity and increase research productivity, potential initiatives were identified as including: mentoring (of less experienced researchers); internal sabbaticals; teaching buy-outs; seminars; and research bulletins. In addition, funding for conference attendance and meetings with research collaborators were seen as vital. Further reflection by participants identified that leadership remains an essential component for achieving

research objectives. Since leadership will not be effective in a vacuum and it occurs at all levels and in all sorts of ways, an institutional structure and culture that encourages staff to work collectively, collaboratively and with collegial support is needed. Naturally the precursor for this activity is a supportive working environment based upon relevant and appropriate resourcing.

This study identifies that there is a delicate balance between leading and managing change. During her study in Australian universities, Curri (2002) discovered that some senior management personnel when implementing institutional restructuring, admitted to making up the rules as they went along. In addition, many of the study respondents acknowledged that they had not received any leadership training and support prior to restructuring. While no specific questions were asked in the New Zealand study about leadership capabilities, inferences were made by participants, from which we identified potential implications. Our firm conviction is that for any research strategy to achieve its aims, it is imperative that visible and competent leadership is a core component.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this research study demonstrate how governmental policy is linked through to the effect on the individual academic. While this paper identifies issues being encountered in New Zealand, many of the conclusions can be usefully applied to other contexts. Any application of our recommendations would need to be contextually framed, since tertiary organisations are subject to differing external pressures and demands. It is the ways in which institutional reactions are perceived by the staff in these organisations that is pivotal to their effectiveness. Piderit (2000) has referred to the significance of accessing “employee support and enthusiasm for proposed change rather than merely overcoming resistance” (p. 783) for the achievement of successful organisational adaptation. This approach is not always easy to achieve, but remains fundamental to effective change management.

We recognise that one institutional response to external influences is to undergo organisational change. In the case of governmental guidelines and imperatives specific to research in New Zealand, institutions have moved to modify the academic environment and emphasise research tasks and productivity. From listening to the views of academic staff it seems as though challenges of an increasingly competitive environment, especially through research assessment, can cause individuals to question their own ability to be effective. Frustration at the gap between espoused objectives, particularly those relating to services and support, and those provided in practice , ‘objectives-in-use’ (Billot & Codling, 2011), can also cause resentment and sometimes resistance to institutional demands. One participant expressed in this way: *“If the values of the institution are to enable research, then every single thing that the institution does from budgeting through to policies, through to practice, should reflect that”* (Non university: Education: participant5). Any disconnect between employer and employee will only serve to disrupt the attainment of institutional objectives. It therefore seems axiomatic, that unless the institution’s strategic directions are developed in alignment with an academic’s notion of their professional self, confusion and conflict in the workplace can occur (Harley, 2002). One participant expressed their reaction to the PBRF: *“Personally for me I find the whole PBRF thing intimidating, frightening and sufficiently unpleasant to make me not want to do it.”* (Non university: Design: participant2)

The project findings also indicate that there had been little preparation for role changes and staff members took exception to perceived inequities and unrealistic expectations. These are particularly evident in the mixed messages about the relative importance of research and teaching within their institutions, and around performance expectations which are not supported by adequate resources and/or time.

The contestation of what constitutes effective management of change calls for greater shared and sustainable commitment between state, institutional and individual parties. Even though academics are not always complimentary of their own institution, they do engage more actively when they can make sense of their changing circumstances. Therefore change that is managed effectively needs to take cognisance of how academics

view their professional identity. Underpinning this perception are their values, the profession to which they belong and their institutional role (Briggs, 2007). Henkel (2000) has suggested that academic responses can be adaptive, so while individuals seek to retain a professional identity that they believe reflects their teaching and research priorities, institutional objectives can be linked to those of individuals. Consequently, this imperative remains an issue for those leading organisational change.

The arguments raised in the preceding discussion provide us with an opportunity to emphasise the obvious implications for leadership. One academic put it this way:

*For me, the starting place is leadership, be it down in Wellington
[location of NZ government] or in our institutions and people who walk
the talk and model the practice that they're aspiring for us to be, rather
than managers dressed up as leaders requiring of us certain routines and
not displaying those themselves. (University: Education: participant2)*

Good leadership is clearly central to the minimalisation of these negative consequences. As respondents indicated, the critical elements of this include transparency, understanding, support, acknowledgement, encouragement and reward, and consistent communication that provide unambiguous messages about the institution's objectives. By these means, strong leadership can draw together the institution and the academics to facilitate enhanced research productivity and avoid unsuccessful organisational change.

In this paper we have identified some of the issues being faced in the tertiary sector when funding and performance precepts are altered. Issues of expectations, equity, effectiveness and performance require careful planning, management and communication. Much can be learnt from the New Zealand research for application in other contexts, particularly with regard to the importance of aligning strategic management with the professional identities of academics. There is also clear potential for further studies in other locations and settings, particularly those that provide in-depth critical analyses.

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