

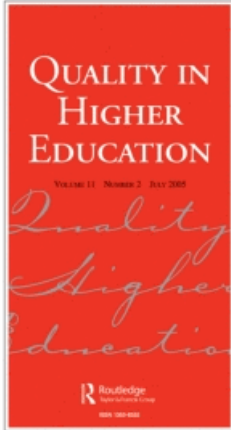
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Changing Academic Work Roles: the everyday realities challenging quality in teaching

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ABSTRACT *A national survey of academics in Australian universities provides the basis for this discussion of changing work practices influencing the quality of teaching. The paper reports the shifts in time and commitment to teaching over the last decade, the impact of changes in approaches to teaching on academic workloads, and the everyday obstacles that academics identify as hindering their teaching. The paper also identifies some aspects of diversity in the work experiences of academics. Work role problems are not experienced in the same way by academics at different ages and career stages, or indeed, in different institutions and disciplinary fields. This diversity presents a major difficulty for national and institutional efforts aimed at addressing the growing problems associated with changes in academic work. The paper suggests that academic workloads and work roles have reached a critical point where nothing short of major reform will be adequate if efforts to improve the quality of teaching are to be achieved.*

Introduction

The work roles of academics in Australian universities have become increasingly complex and demanding over the last decade. In the last 5 years, in particular, the decline in academic work conditions, levels of satisfaction, and career outlooks has been dramatic by any measure (McInnis, 2000). There has been widespread concern about workloads and stress in most universities in the context of long and intense rounds of industrial negotiations for salary increases. However, the increase in hours of work is only part of the story, and perhaps considerably less problematic for academic work than assumed when it comes to issues of quality in teaching and learning. Far more important is the undermining of the fundamental work motives by the pressure of everyday work realities and the inevitable threat to quality and productivity that comes with confusion of purpose and competing demands that now confront academics.

Changes to the everyday work realities of academics are a challenge for everyone concerned with promoting notions of quality as transformation. Failure to understand the factors influencing the outlooks of academics is likely to lead to a widening gap between the rhetoric and reality of quality in teaching and learning. Academics in Australia are now operating in a far more competitive environment where the drive to initiate research, recruit fee-paying students, and attract consultancies has given a new edge to the ever-present tension between teaching, research and the expanding category of 'other work' (McInnis, 1996). These changes, in conjunction with expanded student numbers and

declining government funding, have generated new conditions widely perceived by academics to hinder the quality of their teaching.

This paper examines recent trends in the teaching activities of academics and identifies some factors that currently influence the quality of their work and capacity for effective teaching. This is followed by the identification of some important areas of diversity in the experience of academics that suggest difficulties for plans and policies aimed at remedying the problems of workload and work roles in the pursuit of quality. The analysis draws on the results of a 1999 national survey of academics in Australian universities commissioned by the Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) as part of an ongoing project monitoring the changing work roles and values of the academic profession in Australia.

The national study essentially replicates some key aspects of a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) in 1993 (McInnis, 1996) and takes up some issues identified by a similar survey in the United Kingdom (NCIHE, 1997). The 1999 survey focused on workloads, levels of satisfaction, key aspects of teaching and research activities, and work preferences based on the responses of a representative sample of 2609 academics from 15 Australian universities. The sample broadly matches the national profiles (DETYA, 1999). The unusually high response rate of 58.4% is an indicator of the importance attached to the issues of work roles and workloads by academics at the present time.

The discussion for the most part focuses on the group of academics defined as the 'mainstream'. This includes only those academics employed full-time who both teach and research ($n = 1554$). It also includes research fellows who are involved in some teaching. In addition to breakdowns by gender and level of appointment, other sub-samples of the mainstream used in the analysis include career stage, institutional differences, disciplinary fields, casual and part-time workers, and a trend group for the purposes of comparing the 1993 and 1999 data. The trend group is defined by the 1993 survey as full-time academics at lecturer level B and above and includes a small proportion (5%) of research fellows ($n = 1610$).

Changes in matters of teaching should be set in the broader context of current academic values activities and outlooks (McInnis, 2000, in press). In summary, the major findings of the study relevant here are that while most academics in Australia (73%) have an interest in both teaching and research, the proportion who say they have a much stronger interest in research than in teaching increased from 35% to 41% over the period 1993–1999. It is crucial to note that the level of overall satisfaction with the job dropped from 67% to 51%, and that there has been a significant increase in the proportion who say their work is a source of considerable stress (from 52% to 56%). The average working hours have increased since 1993 from 47.7 to 49.2 hours per week, but perhaps more importantly, 55% of the sample believed their hours had *substantially* increased over the last 5 years: 40% of academics now work more than 50 hours per week, and the proportion of time spent on teaching has declined over the last 5 years from an average of 53.0 to 48.7% in a typical working week.

Trends in Commitment and Time Given to Teaching

Most academics in Australian universities spend just under half their working week on activities concerned directly with teaching. There are, of course, major variations in the way the work of teaching is managed by individual academics, and in the priorities they give to the tasks. The survey was not able to explore in any detail these often complex patterns of behaviour that comprise the activity of teaching. For some academics, teaching

means designing and leading an international field trip with a large group of students supported by an intensive pre- and post-trip lecture programme. In other instances, teaching means long days working closely with groups of students developing clinical skills. Of course, there are also those who work most effectively, and appropriately, with a mix of large group lectures and blocks of seminars and tutorials.

Increasing class contact time is bound to have an impact on other related work (McInnis, 2000). Although 36% of academics reported a substantial increase in class contact, a larger proportion (45%) have also seen an increase in their teaching related activities such as preparation for classes or marking papers. Of the activities that have had the most impact on changes in their working hours in the last 5 years, providing academic support for students figures prominently with a substantial proportion of those surveyed (69%) believing this aspect of their work is changing their work hours. Associated is the perception of 52% of the academics that the pastoral care provided to students has been a major contributor to their increased hours.

Two-thirds of the mainstream academics report that developing course materials for new technologies has had a major impact on their changing work hours, and designing and scanning of online materials has had a marked impact on work time for 43% of academics.

The Pressure to Change Teaching Methods and Assessment

The respondents to the survey were asked if, over the past 5 years, they had changed their teaching methods. A clear majority of academics who are teaching say they are using problem-based learning (74%), computer-assisted course delivery (72%), multimedia technology (70%), and collaborative learning strategies (65%). A substantial minority are using distance-based learning approaches (46%) (Table 1). On the face of it, the level of usage appears higher than expected, although the nature and extent of usage are not entirely clear, partly because there may be some definitional problems.

Respondents were also asked what prompted them to make changes in their teaching methods. Aside from the majority responding that they were motivated by their own initiative (78%), the next most common reason has to do with the availability of technology (72%). The pressure of institutional policy (46%) and student expectations (42%) are important but not nearly such strong influences. To a much lesser extent, the adoption of new teaching methods has been prompted by the increase in student numbers (39%) and resource constraints (31%).

Attitudes towards assessment practices can be considered something of a litmus test of change in approaches to teaching. The respondents were asked to indicate on a list of seven items (shown in Table 2) the aspects of student performance they currently assess and those they think should be assessed. Depth of knowledge is the highest by far (94%); the

TABLE 1. Change in teaching methods (% responses mainstream cohort: *n* = 1554)

| | Start using | Using more | Using less | n/a |
|------------------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----|
| Distance-based learning approaches | 19 | 25 | 2 | 55 |
| Computer-assisted course delivery | 30 | 40 | 2 | 28 |
| Multimedia technology | 26 | 42 | 2 | 30 |
| Collaborative learning strategies | 18 | 43 | 4 | 35 |
| Problem-based learning | 18 | 51 | 5 | 27 |

TABLE 2. What is and what should be assessed (% responses mainstream cohort: $n = 1554$)

| | Currently is | Should be |
|---|--------------|-----------|
| Depth of knowledge and understanding of the subject | 94 | 84 |
| Ability to think critically and to reason | 84 | 87 |
| Written communication skills | 81 | 79 |
| Problem-solving skills | 78 | 81 |
| Verbal communication skills | 55 | 73 |
| Ability to memorise | 38 | 18 |
| Diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses | 31 | 63 |

three related generic skills—ability to think critically, written communication skills and problem-solving skills—have similarly high responses. More than half the academics say they assess verbal communication skills and a relatively small minority currently assess the ability to memorise (38%) or use diagnostic assessment (31%).

The contrast between perceptions of what is and what should be assessed is telling. Although it remains high at 84%, there is notably less support amongst the respondents for depth of knowledge and understanding of the subject in the assessment process. At the other end of the continuum, the ability of students to memorise drops from a low of 38% who believe it is currently assessed to only 18% who think it should be. The majority of academics believe that the ability to think critically and to reason should be assessed, but of course, that effectively matches what they suggest is their current practice. Likewise, there is minimal variation in the priority given to problem-solving and written communication skills.

A particularly interesting result here is the 18% difference in the proportion of respondents who believe that verbal communication skills should be assessed. Finally, and of major importance, two-thirds of respondents believe that assessment should involve the diagnoses of students' strengths and weakness as against 31% who believe it does currently.

Everyday Obstacles to Teaching Quality and Commitment

Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale: 'to what extent, if at all, is your teaching hindered by the following?' (Table 3). This has been a useful item for the analysis of the impact of change on the everyday work of academics in the previous national survey (McInnis, 1996).

TABLE 3. Factors hindering teaching (% responses to five-point scale for mainstream cohort: $n = 1554$)

| | Not hindered | | | Greatly hindered | |
|---|--------------|----|----|------------------|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Having to teach subjects outside your area of expertise | 49 | 15 | 16 | 15 | 5 |
| Current research commitments | 38 | 16 | 20 | 19 | 7 |
| Lack of up-to-date equipment/technology | 32 | 19 | 20 | 19 | 11 |
| Too many students | 24 | 12 | 18 | 24 | 22 |
| Too wide a range of students' abilities | 17 | 12 | 21 | 28 | 22 |

The major hindrances to teaching concern the students. Fifty percent of academics cite the wide range of students' abilities as a problem, and 46% believe that having too many students is a hindrance to their teaching. However, at the other end of the scale, and again raising the issue of diversity of contexts for academic work, 36% of the academics are not hindered by the number of students, and 29% are not having difficulties with the range of student abilities.

The lack of up-to-date teaching equipment and technology is not an issue for 51% of the respondents, but it is regarded as a hindrance by 30% of the respondents. Similarly, 54% of the respondents do not find their research commitments present a problem for their teaching, but 26% do.

Perhaps one of the most important responses to consider closely concerns the demands on the mainstream group to teach in unfamiliar territory. One in five academics say they are hindered in their teaching because they are teaching subjects outside their expertise.

Not shown in the table is the result on a related issue that hinders teaching: the perception that students are increasingly less equipped for higher education. The respondents were asked to rate the calibre of the students they were currently teaching, compared with those they were teaching 5 years ago. Almost one-third of the academics surveyed believe their undergraduates are worse now, and only a small minority (11%) think they are better. Considerably fewer (17%) think the calibre of postgraduates has declined.

There has been a significant increase over the last 5 years in the proportion of academics who say their teaching is hindered or greatly hindered by each of the five aspects listed in Table 4. The biggest increases having a negative impact on teaching are the demands of current research activity (15%) and too wide a range of student abilities (13%).

The proportion citing too many students as a problem increased from 1993 to 1999 by 10%, lack of equipment by 8% and teaching subjects outside one's expertise by 4%. It is worth noting the sharp increase in those who now say they are *greatly* hindered by having too many students (an increase of 7%), or too wide a range of students' abilities (an increase of 11%).

TABLE 4. Factors hindering teaching 1993–1999 (% responses to five-point scale for 1993: $n = 1340$ and for mainstream cohort 1999: $n = 1554$)*

| | | Not hindered | | | Greatly hindered | |
|---|------|--------------|----|----|------------------|----|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Having to teach subjects outside your area of expertise | 1993 | 48 | 20 | 16 | 12 | 4 |
| | 1999 | 49 | 15 | 16 | 15 | 5 |
| Current research commitments | 1993 | 41 | 31 | 18 | 9 | 2 |
| | 1999 | 38 | 16 | 20 | 19 | 7 |
| Lack of up-to-date equipment/technology | 1993 | 37 | 23 | 19 | 15 | 7 |
| | 1999 | 32 | 19 | 20 | 19 | 11 |
| Too many students | 1993 | 29 | 19 | 17 | 21 | 15 |
| | 1999 | 24 | 12 | 18 | 24 | 22 |
| Too wide a range of students' abilities | 1993 | 22 | 21 | 21 | 26 | 11 |
| | 1999 | 17 | 12 | 21 | 28 | 22 |

*All differences statistically significant at 0.05 level.

TABLE 5. Estimated average hours per week on teaching and supervision during teaching period of mainstream cohort by institutional type ($n = 1554$)

| | Old ($n = 462$) | Mid ($n = 450$) | New ($n = 604$) | All ($n = 1554$) |
|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Teaching | 6.9 | 8.3 | 9.6* | 8.4 |
| Teaching related activity | 10.2 | 12.7 | 13.2* | 12.1 |
| Thesis supervision | 4.8 | 4.3 | 3.1* | 4.0 |

*Significant at 0.05 level (ANOVA).

Diversity in the Problems Faced by Academics

Any programme for change to the working lives of academics and any policy to change has to take account of major differences between universities and fields of study. It was noted, above, that individuals vary in the time they spend on teaching. There are also institutional differences in the time given to teaching that have been sustained over time according to the profile of the institutions, especially their relative emphasis on research. The sample was divided for analysis by a broad classification of institutions according to date of establishment, that is, four 'old' universities, established 1853–1958 ($n = 462$); four 'middle' period universities, established 1960–1988 ($n = 450$); and seven 'new' universities, most of which were established from former Colleges of Advanced Education in 1987 ($n = 604$). There is a clear pattern of difference with academics in the new universities teaching significantly more hours than those in the old universities but spending a smaller amount of time on thesis supervision than those in the old or mid-period universities (Table 5).

Diversity in the Experience of Obstacles

The only gender difference (not shown in the tables) of significance on factors that hinder teaching is that females are more likely than males to cite teaching outside their area of expertise as an obstacle (23% compared with 19%). This is partly a function of their higher proportions in the junior levels of appointment. There are, however, distinct career stage patterns in the perceptions of obstacles to effective teaching. Late career academics (21 years or more experience) are less likely to be hindered by teaching outside their area of expertise and considerably less likely to be hampered by their current research commitments. The group who appear least hindered in their teaching are professors. Relative to the other levels of appointment, professors are much less likely to teach outside their area of expertise, or to be affected by lack of equipment, too many students, and too wide a range of students' abilities.

Academics in the new universities are significantly more likely to agree that their teaching is hindered by teaching outside their area of expertise (25% compared with 20% of faculty in mid-period institutions and 14% in old ones) and their teaching is also perceived to be under greater pressure from their research commitments (29% compared with 26% and 22%) (Table 6).

Academics from the new universities are significantly more likely to be hampered by too many students and too wide a range of abilities. Fifty-three percent of those in the new universities believe the overload in students interferes with their teaching, as against 40% in the old, and 43% in the mid-period universities. There is little difference between the three groups with respect to the lack of up-to-date teaching equipment and technologies.

TABLE 6. Factors hindering teaching: institutional differences (% responses mainstream cohort: $n = 1552$)

| | Old ($n = 462$) | Mid ($n = 450$) | New ($n = 604$) |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Having to teach subjects outside your area of expertise | 14 | 20 | 25* |
| Current research commitments | 22 | 26 | 29 |
| Lack of up-to-date equipment/technology | 29 | 31 | 30 |
| Too many students | 40 | 43 | 53* |
| Too wide a range of students' abilities | 48 | 50 | 52 |

*Significant at 0.05 level (Kruskal–Wallis test).

Field of study differences in factors hindering teaching are quite marked. For example, the analysis showed that those in the business and administration fields are significantly less likely to find that teaching outside their area of expertise is a problem for their teaching. On the other hand, a much higher proportion of the business group (35%) find their research commitments a hindrance than the humanities (27%) and the engineering groups (23%). The engineering group are, not surprisingly, significantly more frustrated in their teaching by their lack of up-to-date equipment (38% compared to 30% in humanities and 22% in business). The other notable feature of the data shows that the humanities group are the most likely to find their teaching hindered by having to teach subjects outside their expertise.

Differing Perceptions of the Calibre of Students

There are some differences in perceptions of the changing calibre of undergraduate students that make teaching more challenging for some academics. The analysis of survey responses found that males (34%) are significantly more likely to be negative about the calibre of students than females (25%). Males (11%) also appear to be somewhat more negative about their postgraduate students than are their female colleagues (16%). Somewhat surprisingly, the differences by institutions suggests little difference between the university types in the proportions who believe the calibre of the current students is worse these days.

However, some field of study differences in perceptions of the changing calibre of students are evident. Overall, those in the humanities group are significantly more positive about their undergraduate students than those in the engineering or business fields. The gaps between the field of study groups on the negative side (humanities 27%; engineering 36%; business 45%) are also quite distinct.

Further, there are also marked differences in ratings of the relative quality of postgraduate students across the fields of study: the humanities group (19%) is significantly more positive than the engineering group (10%) and the business group (9%). While a higher proportion of the humanities group (16%) are more negative about the postgraduates than the engineering group (12%) the most striking and statistically significant difference is between the engineering group and the business group. Almost a third (32%) of the business group believe their postgraduate students are worse than 5 years ago.

Training and Support for the Improvement of Teaching

Professional development activities have assumed increased importance in the eyes of institutional policy makers intent on improving teaching quality. However, for the most

part this remains a voluntary activity. The academics surveyed were asked if, at the start of their career, or in the last 2 years, they had received training in teaching methods. Just over one-third (34%) had received some training at the start of their career. A quarter had some professional development in teaching methods in the 2 years prior to the survey. A more negative pattern was evident with respect to training for thesis supervision. Only 12% had any training to prepare them for the task of supervising research degree students and 16% had received training on this subject in the 2 years prior to the survey.

New academics are now more likely to get some form of training through induction programmes at the start of their careers, although the majority (56%) still do not. A notably higher proportion of academics in the new universities had some training at the start of their careers (37%), but it appears that more in the old and mid-period universities had training in the last 2 years. This may reflect the larger numbers of early career academics in the new institutions.

Conclusion

The level of activity in Australia aimed at improving teaching over the last 5 years or so has been extraordinary. National bodies have been created to encourage, fund and steer teaching innovations. These have been replicated at the institutional levels in a variety of forms. All university graduates are surveyed on their course experience and the quality of teaching. Again, these extensive national efforts at monitoring and rewarding good teaching are mirrored in the universities and academic departments. The pressure on academics to examine and change their approaches to teaching has left few unaffected.

The growing demands on universities to improve performance in teaching over the last decade has accelerated most recently with the development of performance indicators by government and the market competition for fee-paying students. Partly in response to this, universities are moving towards formal management of academic careers, from induction to systematic and award-granting professional development programmes. Most of the increasing regulation derives from efforts to improve the quality of teaching.

The pressure to change and innovate is no longer confined to a minority of early adopters and enthusiasts. The bulk of mainstream academics are now seriously engaged in revising their approaches, although it appears that many are doing so with minimal levels of professional development from their universities. Despite the continuing high status given to research, and the apparent increase in time spent on research rather than teaching, the demand for quality in teaching is putting many academics under enormous pressure. More universities are devising teaching plans and initiating their own programmes for financial incentives and penalties with respect to teaching performance.

The data show clearly what many (but not all) academics know only too well. Their everyday reality consists of much more time now given to helping students with their work, much greater involvement in pastoral care (despite the professionalisation of student support services) and far greater engagement with new technologies for teaching.

The significant increases in the hindrances to teaching link most obviously to the larger classes with far broader ranges of abilities that in turn require increased time for preparation and assessment. Again, this is old news for academics in many universities. This change in students profiles is in part driving the shift towards a preference for diagnostic assessment, which, if it becomes a reality, will alone account for a major increase in time and energy. In the meantime, a large number of academics are not able to provide the kind of assessment they think is appropriate for their students.

The 'sleeper' in this catalogue of obstacles to good teaching is the growing proportion of

academics, about one in five, who see teaching outside their field of expertise as a hindrance to good teaching. This is often a direct consequence of resources being stretched to the limit and departments reducing subject offerings and filling teaching places with little regard for qualifications or expertise.

What we see from these results overall is the rapidly growing complexity of problems influencing the quality of teaching. To suggest there is no easy solution is an understatement. Diversity was identified in this paper to counter the simplistic view that academics are all in the same boat. They are not. It follows that policy changes at the national level are limited. Most of the problems of academic work need to be dealt with at the level of the institution and the department where local conditions are the primary determinants of satisfaction, productivity and quality in teaching. Efforts to improve teaching that simply ask academics to do more without reference to their primary work motives, or the everyday realities of practice that hinder their teaching, are destined to fail.

While it is reasonable to suggest that many (but again, not all) academics have reached the limits of tolerance for change and lack the energy to pursue quality in teaching, the situation is not as intractable as it might appear. However, the idea that management offering rewards and punishments can cajole or, worse, bully, academics into teaching well is misguided. Such strategies may certainly work in the short term, or at least give the appearance of working on the basis of some indicators. To have a sustained effect on the quality of teaching of the mainstream group, for whom teaching is a commitment of a special kind, in the current context of overload and complexity requires new ways of thinking about the organisation and distribution of academic work. A key issue is whether the enhancement of teaching can and should be achieved by a mix of specialisation, outsourcing and casualisation. The fact is, the change has been occurring incrementally for some time without policy or plans.

Academics have until now been strongly socialised into the profession through their disciplinary experience as postgraduate students. This is less likely as casual appointments increase (Jones *et al.*, 1999) and opportunities are limited for a lifelong career path in university teaching and research. The low levels of involvement of the sample respondents in professional development programmes suggest that academics are likely to be self-directed in their efforts to deal with change. It also suggests that they are finding it difficult to attend such voluntary activities given their workloads. It is clear, however, that many are losing the battle to maintain control over the quality of their work environments and the quality of their teaching.

What is needed is a rethinking of recruitment, accreditation, induction and deployment of teaching staff rather than persisting with the belief that all academics should be cast in the same mould and that they all ought to be able to do more and perform better on all fronts for their entire careers. One option, in dealing with the work and quality issues now facing academics, is for government and universities to attempt to regulate and manage these processes. If academics individually and collectively cannot take stock and reflect on their changing roles, then their defence of the status quo will simply slow down but not redirect the forces influencing their core work values. The other option is for academics to take a more creative approach to redefining their work roles and to find solutions that sustain the primary sources of work satisfaction that best promote quality.

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