STOP THE BUS I WANT TO GET OFF: ACADEMICS COPING IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

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Abstract

During periods of radical organisational change, individuals are confronted with a multitude of new experiences and stresses that impact in varying degrees on their personal and professional lives. The manner in which individuals perceive, define and experience these changes will vary according to a number of factors, including the effectiveness of the strategies chosen to cope with such change.

Quantitative methodologies used in studying coping strategies suffer from a number of deficiencies. Qualitative research approaches show promise and form the basis of this study of the differing approaches utilised by academics to manage and cope with their changing work environment during a period of substantial change. This paper argues that coping is a dynamic process, in which academics are constantly engaged in defining and redefining their environments in order to make sound decisions and take appropriate action. To illustrate this process, the metaphor of the bus journey is used to highlight academics' responses to an ever-changing landscape. There is little doubt the strategies utilised will produce differing outcomes, and the long-term success of these strategies will be partly dependent on the relationship they have to the overall goals and the direction of the organisation.

Introduction

Major organisational restructuring, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, and other workplace changes have been shown to impact negatively on individuals (Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991; Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Bergin & Solman, 1995; Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997; Trowler, 1998) resulting in increased job insecurity (Schweiger & Lee 1993), higher levels of stress and uncertainty, reduced job satisfaction, trust and commitment, and greater desire to leave the organisation (Le Craw, 1992; Terry, Nielson & Perchard, 1993; Potts, 1997; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). Organisational restructuring in particular is likely to result in feelings of powerlessness by individuals to effect any improvement in their situation

(Schweiger et al., 1987; Trowler, 1998). Rarely have decisions to restructure been reversed (Begley, 1998). This paper reports on academics' responses to the radical organisational changes that occurred within a new multi-campus Australian university formed in 1991 after what has commonly been termed the 'Dawkinization' of higher education in Australia.

Academics under pressure

Ongoing changes within universities have had a deleterious effect on the productivity of academics, as well as on their health, well-being, and levels of stress and tension experienced (Hort & Oxley, 1992; Noble, 1994; Fisher, 1995; Abouserie, 1996; Hort, 1996; Trowler, 1998; Borg & Arpa, 2000; Broadbent, 2000). The pressure emanating from the efforts of universities to cope with contemporary challenges has left academics with an increasing sense of insecurity (Taylor, 1997). Consequently, academics are suffering identity crises due firstly to the demands made upon them, secondly, the changes in those demands, and finally the limited resources they have to meet those demands. Notions of collegiality, or cohesion and stability have been replaced by competition, disjuncture and never-ending change, leaving academics increasingly exhausted from 'change fatigue' (Rodger, 1998).

Understanding coping

Understandably, interest in coping in the workplace has been primarily aimed at reducing the impact of numerous work-related stressors such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and work demands (Nelson & Sutton, 1990; Carpenter, 1992; Latack & Havlovic, 1992; Callan, 1993; Leong, Furnham & Cooper, 1996). From an interactionist perspective (Cooper, Cooper & Eaker, 1988; Edwards & Cooper, 1990), stress occurs as a result of the 'lack of fit' between environmental demands and individual needs, and the interrelatedness of both subjective and objective stressors is important. Yet most workplace intervention strategies focus on improving the ability of individuals to adapt to continuing environmental demands, the implicit assumption being that organisations are incapable or unwilling to modify the change process and, as a consequence, workplaces remain stressful. This then places the responsibility on individuals to strengthen their resolve to either adapt to, or resist, ongoing workplace stressors; far less attention is directed towards reshaping the environment to 'fit' the individual.

Coping is generally considered to be a dynamic, multifaceted construct comprising thoughts, feeling and actions that are used to deal with problems encountered in everyday life (Frydenberg, 1995). It is regularly used interchangeably with 'concepts such as adaptation, mastery, defence or realistic problem-solving' (ibid., p.28). This is reflected in the changed emphasis from a deficits or disability model of behaviour towards 'ability' models that focus on health and wellbeing, prevention and productivity, or are supportive of 'a quest for staying ahead and on top' (ibid., p.26).

Drawing on the work of Lipshitz and Strauss (1997), Taylor (1999) suggests that the use of coping strategies is 'learned in context' and personal values and identity feature strongly in the conceptualisation of and ability to cope. Coping should be regarded as an interactive process that takes into consideration the characteristics of the individual, contextual issues, and the appraisal of the situation. Both the individual's perception of the demands of the environment and his or her perceived capability to respond to those demands are important in determining the effect of the stressor. Importantly, the identification of concerns or life experiences as stressors is dependent on individual interpretation and experience; 'potential stresses only become real stresses when they are perceived as threatening' (Frydenberg, 1997:17).Of importance also, if the management of change is to be effective, is the

recognition of the emotional stages individuals traverse in order to personally cope with change (Scott & Jaffe, 1989; Bridges, 1995).

Problem situations are usually dynamic and multidimensional in nature, and occasionally coping solutions only generate more problems. Gaining insight into this process, including understanding the way in which individuals generate further problems when coping, is best achieved through qualitative measures, rather than quantitative measures that are limited in their ability to provide explanations for the relationship between coping strategies and situational and personal outcomes (Oakland & Ostell, 1996).

Methodology

The research presented in this paper is positioned within an interpretive framework and draws on the traditions of symbolic interactionism in understanding human action. Consistent with this approach, the study regards academics as dynamic and active, rather than passive; as such, immediate situations are defined 'according to perspectives developed and altered in ongoing social situations' (Charon, 2001:40). In this regard, academics not only respond to their environment, but also 'act toward it, and use it' (ibid., p.40). While previous studies of universities and academics within Australia have focused predominantly on the collection of data through the use of surveys and tightly structured questionnaires, this qualitative research project utilises semi-structured interviews for the collection of data. Throughout the analysis of the data the researcher became immersed in the 'lively world of academics within the new University' and gradually formed clusters of related ideas that became 'the organisation and conceptualisation of that data' (Dey, 1993:112). Relevant responses from 44 of the academics are mentioned in this paper.

From the qualitative analysis of the interview data, there remains little doubt the organisational changes brought about by the formation of the new University impacted significantly on academics, although the level of intensity and stress experienced by each academic varied considerably. To encapsulate academics' responses, this paper utilises the metaphor of a bus journey to highlight the differences between academics in their response to change and in the strategies they adopted to cope with those changes.

Riding the change

Stop the bus - it's out of control

A major concern for many academics was the rapidity with which the organisational changes occurred. The increased uncertainty and lack of understanding of the direction of the changes left some academics believing the organisation to be *'out of control'* and *'going nowhere'*, thus creating an overwhelming feeling for some that 'everything is going round and round in circles' (Academic 1). This produced such intense feelings of pressure for some academics that even those who supported the changes believed a reduction in the pace was needed to allow academics 'to take ownership of the changes' (2), although as respondent (3) commented 'it would be good if it stopped'. Exhausted by the constant pressure, some academics believed a period of reassessment was needed to allow time for reflection on the direction and negative impact of the changes on staff, both at work and in their personal lives. Respondent (4) highlights the difficulty:

> 'we need time to consider the worth of what is being done to individuals working at this pace. It is very hard to be working at the level we are working, studying at the levels we are studying, committing ourselves to family, and fulfilling our needs and obligations to family (4).

Further, respondent (4) argues:

> 'The ideal University would be one that calmed down for a while to give time for reflection, time to celebrate achievements and then to foster new growth as the staff become comfortable with the changes, own them, and become change agents.

The rapidity of change had increased the 'unpredictable nature of work and administration' (5) and this had made the 'future for individuals less certain' (6). As a consequence, academics found themselves immersed in an 'unpleasant working environment' (7) where concerns regarding staff losses and campus closures were compounded by a heightened level of anxiety regarding the viability of the University. 'All staff are frightened for their own jobs ...and staff feel that all they have done in the past is not valued' (8). The sense of pessimism that emerged at this time in the minds of some academics is clearly evident in the response of interviewee (5):

> 'The University is barely surviving and that has presented many difficulties particularly for some staff who are stressed by the uncertainty of their jobs. The workload is very hard. Once 4pm was the end of the day. Now it is 7pm. Teaching has also become demanding as the courses have changed involving total rewrites. The biggest personal difficulty is the irritation that after all this is over we may still not survive. This means it is impossible to be optimistic. There have been too many upheavals. Too many staff losses while student numbers have increased. In a word: we are diminished at the campuses and have very little input into the whole picture'.

These concerns left some academics fearful of 'losing their jobs and feeling threatened by the changes' (7), while others were made more vulnerable by the dramatic changes to their workplace roles, especially those academics 'who had well defined roles in the college system' (7). This had produced an 'adverse personal impact in terms of role clarification, tiredness, excessive pressure and morale' (9). Even those academics supportive of the changes believed the change experience had exacted a heavy toll, and the high level of energy required to continue working at the current pace eventually unsustainable.

For many academics, the impact of the changes produced an overwhelming sense of 'loss', as described in the: loss of the nurturing, caring environment for students; loss of the opportunity to continue to build a career focused on teaching; loss of power; loss of time to do things well; loss of control over the environment; loss of a sense of belonging; loss of energy; loss of self-efficacy; loss of trust; loss of value; loss of area of subject speciality; loss of autonomy regarding course development and structure; loss of funds to central administration; loss of staff not replaced; loss of staff expertise; loss of service; loss of quality; loss of courses; loss of choice of units; loss of enjoyment; and loss of self-confidence.

The reduced opportunities for academics to participate productively in the changes had increased the feeling of isolation from management, and some greatly missed the climate of support and camaraderie experienced previously in the colleges. Although commitment to the concept of the new University was generally quite strong, the organisational changes had resulted in considerable alienation for some academics, and a feeling of no longer 'belonging' to the organisation. This had contributed to the significant reduction in motivation for these academics, as well as a lack of self-efficacy in being able to contribute to the ongoing life of the organisation, as expressed by respondent (6):

> 'Overall the impact has been the loss of a sense of belonging or being part of the institution. I don't feel that I am a part of it nor a part of what is going on anymore. I no longer know whom to contact...If people don't feel they belong to anything then they won't contribute to it'.

Still maintaining the old model

For some academics, the strength of commitment to the *'old way of doing things'*, along with a firm belief the changes had done 'more harm than good' (6) left them struggling to cope with the dissonance created by the changes. As a result of a high commitment to teaching and student care, some academics disregarded the advice from management to focus on research, preferring instead to direct their energies towards those aspects of their work that gave them most satisfaction; a course less likely to be productive in terms of career advancement in the new University. Justification for this stance came from the belief that not only should time be spent with students, but that extra time was needed to fill the void left by other academics, who now were either more reluctant to give their time to students or unable to do so as they were employed on a sessional basis.

The high level of satisfaction gained through the interaction and encouragement of students' learning proved too valuable to discard and as these academics struggled to maintain those practices now perceived to be less valued by the University, some strengthened their resolve by becoming overly critical of the performance of management in handling the change process.

For those academics unable, or unwilling, to integrate the changes into their working and personal lives, the ongoing pressure and growing disenchantment with the workplace changes reduced their stamina to 'remain in the race', and this contributed further to their increasing sense of alienation from the organisation. Respondents (11) and (9) portray the picture as bleak and there appears little chance that conditions for these academics will improve in the foreseeable future; the burden is considerable:

> 'I have little future and have been job hunting for twelve months. This job is now very frustrating - it takes so long to process initiatives. Centralisation of functions has been ineffective and inefficient. Things will break down soon. Perhaps we will then decentralise again. We are getting tired of the constant physical, mental and emotional stress. Maybe the older ones have ploughed the field and must now get out of the road to let the others plant the crop and harvest it' (11).

And:

> 'The pressure put on everyone now is immoral, and necessitates working solidly most weekends, and looking for an opportunity to retreat' (9).

For those struggling to make sense of the changes, the attraction to revert to past practices was strong, as shown in the comment of interviewee (11) who held some hope that 'perhaps we will decentralise again', while respondent (12) provides another example:

> 'Within this University the main change has been the upgrade from colleges to a university model. But this has been at the cost of now needing to comply with the government's rules. It was all very confusing. I am hoping that one day we will go back to the college system'.

The sense of disillusionment brought about by the organisational changes left some academics feeling 'bitter and twisted...and more frustrated than at any time in the past' (12).

The strong sense of community that had characterised the pre-university colleges was sorely missed, yet some academics felt reluctant to promote 'a campus perspective or spirit' lest it be misconstrued 'as working against a sense of belonging to the whole university' (6). In the previous organisational environment, most academics had enjoyed opportunities to socialise, support and interact with colleagues, whereas the change to University status produced a noticeable reticence in staff attending community or staff functions, especially so since attendance at such functions would no longer gain recognition or reward.

For some academics, the greatest disappointment during the changes had arisen from a lack of recognition of their efforts to contribute and adapt to the workplace changes, which having gone unnoticed had left them despondent and depressed. In an endeavour to cope, some looked more readily to move away or retreat from the workplace:

> 'The changes have caused a lot of stress and I have been depressed for some time. There is the pressure at work and the pressure to upgrade qualifications but I have been run ragged in work for students, which is most important. Yet there is a lack of care and this is bad for self-esteem. I haven't got a hope in hell of ever becoming a senior lecturer. On top of this is the new pressure to be entrepreneurial, to raise funds. Yet no one noticed my first article published. The disappointments here have been huge. So now I come to work, assist the students, attend meetings and do all that is required but also retreat to home and work there when possible. This is to survive physically' (13).

The increasing difficulty for some academics to cope with the burgeoning workload and the increasing sense of hopelessness extended far beyond the working day and into their personal lives, resulting in an increase in the 'hardworking people who are demoralised, and getting sick and stressed' (9).

Balancing the pressure in the tyres

The 'pressure is everywhere' lamented respondent (6) and the need for support paramount, yet the provision of greater assistance by management was not forthcoming. The concern that insufficient information had been provided regarding the need for change left many academics feeling they were 'just being told we should be changing' (6). The pressure on academics to cope with the demands made upon them did not correspond, some argued, to the amount of training available to assist and build confidence in those attempting to participate in the changes.

Many academics reported stress in trying to publish, research, teach and, as well, care for students; this was further increased by the frustration at not having sufficient time to complete the work properly. At the same time 'new courses needed to be written' and teaching had become more demanding 'as the courses have changed and involve total rewrites' (5); this had all been made more difficult by 'the significant reduction in academic staff' (4). As respondent (17) highlights:

> 'The changes overall have been beneficial to staff as well as students but the frustration level has also increased, especially in trying to carry out research while doing all the other jobs. And the stress comes with the deadlines. There is not enough time to balance it all out'.

The need to attend to many differing tasks within the same time period had produced a situation where 'things compete against each other' (16). This had produced a feeling of 'just getting there; when the work is done it is fine, but sometimes I would like to be further ahead than I am' (16).

The effort in *maintaining a balance* between teaching long hours, developing a research profile, completing administrative tasks, and fulfilling community service obligations, proved difficult for many, especially when also grappling with the 'remoteness of headquarters' (18) for administrative matters, such as approvals for initiatives. The lack of resources provided a professional challenge for others, requiring tolerance and patience with the increasing 'degree of inefficiency and poor practice' (19). Some struggled with the burden of maintaining clinical expertise, especially the nursing staff 'doing shift work such as night duty and weekends' (20), which was regarded as extremely hard work and stressful.

Some academics sought relief from the 'huge increase in personal stress' (14) through the pursuit of physical activity including 'getting up earlier and going for a walk' (14), or engaging 'in aerobics to keep fit' (15). As respondent (16) explains: 'I now deliberately exercise, so I have joined the recreational centre and I go along there three or four times a week. I find that helps because I was getting too tired in the evening'.

Seeking support from co-drivers

Some academics looked to colleagues for support and this had proved to be a great source of comfort and had assisted them to cope. This, it was argued, was in stark contrast to the level or lack of support offered to them by the management of the University. A 'far more user friendly' approach was required, some argued, and a model of organisation that is 'more supportive and addresses people's insecurities generated by the changes' (21). While the University 'demands we publish', some academics felt they were attempting to do the 'impossible with nothing' (21) and this had resulted in the perception that the changes and workplace demands were somewhat 'one-sided' (21). Working within a new definition of community, the workplace environment had become less personal than that experienced in the predecessor colleges. As a result, this had created a more 'impersonal university world' (13).

> 'No one knows whether you are sick, divorced, remarried, or have other problems and need pastoral care. No one has time to check the staff is being cared for. The campus ministers are run off their feet not only with stressed students but also stressed staff'.

Travelling over bumpy roads

Although disenchanted by the changes, many academics sought to *accommodate* the ongoing changes into their working lives by expanding or modifying their behaviour in order to meet the expectations brought about by the organisational changes. In a relatively short period of time, a significant number of academics had enrolled in post-graduate studies to improve the level of their qualifications, were attending conferences more regularly, and had begun to consider the possibility of engaging in research projects. Active participation in various endeavours brought some academics higher levels of work satisfaction and motivation as effort and outcomes produced tangible results, either in recognition or career advancement, thereby providing the necessary reinforcement to continue. The new expectations, including the move to upgrade qualifications, carry out research, publish, as well as teach, had created, for these staff, a positive feeling of being intellectually 'stretched' (6); an attitude well appreciated by a University striving to enhance its profile through improved staff credentials. Yet the increased productivity came at a price, as many

academics worked tirelessly to cope with the increasing workload, demands of administration, and the extra burden of upgrading qualifications while writing for publication. Without adequate support, many were left struggling:

> 'This year has been extremely hard. The effect is stress. While the University has its attractions and its potential, I don't want to stay much longer as my own personal goals in research and study for a Ph D have not been supported. I have to think about the future and increase in stress' (22).

Some academics coped with the increasing pressure and workload by *extending* the working day and by working at weekends to complete, or 'keep up', with the daily demands placed upon them. Others sought opportunities to *retreat* from the workplace to minimise disruptions and complete work tasks. Some found it essential to *ration time* or 'block out a period of time each week' (17) in order to gain time for concentrated periods of research, writing and relaxation, as evidenced in the example provided by respondent (19):

> 'Personally the work has been very stressful and hard. This has led to working at home a lot more, particularly in writing books and journal articles, in reviewing student theses, so professional development has improved of necessity' (19).

Variable performance

Although many academics complained of feeling exhausted and 'burnt out' others remained positive, despite the difficulties experienced in the workplace. While the University environment provided academic stimulation, the stress and disappointment is obvious in the comments of respondent (24), yet this academic is able to remain positive through continuing to achieve personal goals:

> 'The personal impact has been hard work, research, publications, committees, a Masters degree, soon a PhD, conference presentations, involvement in aboriginal education that was very rewarding. But there is stress, there is the problem of being let down, feeling tired. None of this was apparent with the former teachers' college. So my time has to be rationed around now. There is a lot of work that is not recognised in any workplace agreement document. I feel positive about the changes, in spite of all this hassle, due to setting goals and achieving them' (24).

Internally motivated, these academics utilised opportunities that arose in order to gain more control over their workplace environment through the adoption of numerous strategies including individual *goal setting*. As a result, they believed they had grown professionally from their experiences; for example, they had, of necessity, become more organised, utilised technology to facilitate learning more than before, and had improved their administrative skills. By actively participating in the changes, rather than 'fighting against them' (25), these academics had been able to increase their repertoire of behaviours, and this had produced a feeling of being 'more able to control the emotional tension, even in spite of the unstable working climate' (26), and had facilitated 'more control over the working environment' (25). Individuals should take some responsibility for the changes, these academics argued, even though it may not be clear 'where the University is going' (27).

While some argued the effect of the changes had resulted in lower staff morale, others believed that individuals had developed 'greater self-assurance about themselves as academics' (28). Conversely, those academics less inclined to believe they might affect

some control over the changes, accepted that academics would 'just have to grin and bear them' (4).

The approach adopted by interviewee (29) provides a useful example of an academic who managed to work effectively within the organisation even though experiencing feelings of considerable rejection as a result of the changes. By actively increasing the level of self-value and de-emphasising the role and value of the organisation, this academic was able to reduce the level of dissonance created by the lack of personal recognition, and de-emphasis on teaching. In this way, respondent (29) was able to restore sufficient balance between work expectations and personal satisfaction to remain working at the University rather than resign. In relation to the intended resignation, interviewee (29) explains: 'but on balance the joy of teaching won the day' and in countering feelings of rejection: 'So while the institution doesn't value me, on another level I am able to say poor them' (29).

Turbo-charging

The significant losses experienced as a result of the changes were, for some academics, compensated for by the creation of opportunities to *work in different ways* and to engage in work related activities not previously experienced. As shown in the comments of respondent (16), the changes brought 'more stress, a lot more stress...and many more demands that before, in terms of administration', yet these had proved:

> 'challenging in terms of the things we have to think about and decide. Miss the personal contact with students BUT now teaching at a higher level and in a different way than before' (16).

For another, the exposure to the new workplace environment brought opportunities to develop assertiveness, the ability to speak with authority and to give definite answers, and, with a reordering of priorities, an 'ability to cope with the increase in pressure' (30). Others argued that their ability to cope with the changes had been a 'matter of choice'; that is, after appraising the situation, academics were free to either adapt or simply allow the changes to overwhelm them. As indicated in the response by interviewee (31) the opportunity for personal and professional growth cancelled out any possible losses caused by the changes, and the required resiliency to cope, on some occasions, had extended to dealing with workplace politics. For respondent (31) the positive outcomes had resulted in an increase in commitment to the University.

> 'The personal impact has been the challenge to sink or swim, better career opportunities than before in the College system, the chance to do a PhD, to develop professionally and in management. Because of this I feel some loyalty to the University although there is a lot of backstabbing politics here, but my scars are healing well' (31).

A strong belief in the impact and need for individual change to ensure change at the more general level is evident in the response of interviewee (32). To this academic, change is about 'self-change' rather than changing others or the institution. In this way change equates to the growth of the individual, others and the institution, and is an essential element if the organisation is to move forward.

Respondent (32) explains: 'If one of you continues to grow, the University continues to grow; if you stop growing the University begins to die. The people who suddenly feel they are on top, that they don't have to grow, that they can tell other people what to do, are finished. As far as I am concerned, the University is going backwards from that moment (32). This philosophy toward change and the ability to remain enthusiastic about the future assisted

this academic to cope with the less than ideal experiences of the past, as illustrated in the comments 'things were decided from on high without consultation, but we strive into the future' (32). The acceptance that change is essential for individual growth, no matter the age, is clearly evident in the words of this academic: 'I am not the same person today as I was last year...I would say I have changed radically...The older I become the more sure I am of myself' (32).

Realigning the road map

The ability to *convert negatives into positives* proved useful as a means of coping with the changes for a number of academics, as evidenced in the comments of respondent (33). While agreeing that many changes had indeed occurred, 'you accept those and look for the positive things you can do about them. Don't dwell on the past. You just simply make the best of the present situation and maintain as much integrity for the program as you can' (33). By reconceptualising the changes, difficulties become challenges to be overcome and a number of academics interviewed had felt a 'warm glow' from the sense of achievement of overcoming adversity. The ability to reduce the dissonance created by the changes through the ability to retain a balanced view between the negative and positive elements of the changes allowed some academics to retain a forward-looking perspective. The approach to 'presenting both sides of the argument' is illustrated in the comments of respondent (32) when commenting on the disparity between the wealth of one university compared with the new University: 'We don't have its wealth, or resources, but in one sense we have a status as a university'. In this way, the positive dimensions of the changes were able to 'move things along' (32).

Respondent (3) makes effective use of metaphor to describe the impact of the changes and, while these had been difficult, the stimulus provided by the 'challenge of change' and the modification to work behaviour had enabled this academic to remain positive.

> 'Working at the university has been a very tiring time, like 'riding a bike and building the bike at the same time'. But there has been the challenge of change. My teaching style has had to change to cater for adult learners and I have had to be more flexible than before'.

Respondent (15) provides another example:

> 'The changes have aged me, caused me to work longer hours here and leave my son at home alone. The challenges of academic work are a positive and I had had to be more adaptable, learn how to switch off, do aerobics to keep fit, be more organised. Generally I feel I have come through the changes satisfactorily'.

Running in the new model

Others found that the increased workload severely restricted their time available for personal relaxation and enjoyment with others, yet the *strong commitment to the concept of the new University* provided the necessary motivation to 'keep on' (16) and impetus to sustain efforts to cope with the changes, as respondent (30) explains:

> 'A difficulty has been the horrendous workload which has greatly reduced time available for contact with others and even personal time such as holidays. But in spite of these negatives, the experience of developing a university has been well worthwhile, a 'great experience' Meeting people, particularly those from other states has been a plus'.

All that is needed is a great deal of 'hope and patience' as respondent (32) highlights:

> 'In all this we need patience. The University cannot happen overnight. Some universities in Australia have been in existence for 100 years, others for 30 years. But the new University has been in existence only 5 years. We need patience and hope'.

Hoping the bumpy road ends soon

The belief that change is transitional in nature assisted some academics to cope more effectively with the organisational changes confronting them; hopefully, they believed, the changes would not last forever. Supported by the view that there is 'a definite end in sight', and that, at least, 'we should be over the worst of it' (7) as 'we move from A to B' (16), these academics accepted the difficulties of the changes primarily to reach the 'the light at the end of the tunnel' (1,16,34). While accepting the difficulties of the changes, academics more readily accepted the negative aspects of the changes in the belief that the changes were characteristic of this transitory stage of the University's development. As respondent (35) shows: 'because the University is in a transitional stage, it is easy to see the negative aspects of the changes, but it is now a University and values such as scholarship and research must be encouraged'.

Guiding the tour

For a small group of mainly senior academics, the changes created little disruption, especially so for those who were either keen researchers in the predecessor colleges or who were ideally placed in positions of influence and control over the direction of the changes. Others believed their success in coping with the changes resulted from their ability to 'work harder and smarter' (36) and as a consequence, the high energy normally required to cope with the changes was able to be channelled more productively into assisting those who were struggling. By assuming the role of mentor or nurturer to others, these academics fulfilled an essential role, as highlighted by respondent (37):

> 'The personal impact has been the necessity to work much harder. There is also the need to somehow stop the troops from mutinying, reminding them of their positive achievements and at the same time watching they don't overload themselves in the interests of the institution but not themselves'.

Wood et al (1998) described the challenge of organisational change as firstly, 'being able to personally deal positively with change and the stress that accompanies it; and secondly, being able to help others do the same' (p.619). The sense of satisfaction gained by some academics in being able to help others is considerable, as the response from interviewee (35) shows:

> 'I like doing positive things and as head of department I feel pride in encouraging staff around the various campuses within the school to achieve their own potential; e.g. giving them access to resources they may not have known existed'.

If any concerns existed for these academics, they were not for themselves but for others who were not as easily able to cope with the changes. The experience of watching these academics suffer caused considerable distress for some who occupied positions in management, as shown in the comments of respondent (36):

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'But for others there is uncertainty, a feeling of being let down, and a lot of stress. It has been distressful watching these hard working, wonderful people feeling this way'.

Forging ahead - keeping up to the speed limit

The increase in institutional status brought about by the changes saw some academics experience a sudden rise in professional status and position, which allowed them greater input and control over the organisational direction and change. This provided an effective 'cushioning' effect against the impact of the changes enabling these academics to remain somewhat more positive than others, even though their 'working hours were much longer' (39). As respondent (10) explains, the impact of the changes had 'allowed me to very rapidly rise within the system' and, as a result of 'being in the right place at the right time', had 'allowed me to develop myself in ways that I hadn't dreamed of when I came here 5 years ago' (10). The sudden rise in academic status was not, however, only attributed to being 'lucky', but also to the possession of desirable personal characteristics, such as in 'being a fairly flexible, easy-going person, who is able to move with the flow, but at the same time maintain those things that I believe in'.

Driving the bus

Some academics expressed considerable delight towards the organisational changes as these had brought greater opportunities for professional development and research, and a high level of satisfaction at being able to contribute to the development of the University. Respondent (23) expresses this well:

> 'Overall the changes have been positive. The personal freedom is exhilarating. This has involved more personal research effort than in the past; making connection with people overseas has helped establish the credibility of the university'.

For these academics, the reorientation of values created by the formation of the University left them excited by the possibility of being able to pursue those endeavours less valued in the predecessor institution. Little realignment was required to maintain the balance between organisational and personal values; for these academics, opportunities to help 'create' organisational change, rather than merely respond to change, was clearly a strong element in their ability to remain positive, as respondent (41) highlights:

> 'Personally, I have always been involved in research and so did not have to adapt (others have felt threatened by the directives to carry out research). I haven't made work behaviour changes although other staff have been greatly affected by the changes'.

The personal impact of the changes has been 'all for the better, particularly in encouraging research, i.e. giving it credit' argued respondent (39), while another rejoiced in the perception that the changes fit with 'my intentions and motivations, identity and vocation' and there were now 'worthwhile challenges to contribute to' (42). Expanding on this, respondent (42) explains:

> 'My view (of the changes) is very much influenced by being originally a CAE lecturer who would very much prefer to be a University lecturer, from my own background and my family background and what I had done. Therefore the changes whereby our college...became a University was something that I wholeheartedly welcomed'.

For the relatively small number of senior academics already in positions of influence, the changes brought opportunities for increased participation in being able to shape the direction of the new University, and being 'very much at the cutting edge of putting people in the picture with the University' (43); a situation that produced high levels of personal satisfaction. Even though the changes had often necessitated considerable adjustment (e.g. increased travel), these academics remained positive towards the changes:

> 'The personal impact has been profound. Driven from one managerial position to another. Chairing committees, acting Head, acting Director in various faculties. There has been constant change and constant travel. Probably only one day per week spent in the substantive position and campus. All other days have been spent at other campuses. So constant change has become normal and there has been less time available for teaching. The administrative experience has been excellent. So the personal effect of the changes is positive' (44).

The extensive knowledge of these senior academics regarding the political, social and economic influences that had led to the changes in higher education and the University provided the necessary contextual framework through which to understand the enormous pressures confronting the organisation as it sought to establish itself in the higher education arena.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the multiplicity of responses utilised by academics in order to cope with the ongoing changes occurring throughout their workplaces. Many academics perceived that the losses from the changes had not been sufficiently balanced by the gains and this effectively increased their sense of loss and disillusionment. In keeping with the work of Bridges (1995), a growing sense of disenchantment or loss of personal meaning was clearly evident in the comments of some academics who struggled to remain effective in the workplace during this period. For others, the loss of role identity had created difficulties and frustrations leading to, in Bridges' terms, a sense of disidentification. The intensity and impact of the changes experienced by these academics helped determine the strategies utilised to cope in the workplace and, for some, this meant effectively removing themselves from the stressful work environment to the comfort of working at home. The lack of congruence between organisational and personal goals left these academics with little confidence to participate in the workplace changes.

This research supports the view that a sense of efficacy plays an essential role in the individual's ability to cope effectively (Oakland & Ostell, 1996). Many academics believed they no longer possessed the skills that would allow them to participate fully in their new environment. They claimed to be overworked and unhappy, and found the work environment alienating. These perceived difficulties were exacerbated further when compared with the abilities of those academics who were apparently more able in their new environment, especially those with a strong appreciation for opportunities for research. For those promoted into middle management roles (e.g. Head of School), the new workplace offered more positive experiences and the opportunity to take an active role in shaping the events and situations in which they found themselves. These academics often attributed their coping ability to personal characteristics, such as being flexible and adaptable to change, while for some senior academics, opportunities to take part in the decision-making process left them feeling more positive. Carpenter (1992) too noted that the need to cope with change might have positive effects. As evidenced in this research, this need can act as a catalyst for personal growth, the broadening of individual perspectives, and the development of new skills.

During any change, the development of new skills and competencies is essential in order to cope with work-related problems. Many academics in this study became involved in professional development activities, including working towards the achievement of a higher degree. Many academics also showed great adaptability in the strategies employed to deal with their daily frustrations, workplace overload and workplace politics. These covered a whole spectrum of possibilities ranging from denial, withdrawal, seeking support, reconceptualising, to more positively supporting colleagues, assuming the role of mentor, and being more proactive in the workplace. Unfortunately, the changed emphasis in the nature of academics' work led many to believe this had led to a deterioration of quality due to the inadequate time to properly perform academic, administrative and professional duties, as in the past.

There is little doubt the strategies utilised will produce differing outcomes, and the long-term success of these strategies will be partly dependent on the relationship they have to the overall goals and direction of the University. While many academics have struggled hard to adjust to the changes, others have achieved greater levels of success than would have been likely in their previous roles. Essential to the process for many academics, is the need to relinquish past practices in order to focus on the possibilities for the future.

Change is with us to stay, and not surprisingly, has always been so. What is surprising is our reluctance to learn from the experiences of the past in order to better facilitate effective organisational change in the present and future, to ensure those individuals encapsulated within the process are not so adversely affected. Of importance also is the recognition by those charged with the responsibility for facilitating change of the need to be diligent in understanding and anticipating the possible effects and outcomes emanating from the organisational change process.

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