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Dr Shelleyann Scott
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987 Perth WA
Telephone: +61 08 92664029
Email: s.scott@curtin.edu.au

Dr Kathryn Dixon
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987 Perth WA
Telephone: +61 08 92662189
Email: k.dixon@curtin.edu.au

Mr Robert Dixon
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987 Perth WA
Telephone: +61 08 92662182
Email: r.dixon@curtin.edu.au

Dr Rosemary Kerr
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987 Perth WA
Telephone: +61 08 92664479
Email: r.kerr@curtin.edu.au

Issues of motivation and workload affecting engagement in good teaching: The 21st Century academics' perspective.

ABSTRACT - Can 21st Century universities afford to maintain elitist attitudes to research and reward structures which minimalise the importance of good teaching, with the underlying principle that anyone can teach and only the elite few can conduct research? This study reports on university academics' perceptions of their work lives. In-depth interviews undertaken with thirty eight academics over five divisions revealed issues with motivation to engage with teaching, and concerns with high workloads. These academics indicated that there were mixed messages emerging from the university administration regarding the importance of teaching. The reward structures and job security were perceived to be overtly focused on the research agenda rather than good teaching. Workload was a significant issue, particularly for academics in the Business Division who were undertaking offshore teaching over and above their normal teaching load. Across the university high student numbers were impacting on academics' capacity to deliver high quality teaching. There was no time for reflection, curriculum review, development of more professional materials, in-depth communication with students, sound feedback on assessments, and professional development of teaching strategies. There was a general positive attitude to teaching with most indicating that they wanted to be more innovative in their teaching but didn't know how to achieve this. This paper also explores the paradox of perceptions that research brings in considerable funding to the university over teaching, whereas the opposite is the reality.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, universities within Australia have experienced a climate of continuing change, decreasing government funding coupled with increased accountability and scrutiny, and commentary critiquing the quality of educational programs and graduates. As a result of declining funding, many universities have strategically positioned themselves to enhance their market share by establishing offshore programs and encouraging international student enrolment. With university education reported to be the 3rd highest service export industry in Australia, worth in excess of \$5 billion, it is hardly surprising that government, business, professional bodies, and community stakeholders have an opinion on what is wrong with university graduates and the quality of their education (Tilbrook, 2003). The former Federal Minister of Education, Dr Brendan Nelson was a vocal advocate for a forceful "quality agenda" in Australian higher education. He highlighted numerous concerns such as the need for better professional skill development by students, poor academic teaching skills, and poor assessment practices. The Government's concerns with teaching and learning practices in universities was demonstrated by the establishment of the Carrick Institute and the allocation of a significant pool of funding designed to "to reward those institutions that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching" (DEST, 2004, p.29).

Even though much of the dialogue about university educational quality is well intentioned, and in many cases appropriate, the higher education context is not a simplistic environment that can be easily "fixed up". In addition to facing issues with improving teaching and learning, academics and administrators alike are juggling many competing agendas including the push for more, better quality, and collaborative research; decreased job security and the 'contractual-ising' of the academic workforce; sourcing new markets for programs; accessing other sources of funding; an increasing administrative load; larger classes; and more tuition periods as a result of increased flexibility for learners; to name a few. These 'agenda' create increased pressure on the university workplace and stress on its staff. Even though teaching matters were highlighted in the Government

priority list, so too was research, with the Research Quality Framework emerging concurrently, further securing the age-old tension between research and teaching in the university setting.

Purpose of the Research

This paper reports on one component of a much larger longitudinal research study that has been exploring teaching and learning issues within the university context. Previous research focused on the students' perspectives, professional development of academics, developing and evaluating an improvement cycle. The research aspect is now focusing on teaching learning concerns from the perspective of the academic. It is also exploring lecturers' perceptions of their work lives to determine the key issues for them in engaging with teaching and learning matters and professional development. To a smaller extent it investigates the university culture.

Literature review

Professional development in higher education

Professional development that has been found to be effective is contextualised, focused on student learning, is ongoing and encompassed within the work day, inquiry or evidence-based, and has a collaborative problem-solving orientation (Scott, 2002; 2003). Ramsden (2003, p.245) indicated that sound academic development generally translated to "working with people who are active in research and whose approach to staff development is driven by a spirit of stimulating inquiry [that] engages us in the excitement of discovery and makes learning about teaching as exhilarating as doing research". Incorporating time in workload models for lecturer-reflection on teaching practices, curriculum [re]development, refining assessment processes, and using student feedback is crucial, not only for developing better teachers, but also for ongoing improvement of programs (Ballantyne, Bain, & Packer, 1999; Costa & Kallik, 2000). While acknowledging the importance of reflection, ensuring that academics have the time to engage in these constructive teaching behaviours is essential to creating an embedded and continuing professional learning environment. Much of the research on establishing sound professional development emerged from the school system rather than universities, and yet how more relevant are these professional development support processes for academics, considering that many are discipline experts with little formal knowledge of teaching theory and practice.

Unfortunately much of the professional development established in universities is based upon the "one-shot-workshop" premise, proven through the research to be largely ineffective in changing teachers' routine practices (Joyce & Showers, 1995). There is little support for systematic professional development within university environments, with most incentive and recognition processes being founded upon research, not teaching prowess. Few universities actively support academics' engagement in formal teaching qualifications (Ramsden, Margetson, Martin, & Clarke, 1995). Many administrators overtly or covertly discourage their staff in pursuing teaching-oriented studies as this takes them away from discipline-based research. Discouragement frequently is evident in refusal of funding and/or leave for educational-oriented conferences and activities; 'loading up' academics who are interested in teaching with higher numbers of classes than their colleagues resulting in less time to engage in curriculum review and educational research; and/or discrediting the value of their teaching and educational research efforts amongst the faculty. Lack of support is also evident through the publication, praise, and loud recognition of colleagues' discipline-based research, in contrast to no affirmation for teaching-oriented activities and research.

The literature iterates the importance of leaders in establishing contexts that support good teaching (Macdonald & Wisdom, 2002; Ramsden, 1998). Schools leaders must assume responsibility for enabling their lecturers to teach well and enhance their development through appropriate support activities (Webb, 1994). Leaders must create environments that support effective academic development, such as, communicating their vision for teaching and learning and encouraging buy-in

at all levels; enabling academics to engage with the support processes; establishing systematic initiatives and programs; making collegial collaborative structures available and desirable; and recognising and rewarding those who are teaching well (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Ramsden & Martin, 1996).

Adult learners' motivation

Academics, as adult learners themselves, have different needs, motivations, incentives and perspectives to those of younger students. Knowles in his work on "adult learners" identified that they need to have a level of self-determination and control with regards to their learning (Knowles, Elwood, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). They come to a task with a depth of life experience which they feel should be recognised. This experience influences their perspectives and they frequently feel that it is useful in providing insights about solving a problem alone or collaboration with others (Long, 2004). When adults have a problem or issue they are most receptive to learning experiences that will assist them to solve or resolve them.

The question of who participates and who does not, and why, is a recurring preoccupation for adult learners. The question of who participates can be interpreted at two levels. First, it can be seeking to understand the needs and motives of adult learners. Second, it can be wanting to explore the issues of what actually facilitates adults' learning, hence, their participation in educational opportunities. Some researchers have proposed that the responsibility for non-participation must lie with the providers. The argument here is that given the right content, methods and conditions, all adult learners are attracted to an educational experience (OECD, 2003). Merriam and Caffarella, (1999) found that 83% of adult learners sampled attributed some past, present or future change in their lives as the motivator for them engaging in learning. Factors that both positively and negatively impact on participation included employment, subject interest, improved qualifications, perceived usefulness, portability and equivalence of credits and the encouragement and incentives offered by employers to engage in the experience. According to Wlodkowski *et al* (2001), the emotional response of the adult learner to the educational opportunity determines motivation. The emotional response is bound to a large extent by the culture in which the adult learner locates himself/herself and this in turn influences task engagement. If academics as adult learners who are interested in improving their own learning and teaching skills are to engage with professional development opportunities, it is incumbent upon the employer to provide learning atmospheres in which the learner and instructor feel connected to one another. Wlodkowski and his associates (2001) also suggested the essential factors that directly influence adult learners' engagement are a favourable attitude towards the new learning; enhancing meaning that included learners' perspectives and values; and encouraging a culture of learning that is truly valued by the organisational context. Additionally, adults tend to be motivated to learn by factors such as self-actualisation; the desire for recognition; security that results in a higher quality of personal and/or work life; and to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem (Wlodkowski, 2004). The learning has to be perceived to be directly relevant to their work or personal lives. The "teacher" or "expert" from whom they are learning must be enthusiastic and credible (Wlodkowski, 2004).

Motivation for academics would be as complex as other workers within industry and business. Academics would have intrinsic and extrinsic motivations; with intrinsic motivators including the desire to teach more effectively, care for their students' learning needs, safeguard academic standards within their disciplines, maintain a high level of interest in their subject area, and engage in good quality research. The extrinsic motivators would be attaining job security (frequently through tenure or long term contracts); seeking promotion and the resultant higher levels of remuneration; and recognition by their superordinates and colleagues for their work (either research and/or teaching).

The importance of time for reflection on teaching

Considerable learning occurs at work where adults are faced with situations or problems that need to be addressed. By engaging with the problem and actively seeking to understand it and seek solutions, adults are engaging in what Kolb (1984) identified as “experiential learning”.

Experiential learning theory posits that learning is an ongoing process of creating knowledge through the transformation of experience into existing cognitive frameworks resulting in a change in a person’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. A key aspect of experiential learning is reflection on the experience and learning from it, both in what went well and what could be improved. This reflection or “metacognition” is essential to developing an individual’s capacity to learn and transfer that learning into the real setting from either workshop settings or different contexts (Bandura, 1986; Woolfolk, 2004). Reflection requires time; mental space; and an understanding of the purpose, importance, and how it influences practice. Unfortunately, time for reflection is becoming an increasing problem within the highly pressured and almost ‘factory production’ orientation that is evident in many Australian universities.

Woodilla, Boscardin and Dodds (1997), investigated how educators perceived time with respect to their work and professional development activities. They identified eight dimensions of time grouped into three main themes. These were “connections between life-world and educational practices, the time economy of the school, and strategies for using time according to individual needs” (p.299). Teachers reported that ‘finding time’ for professional development depended on “achieving a balance” among the complex and conflicting demands on their time. They found teachers’ frequent references to time underscored their concern with time issues and “reflected the pervasiveness and centrality of time consciousness in their lives” (p.300). Although Woodilla and associates research on time was based in schools, the issues of finding or making time for professional development, refinement of practice, feeling pressured, and juggling and prioritising competing agenda resonate within the higher education context.

The literature supports the fact that the adult learner is the new majority, and adult learning is fast becoming the new priority in the educational environment (OECD, 2003). Foley (2004) points out that over the last twenty five years, participation in adult learning has been constantly increasing. The increase in adult participation and involvement in education impacts upon how educational institutions respond to the needs of not only externally sourced clients but also to their own teaching staff. This coupled with a growing pressure to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the Australian tertiary sector impacts upon the response from universities regarding professional development opportunities for academics. This response will need to be guided by a recognition that education is a process which continues throughout life; a willingness for institutions to respond to the needs of a changing clientele; and the need to adopt teaching methodologies and program delivery styles that are compatible with the needs of adult learners.

Theoretical framework

The individual academic is the central focal point in this study due to his/her importance in the classroom as the “architect” of the learning experiences for students (Fogarty, 1999). Traditionally in universities, academics had two main priorities in their work lives - research and teaching. Over the past ten years, however, a third component has emerged - administration. This is frequently because of the venturing into offshore educational markets, encouraging increased international student enrolments in Australian campuses, and economic rationalisation evident in larger classes. Additionally, over the past five years there has been an increasing focus on the quality of graduates, which in many cases is translated to the quality of the teaching in universities. Hence, improving teaching has raised its profile over, the traditionally pre-eminent priority of research. This study therefore, explores the motivational drivers on academics in their work lives and specifically to investigate engagement in teaching, administration as it relates to teaching, professional development, and research.

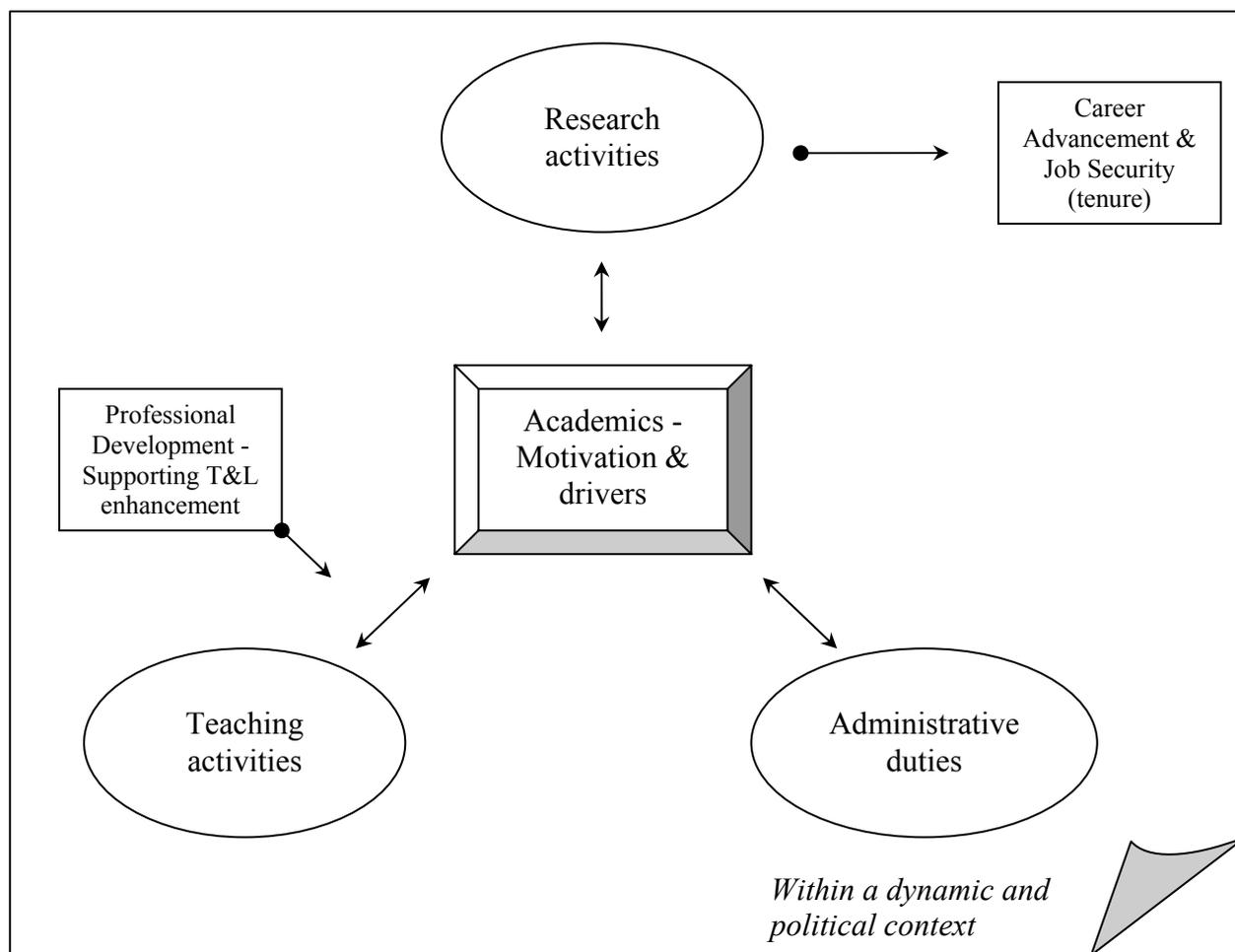


Figure 1: Driving forces influencing academics' motivation

Method

This study was aligned with the interpretive paradigm. It bridged qualitative and quantitative methodology and involved in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interview duration ranged from 30 minutes to one and a half hours with the mean being one hour. Academics' experiences, perceptions, opinions were sought regarding their teaching and learning activities and expertise. These lecturers were invited to outline their teaching strategies and assessment practices and rationale for implementation. Additionally, the participants were encouraged to discuss their understanding of a range of programs and initiatives designed to support ongoing teaching development and curriculum review. Their professional development activities were discussed. Academics' opinions of the value placed on teaching by their school and the division was explored. Lecturers were invited to reflect on what motivated them to engage with teaching, and to outline the incentives and impediments that were in place for staff to engage with teaching-related activities. Lastly, respondents were encouraged to reflect on the context in which they were teaching and outline a predictive perspective related to the future of higher education within Australia.

Sample

The sample comprised thirty six academics who participated in a semi-structured interview. These academics were randomly selected from the six divisions that comprise the university: Business, Health Science, Humanities, Resources and Environment, Science and Engineering and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies. Six members of the sample were at professorial/associate professor level, a further twenty were at lecturer/associate lecturer level with the complement comprising non-tenured

and contract academic staff. There were more male respondents (61%) than females (39%) and the academics' ages ranged from ~28 to 60 years.

Results

Good teaching

Approximately 80% of the sample indicated they were interested in their teaching, students and becoming a better teacher. This high number of academics who were engaged with developing good teaching may have been an aspect of sampling bias as many who were selected were as a part of a number of teaching and learning initiatives, although many of these academics stated their activities and attitudes were commonplace in their schools. All of these respondents indicated that they had previously engaged with, or were currently participating in a teaching and learning-oriented initiative or professional development program. The majority (75%) indicated they enjoyed activities that enabled them to work with the colleagues, to discuss and problem solve issues in their teaching or emerging from their educational programs, and to develop and share resources that would have a positive impact on their students.

The majority (88%) lamented the lack of good quality time they have to reflect on their teaching, make changes and implement refinements. Most of this group (88%) indicated that their reflection on teaching was ongoing, short bursts and usually related to re-developing their unit outlines and guides. The academics from the business areas were the most emphatic that they rarely enjoyed blocks of time to deeply reflect due to their heavy teaching and administrative loads which was as a result of unit coordination with large student numbers and many offshore locations.

Many academics (60% of the total sample) in the Business and Health areas indicated that having relevant industry experience and maintaining close ties to their industry was a significant factor in providing good teaching for their students. The majority of the sample had engaged in teaching-oriented initiatives that were focused on reviewing the curriculum, assessments, increasing their teaching strategies, integrating professional skills into their units, and developing more useful resource materials. This group reported using a range of teaching strategies which included ice breaker activities, interviewing, reflecting debriefing activities, guest speakers, authentic tasks such as using actual forms and information from the workplace, case studies and practical examples, group and discussion based exercises, and simulations.

Disengaged teachers

Twenty percent of the total sample were disinterested and/or disengaged with teaching. All in this group were older male academics, and most were senior positions/responsibilities in their schools, although none were full professors. These academics were across all the schools that were sampled. Their priorities were primarily research and/or external consultancy, with one who was consumed with running a business aside from his/her academic role. These academics viewed teaching as an unfortunate interruption to their other interests. They were extremely negative towards their students and were not interested in engaging with any professional development to improve their teaching abilities. Almost all, of this group (90% of the 20%) described their teaching strategies as traditional "lecture style" which was mainly didactic with occasional question and answer.

Concerns with the quality of the students and programs

Almost 95% of the sample indicated they had serious concerns with the quality of the students and the educational programs. They stated that many students who were now entering university had less commitment to their studies than those of previous years. In their view students had too many competing activities in their lives, such as work, study, children, social life, and aging parents, to really prioritise their studies. As a result of these time pressures they stated students rarely came to class prepared which meant that tutors had to drop the cognitive demand of discussions because the majority were not able to engage. These academics found it frustrating that many students did not

attend lectures but demanded that notes and associated materials were made available to them through an online medium. Students were reported as “more demanding”, having “less commitment” to their studies, were more reliant on the lecturer ... “required spoon feeding”, had poorer skills ... “they were in third year and yet they had never accessed the databases for a research assignment” “the quality of written work was appalling” “they simply cannot manage their time effectively”, and were quite strategic about how much effort to put into their studies in order to pass their units ... “one student told me anything more than a pass was a waste of his time which he could spend on something else”.

Respondents stated that the practical elements that made this university’s courses industry relevant were being downgraded due to poor attendance by students. Poor attendance meant that students were not engaging with practical exercises, field trips and industry guest speakers all of which had been overtly incorporated to ensure industry relevance and authenticity. They indicated that this was a serious matter that should be addressed by senior administrators. Twenty five percent of the respondents overtly stated that the pressure to push less-able or less-motivated students through the course was having the effect of “dumbing down” the educational quality of the programs.

Another quality issue that was raised were the number of students who were entering programs who had very poor English language skills and/or literacy skills. Almost 70% of the sample (mostly in the business and Engineering areas) mentioned the difficulties that they had with students who could not participate in class, follow lectures, or cope with relatively simple written tasks was a very real concern. Poor literacy skills was acknowledged as a problem by almost all academics (96%) and was not only associated with international students but also with those entering from the Australian school system. Half (51%) of the respondents indicated that they simply did not have time to correct the English in assignments and to “teach” the students how to write reports, essays, how to paraphrase and reference properly. If they were required to take a more active “literacy” skills role then it would be at the “expense of teaching content” and they were not prepared to do that.

Ten percent of the sample stated that lack of “quality students coming into programs” coupled with the pressure from their administration to pass these students regardless of their poor performance had serious implications for the reputation of the degree and the university’s reputation. An interesting angle that these staff took was that they were themselves graduates from this university and their own qualifications were being downgraded because “standards were slipping” and there was a danger that over time the degrees from this university would be viewed as “coming out of a Weeties packet” or of very little value.

Organisational Culture

All respondents (100%) reported feeling under stress with their heavy teaching and administrative workload and research responsibilities. A consistent theme was that even though teaching was a valuable activity which brought in student funding into the university “it [was] research that gets you recognition, promotion and security”. There was a mixed response about whether teaching or research was prioritised. There was no doubt though that all felt that they were under pressure from the university administration to engage in more research and that this was emphasis probably arising from the Government’s Research Quality Framework (RQF) agenda. Many were unsure how this RQF was going to impact on them in the long term but they felt that there had been a revisiting of the traditional values that research was again important, and in many cases, the key priority of university academics, placing teaching in a subsidiary position again. Sixty per cent felt that there was a real priority issue for academics with expectations on them to complete their PhD to ensure ongoing contracts or the possibility of attaining tenure, while juggling huge teaching loads and massive administrative loads. For example, one respondent outlined his/her semester teaching and administrative load as unit coordination of four units, with student enrolments in excess of

2,000 students. His/her units were running in eight different locations and s/he had to coordinate up to 20 sessional tutors. The teaching quality implications were considerable just in attempting to provide uniform materials to all tutors much less to coordinate moderation across different tutorial groups. In addition to these considerations this lecturer was expected to travel to all locations to undertake 12 hours of teaching in each site over and above their Australian campus teaching load.

Administration was described by 50% of the respondents as “increasing over the past ten years” to the extent where one respondent described it as “out of control”. There was a feeling that much of their time was being wasted in tasks that could have been undertaken by school administration or office staff. One academic indicated that there was simply no “down time” between the semesters, trimesters, summer schools, intensively run units, and mid year schools. His/her comment was that this meant that they had no time to engage in an in-depth review of the curriculum and they just had to ‘tweak as they went’ because they were running from one unit to the other. There was no doubt that all the academics in this study were time-poor. They wanted to teach more effectively, engage with professional development, and do more research but they were always running from one deadline to the next. They felt that this was having a detrimental impact on the culture of their school and the wider university which should be explored by administrators.

Conclusion

The research has revealed a number of significant issues related to the current pressures under which academic staff, work. It has been acknowledged in this paper that the views of the sample towards tertiary teaching may be slightly skewed due to the fact that most were engaged in some form of ongoing professional development regarding teaching skills. The majority (80%) appeared to maintain positive attitudes towards teaching and their students. What is clear, however, is that even though the sample remained interested in their students’ well being and overall progress and were keen to pursue learning and teaching initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of education, there appeared to be a number of measures which seemed to militate against this.

Given the push towards the current teaching quality agenda by the Australian Federal Government and the emergence of organisations such as the Carrick Institute which aims to reward sound learning and teaching initiatives, academics still appear to be struggling under the weight of numerous demands currently at play in higher education. The sample indicated that although they would prefer to deliver high quality learning opportunities, they were restricted from doing so due to lack of time. In order for teaching staff to truly engage in ongoing cycles of improvement regarding learning they need time to develop professional materials, time for reflection and curriculum review, and greater opportunities to provide quality feedback on student assessments.

The research has also revealed that the increasing commercialisation of higher education is impacting upon the quality of the learning experience for students. Staff in the sample indicated that with larger class sizes and greater numbers of students enrolling in units in both onshore and offshore settings, there is far less time for academics to reflect upon their practice as they struggle to provide materials, oversee sessional staff employed to teach the units, monitor the assessment process and engage in the heavy administrative task load that is now a part of academic life. It seems that the changing student demographic in higher education is also impacting upon the relationships between the learning activities, the lecturer and the organisation. Students in many cases have developed a more professional orientation towards their study as university life competes with a myriad of other responsibilities such as family and paid work. University study has become another component of a busy work/life schedule and must therefore comply with demands for clear, baseline learning materials particularly with respect to assessment. The sample also suggested that an increase of students who present with English as a second language is also

potentially contributing to a perceived drop in standards regarding the cognitive level of class discussions as many students find it difficult to understand and therefore contribute. These factors, when linked to the perception by the sample of the increasing pressure to pass students, provide an environment for reduced rigour across a number of degree courses.

It would appear that in a number of cases academics would prefer to have the opportunity to engage in quality teaching and that even with limited resources they attempt to do so. However it remains to be seen whether universities possess the will to re-assess the major source of their funding. If it emerges that it is in fact teaching and the processes associated with it, there is surely a clear need for ongoing re-investment by the tertiary sector into programs and teaching skills. This may be achieved through dedicated curriculum review processes, educationally sound, comprehensive professional development for academic staff that articulates into teaching qualifications and genuine reward structures for those who strive to implement and maintain high quality teaching.

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