ACADEMIC WORK: PERCEPTIONS OF SENIOR ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS

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INTRODUCTION

The nature of academic work has been receiving increasing attention by researchers in the field of higher education in recent years. In the United States, for example, Clark (1987) has portrayed vividly the academic profession and academic life in American universities, while Ruscio (1987) has discussed academic work in a specific group of American higher education institutions. In the U.K., Becher (1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1990) has focused on academics and academic work at the level of the discipline, illuminating a rich variety of disciplinary cultures. In Australia, Harman (1988) has undertaken a case study of academic work and culture at the University of Melbourne. Adopting a different approach, Moses (1990) has undertaken a questionnaire study of academic work in select disciplines in a traditional Australian university, while Everett and Entrekin (1987) have undertaken a longitudinal survey study of academic attitudes on a number of aspects of academic work across a broad range of higher education institutions.

This paper reports on the findings of the first stage of a qualitative study of academic work in Australian universities1. This stage examined through interviews and document analysis the perceptions senior academic administrators hold of the research and teaching roles of academic work. The perspective sought, is thus an "internalist" one (Clark, 1983:4). The findings presented in the paper briefly describe the perceptions of 'research' and 'scholarship' and the link between research and scholarship, as well as the interconnections between research, scholarship and teaching. The study found a high level of consensus in the views presented and the final section of the paper discusses possible reasons for and interpretations of the unanimity of perceptions.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The aim of the current study is to investigate the core roles of academic work in universities about which many assumptions are held, but about which relatively limited systematic study has been undertaken. Fundamental to this study is the organisational context within which academic work takes place. Two major organisational dimensions in particular were identified for this purpose. The first is the structural division within universities which mirror and thus differentiate the different domains of knowledge. The broad disciplinary groupings of departments and faculties constituting the humanities, sciences, social sciences and professional areas are used. The

second organisational dimension is the 'vertical' structure of academic authority, a subset of which, in the form of administrative levels, is being utilised in this study. These are the senior academic administrative levels from department head to vice-chancellor.

In examining the core work roles of academics, the starting point for the study was to pose some key questions about the apparently obvious. Among the questions asked were:

1.   what is 'research'?
2.   what is 'scholarship'?
3.   is there a connection between an academic's teaching role and research role?

The combined approach of interviews and document analysis was adopted to begin to answer these questions.

While the three questions above may appear relatively straight-forward on one level, they are in fact quite complex and call for an approach which permits exploration and depth. Hence, a qualitative approach was adopted to investigate them. Further, given the theoretical considerations of the organisational context of the study, it was important to collect data from appropriate levels within the university and provide a degree of coverage across the organisation. The prime source of data is derived from semi-structured, open-ended interviews which permit an intensive probing of the issues and the possibility of seeking clarification and pursuing matters in detail which were seen to be important. The interviews averaged one to one and a half hours each and resulted in approximately 800 pages of data for analysis. Given the limitations arising from relying solely on one data source, documents were chosen to provide a second data source, and were used primarily to cross-validate the interviews. The documents analysed were either authored by senior academic administrators or were representative of universities or their departments, schools and faculties. (For a detailed description of methodological issues see Neumann, 1990).

The discussion of the findings in the following section reflect both the interview and document data. The intent is to portray the broad picture of the core components of academic work and their interrelationships, rather than to present a detailed close-up of each role.

PERCEPTIONS OF RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP AND TEACHING: DEFINITIONS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS

While research, scholarship and teaching may be seen to form the core activities of academics, what constitutes 'research' or 'scholarship', and how these relate to teaching, for example, do not readily appear to be identified, because they have not been explicitly articulated by academics. The portrait that follows draws on both the interviews with senior academic administrators and the document data. However, the discussion of

scholarship, and the interconnections between research and scholarship on the one hand, and research and teaching on the other, draw more heavily on the interview data than that of the documents.

The definition of 'research' emerging from the first stage of this study encompasses three major elements:

1.   the creation of new knowledge,
2.   the pursuit of a sustained line of enquiry, and
3.   the dissemination of research results through publication for the scrutiny of peers.

The data suggested that the creation of new knowledge may mean different things in different disciplines. For example, in the physical sciences it may be the discovery of a new compound, while in the histories it may be a new way of interpreting past events. Interestingly, the issue of what constitutes "new" knowledge was the only area in this stage of the study where disciplinary differences appeared. A small group of participants from sciences and one science-based professional area contended that in the humanities academics engaged in scholarship and not research since the amount of "new" knowledge was limited. The following words of one dean of sciences sums up the arguments of this group:

I think looking at it from a scientific perspective - and speaking from ignorance probably - we would tend to see a lot of the research that's done in the humanities as being more in the nature of scholarship rather than what we would see as research ... For example, people say they carry out 'research' in classics for example, now I would refer to that more as scholarship rather than research. There are only a limited number of things that you can read and study ... without regurgitating previous opinions and so on. (Participant 9:5) Hewitt

Certainly not all participants agreed with this differentiation and this area is being pursued in the on-going study. Enquiry was defined by the interview participants as a continuous, sceptical reflection on knowledge. While the creation of new knowledge is possible without the pursuit of a sustained line of enquiry, it was generally perceived that such work was unlikely to have an important longer term impact and would be of poor quality. Dissemination of results was considered vital because it communicates new knowledge to peers and allows for the replication of results.

The definition of 'scholarship' is generally far more difficult than that of 'research'. One interview participant compared defining 'scholarship' with defining "an elephant, you know it when you see it, but you have great trouble describing it" (Participant 30). As an activity, it is both interrelated with, and separate from, research. Scholarship interrelates with research in that it provides the context for research. It is both preliminary to and simultaneous with research, forming an important part of the "enquiry" process. As such, it involves the asking of questions, the

ability to glean information and to respond critically to what has been done in a particular area of knowledge. Whereas, however, research refers to depth of enquiry, scholarship provides breadth to enquiry. There is thus an interconnection between research and scholarship, which in this study has been termed a research-scholarship nexus.

However, scholarship is also an activity which is far broader than that of the research process, namely it spans the entire endeavour of academic work. It is an activity which extends into the many roles of academic work: teaching, mentoring, consulting, reading and writing. Writing in the area of scholarship involves the dissemination of research findings and knowledge to the broader academic community than just peers in a specific research specialisation, as well as to society. One interview participant explained:

I think that scholarship is a little more than research because, as a scholar at a university you can link in the research that you are doing with the papers you are presenting, with the academic leadership you are giving and the way in which you even motivate your students. (Participant 4, Dean, Social Sciences)

A definition of 'scholarship' needs to take into account its use beyond describing an activity. It also refers to a quality, or mode of working, which is thoughtful, careful and critical. These qualities are important academic values which pervade all areas of academic work and provide an important, though intangible, connection between the areas of research and teaching.

Indeed, the question of whether or not there is a connection between an academic's research role and his/her teaching role is not easily explored. The documents located and analysed provided limited information and the examination of a connection between the teaching and research roles relied very heavily on the interview data.

There was consensus among all interview participants that a multi-level, symbiotic nexus exists between the research and teaching roles of academic work. Indeed, this nexus is a distinctive feature of universities, differentiating them from other 'knowledge' institutions in society. It adds an extra dimension to teaching as well as enhancing university research. The participants' views on links between the teaching and research roles have been classified into three groups which have been termed:

1.	the tangible nexus
2.	the intangible nexus, and
3.	the global nexus.

Each is briefly described below, but for a detailed analysis of each of these types of connection, see Neumann (forthcoming).

On one level there is a tangible nexus where advanced knowledge and research skills are communicated to students, particularly in the senior undergraduate and postgraduate years. The documents studied also support this level of connection between research and teaching, but only few provide information at a more detailed level.

On another level the nexus operates in a more subtle, intangible manner, communicating to students at all levels an approach and attitude towards knowledge, which interview participants believed is only gained through continuous involvement in research. Participants emphasised the development in students of a critical, questioning approach to knowledge and a positive attitude towards learning. They stressed the need to foster curiosity among students, and excitement and enthusiasm about knowledge. On the other side, academics also benefit in a number of ways from teaching. They are continually forced to place their area of research within the broader context of the discipline and are stimulated by contact with an intelligent, young and continually changing student group. Such contacts guard against insularity and isolation. Participants pointed out that these benefits from the links between teaching and research do not operate for all students at all times at all levels. The nexus is influenced by factors such as: the type and purpose of the course; the ability and motivation of the student; the nature of the discipline; and the level of development of the discipline.

On yet a third level, there is a global nexus between the total departmental research activity and the department's teaching. The department's overall research areas provide the direction and framework for undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Since most disciplines today operate on a very large front, it is impossible for each department to have a total coverage of the field. Thus, many participants argued that universities have an obligation to maintain a broad spread of research specialisations in order to provide a balanced, undistorted coverage for teaching.

In the interviews, all participants readily admitted to a conflict between the two work roles, but stated that unless there was a wide divergence between an academic's area of research and that of his/her teaching, the source of conflict was one of time. Hence, time management and personal organisation are important, but many interview participants also argued that conflict was a natural part of academic work and should not necessarily be perceived as negative.

An important aspect stressed by participants is that a broad definition of research is essential to understanding the nexus between teaching and research. 'Research' covers a diverse number of activities and includes the overlapping area of scholarship. Scholarship, as discussed above, is both an activity and a manner of conducting research. It provides the wider context for research, merging with the research process of discovering 'new' knowledge. Given the intricacies of the teaching-research nexus

discussed above, scholarship forms a vital part of the tangible nexus and - perhaps even more strongly - the intangible nexus. Hence, scholarship permeates all aspects of academic work and can be seen to provide a link between research and teaching. However, as has been described, teaching also feeds back into scholarship and research in many subtle and diffuse ways. The result is a series of complex, interweaving, often invisible connections between the research and teaching roles of academic work.

In examining the research, scholarship and teaching components of academic work, two key activities form the core of these three areas - enquiry and dissemination of the results of enquiry. Enquiry covers a broad and diverse range of activities and incorporates a critical, questioning stance towards knowledge. This enquiry translates into the activities of research and scholarship, which can be seen to form opposing but merging ends of a continuum. Since scholarship describes both an activity of enquiry - providing the breadth to complement the depth of research - and a way of conducting enquiry, it forms part of the continuum of the research process. At one end of this continuum, research activity results in the creation of new knowledge. At the other end, research through scholarship is communicated in teaching. This communication occurs at a number of levels, often operating simultaneously. It can be the communication of advanced knowledge and research skills (the tangible nexus) or the transmission of the appropriate approaches and attitudes towards knowledge (the intangible nexus) or the direction and framework for the teaching offerings (the global nexus). Furthermore, the teaching feeds back into the research in subtle ways. Dissemination of the results of enquiry also occurs at a number of levels. It includes the publication of research results in a variety of forms for the scrutiny of peers. It also includes the wider dissemination of research progress to students through the teaching process, as well as the distribution of scholarly thinking and work to a more extensive intellectual community which could include, for example, academics outside the immediate peer group, students and other interested people.

DISCUSSION

The views on academic work presented above are derived from interview and document data. The interview participants had been selected to provide a balanced representation of senior academics, since the literature had indicated that different disciplines espouse different values and cultures and that intellectual authority resides in senior academics. Hence broad disciplinary affiliation and academic administrative level were incorporated in the selection of participants, as well as in the documents for analysis.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the unanimous agreement among all interview participants on matters of fundamental importance to academic work and universities. Their views demonstrate a unity and coherence of opinion on what constitutes research, scholarship

and the complex interconnections between the various components of academic work. This finding raises a number of questions and issues which need to be pursued, in order to determine the meaning of the results and their level of confidence. Hence, some interpretations are discussed in this section.

A number of writers (see for example, Kerr, 1972; Redner, 1987) have suggested the disintegrating effect on universities and academic values resulting from the increase in, and fragmentation of knowledge and the plurality of goals in the era of the "multiversity". Further, Becher's recent work has strongly advocated the existence and importance of disciplinary variation and the influence of disciplinary cultures on the conduct of academic work. However, this study has found that academics across a broad range of disciplines have demonstrated a consensus and unity of opinion on the fundamental roles of academic work.

There may be several reasons to account for the unity of opinion expressed. It may be that the type of questions asked by this study, while relating to issues fundamental to all disciplines, are at a level of generality applicable to the university as a whole. Such a conclusion is supported, for example, by the insistence on a broad definition of 'research' which recognises different disciplinary approaches within an umbrella definition, and by the tolerance of ambiguity demonstrated in defining 'research' as well as the acknowledgement of conflict as fundamental to academic work. The acceptance of diversity, ambiguity and conflict result in a unity of belief and can be seen as integrating fragmentary disciplinary forces to create a culture of the academic profession which espouses a collective perception of the nature of academic work. This theme of the existence of the opposing forces of fragmentation and integration has been recognised by a number of other writers. Clark (1983:106) discussed it in his master matrix model of higher education, suggesting that:

Individuals diverge and yet have a sense of serving one another. They go down different disciplinary paths yet belong to the academic profession. They become identified with one enterprise yet are made common members of a national system. Symbolically, modern academic systems are vast congeries of crosscutting lines of integration and overarching unities. There is so much to counteract, to overcome, since in the contents of knowledge and all the meanings associated with academic subjects, fragmentation is the dominant force. It is in the nature of academic systems to be increasingly pluralistic in the production of patterns of thought and in the precise definitions of proper behavior. But the specifics are lodged in generalities, and system making proceeds along cultural lines and according to administrative procedure.

%Clark (1987) pursued this idea of fragmentation and integration in his study of the very large and diverse American academic profession and re-affirmed it as a paradox of opposing forces arising from the matrix of disciplines and institutions. %Dill (1982a) discusses the theme of fragmentation and disintegration in academia, stressing the importance of

managing academic culture to bring about unity between enterprise, discipline and profession. Further, Kuh and Whitt (1988) see fragmentation and disintegration within academic culture, but also a set of overarching basic values which integrate the academic profession.

In considering the issue of academic culture and a basic set of overarching values, an interesting observation arising from the study is that some aspects of academic work - or at least views about them - appear to operate on an implicit rather than an explicit level. As noted earlier in the paper, the document data provided very little information on the question of what scholarship is. Indeed, even in the interviews, participants often commented on the difficulty of explaining scholarship and the difference between research and scholarship. Further, on the question of an interconnection between research and teaching, the interviews also proved a more effective means of exploring this question, especially the more subtle and arcane areas. If there is a need to strengthen academic culture and to identify integrating values, it may be that the more intangible aspects of academic work need to be more explicitly expressed.

It may of course be, that the high degree of consensus found in this study is specific to the particular hierarchical group of academics investigated and that if younger, less senior academics had been interviewed the findings would be different. However, from the literature on academic socialisation, it can be assumed that the perceptions of less senior academics will most likely concur, but that they may differ in degrees of intensity, depending on the degree of socialisation attained.

An additional consideration in seeking an explanation for the unanimity of views, is that the beliefs and the reality may in fact be totally separate. It needs to be remembered, that this study interviewed senior academic administrators and asked for their perceptions of the research role within academic work. It could be argued that what they perceive is an illusion, that it is not in fact the reality. Indeed, the reality of what academics actually do, may be quite different from what they say they do. A useful tool in considering the question of perception and reality is the conceptual framework developed by Becher and Kogan (1980). Their model allows for normative and operational modes of behaviour and intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions in behaviour. Utilising the Becher and Kogan framework, the unity of beliefs and values expressed by the participants could be interpreted as expressions of what they believe the ideal beliefs and values to be, as opposed to the values and beliefs which are in fact put into practice. Thus, the finding of unanimity of beliefs and values is in fact the articulation not of the individual's perceptions, but what participants believe are the values and expectations of those of the wider peer group - the extrinsic normative dimension. It could, however, also be argued that the perceptions expressed and the reality of what happens may not be very sharply delineated and do in fact interact, "denoting two aspects of the same state of affairs" (%Becher and Kogan, 1980:13). Further, %Clark (1983:105) maintains that values, even shared values "do not have to produce similar behaviors to be integrative".

Nevertheless, this study has revealed the expression of a number of important shared values. These arise from the interviews in particular, but are also support by the document analysis. What emerges are well formed views on academic work and the interconnections between research, scholarship and teaching. Other components of the project are focussing on interview and document data from other academic strata, including academics from the former college sector. Information from these areas will provide the means for making comparisons between the beliefs and values espoused in this first stage of the study with senior academic administrators. Indeed some early findings (Neumann, 1991) from student interviews on their experiences of university teaching and research show promising data to "test the validity" of the three levels of the teaching-research nexus discussed above. The on-going study should also enable a more detailed examination of the findings from this stage in light of the theories on academic culture and socialisation into the academic profession.

FOOTNOTE:
1. The word 'university' is used to refer to institutions with a well-developed role in research and teaching across a broad range of disciplines. At the commencement of this study Australia had a binary system of higher education, comprising universities and colleges of advanced education. The colleges principally had a teaching responsibility and only a very limited involvement in research. During the course of this study a unified national system of higher education was introduced. The on-going study is looking at the nature of academic work in the former college sector as well.

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