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The impact of increasing workload on academics: Is there time for quality teaching?

ABSTRACT – This paper reports on the results of an investigation into the impact of increasing workloads in higher education on teaching quality. Thirty eight members of faculty in a Western Australian university were interviewed on a number of issues related to the increasing hard managerialism evident in their work environment as well as other issues associated with the changing nature of organisational culture in higher education. The available reward structures, including job security, were perceived to be focussed upon the research agenda rather than good teaching. The research has revealed that although the majority of those interviewed perceived themselves as having positive attitudes towards their teaching, this did not always translate into adequate time spent on preparation and delivery. With increasing pressure being placed upon the higher education sector through the rise of an ‘audit culture’, increased scrutiny and greater waves of criticism from government and the public, we may be facing a crisis of confidence with the quality of teaching in our universities as we move further into the 21st century.

Introduction

For those of us working in and researching the current higher education culture, there is little doubt that changes are upon us; not just the usual cyclical shifts that we are used to, when for instance we are faced with a change of government at federal and/or state level, but fundamental alterations and re-conceptualisations. These transformations are based upon re-structuring, increasing globalisation, the growing importance of technology in learning, alignment with the corporate powerhouses of the post-industrial economies, management trends and pressures associated with faculty renewal. Over the next ten years in particular, we will witness the exit of large numbers of faculty members from the ‘baby boomer’ demographic, thus exacerbating the change process through lack of succession planning.

Teaching and assessment practices in higher education have come under increasing scrutiny and this has promulgated an imperative for improvement. Alongside the call for better teaching are accolades for research prowess, particularly in the sciences or in other areas that demonstrate value to business interests. Universities in Australia, and indeed in other Western countries, are now operating with reduced government funding (Scott & Dixon, 2007). As a result, exploring alternative ways to boost traditional revenue sources has become necessary. International full fee paying students have become a key source of alternative funding. Australian universities have been successful thus far in enticing overseas students onto their campuses, however the stakes are indeed high if the tertiary sector is to maintain its market share, especially now that other institutions such as the TAFE colleges are able to compete with universities in offering degrees and advanced diplomas, and who increasingly draw from the same tarn of candidates. The establishment of the Carrick Institute and the allocation of a significant funding pool aimed at rewarding those institutions that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching is evidence that the government is keen to promote engagement with learning and

The research grant, which remains an important source of funding for universities is in competitive alignment with good teaching. The university which is the focus of this research in recognition of this dilemma, has recently (2007) introduced a proposal for organisation-wide monetary rewards and promotional opportunities for academics engaged in what is deemed to be good teaching. This system, known as the Teaching Performance Index (TPI) has been fashioned along the lines of the traditional Research Performance Index (RPI), which has been in place for a number of years and is familiar to all current academics. Once the TPI is implemented in 2008/09 it will be interesting to see whether the tensions between teaching and research will remain, as academic promotion will be available at all levels to those who choose to favour and excel at processes related to good teaching, including program development and positive student feedback.

According to the literature on higher education and the structure of our universities in the west, we are facing pressing imperatives for change as we move further into the 21st century (Abeles, 2006; Deem, 2007). The pressures brought about by increasing attention to internationalisation and globalisation in the university sector as well as the fluctuations in student populations and the rise of technology are ringing fundamental shifts in what we perceive to be a typical university education. Indeed what we have considered a typical university education is also undergoing transformation. Research and commentary from Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada confirms that not only are we facing a re-conceptualisation of higher education but we may in fact eventually bid farewell to the structures and cultures that we have come to know in favour of a more technically, vocationally oriented education sector driven and controlled by the corporate world (Craig, 2004; Beach et al., 2005; Siegel, 2006; Dixon et al., 2006).

In addition to facing issues concerning 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. The Research Quality Framework (RQF) within which Australian academic staff now find themselves located, further ensconces the age-old tension between research and teaching in the university setting and given the increasing limited amounts of time academics have for all components of their work, it will be of no surprise to see staff choosing pathways aligning them with enhanced promotional opportunities. These chosen pathways more often than not, privilege research over teaching. This paper reports concerns regarding teaching and learning from the perspective of the academic. The study attempts to illuminate the real impact that a changing university organisational and managerial culture is having upon academics’ motivations to teach well and as a result it focuses on changing attitudes towards providing quality teaching in academe.
Review of the literature

The theoretical constructs that support this study are drawn from the domains of both education and psychology literature. When exploring learning and teaching it is important to understand what constitutes good teaching practice within an adult learning environment; hence Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) principles of good practice in undergraduate education is included. Motivation to engage with learning and teaching issues is also a key element, drawing upon the research of Knowles (1984) and Wlodkowski (2004). Burn’s (2002) publication on the adult learner at work is informative in identifying linkages inherent within professional development in a learning organisation. A key factor in the ever-changing, fast-paced workplace is temporal paucity. Hargreaves’ (1994) research on ‘time within educational settings’ is outlined to explain some of the issues that academics in this study identified.

Good practice in university education

During the 1980s much research was conducted in schools and higher education to explore sound teaching. Chickering and Gamson (1987) distilled “seven principles of good practice in university education” which have since become a yardstick by which good teaching practice is measured. They identified that good practice:

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty - This interaction “enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, np).
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students - “Good learning … is collaborative and social … [s]haring one’s own ideas and responding to others’ reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding” (Chickering, Gamson, & Barsi, 1989, p.5).
3. Encourages active learning – Passive students generally do not learn as effectively as active ones. They must talk, write about it, relate and apply their new learning to past experiences.
4. Gives prompt feedback – feedback on performance is essential for the students to be able to learn from their mistakes. Guidance is critical to ongoing development of knowledge and skills.
5. Emphasises time on-task - Learning to use one’s time effectively is an essential skill for students and professionals alike and appropriate use of time is critical in the learning process.
6. Communicates high expectations – High expectations are frequently met, thereby extending students’ capacities.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning – No two learners are alike. Therefore good teaching provides a range of learning activities and experiences to enable different learning styles to be accommodated.

Academics who endeavour to implement these seven principles consistently and conscientiously in their teaching practice, according to Chickering and Gamson et al., are clearly sound practitioners. Another aspect of good practice is engaging in evidence-based reflection and the implementation of developments (Ramsden, 2003). Engaging in action learning which is informed by empirical evidence can greatly facilitate academic development in relation to learning and teaching. This evidence should be collected from a range of sources, such as, student feedback, interaction with expert-colleagues, professional development, and reflection on students’ learning.
and assessments. Ramsden (2003) indicated that such inquiry-oriented activities could even be as stimulating to an academic, as research.

The university context - academics' motivation and workload
Academics’ activities are mitigated by contextual variables. Moreover, levels of motivation are influenced by their interactions with colleagues, students, administrators and the environment in which they work. So what impacts on academics’ motivation to teach well and engage in professional development with the view to continually improve? Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (1998) identified that adults need to feel in control of their own activities and learning. As a result of their experiences they perceive value in collegial networking and sharing activities where learning resulted. Receptivity to learning situations is directly linked to the perception of relevance to their job or personal life. Adults are most open to learning during periods of transition or following major change events. Wlodkowski (2004) posited that adults must perceive the time spent in learning to be useful, relevant and timely. Adults tend to be drawn to learning tasks that are problem, task or life-centred, rather than subject-centred. Adult learning motivation is also linked to intrinsic factors such as recognition, self-esteem and confidence, better quality of life, and self-actualisation. Academics, as adult learners themselves, have different needs, motivations, incentives and perspectives to those of younger students. Knowles in his work on “adult learners” found that adults need to have a level of self-determination and control with regard to their learning (Knowles, Elwood, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). The question as to who participates and who does not, and why, is a recurring preoccupation for adult learners. It may be 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, 2001). Similarly, academics have intrinsic and extrinsic motivations which drive their level of involvement in a range of activities. Intrinsic motivators include 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 include retaining 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 organisational messages received by academics are imbued with the driving notion that in order to succeed, the career-wise academic will focus upon those aspects of the workplace that are aligned with the reward system. In the past it has been the practice in the tertiary sector for these aspects to involve research activity rather than teaching prowess. For a number of academic staff with limited time to devote to the myriad of demands placed upon them, high quality teaching and associated processes have been demoted behind the pursuit of promotional opportunities through the more strategically aligned research pathway.

The enemy of the 21st century academic – time
Academics’ average working hours have increased from 47.7 hours per week in 1992 to 49.2 hours per week in 1999, with 40% of academics reporting that they were working 50 hours per week. Over half of the sample (55%) believed their work commitment in hours had substantially increased over the last five years (DETYA, 1999). Coupled with the findings that general job satisfaction had dropped from 67%
to 51%, with a significant proportion who reported their job was a source of “considerable stress” it appears that the university workplace has become highly pressured and less fulfilling than in previous years.

‘Time’ is a frequently cited issue in educational environments; the lack of which routinely constitutes the rationale for non-engagement with professional development, implementation of innovations, or other expectations from administrators. The issue of ‘no time’ has been extensively explored in literature relating to schools. Woodilla, Boscardin and Dodd (1997, p.299), identified eight dimensions of time which included “connections between life-world and educational practices, the time economy of the school, and strategies for using time according to individual needs”. Teachers reported that “‘finding time’ for professional development depended on achieving a balance” among the complex and conflicting demands on their time. Hargreaves (1994) classified time into four main categories technical-rational, micro-political, phenomenological and socio-political time.

Time as a technical-rational commodity is a “finite resource or means which can be increased, decreased, managed, manipulated, organised or reorganised in order to accommodate selected educational purposes” (Hargreaves, 1994, p.96). It is perceived as an objective variable, which can be managerially adjusted for productive use to create real benefits, for example, to promote collegial interactions breaking down isolation and encouraging best practice analysis and study.

Micro-political time also has the aspect of objectivity and reflects dominant configurations of power and status within schools and systems. An example of this is when “higher status” more “academic” subjects receive more generous time allocations or are granted more favourable scheduling slots and/or are made compulsory as opposed to less academic, lower status units (Hargreaves, 1994, pp.98-9)

Phenomenological time has an important “subjective” dimension. It is where people perceive time differently to the ‘clock time’ seeming to ‘drag’ or ‘fly’ depending on what they are doing. Hargreaves identified that educators frequently perceive time differently in the classroom, which may be at variance with administrator’s innovation schedules. Therefore in the context of implementation of innovation, educators “feel pressure and anxiety because of excessive time demands, along with guilt and frustration because they are implementing the new program less quickly and efficiently than the administrative timelines require” (Hargreaves, 1994, pp.100-1). In these situations dissonance between administrators’ perspectives and educators’ ability to comply with innovations causes conflict. Administrators appear “insensitive” to teachers’ requests and demands for “additional planning time” and/or “relaxed innovation timelines”. Even though Hargreaves’ work was predominantly in schools, the issues of time are mirrored in other educational settings such as higher education. Sociopolitical time is where time becomes “administratively dominant” and involves “control of teachers’ work and the curriculum implementation process” (Hargreaves, 1994, pp.106-7).

Two sub categories that Hargreaves discusses are Hall’s conceptions of time, that of, mono-chronic and poly-chronic time-frames (Hall, 1984, in Hargreaves, 1994). Individuals that exhibit a mono-chronic time-frame tend to do one thing at a time, in a
series, or as a linear progression through discrete stages. Completion of tasks, procedures and schedules are their priority and over the cultivation of relationships with people. It is most widespread among males and is the “prerogative of the powerful”. A poly-chronic time-frame is demonstrated by doing more than one task at a time or in combination, with priorities being the successful completion of the task or ‘completing … transactions’ rather than meeting some form of deadline or schedule. The orientation is ‘people’ more than ‘task’. Administrators that exhibit this time-frame perspective allow subordinates high discretion over time schedules but are more likely to have ‘stricter control over the description and evaluation of the task itself’ and according to Hargreaves (1994, p.103) it is more likely to be demonstrated by women.

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.

**Research context**

One of the most significant changes in higher education has been a new, sharp focus on the quality of learning and teaching, and the outcomes of students - as consumers- of this new vocationally-oriented university sector. Academics are at the centre of this study due to their importance in the classroom as the designers 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. As the literature indicates this has resulted in more demands on academics’ time, coupled with increased stress and reduced workplace satisfaction. A number of organisational components have contributed to the changing nature of academic life not least of which are the sourcing of offshore markets that have resulted in increased student numbers and the economic rationalisation that is 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, the importance of improving teaching has at the very least started to raise its profile over, the traditionally pre-eminent priority of research. This study therefore, explores the motivational drivers on academics in their work lives and investigates the relationships between teaching, research and administrative duties on motivation. In particular the study seeks to illuminate the impact of workload pressure and lack of time on academics’ attitudes towards teaching.
Method

The research was situated within a qualitative paradigm and as such it utilised a semi-structured interview approach to data collection. The interview schedule was developed based upon the major areas of concern originating from the academics’ contexts such as teaching activities, administrative duties, career advancement, research activities and opportunities for professional development and the impact these elements were perceived to have on motivation to teach. Each of the six sections of the schedule comprised five items relating to each of the areas of concern. The duration of each interview approximated one hour. The sample was asked 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 also discussed. Academics’ opinions of the value placed on teaching by their department 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. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data were then subjected to a content analysis in order to investigate the major themes.

Sample

The sample for the study was comprised of thirty six academic staff members who participated in the semi-structured interviews late in semester 2, 2006. 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. All members of the sample were engaged in some form of university teaching including facilitating small tutorial groups, larger workshop classes, online teaching or full scale lectures. 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

Reflection on 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 perceived themselves to be engaged with developing good teaching was interesting given that as the data-gathering process proceeded increased numbers of comments pointed to the growing concerns that time for good teaching, reflection on curriculum renewal and professional development was seen to be diminishing. A number of the sample stated that positive attitudes towards teaching were commonplace in their departments but were unsure as to whether or not these translated to effective teaching practices. The majority (75%) indicated they enjoyed activities that enabled them to work with their colleagues, to discuss and problem solve issues in their teaching or
those emerging from their educational programs, and to develop and share resources that would have a positive impact on their students.

I actually love teaching … I do like to hear how other people think, where they’re coming from … and if I can understand that then I can help them … I think it shows if you are really genuine… you find a lot more joy out of doing it different ways and being flexible … I try to accommodate diversity, I am not afraid to switch into other areas of knowledge … in order to meet the need of students, and also in terms of the methodology, the teaching style. … They see you, the teacher, excited about what he’s teaching and they’re going to respond to that … I get feedback … [on my] sense of humour … I’m there for support and help … not just looking after my own interests.

The majority (88%) of the sample 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, snatched from time when they were developing new materials or reviewing them for the next teaching period …

I’m also working seven days a week just to keep on top of my workload… but there just hasn’t been that time to really sit back and reflect on what could I perhaps do better…we are expected to do a lot more a lot quicker, so I think all of that can take away from sitting down and catching your breath for five minutes so you can think about how you’re going to make your next class a bit, a bit more interesting rather than picking up the books and running.

It was obvious that many of the participants in this study had a poly-chronic perception of time. This was demonstrated by academics’ ability to undertake and complete more than one task at a time or in combination (Hargreaves, 1994, p.103). They tended to be more ‘people oriented’ as is usual with teachers. Although Hargreaves indicated that poly-chronic time was more prevalent amongst women this did not appear to be the case in the current study. Being under so much pressure to handle many tasks competing for their attention left them with no time for reflection. As Currie, Thiele and Harris (2002, p.181) reported about their respondents … “[t]here is no longer any leisure to reflect deeply about academic decisions, unless it is extracted from the time that should be spent with students, family, and friends or in contributing to the community”. Clearly professional development in universities must be reconceptualised to “focus on how to create conditions for learning instead of investing in precisely defined organisational structures”. This means that “technical-rational” time must be made for, or “reorganised in order to accommodate selected educational purposes”, such as, collegial networking and mentoring, reflective problem solving discussion, and resource development (Hargreaves, 1994, p.96).

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. These academics indicated that in order to just maintain a basic organisation of the unit for which they were responsible they had very little opportunity to read widely on their topic and incorporate cutting edge research into learning materials. The administrative loads inherent in coordinating sometimes upwards of one thousand students per unit of study and multiples of sessional teaching staff were too demanding on their time to be able to engage in an ongoing space ‘just to think and reflect on how to best teach the subject matter’. As a
result it appeared that unit materials were likely to remain the same and the status quo maintained over subsequent semesters/trimesters.

As a unit coordinator it’s all I can do to just try to stay on top of things…the unit I look after has about twelve hundred students enrolled in it and it’s delivered here on campus and in three offshore settings. Making sure the sessional staff get the materials on time along with the assessment guidelines is about all I can do at the moment. I’ve also got a heavy responsibility for a number of committees in my department…at the moment I’m coming in every weekend to try to keep it all under control. I’m finding the whole thing pretty stressful.

Disengaged teachers
Twenty percent of the total sample was uninterested and/or disengaged with teaching. The academics in this group ranged in age from 28 to 60 years and represented all levels in the organisational hierarchy. 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. Comments from younger academics indicated that they had been interested to work in academia due to the research opportunities such a context would provide and they were ill-equipped to deal with a teaching load that was seen to intrude upon preferred activities. These academics also suggested that upon starting life in the university they were advised by those who had taken on a mentoring role in their particular departments, that devoting time to teaching would not result in promotion and that jealously guarding time for research activity was a necessity if they were to survive in academic life.

A number of comments clearly suggested that the rewards system within the university was not perceived to be aimed at improving teaching quality and that more emphasis was given to research output. A number of academics were quite clearly ambitious and viewed their upward movement through the organisational hierarchy as being contingent upon research effort and attention to administration. Comments indicated that teaching was something to be taken care of on a ‘needs-to-basis’ and that strategic administrative duties such as chairing various committees and program initiatives along with a comprehensive research output clearly signalled leadership capability to those in power and would eventually result in reward. They recognised the increasing demands on their time were often not congruent with career aspirations and they were resentful of the intrusion. Recognition of quality research through the attainment of external competitive grants was viewed as essential to self esteem and an improved quality of life within the organisational culture. This improved quality of working life included aspects such as access to increased funding which would allow
academics to ‘buy out’ teaching responsibilities, travel to national and international conferences to present research and substantial blocks of time to devote to research either as a sole pursuit or in collaboration with others. Of those academics who were not overtly ambitious, upward organisational movement was not as important as ‘being left alone to pursue individual interests’ and devoting time to teaching was seen as often stressful and not rewarding either intrinsically or extrinsically.

Engagement with professional development
The majority of the sample (74%) were aware of professional development related to improving teaching practices offered by the university. Each of the divisions represented in the research promoted learning and teaching professional development via either informal in-house training (academic development groups), university-wide workshops facilitated by the central teaching support network or the formal accredited Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching coordinated by the Faculty of Education. The responses suggested that while staff were cognisant of these opportunities there was only limited uptake due to lack of time and motivation. As adult learners, the sample did not seem to perceive the professional development as being central to their work context. Extrinsic rewards offered for engagement in the formal and informal courses of study were seen to be non-existent and furthering teaching qualifications was not perceived to be important within the promotional framework. A small percentage (12%) of the responses suggested that while some staff had attended the occasional learning and teaching workshop, these were offered on an informal basis by their own division and the personal contact and relationship they had with the facilitator had encouraged them to contribute. Only 2% of comments reflected interest in the Graduate Certificate or the professional development offered on a regular basis by the central teaching support group and again the main reason given for this was lack of time due to workload pressures and a perception that the content of such professional development may not be entirely relevant to their work as academics.

Attending teaching and learning workshops would probably be worthwhile but I just haven’t got the time… I could probably teach better with more information and examples of how to do it but you don’t get any points for doing it and I can’t afford to buy out any of my classes at the moment.

Academic workload and its impact on teaching
The weight of academic workloads was an emotive theme that emerged. Every respondent (100%) identified major workload issues with the majority (85%) becoming passionate or angry with regard to the diminishing quality of their work environment. Some of the factors that contributed to heavy workloads included increasing pressure from administrators to engage in research, increasing administrative loads, high numbers of students in units, servicing overseas teaching commitments, multiple sessional tutors. They indicated that these issues were severe retardants on their professional development enhancement of teaching practices.

The administrative workload is frankly beyond the pale … to the point where it really does detract from everybody’s teaching. Every hour I spend filling in another form in triplicate and blood, is an hour less that I have to be preparing a quality lecture … it’s taking away from time that we could be spending developing our teaching… the university tends to pile on work and just expects staff to work X-many hours per week, there has to be some sort of measurement done … well this is getting too much…. Yeah, it’s difficult, but administration – a necessary evil I guess.
The sample clearly indicated that when the pressures of workload increased, attention to quality teaching and student interaction was the first casualty. 76% of comments suggested that academics were less likely to source new and interesting content and preferred to rely upon materials that had been presented in past lectures and tutorials. The time allocated to student/lecturer interaction was also reduced so that academics were less likely to be willing to meet with students personally who may have been experiencing difficulty or were in need of course advisement. Less time was also spent on marking assignments as time-poor lecturing staff were increasingly more inclined to use self-tests, peer assessment, multiple choice and quizzes as assessment protocols in units. These were quickly graded as opposed to lengthy periods of time spent on in-depth reading and analysis. Student feedback was also more likely to be reduced as academics in the sample had little time to write at length regarding the progress or otherwise of individuals. The risks inherent in these practices are clearly reduced interaction with students over time and a lessening of the quality of the relationship the students experience with the academics who are teaching them and with the organisation per se. It was interesting that one respondent indicated that some of the academics’ workload was self inflicted due to their desire to make more “money” over and above their usual salaries … “A lot of staff do a lot of tedious marking which they can get paid for … they can top up their wages quite nicely … doesn’t progress them one iota promotionally, teaching-wise, it’s tedious, boring, and I’ve tried to encourage staff to actually use sessional staff there as much as possible”.

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 student funding into the university “it [was] research that gets you recognition, promotion and security”. There was little doubt that all felt that they were under pressure from the university administration to engage in more research and that this emphasis was 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 once again in a subsidiary position. 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 significant teaching and administrative loads. For example, one respondent outlined their semester teaching and administrative load as unit coordination of four units, with student enrolments in excess of 2,000 students. The units were running in eight different locations and they 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.

At least half of the sample described administrative tasks 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. A number of them
may have 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 department
and the wider university and that the overall organisational culture that was emerging
reflected a bias towards research as opposed to enhanced teaching practices.

Conclusion

Although this research was small-scale with thirty eight participants, it was interesting
to note the resonance in findings between this study and the large-scale Department
of Education and Training (1999) national survey (encompassing 2,609 academics
from 15 Australian universities), and Currie and her associates’ research (2002) with
99 academic responses over two Western Australian universities. The richness of the
insights the academics provided coupled with how closely the themes aligned with the
larger studies does tend to provide a measure of generalise-ability.

The academics in this study were interesting and insightful professionals. They were
overall, invested in their university work, exhibited considerable pride and a sense of
ownership for their units, program and ultimately, for their university. They appeared
to savour the chance to relate their experiences with teaching, students,
administration, and to share their concerns with workload, research agenda, and the
corporatisation of universities within our increasingly politicised higher education
context.

A very worrying aspect of this research was that the academics tended to agree with
Currie and her associates’ assessment that “[m]any writers in Australia and the United
States suggest that the current situation of overwork and academic erosion is likely to
continue. In spite of budget surpluses, both conservative and liberal governments,
have continued to reduce the public funding of universities” (Currie, Thiele, & Harris,
2002, p.181). The unmanageable workloads under which these academics were
labouring is non-sustainable. Many were concerned that the quality of their work,
both teaching and research, was being affected and this piqued their sense of
professionalism and academic integrity. It was clear that the impact of high
workloads, disillusion with administrators’ lack of understanding of their problems,
and pressure to keep delivering more and more were affecting them at a fundamental
motivational level. The academics in the sample were consumed by their work lives
and a culture of a “greedy institution”, and in many cases were not able to maintain
their personal equilibrium (Currie, Thiele, & Harris, 2002). There were elements of an
almost valiant striving to sustain reasonable teaching practice against the odds … but
for how long - was a consistent nagging subtext in their conversations. It is
astounding that at the time the research was undertaken a reversal in status,
recognition and university priorities had not occurred for ‘teaching activities’ over
‘research’, considering that ‘Australian education’ is the 3rd highest service export
industry worth in excess of $5 billion. Put in those significant financial terms we need
to ask why aren’t our academics being supported by giving them time for reflection
on teaching, encouraging them to be trained and professionally developed, and
recognised and rewarded through tenure and promotion on the basis of ‘excellence in teaching’?

The research has revealed a number of significant issues related to the current pressures under which academic staff, work. Although the majority (80%) appeared to perceive themselves as having positive attitudes towards teaching and their students, this did not always translate into time spent on effective preparation for and delivery of quality teaching. What is clear is that even though the sample seemed to remain generally interested in their students’ well being and overall progress and a number 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 teaching quality agenda by the Australian Federal Government and the emergence of organisations such as the Carrick Institute which rewards 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 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 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 some 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 overall.

Teaching well according to Knight (2002), depends not on the individual alone but on the individual in the community. Whether that community is the department, faculty or the university division, there needs to be a re-investment in the core activities for which academics have been traditionally responsible and they are teaching and research. We need to ask ourselves do teaching and research sustain each other or do they compete? Our patterns of behaviour are learned as we are absorbed into our work cultures. If the work culture genuinely values and rewards sustained high quality teaching effort, then so too will the individual. Changes to middle class work such as that experienced in higher education have brought about increased managerialism and according to Webb (1999) this has resulted in the corrosion of the individual’s
relationship to work. We sense that we are being monitored, directed and controlled more and trusted less. Tight job specifications, codes of practice, numerical performance indicators added to the pressures to teach more and increase publication outputs have resulted in a decrease in psychological rewards for academics. As Hargreaves (1994) indicated, the rise of contrived collegiality in academe enhances the sense of dislocation from support networks that motivate teaching in favour of advancing organisational plans that have been decided by senior management. The pressures for promotional opportunities based upon research prowess means that the more research-active academics get locked into increasing research performance and this can only lead to reducing teaching effort either within classes under their control or by sub-contracting teaching to even more marginalised part-time staff.

Australian university leaders must take action to address these very real issues in terms of culture, community, motivation and workloads within their institutions; otherwise the appeal of the academic profession will be seriously eroded. Will academics continue to be “happy to trade off less than adequate work conditions and career benefits for the opportunity to pursue matters they personally define as worthy of investigation”? (DETYA, 1999, p.5) As the “degree of choice [academics] have traditionally had over their work agenda” is eroded will they continue in the profession and will they encourage bright young minds to pursue academe as a desirable career? These questions have a significant implication for the maintenance of the “clever country”.

It will prove interesting to see what changes occur in the attitudes of staff at this university towards teaching with the introduction of the TPI in 2008/09. The overt systemic alignment between quality teaching and promotional opportunities may help to motivate academics to be more willing to focus on improved instruction, student feedback and learning environments. It may also stimulate efforts that align with organisational improvement such as professional development for academics and a more comprehensive use of student evaluation tools such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). There are a number of fundamental ‘messages’ inherent in the TPI process however. Along with privileging teaching and associated processes which could be viewed as a positive development, claims for ‘points’ against student feedback will only be allowed for classes with enrolments greater than twenty students. These and other similar protocols will impact upon post graduate classes which tend to be small, leading to a rationalisation of study and research opportunities. It may however help to re-balance the conflict of interest for staff who would like to devote more time to teaching but have traditionally been drawn to focussing upon research output. Future research in this area will investigate changing attitudes of staff towards the teaching and research with the implementation of the TPI into 2008.

Currie and her associates (Currie, Thiele, & Harris, 2002, p.190-1) summed up the significant findings in this current study when they stated … there is the need for “employing organizations to take a better account of the personal lives and private responsibilities of their employees. … Universities need to take a more responsible role … to the creation of a more caring, collegial, and family- and community–friendly ethos within the university. … We want universities to pursue social goals that work toward greater justice and more caring communities, both within the academy and outside of it”. 
References


