

TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF CHANGE IN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief overview of longitudinal case study research that focuses on the impact of change on academics in an Australian university. The research to date has been conducted primarily in two stages with a third stage under way as the university responds to the changes brought about by the Bradley review of Higher Education (2008). The Stage 1 research comprises doctoral research related to the impact of change on academics after the amalgamation of institutes or colleges of education to form a new university in 1991, post-Dawkins era. Five years after the completion of the doctoral research, a similar Stage 2 study was conducted at the same university and involved academics who participated in the Stage 1 research. Almost twenty years after its formation, the recently commenced Stage 3 research aims to identify the way in which the university and academics respond to the challenges presented in the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008). Although this stage of the research is not yet completed, the paper outlines two initiatives that are indicative of emerging change processes within the university.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, Government initiatives in Australia brought about unprecedented change within the higher education sector, resulting in numerous college mergers and amalgamations as necessary prerequisites for entry into the post-binary Unified National System. As a consequence, a new Australian university, the Australian Catholic University, was formed in 1991 through the amalgamation of four colleges or institutes of education that spanned three states, including NSW, Queensland and Victoria, and the ACT. The restructure led to the formation of three Faculties of Health Sciences, Arts and Sciences, and Education. Staff employed within the structures of the previous institutes identified their Faculty preference and Schools and Departments were established to facilitate the local operations at the various campuses of the new University. The process differed from past mergers, which had resulted in the formation of multi-campus institutions located in the one state and although institutional amalgamations in higher education had occurred previously, it was the pace of change initiated by the Australian Government in the late 1980s that was unprecedented. At the same time, the pressures to increase economic efficiency across the higher education sector resulted in the modification of the role of universities, extensive cultural reorientation, and substantial changes to academics' work that impacted on their health, well-being and level of satisfaction (Broadbent, 2002).

Since 1991, ongoing change has been evident across the higher education sector and again, almost twenty years after its formation, the University is about to enter another period of significant change as it positions itself to respond to the challenges presented by the recent Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (2008). From this perspective, an internationally competitive Australian higher education system is a key determinant in the economic and social progress of the nation and in maintaining 'a high standard of living, underpinned by a robust democracy and a civil and just society' (Bradley, 2008). The Review has provided the impetus for substantial Australian Government investment in universities and the tertiary education system in order to generate comprehensive reform across the post-compulsory education and training sector. The underlying rationale is that: 'the world is

becoming more interconnected; there is an increase in global markets for skills and innovation; Australia needs sufficient highly skilled people able to adapt to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing future; Australia is falling behind other countries in performance and investment in higher education and within the OECD Australia is now 9th out of 30; the supply of people with undergraduate qualifications will not keep up with demand; there is evidence that the quality of the HE experience is declining; and, there is a need to invest more in HE to increase numbers of people with degree qualifications' (Bradley Review, 2008).

Of particular importance is that all citizens have the right to share in the benefits of a changing system and an increase in the numbers participating in higher education is essential. This is especially so for those groups currently under-represented and less-advantaged by their circumstances, including members of the Indigenous community, people with low socio-economic status and those from regional, rural and remote areas. The level of participation by members of these groups has been static or falling over the last decade and this imbalance needs to be redressed. Universities also seek change that enables them to 'develop a distinct identity and respond to changing student expectations' (Davis, 2010).

As highlighted by Davis (2010), the Review recommends 'less prescriptive regulation' and 'more opportunity for higher education institutions to develop their own character'; ...it also 'encourages institutions to experiment more boldly with curriculum'. This has led universities to develop new initiatives and pathways to enhance equity and widen participation as they and other education providers seek to actively respond to the changing Government agenda. As Craven (2008) reflects:

'As a major operation on the prone body of Australian universities, the Bradley Review passes the first test of cardiac surgery. It has its heart in the right place. This is not a report obsessed with ivory spires, world rankings and vice-chancellors' egos. Instead, it is firmly focused on two things that really matter. First, it drips with a conviction that higher education is about social equity and that every qualified Australian should have their day in the lecture theatre. Second, it decisively dismisses the fantasy that Australian higher education should be all about producing one or two Harvards of the south. To Bradley, what matters is a quality system composed of quality universities'.

Craven (2008) argues that the outcomes of Bradley's proposal are not easily predictable and the vulnerability of some Australian universities, including regional universities and lower-prestige, outer-metropolitan universities, needs to be recognised; it would not, he argues, 'take a nuclear strike to destabilise them'.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project is a longitudinal case study that focuses on the impact of change on the higher education sector and academics in an Australian university. The research to date has been conducted primarily in two stages with a third partly completed stage following the changes brought about by the Bradley Review (2008). Stage 1 research comprises doctoral research related to the impact of change on academics after the amalgamation of institutes or colleges of education to form a new university, post-Dawkins era. Five years after the completion of the doctoral research, a similar study, or Stage 2, was conducted at the same university and involved academics who participated in the Stage 1 research. The Stage 3 research aims to identify the way in which universities and academics respond to the

challenges brought about as a result of the recent Australian Government reforms after the Bradley Review (2008).

The research project is positioned within an interpretivist theoretical framework and draws upon the traditions of symbolic interactionism (Plummer, 1991; Charon, 2001) in understanding human action. Predominantly qualitative methods of inquiry and data collection have been utilised in the first two stages of the project to investigate academics' perceptions of: the broad changes within higher education; the organisational changes created by the formation of a new University; the changing nature of their work; and, the approaches they adopted to cope with the changes. Some simple quantitative measures have been introduced at times to strengthen and extend the analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the various campuses of the University, including in Brisbane, Queensland; Sydney, NSW; Canberra, ACT; and Melbourne and Ballarat, Victoria. In the first instance, the research participants were determined on the basis of an incidental or opportunistic approach. The third stage of the research project utilises a similar methodological approach. Theoretical considerations relevant to the research are drawn from the authoritative literatures of organisational change and management, higher education and stress and coping.

Stage 1: Amalgamation

The Stage 1 research found that academics situated at all levels of the university considered they had been significantly affected by the rapid changes that had led to the formation of the new university. Academics (69 in total) at different levels of the organisation and across Faculties reported both positive and negative aspects of the changes regarding the formation of the University and the degree to which they had experienced personal and professional upheaval in the workplace. Not unexpectedly, those academics occupying higher positions in the organisation believed the changes to be more beneficial and positive than did those academics occupying lower positions and who had less opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes related to the development and implementation of policy and procedures. At the higher levels of the organisation there was evidence of a strong commitment to the acceptance of change regarding the concept and formation of the new University; less so at the middle and lower levels.

Nearly all academics interviewed had modified their work behaviour significantly to cope with the changes to their former roles. Academics strongly oriented towards research more readily welcomed the changes, while those with a strong preference for teaching felt under pressure to develop a research profile. Overall, a greater proportion of academics recorded negative effects. Of special concern was that, for some academics, personal working relationships and home life were negatively affected.

The research also identified academics' perceptions of change in higher education, their views regarding the future development of the University and the way in which they coped with the changes in the workplace. The unpredictable nature of change across the higher education sector at the time left some academics operating in a state of constant shock. With each new change came a sense of loss; for some academics, adapting to change was emotionally and physically exhausting. As a result of the changes, it was not surprising to find that 72% of those academics interviewed expressed the view that they were now working harder than ever before, 36% believed they were suffering from the new pressures and stress, and an unexpectedly high 25% of academics were left feeling devalued as a result of the changes. Of all academics

interviewed, the changes for nurses had been the most significant and the most beneficial; however, the changes had also created considerable ambivalence.

Academics at all levels within the organisation were generally clearly committed to the formation of the new University, although considerable differences existed regarding the nature, role and future direction of the organisation. Eight contradictory tensions emerged: pragmatism vs independent vision; centralised control vs local autonomy; academic freedom vs Catholic conservatism; teaching and learning vs research and scholarship; equality of women vs patriarchal control; consolidation vs diversity; autocratic managerialism vs democratic collegiality; and academic workloads vs maintenance of quality (Broadbent, 2002).

Stage 2: Consolidation

This stage of the research was conducted at the same University, five years after completion of the collection of data for the doctoral research. The participants were drawn from the sample group of academics who participated in the Stage 1 research, although fewer academics (23) were interviewed as some had already left the organisation. It also became evident that further interviews were unlikely to provide significant new information as the process was reaching a point of saturation.

Academics regarded this period of organisational change as one of consolidation characterised by an over-emphasis on cost-effective measures, bureaucratic involvement and an increased administrative load that was not apparent in the earlier years. The Government's unwillingness to take full responsibility for university funding required universities, in Australia and in other Western countries, to generate their own income. In this respect, universities were regarded as businesses that should be self-supporting, at least to a major extent if not completely, and this necessitated the need to explore 'alternative ways to boost traditional revenue sources' (Scott & Dixon, 2007).

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' (Dixon et al. 2007).

The limited replacement of staff members who had left the University as a result of redundancies and for other reasons, had led to an increase in academics' workloads and employment of sessional staff members to service teaching commitments across the University. This was not unique to the new University but common across universities nationally. This was also the case in regard to the increase in student numbers entering higher education at this time. The gain in status from a conglomerate of colleges to a single university was regarded positively and believed to have enhanced the University's identity and credibility with respect to the students and the wider community. The University's mission, however, still remained unclear and the search to find its place within the higher education sector was ongoing. There was an expressed need, some argued, for the University to develop its ethos and then 'stick with it' as this remained the strength of the institution.

The challenge for ACU is to see where the need is for our type of university and ... to capitalise on that need. Some people would say that, because it is Catholic, this is

holding it back. But I would say that if that's the case and we have to become like everyone else, then we should close down. If we can't mention our ethos and actually act accordingly we don't have a right to exist. (Interviewee 1)

The development and refinement of University policies in areas such as access, equity and equal opportunity, was regarded as a positive feature of the change. Decision making had become more formal in the selection process for positions and there was now more openness to the ideas from international scholars irrespective of faith backgrounds. While it was believed the rich Catholic tradition was something to be proud of, there was a growing acceptance of others by those within the University.

The relationship between teaching and learning and research still generated concern and some academics questioned the over-emphasis on research. The need for publications at the expense of quality teaching and learning, which was a strength in the predecessor institutions, was believed to be more highly valued in the current climate; however, those who had always been keen researchers were pleased their work had gained prominence. The research of Dixon, Scott and Dixon (2006; 2007), who investigated the changing nature of organisational culture in higher education and the impact of increasing workloads in higher education on teaching quality, reflect similar findings. Their study also found that available reward structures, including job security, were focussed more on the research agenda than on good teaching.

Although now a national institution, there was some evidence to suggest the various campuses and Schools of the University were starting to differ from each other, for example course and unit offerings, and this had made it difficult for students to transfer to other University campuses. Academics still appreciated the sense of community and were hopeful that working together would still be valued. Many had gained contacts with fellow staff on interstate campuses and, for some, the facilities had improved. Many staff had either completed or commenced their doctorates and, while their workloads had increased, this was generally regarded positively.

Stage 2 academics also commented on what they perceived to be the artificiality of achievement including, for example, academics receiving accolades or gaining coverage for self-promotion in such things as the University's news bulletin. Some regarded this form of involvement had resulted in a loss of quality and service to students. As also noted in Stage 1, the lines of communication throughout the University, especially upwards, remained a perceived weakness.

Coping with the changes continued to present challenges and for some academics it was essential to stay involved and not become marginalised. Those more negative towards the changes identified some aspects as detrimental to them and the institution. These included:

- emphasis on generating income rather than what is good;
- changes to students' attitudes; e.g. demand the degree without effort, are self-centred, are reluctant to attend lectures, are more aware of their rights, work more in isolation, don't support SRC, don't value learning;
- work slanted to take on PhD students rather than undergraduates;
- class sizes much larger;
- loss of ownership of teaching units;

- favouritism for those in Flagships; e.g. Mathematics, Leadership
- travel time to work each day became longer and more tiring;
- work seen as less enjoyable due to lack of time and the huge workload; and
- lack of time for research, publishing or use of technology.

Finally, academics' reflections as illustrated below provide insights regarding the changing nature of the University since its inception and the level of satisfaction expressed toward those changes.

'First 5 years were radical change with lots of upheaval. Since 1996 it has been positive. Given all I've said (some criticisms discussed in interview) it's still positive. ACU is better known in the community and that's important in itself. We've found ways to preserve money in some areas. That first structure was heavy and used up a lot of money. Travelling backwards and forwards to Sydney all the time and Brisbane – on a plane all the time. So we've saved money in travel. Not as many people are now involved in decision-making as before' (Interviewee 2).

'In a way it has gone the way I expected. Only that doesn't matter. I anticipated that when things are set in place, e.g. Faculty of Arts and Sciences would come (be formed) and needed to happen. And, in fact, it has been much better than I thought it would be. People who were education-based went into education. People in Nursing went into Nursing and anybody who didn't fit with those major categories became an Arts and Sciences person. Arts and Sciences, particularly, is very diverse' (Interviewee 3).

Stage 3: Innovative Partnerships

With the release of the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008), the higher education sector has again entered a new stage of significant change as universities position themselves for ongoing growth over the coming years. This has led universities to develop new initiatives that blur the boundaries between universities, corporations, community organisations and members of the wider community. While traditionally the two major foci in higher education have been teaching and research, more recent developments have included a third element, or 'third stream activities', as highlighted in the Bradley Review (2008), that loosely comprise 'universities relationships with and contributions to other sectors of society' (Webber, 2008). New partnerships and pathways are needed to enhance equity and widen participation as universities and other education providers seek to actively respond to changing Government agendas. Although there is acknowledgement of the difficulty in providing a clear definition for such a diverse range of activities, Holland and Ramaley (2008) provide a rationale for the change:

Our educational institutions are beginning to work together and interact in different ways, both internally and externally, to create research and educational environments that are easy to traverse and responsive to the changing knowledge and skill needs of a global, multidisciplinary, collaborative, and evolving community landscape in order to address the challenges of life in the regions we serve (Holland & Ramaley, 2008, p.33).

James Powell, PVC, University of Salford, calls for radical action in order to create meaningful, wealth-creating and socially inclusive partnerships between academics and industry, business, the civil and voluntary services, and communities. He believes that key ways of working should include co-creation, co-design and co-production. Quality engagement with society, the community and business, he argues, should be the new paradigm, rather than technology or knowledge transfer.

Gurstein and Angeles (2007) believe this is now more important in a globalised world where public issues and social problems continue to impact on an increasing number of people. The need to build capacity and self-determination in the various forms of development is highlighted in the New Paths to Social Development Report (2000) where the World Bank states:

'The development community now recognises that it needs greater understanding of community institutions, networks, norms and values to enable people to capture the benefits of development and build their capacity to help themselves'.

Many people in Australia and elsewhere, still remain socially excluded for various reasons, including unemployment, low incomes, poor housing, crime, poor health and disability and family breakdown. Together, these problems produce cycles of poverty that span generations and geographical regions. Where social disadvantage has become entrenched, members of those communities often have difficulty receiving a decent education, finding a job, or accessing adequate health care. In these circumstances, it is likely that such disadvantage will be passed from one generation to the next unless individuals and communities are 'empowered to become a successful part of developing solutions and achieve something for themselves, their health, wealth and quality of life (Quirk Review, 2007). As highlighted in the South Australian Social Inclusion Board Report (2008), there are benefits that accrue from communities working together:

'when communities share the responsibility for responding together to the identified needs of individuals, those individuals are also connected with their communities. By working together in joined-up ways through partnerships, we will collectively reap the benefits, as responses are more targeted, efforts more coordinated, outcomes more effective, and satisfaction greatly increased' (p.11).

The pressure for change across the higher education sector has been ongoing since the formation of the new University in 1991. Although in its infancy, Stage 3 research aims to investigate the impact of the reforms outlined in the Bradley Review (2008) on the University in the context of change across the higher education sector more generally. This section of the paper outlines two initiatives as examples that seek to address these issues and strengthen, where possible, the University's focus on social inclusion and justice.

The 'Down South' Initiative

This initiative focuses on the development of strong university-school-community partnerships to enhance and provide authentic learning opportunities for secondary students, staff and pre-service teachers. The initiative aims to strengthen links between the University, located in the northern suburbs of Canberra and a Catholic Secondary College situated in the southern

Tuggeranong Valley in Canberra to create multi-dimensional layers of interaction and learning that will benefit all participants for teaching and learning and research.

In 2011, students enrolling in the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) and Master of Teaching (Secondary) courses offered by a School of Education at one of the campuses of the University will enrol in a mixed-mode teaching and learning program located at the southern College. This new model for teacher education aims to create more authentic learning environments for students and staff at both the University and College, while also providing opportunities for teachers and pre-service teachers to engage in collaborative professional learning, including action research projects that include coaching and mentoring supervision. It is anticipated that the increased presence of university students at the College will work effectively to lift the aspirations of young students at the College to consider a university pathway for future study.

Currently there is no higher education institution on the southern side of Canberra. This initiative should raise the profile of both the College and the University and work effectively to create a higher education presence in the southern suburbs of Canberra with possible links to vocational education and nearby rural and regional centres. It is anticipated that through the University's involvement in the life of the College, this initiative will impact positively on all participants while aligning with Government agendas to increase participation in higher education, specifically for students from lower socio-economic groups.

The Clemente Australia Program

The Clemente Course was first offered in 1997 at a community centre in New York City as a free tertiary-level humanities education program for people living in poverty (Shorris, 2000). In 2003, the University, in collaboration with the St Vincent de Paul Society and assisted by funding from the Sisters of Charity and Sydney City Council, introduced the first Australian Clemente program in Sydney. In 2007, a four unit Certificate of Liberal Studies Clemente Australia program was introduced in Canberra. This continuing partnership brings together the University, community agencies, and members of the wider educational community, to provide a university-approved course in the humanities to members of the community. The Clemente Australia program is offered in partnership with the St Vincent de Paul Society and seeks to address the social injustices often experienced by marginalised groups by offering a university-accredited course (Certificate of Liberal Studies) within a supportive university environment. The program has received favourable media coverage and this has encouraged a positive response from government, community, and corporate groups. To be successful, Clemente Australia in Canberra is dependent on the development of mutually reciprocal relationships that enhance 'the dignity and well-being of people and communities, especially those most marginalised and disadvantaged' (ACU Statement on Community Engagement, 2007).

On completion of the Clemente Australia program, the participants are awarded a Certificate of Liberal Studies at the University graduation ceremony alongside other students who have completed their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. This reflects the esteem held by the University for the Clemente Australia program and acknowledges the significant achievement of the participants who have demonstrated commitment and perseverance to complete the academic program. The program has been instrumental in the establishment of a strong community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002) that acknowledges the contributions of all participants, is challenging yet supportive, and is effective in affirming relationships between the University, the participants, community organisations, corporations, and members of the

wider community. As the Clemente Australia program continues to grow, it is imperative that the process involves the collection of research-based evidence that identifies the key elements of the program's success. Academic units offered to date include: Australia to 1890, Australian Indigenous Peoples-Past and Present, Introduction to Communication, Philosophy, Australian Literature and Arts and Culture. Evaluation of the program is considered especially important to ensure the participants, once enrolled in the program, have every opportunity to achieve success. This is in keeping with a positive or strengths-based approach that is characteristic of all Clemente programs.

Effective partnerships, such as exemplified in these initiatives, aim to increase the level of connectedness between universities, community organisations and members of the wider community for collaboration to facilitate meaningful engagement and re-engagement in learning (Broadbent, Burgess & Boyle, 2003; Beck, 2006; Chapman et al. 2006). This is in keeping with the tenets of the Bradley Review (2008) to widen participation across the higher education sector.

CONCLUSION

Ongoing change within higher education is constant and institutions are likely to experience further organisational change. There needs to be wisdom applied by those charged with the responsibility for facilitating change to anticipate the potential effects emanating from the organisational change process. This would ensure those university academics involved in the process are not so negatively affected.

The ability of academics to exercise some control over the work environment in which they participate is essential to the acceptance of responsibility for individual learning and use of productive coping strategies that strengthen the individual's self-efficacy and sense of achievement. Greater control and participation in the decision-making processes that directly affect academics' lives and a deeper understanding of the drivers underpinning the changes should encourage more active engagement and level of satisfaction within the workplace. Attention also needs to be directed to the tensions and ambiguities that arise between the personal visions of individuals within the workplace and the shared vision of the organisation as a whole.

This paper has outlined some aspects of the impact of organisational change at a University and discusses these in relation to the academics affected. A clear positive outcome of the change process since 1991 has been the University's increase in confidence and change of focus from being inward-looking to that of reaching out to the broader educational community through innovative initiatives via university-school-community partnerships based on mutual reciprocity and enhanced equity. This paradigm shift towards socially sustainable practices aligns with governmental needs for increased participation levels. It also reflects a key purpose of the University identified in this paper: to respond to and serve the needs of the broader community. The Bradley Review (2008) sends a clear message to universities that it is time again to rethink and reshape the way in which they conduct their business and construct their learning environments. A focus on breadth as well as depth is seen as desirable to provide students with 'an expansive view of humanity...and a more reflective approach to understanding life (Davis, 2010, p.6). The coming years will no doubt bring further challenges to those across the higher education sector; to survive, universities will surely need to employ innovative strategies that meet the changing needs of the community.

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