Abstract: Public sector reform, with its emphasis on flexibility and client focus, has brought with it pressures to find efficiencies through a re-evaluation of the way in which services are delivered. In response, many universities have developed services that are flexibly delivered. Flexible delivery is lauded by some university administrators as a 'win-win' means of reducing institutional costs by servicing increasing numbers of students, and replacing labour costs with technology, all under the banner of customer responsiveness and learner needs. However, the complexity of flexible delivery as pedagogy, a marketing tool and also a form of work organisation is rarely acknowledged. This paper explores unintended consequences of flexible delivery for the teaching and learning environment through an occupational case study of academics in Australian universities. The study draws on: interviews with academics, academic managers and industry commentators; analysis of university documents; review of government policies; and participant observation.
CSU ID: CSU289197

Flexible Delivery in Business Schools:

A Winning Strategy or Pandora's Box?

Jennifer Sappey

Institute of Land, Water and Society

Charles Sturt University, Australia

Greg J Bamber

Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Australia

Visiting Professor, Newcastle University, England

Dr Jennifer Sappey

School of Social Sciences and Liberal Studies

Charles Sturt University

Panorama Avenue

BATHURST NSW 2795

AUSTRALIA

e-mail: jsappey@csu.edu.au

The BAM contact address and email is below:

Professor Greg J Bamber

Griffith Business School

Griffith University

NATHAN Queensland, 4111

AUSTRALIA

e-mail: g.bamber@griffith.edu.au

Flexible Delivery in Business Schools:

A Winning Strategy or Pandora's Box?[1]

Public sector reform, with its emphasis on flexibility and client focus, has brought with it pressures to find efficiencies through a re-evaluation of the way in which services are delivered. In response, many universities have developed services that are flexibly delivered. Flexible delivery is lauded by some university administrators as a 'win-win' means of reducing institutional costs by servicing increasing numbers of students, and replacing labour costs with technology, all under the banner of customer responsiveness and learner needs. However, the complexity of flexible delivery as pedagogy, a marketing tool and also a form of work organisation is rarely acknowledged. This paper explores unintended consequences of flexible delivery for the teaching and learning environment through an occupational case study of academics in Australian universities. The study draws on: interviews with academics, academic managers and industry commentators; analysis of university documents; review of government policies; and participant observation.

---

[1] Pandora's Box is a metaphor for the unanticipated consequences of technical or scientific development.

Introduction

With regard to the conference theme, the future is invariably less clear than the past. In terms of the education sub-theme, this lack of clarity is exacerbated by the moves towards more flexible learning[2] using information and communication technologies (ICT). Such moves may have unintended and perhaps unanticipated consequences. To what extent have these moves precipitated tensions? In accord with the conference theme, this paper considers present and future directions based on past experiences.

In view of its vast remote hinterland, Australian higher education has long offered various forms of flexible learning (via distance education). In Australia, nearly 14 per cent of all university students study by distance education using a variety of web based technologies (94,000 people compared with about 48,000 ten years ago). They are comprised of more women than men, and more people from high and middle socioeconomic groups. About 10 per cent (9,000) external students are overseas with learning facilitated by web based technologies, with the largest enrolments in business, arts, education and health (Richardson 2000). All Australian universities now utilise information and communication technologies (ICT) to service on-campus and off-campus students.

Australian experiences are probably prototypical and more varied in terms of their use of flexible delivery compared with those in many other developed market economies. The UK Open University is another pioneer: 60,000 of its 165,000 students are 'on-line'. Around the world, more than four million students are being educated 'at a distance' using ICT (McLeod 2000). This on-line phenomenon is an established strategy for universities internationally, predicated on their aim to respond to the market and customer needs in an increasingly competitive global environment.

In a broad sense, the concept of 'flexible delivery' in higher education involves allowing students a choice of 'modes of delivery of instructional material', and emphasises the use of multimedia/communication technologies (Cunningham et al. 1998, 24). However, it is operationalised by institutions in very different ways. Management strategies for flexible delivery may incorporate: the introduction of tri-semesters; the development of international twinning arrangements with other institutions supported by ICT-based teaching materials and 'block' or intensive periods of face-to face teaching; the introduction of complete on-line courses requiring independent learning from ICT-based teaching materials (conducted at special purpose-built campuses or through modem connection to a student's home or workplace); a mixture of on-line instruction (using web-based notes, chatboards, podcasts, web video streaming and e-mail). These approaches can be coupled with traditional face-to-face teaching on either a weekly or intensive-block basis; and 'web'

---

2 As noted by Cunningham *et al* (1998) there is an important distinction between flexible learning and flexible delivery. Flexible learning is a pedagogical term which focuses on the learning process and student centred learning. Flexible delivery is an administrative term that focuses on the modes by which content can be distributed to students. In a labour process theory framework, this is a form of work organisation.

access by students to course information and administrative procedures such as enrolments, results and course information.

There is neither a universal approach to flexible delivery, nor a generally accepted definition. The only common elements are the use of ICT meshed with customer service. It is a means of speeding up communication and facilitating connectivity between producers and consumers, leading to product and process innovation designed to increase competition in product markets. Flexible delivery in higher education is one example of a production system and form of work organisation which has the capacity to, and the resultant client expectation of, the design and delivery of products and services more quickly than ever before (Cunningham et al. 1998).

The growth of flexible delivery has been a consequence of improvements in ICT, leading to a fall in costs and a dramatic increase in the ownership of personal computers with modem access. Its operationalisation is shaped by an institution's policy framework and its culture, and usually takes the form most appropriate to the institution's target market. These factors account for the diversity of flexible delivery practice in the higher education industry, resulting in a wide range of experiences and responses from academic labour at different workplaces in Australia. Therefore as a point of departure for discussion it must be acknowledged that flexible delivery *per se*, and the impact on the teaching and learning environment are not homogenous throughout the sector. The diversity of flexible delivery also accounts for the academic union's acceptance of the introduction of flexible learning as a pedagogy. This, together with the associated flexible work practices—and given that many members' experiences with ICT in the mid 1990s were positive—the complaints of the few seemed unjustified.

To service both domestic and overseas markets, flexible delivery is firmly entrenched as a commercial strategy for most Australian universities. Our research question is: If customers needs of 'flexibility' are an important element in higher education delivery, how is flexible delivery affecting university teaching and learning processes? This paper exemplifies some critical current issues in the management of people in such contexts.

Methodology

The study uses: participant observation, interviews, content analysis of policy documents and electronic communications. It employs the extended case method in an ethnographic tradition (Burawoy 1988). Interviews with academics were sought from university workplaces that resembled the commercial-industrial model rather than the *universitas* collegiate model of universities (Warner and Crosthwaite 1995, 9). The commercial-industrial model is characterised by former polytechnics in the United Kingdom and former colleges of advanced education in Australia. Faculties of business were chosen from within those institutions because of their tendency to adopt client focus; and their student cohort which has a reputation for demanding efficiency, effectiveness and value-for-money. All of the respondents were full-time academics and academic managers employed in universities

on the east coast of Australia, and all agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted between 1999 and 2004 with 27 academics, ranging in rank from vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, deans and associate deans, to senior lecturers and lecturers. In addition, a university marketing manager and a communication-media manager were interviewed. Additional interviews on the topic of higher education and university teaching were conducted with twelve specialists. Furthermore, one of the authors kept a diary of experiences with three universities which recorded personal observations of interaction with academic managers, academic colleagues and students.

Background

Australian higher education reform and the adoption of flexible modes of delivery must be seen in their global context. In its discussion of the political economy of higher education this paper draws on comparative research from Australia, Europe and the United States. As Scott (1995, ix) suggests, such an approach is valid on two counts. First, higher education systems in all developed countries are being transformed by similar pressures and in similar ways, hence it is appropriate to draw comparisons. Second, the phenomenon is part of a much wider global change with universities being challenged by increasing international competition. These changes are also a response to the demand for products and services tailored to individual requirements, accompanied by the fact that we have the ICT capacity to provide them (Cunningham et al. 1998; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Currie and Newson 1998).

Periods of Structural Change in Higher Education

The complexity of education production and university teaching and learning processes should be considered in a wider international context of massive structural adjustment occurring in developed market economies (Smyth 1995; Marginson 1995; Rooney and Hearn 1999). Structural change in higher education has been an international phenomenon (Smyth 1991 and 1995; Miller 1995; Dudley 1998; Baker, Creedy and Johnson 1996; Barnett 1990; Barrow 1995; Buchbinder and Rajagopal 1996). Neave (1990) observes three phases in all western higher education systems. The first is the government retreat from the welfare state since the early 1980s and the consequent reduction of government funding of higher education. In Australia this coincided with the reduction of Commonwealth budgetary outlay on higher education from 4.5 per cent to less than 3 per cent (Miller 1991, 41) and led to deterioration in buildings, research equipment, student demand and academic morale. The second phase from the end of the 1980s saw public sector reform initiatives based on efficiency and effectiveness principles, primed by the increasingly competitive environment of globalisation. In Australia it was marked by a period of government intervention under the post-1983 Labor Government which sought to rationalise the industry and make it relate to the needs of the economy in general, and to the trade deficit in particular. The third phase of change from the early 1990s saw the retreat of the state from public financing of higher education and the advent of more market competition. Coinciding with this period, policy and legislation in Australia led to the abolition of the binary divide between the college of advanced education (polytechnic) and university sectors. This abolition had resulted in mergers, and by 1991 the subsequent reduction of eighty colleges of advanced education and universities to only thirty-five. There was a restructuring of the industry with the establishment of the Australian Research Council (ARC), which distributed public research funding to institutions. The ARC funded applications for grants on a competitive basis and against the background of national

priorities. This financial restructuring brought with it pressure to change university government from the collegial to the corporate managerial model under the banner of 'accountability' and good public sector management. Pressure was also brought to bear to find efficiencies and re-evaluate the way in which educational services were delivered. Flexible delivery was one solution.

Globalisation and its Implications for Higher Education

Globalisation has framed the restructuring of higher education and educational practices of institutions in terms of educational commodification, production, marketing and consumption. There are various different explanations of the emergence of globalisation and its implications for universities (see Scott 1995; Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

For example, one view has its foundations in neo-political economics, which considers the primary agent of globalisation to be the market (Friedman and Leube 1987). It sees the domination of institutional, social and cultural change by economic forces driven by technology. Gains in productivity arising from technological innovations and enabling patterns of production (and consumption) drive sequential linear waves of socio-economic change. In the case of the Fordist economy, the technology took the form of electro-mechanics, oil and petrochemicals, and mass production. Replacing it is the post-Fordist economy, where technology has taken the form of microelectronics, new energy sources, ICT and more flexible patterns of production.

A second view offers a dialectical rather than linear perspective—post-Fordism co-existing with rather than replacing Fordism; and the primary agents as being consumption and capital mobility (Thurow 1985). In such a view it is consumption, popular culture, political power structures and changing employment structures, facilitated by technology, which dominate the mode of production. In post-Fordism the displacement of mass production for flexible specialisation using ICT-based technologies is a response to consumer demand for non-standard high quality goods. In this context specialisation lends itself to small and medium-sized entrepreneurial producers (Scott 1995, 106).

A third view applies a radical or neo-Marxist framework and sees the primary agent as social class (Barnett and Cavanagh 1994). In developed market economies,there has been class fragmentation and hedonistic consumerism. This has precipitated changes to the means of production and to the nature of work including diversity in the patterns of work, intensification of the labour process and the concurrent acceleration of production (Scott 1995, 107).

While there is conceptual disagreement between those who promote these three frameworks about the agency – market, consumption or class – as Scott (1995) and Slaughter and Leslie (1997) point out, empirically they have much in common. They share acceptance of the emergence, during the 1980s, of a global market. They agree that the phenomenon of globalisation means less public money for social welfare and education and potentially more private money for businesses. The public policy implications for higher education were that universities implemented major structural change consequent on the different funding mix and they developed a stronger focus on products and alternative sources of funding. Some, although not all (Currie and Newson 1998; Halsey 1992), believe that these changes have led to a new-founded competitiveness in higher-education institutions.

Globalisation has induced broad structural change in four major areas of the higher education industry: the marketisation of the and ensuing competition between institutions;

changes to higher education consumption patterns; the commodification of education consequent on marketisation; and the administration and management of institutions (managerialism).

i) Higher Education and The Market

The first change is that the sector has been exposed to intensified competition leading to increased marketisation. This can be attributed to the breakdown of market boundaries between providers consequent on the transnational mobility of capital, and in particular, new forms of ICT and transport (Rooney and Hearn 1999). The implication for universities is that instruction is carried across borders, facilitated by the ICT developments and delivered in flexible mode (Cunningham et al.1998, 2000; Rowan et al. 1997; Marginson 1995). The higher education response has been: first, the implementation of organisational re-engineering at the institutional level, with the redesign of work practices and the shedding of functions seen as non-essential; second, to provide an increased responsiveness to clients' demands for services that are customised and flexible; third, to tailor courses to the workplace, for example, to provide short courses that are industry specific and delivered at least to an extent on-line; and fourth, the development of multi-campus institutions (Cunningham et al. 1998).

ii) The Culture of Consumption

A second structural change which is central to the economy as a whole and to higher education in particular, is a change in the culture of consumption and consumption patterns (Usher et al. 1997; Scott 1995; Knights et al. 1999). It is argued that in the postmodern world, the relationship between production and consumption has changed, with consumption replacing production as the major basis of social differentiation in developed market economies (Burrows and Marsh 1992). This raises issues of: the primacy of consumers over producers, or vice versa; the social construction of the customer by management and its implications for a reconfigured labour process; and emotional labour between customer and employee in the service encounter. In this context, higher education is no longer merely an economic or even socialising instrument, but also a way of constituting meaning through consumption. It has become symbolic of lifestyle, signifying difference. As a corollary, higher education processes become individualised and reconstituted as a relationship between producer and consumer. This represents an ideological shift where education is governed by consumer orientation and activities geared to consumer satisfaction. It also manifests itself in major structural and cultural changes to conventional university practices and the academic labour process. Higher education is

delivered as a service encounter between academic labour and student customers, facilitated by communication technologies which mean that the 'shop is open 24/7'.

iii) The Commodification of Higher Education

A third structural change to higher education—associated with the neo-classical view of economics based on the 'market' (Bottery 1999, 104)—is the commodity view of education. Commodification of education leads to management and production processes which seek to improve the quality of product as determined by customer satisfaction (Knights et al. 1999; Rooney and Hearn 1999). Whereas once the value of knowledge lay in its contribution to the pursuit of truth and liberty, the postmodern condition values knowledge according to its 'performative value', that is to say, its ability to be assimilated to information that can be conveyed through ICT then used by the consumer to enhance efficient performance. Knowledge only has value if it is in the form of information which has the potential to bring direct benefit to the consumer (Usher et al. 1997).

What are the implications of 'performativity' for the teaching and learning processes? Knowledge is exchanged between educational institution and consumer on the basis of the performative value it has for the consumer. This draws educational institutions into the market, producing and selling knowledge as a commodity. It also places the consumer, as constructed by management and their perceptions of customer needs and wants, at the centre of organisational strategy and focus. Linked to this is a shift to managerialist performance indicators of efficiency and effectiveness and a general reconfiguration of social relations, including teaching and learning processes, in the academic workplace. In other words, the 'performativity' of knowledge as a product is the catalyst for re-evaluation of academic labour's value and performance.

iv) Managerialism

A fourth structural change—and a major catalyst in cultural change in universities—is managerialism, (Trow 1994). The new managerialism, together with the changing culture of institutions, has weakened the traditional professional bureaucracy that was driven by professional authority of staff based on their status as gatekeepers to social knowledge. The managerialist approach brings with it new forms of decision making, which fundamentally 'undermine(s) a conception of a university as an autonomous self-directing, peer-review and professional-authority based institution, and thus changes the politics of how academic work is accomplished' (Newson 1993, 9). This has major implications for the organisation of work in terms of decision-making and control, with administrators and technocrats assuming functions and decision-making roles which were once in the academic domain. And for academic labour, the pre-eminence given by managerialism to the role of the customer will inevitably lead to issues of consumer sovereignty, and the challenge to traditional academic authority.

The Changing Nature of Academic Work

The interview data identify that in strongly market-oriented universities, management legitimises and defers to consumer sovereignty, thereby affecting a shift in emphasis from producer to consumer, and which in turn effects the transformation of the relationship between academic and student. Interviewees encountered specific changes to the labour process, which are triggered either by direct influence from students or as a consequence of management seeking to reconstruct academic work to find fit with student-customer preferences. Knights et al. (1999, 10) warn that this shift from producer to consumer has occurred in society generally and is more or less permanent. The range of specific changes include: re-configuring university 'trading hours' to incorporate the inclusion of weekends and a wider span of hours on weekdays; the extension of university teaching weeks with the introduction of trimesters; mandatory overseas teaching duties (if required by management) in support of flexibly delivered courses at partner institutions; mandatory student evaluations of teaching (facilitated by electronic surveys of student cohorts through e-mail); the negotiation of teaching-only employment contracts for staff servicing electronic forums and communications; and the introduction of performance management for academics incorporating mandatory satisfactory performance in teaching and research. Flexible delivery can be used to facilitate the implementation of these changes.

Flexible delivery, however, is also a key catalyst to the fragmentation of academic work, such as the use of part-time and casual staff. One development has been the creation of tutor positions attached to large, undergraduate classes that deal with students via e-mail, chatboards, voice-mail and phone communication. Flexible delivery allows, then, the academic labour process to be split between a full-time career academic in the core, who assumes a coordinating/lecturing role, and, on the periphery, a contract tutor who may be the main contact for up to several thousand students in the subject. The down-side of this arrangement is that such positions are usually 'teaching-only', without tenure or accrued benefits of academic study leave, higher-degree support, research support, career development or travel.

This is consistent with the trend since 1995 of teaching-only staff numbers across the sector rising at a rate of approximately 10 per cent per annum, significantly higher than for other categories of staff positions (www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education: accessed on 29/02/06). The university teaching-only contract academics are in effect customer service officers who handle customer enquiries, a role contrived by universities as a means of efficient and effective resource deployment. Through the creation of an academic 'under-class', management reshapes the academic labour process to reduce the relatively high costs of academic labour and to achieve a customer service focus. The values attached to these peripheral roles filled by casual and contract academic labour are those of compliance with administrative directives to meet student-customer needs. This is the pathway to securing their job security at the expense of academic freedom and participation in collegial decision-making.

The organisation of academic work is thereby effectively fractured into the categories of higher status career academics that are operating with the security and resources of the core, and an under-class of contract academics employed under different assumptions of skills and expectations of benefits, monetary and non-monetary rewards. By creating the academic under-class as customer service officers employed to meet the needs of large numbers of student-customers enrolled in foundation subjects, management is using a

maladapted form of Taylorism in the electronic classroom to meet the expectations of student-customers of customisation and individual service. Although the focus for management is on operational needs, the unintended consequences for labour, which are rarely acknowledged by management or unions, are the further fracturing of academic collegial culture. This time such fracturing is on the basis of flexible delivery, with the unintended consequence of the creation of an academic under-class.

E-Learning and On-Line Teaching

Not only has the academic structure been fractured by on-line teaching, but there has also been a fracturing of the traditional academic authority over the content and delivery of material which goes to the heart of the academic labour process. E-learning product development, in particular, leads to a blurring of the demarcation between traditional academic and non-academic work, between academic labour, educational designers and technology experts. Whereas once the design, content and delivery of a subject was the relatively autonomous domain of academic labour, academics involved in e-learning are increasingly working under the direction of specialists who have skills to enhance 'product', thereby making it more attractive and acceptable to student-customers not only in pedagogical terms, but also in marketing terms. The technology that underpins flexible learning requires specialist ICT skills that are not necessarily part of academics' tool-kits.

The requirement for these technical skills facilitates the surveillance of an academic's e-classroom by other staff. Thus the line between the academic and administrative domain is no longer clear-cut. Interviewees at one university identified the increasing scrutiny of their on-line study guides by educational designers in the administration, who changed content, format and often required academics to make major alterations to the study materials. Similarly, academics at another workplace report that e-forums were controlled by an IT administrator in the on-line learning centre. The administrator controlled the opening and closing of the forum (the academic's virtual classroom) attached to a subject (usually closed 30 days after the conclusion of the formal teaching period although students still had an expectation of service from the academic in that 30 day period); monitored each subject forum and where considered there was a tardy response from the academic teacher to a student enquiry, would contact the academic directly and instruct them to respond. The administrator generated semester reports to academic management on the frequency of access and postings by academics teaching a particular subject (info-normative control). These were expressed in terms of raw frequencies (e.g. of 162 postings, the academic posted 45 per cent of messages, students posted 55 per cent) and gave no indication of the content, comprehensiveness or quality of the teaching direction given by the academic. On the basis of this data, academics reported that at that particular workplace, management was considering performance managing academics' on-line contribution to their subject by setting minimum percentage targets for academic-student interaction on the e-forum, to be monitored by the administrator and reported to management.

The blurring of responsibility domains, together with the intrusion of administrative staff into the 'virtual classroom' allows the introduction of info-normative controls consequent on management reconstructing the academic employee to find best fit with organisational strategies of survival, based on customer satisfaction. It is consistent with Braverman's (1974) argument that 'the application of technology, speed-up, Taylorism, fragmentation and routinisation strategies intensify

labour, increase productivity and extend the control of most non-manual occupations in ways which parallel the experience of manual workers' (Smith et al. 1991, 3). In higher education, there is the potential through the on-line delivery for the technology to provide data on academic employee responsiveness to customer demands (e.g. response times to electronic student-customer queries and the actual content) such that managers can 'more closely police those in their employment' (Jones 1999, 7). As one senior academic manager interviewed in the study commented, 'With on-line teaching things are no longer private'. Info-normative controls are justified by university managements on the basis of the need for universities to develop isomorphic adaptive strategies of survival: to make universities more like other organisations, and academic labour more like other workers'.

Performance Management

Performance management of academic labour is consistent with the trend in performance management in other organisations. Interviewees identified that their managements responded to market pressures by introducing info-normative controls through performance management of individuals. It is a direct outcome of a corporate style of management with a mission of institutional reform under the banner of customer relations and based on an assumption of value-for-money. It also contributes to the redefinition of the value of academic work, according to customer satisfaction criteria and serves as a tool of employee control in professional service work (Manley 2001). For example, the student evaluation of teaching survey at one interviewee's workplace was more sophisticated than many private-sector employers would administer directly to their employees, with satisfactory ratings necessary for tenure and promotion. Management used it as a 'tool to reinforce the link between organisational goals and individual academic performance though human resource management (HRM) practices such as probation, incremental advancement and promotion'.

Interviewees were critical of the mandatory use of formal student surveys of teaching performance. Some held that this performance management tool is based on consumer behaviour and reactions to individual grades rather than an accurate reflection of academics' performance. As one said, 'The [student survey] score is whether or not the student has been serviced enough - maximum input from us, minimum effort by them.... Its a reaction to personal factors such as their marks'.

Customer satisfaction surveys have become an integral part of university quality and marketing processes. They sensitise professional employees to a market context for service delivery, redirecting their framework away from their professional affiliation and gatekeeper roles for their profession. They also act as a conduit between student-customers and management, and legitimise student-customers' wants in the service encounter. Student evaluations of teaching give effect to student-customers' indirect control over academic employees by setting the agenda for management. Student evaluations of

teaching also give effect to student-customers' control over academic employees, as staff respond by self-censorship and increased responsiveness to student-customer demands. Failure to do so may bring academics into conflict with student-customers and management, and have consequences for career prospects.

Arguably survival in a competitive higher education context is linked to customer focus (consequent on broad patterns of financial and operational change driven by governments), hence managers seek to serve student-customers' interests in an attempt to secure their custom. This flows through to the substantive outcomes and conditions of employment for academics achieved by legitimising the student-customer through formal organisational processes and the development of corporate culture which leads academics to internalise the student-customer concept. These processes include: appraisal of academics by student-customers; student-customer complaints and appeals processes; enterprise bargaining in which managers seek to secure delivery standards and flexible working arrangements to meet their assumptions about customer preference for flexibility and value-for-money; and procedural flexibility from academics to tailor academic standards to different customer groups (e.g. where there is a direct clash between academic labour seeking to maintain a universal academic standard and the employer's commercial contracts with overseas partners or corporate clients). This last element highlights the contradictions inherent in higher education in a marketised context: university education with its traditions of truth and social justice versus the imperatives of commercialisation. Interviewees exemplified employer-employee conflict over academic's right to determine academic standards, particularly at the level of the individual student.

Consumer Sovereignty

Academics commented that managers (heads of school and deans) often take a position in support of consumer sovereignty, in direct challenge to academic autonomy. The inculcation of consumer sovereignty into cultural norms, coupled with the experience of academics leads the latter to either internalise the value of consumer sovereignty or apply self-censorship. Interviewees indicated that in the context of increasing academic workloads they were likely to tailor assessment processes and their own decision-making on individual student cases, to serve their own interests, namely to defer to student demands lest they be caught up in direct conflict with their managers and involved in lengthy and difficult appeals processes without the support of their managers. In such ways new cultural norms have been established which legitimise consumer sovereignty and integrate the customer into decision-making frameworks. Organisational processes are implemented by managers through values of consumer sovereignty which directly affect the authority and scope of academic work. As one academic explained, 'There's a push from management to think of them as customers, but I'm not happy with that...I ran one course designed specifically for a client group [corporate group] and I did it on contract outside my teaching load. That's

when it hits you. The terms of my contract stated that I had to respond to e-mails within 24 hours and there was a one week turnaround on assessment'. From this example, we infer that the academic employee was reconstructed by management into a stronger customer service role to fit management's perceptions of their corporate customers' heightened wants and needs. Management negotiated conditions of employment based on their perceptions of student-customer wants and expressed these as specific conditions of employment in an individual employment contract.

Different Categories of Academics

Academics, then, do not necessarily share management's view of the student-as-customer or the processes by which management constructs the student-customer. Interview data identified that teaching academics with more than ten years service (usually in the 35 plus age group) generally express rejection of the student-as-customer metaphor, seeing it as a challenge to good pedagogy as well as professional academic authority. A strong theme was, 'Students are not my customers. This is not a petrol bowser [pump], but I know students see themselves as customers'. Many academics in this older age group had experience which pre-dated the advent of marketisation in the 1990s. They often expressed a sense of loss as academic teachers working in a market-oriented university environment. It is a view echoed by Currie and Newson (1998, 4-5), Smyth (1995) and Meek and Wood (1997). Recurrent themes from interviewees included: the deterioration in the working conditions of academics, with national and international trends inducing academics to work longer hours. Moves towards user-pays notions for students as well as departments and other units, as the purse strings are tightened; and the development of on-line delivery coupled with the internationalisation of the curriculum as a marketing strategy to sell product overseas.

However, younger academics were far more supportive of the student-as-customer concept, accepting the delivery of higher education as a market exchange and perceiving a more responsive role to student-customer demands as a moral obligation and often indicating that they make a strong link between this view and their career prospects. In the words of one junior academic, 'Students are definitely your customers ...students always come first...it's part of my teaching ethos, but also partly the customer driven focus of the place'.

Irrespective of how they view their own role, all academic respondents considered that their students see themselves as customers of the institution, and more specifically, of the individual academic. Academics identify this as a consequence of students' fee-paying status and link it to a decline in traditional academic authority. For example, 'More and more students see themselves as customers, particularly international students because of the fees, but domestic students more and more are demanding and service focused'. And from another, 'Lots of students consider themselves my customers ... it leads to a lack of

respect and increased bullying from them. It was a consistently strong theme from academic interviewees: 'we don't have the authority we used to have', 'students have more power', and 'students have an inflated sense of authority'.

These last comments reflect the trickle-down effect of the marketisation of the industry to the anonymous user on the other end of the computer, with academic labour being viewed as an asset from which increased productivity and flexibility is demanded by the employing institution and the student-customer. There are those for whom this change presents opportunities and others for whom it signifies loss. Therefore, it is not easy to evaluate the impact of the changing nature of the academic labour process and the quality of working life for academics. The divide is marked, between the vested interests and expectations of young academics, accepting as they are of the morality of the market, and those with more than a decade's experience in the sector prior to marketisation, many of whom see their role as one of public service for what they perceive to be the greater good. It is a demarcation which one commentator views as the trumping of money over altruism as the major influence on the academic profession (Bok 2003). Such an analogy is extreme, but it is worth noting that younger academics view changes to academic work as an outcome of their position in a career cycle—an individualistic, career-oriented focus—rather than the outcome of changes to the sector as a whole. As one young academic pu it 'Changes to the work and pressure are due to the career cycle...the divide is between the hacks and the big persons'.

Defensive Strategies

For academics of longer standing who have an orientation to community service, the changing labour process becomes a question of acceptance or resistance. At the heart of most labour processes (including academe) is the counterbalance between change and resistance. 'Circling the wagons' (a phrase used by an interviewee) was common across all workplaces and describes the act of anticipating consumer behaviour and devoting time and effort to developing systems and policies which will minimise conflict. It is just one of many forms of resistance from academic labour. For example, academics reported the defensive tactic of deploying the traditional course outline in a pre-emptive strike by developing it into 25+ page document detailing most possible policies and procedures which the academic/student-customer exchange might encounter. A common theme was, 'the unit outline...you have to cover yourself...things have to be explicitly written or you don't have a leg to stand on'. The process was considered by academics to contribute to work intensification, but to be worth the effort in order to 'head them off at the pass'.

A second defensive strategy was the 'double-dip' customer satisfaction survey. One subject coordinator in a large foundation subject had the practice of surveying grievances, held by students enrolled in the subject, in the middle of the semester in order to deal with

any complaints or problems at that point in time, rather than having them reflected in the student evaluation surveys at the end of the semester. This involved the coordinator attending up to fifty tutorial groups (day and evening) across four campuses during a two week period mid-semester.

A third defensive strategy involved assembling the academic troupes in a defensive formation. A different coordinator of a large foundation subject, which has up to 25 casual staff teaching, called regular staff meetings to ensure consistency of approach and solidarity against student demands; that is to say the student-customer 'bush lawyers' who it was assumed would attempt to exercise control on the basis of their interpretation of policy and rules. However the net effect of these regular meetings was more time being spent on customer focused matters and less on traditional academic work.

Defensive strategies targeting ICT were particularly common and took several forms. Some academics reported that they limited electronic access to them by refusing to 'log on' everyday, and opted for selective days on which they would reply to student-customer queries. 'I got e-mails throughout the weekend before the exam…they had an expectation that I was working over the weekend…I didn't answer them … in protest, because I've given as much as I can and I'm protesting against expectations on me…and management can't find fault with them…they support students and not academics'. Some academics used the on-line teaching technology to try to reduce their increased workload by giving group rather than individual responses.

Several academics covertly turned off their telephone voice-mail, unbeknown to their management. It was common to find the following responses: 'I try not to answer the phone…I take it off the hook…I don't turn on the voice-mail…and only answer some messages'.

Conclusions

While flexible delivery is seen by some university administrators as a means of replacing labour (ongoing costs) with technology (variable plant costs), it remains to be seen whether or not flexible delivery and its use of pre-packaged learning materials will actually deliver the heralded efficiencies. This will greatly depend on managers' strategic use of it as a tool for offering either high-quality, customised instruction or low-cost standardised production to facilitate a large volume of business.

There is a dichotomy between, first, small classes of individual, customised learning, requiring individual feedback from the tutor (small batch), and, second, a pedagogy introducing economies of scale for large enrolments in which there is a lack of the personal mentoring of traditional methods (mass production). In either case, self-service education, anywhere, anytime is seen as providing better 'win-win' service to the customer, and assumes a closer relationship with the customer. While this may be the case in resource rich subjects, particularly at postgraduate level, the distance between the customer and academic actually increases with flexible delivery in large, resource poor undergraduate subjects of up to two thousand students, and degrades the quality of experience for both academic and student.

This paper exemplifies some critical current issues in the management of knowledge workers: academics. Our fieldwork data highlights academic interviewees' perceptions of

flexible delivery as being supportive when used in groups of less than four hundred students, but they also identify that an unintended consequence can be its use for surveillance and control as an aggressive weapon against academic labour. Therefore, management's assumption about customer preference for flexibility and the consequent strategy of flexible delivery fail to achieve the desired customer satisfaction for all customer groups. The strategy of using ICT to enable 'product' and processes to be streamlined to become a low cost producer while creating a large volume of business (Knights et al. 1999, 17) is strategically sound, but fails when customer expectations of high quality service are not met. Within the parameters of these options flexible delivery is a diverse experience shaped by management strategy in response to the financial needs of the institution, although justified in pedagogical terms.

We draw two main conclusions. First, management makes assumptions about its customers which are then expressed in particular technological forms and in the organisation of work (Knights et al. 1999). This is the link between consumption, production and the labour process, and is an ongoing point of tension in Australian higher education between producer (academic) needs and consumer (student) desires (Lourens 1990). As illustrated in the fieldwork, it is a major theme of the data and important to an understanding of flexible delivery as a marketing strategy designed to be responsive to perceptions of customer needs for flexibility (consumption), a student-centred pedagogy (production system) and a very different form of work organisation to the traditional academic labour process (organisation of work). Of necessity, flexible delivery alters the organisation of academic work with a changing academic work pattern in response to customer preference, negotiated through enterprise bargaining processes and individual contracts. Our research identifies the introduction of trimesters, summer schools, intensive block periods of delivery, weekend delivery and overseas teaching blocks with partner institutions. While on-line delivery has the potential to free academic labour from a physical presence in the classroom to labour's advantage, it is also being used by management as a tool of work intensification, with academics reporting management's insistence for continued on-line teaching, even during periods of official sick leave or overseas sabbatical leave. Increasingly the contemporary academic shop is open 24/7.

Second, within this framework, there are unintended consequences for teaching and learning processes. The use of ICT changes the power relationship between academic and student, fundamentally changes the teaching process (the tasks to be done, when and how) and potentially creates an underclass of academics who are assigned information processing tasks of forum monitoring and e-mail response. For the academic in the 21st Century, flexible delivery takes on a whole new dimension: a flexible (expanding) workload, flexible hours as decided by management; flexible teaching duties as a generic teacher instead of a specialist; and a flexible employment contract (Sinclair et al. 1996, 654).

Acknowledgements

References

Baker, M., Creedy, J. & Johnson, D. (1996) *Financing and Effects of Internationalisation.* In *Higher Education: An Australian Country Study*, Canberra, Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

Barnett, R. (1990) *The Idea of Higher Education*, Buckingham, The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Barnett. R. & Cavanagh, J. (1994) *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order*, New York, Simon Schuster.

Barrow, C.W. (1995) Beyond the Multiversity: Fiscal Crisis and the Changing Structure of Academic Labour. In J. Smyth (ed.) *Academic Work*, pp. 159-178, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Bok, D. (2003) *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialisation of Higher Education,* New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

Bottery, M. (1999) Education Under the New Modernisers: An Agenda for Centralisation, Illiberalism and Inequality?" *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 29(1), 103-20.

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, London, Monthly Review Press.

Buchbinder, H. (1993) The market Oriented University and the Changing Role of Knowledge, *Higher Education*, 26(3), 331-47.

Buchbinder, H. & Rajagopal, P. (1995) Canadian Universities and the Impact of Austerity on the Workplace. In J. Smyth (ed.), *Academic Work*, pp. 60-73, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Burawoy, M. (1988) The Extended Case Method, *Sociological Theory*, 16(1), 4-33.

Burrows, R. & Marsh, C. (eds) (1992) *Consumption and Class: Divisions and Change*, Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Cunningham, S., Tapsall, S., Ryan, Y., Stedman, L., Bagdon, K. & Flew, T. (1998) *New Media and Borderless Education: A Review of the Convergence between Global Media Networks and Higher Education Provision,* Canberra, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Cunningham, S. (2000) *The Business of Borderless Education*, Canberra, Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

Currie, J. & Newson, J. (eds) (1998) *Universities and Globalization: Critical Perspectives*, London, Sage Publications.

Dawkins, J. (1988) *Higher Education: A Policy Statement (White Paper)*, July, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service.

Dudley, J. (1998) Globalization and Education Policy in Australia. In J. Currie & J. Newson (eds) *Universities and Globalization*, pp. 21-43, California, Sage Publications.

Evans, T. (1997) (En)countering Globalisation: Issues for Open and Distance Education. In L. Rowan, L. Bartlett & T. Evans (eds), pp. 11-22, *Shifting Borders: Globalisation, Localisation and Open and Distance Education*, Geelong, Deakin University Press.

Friedman, M. & Leube, K. (1987) *Essence of Friedman*, Stanford, Hoover Press.

Halsey, A.H. (1992) *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Jones, B.T. (1999) *From Mail Order to Telephone Order: The Call Centre Revolution*, 17th International Labour Process Conference, London, University of London.

Knights, D., Noble, F., Willmott, H. & Vurdubakis, T. (1999) *Constituting the CSR: Consumption, Production and the Labour Process in Call Centres*, 17th International Labour Process Conference, London, University of London.

Lourens, R. (1990) University Management: Tensions in a Changing Environment, *Journal of Tertiary Educational Administration*, 12(1), 217-31.

Manley, J. (2001) The Customer is Always Right? Customer Satisfaction Surveys as Employee Control Mechanisms in Professional Service Work. In A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis & H. Willmott (eds), pp. 157-169, *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*, Hampshire, Palgrave.

Marginson, S. (1995) *Markets in Education*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.

McLeod, D. (2000) Distance Learning, *Guardian Weekly*, January 13-19, p. 20.

Meek, V.L. & Wood, F.Q. (1997) *Higher Education Governance and Management: An Australian Study*, Canberra, Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

Miller, H. (1995) States, Economies and the Changing Labour Process of Academics: Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. In J. Smyth (ed.), pp. 40-59, *Academic Work: The Changing Labour Process in Higher Education*, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and the Open University Press.

Miller, H. (1991) "Academics and their Labour Process" in C. Smith, D. Knights and H. Willmott (eds.) *White Collar Work: The Non-Manual Labour Process*, Macmillan, London, pp. 109-137.

Neave, G. (1990) On Preparing for Market Trends in Western Europe 1986-88, *European Journal of Education*, 23(1), 7-23.

Newson, J.A. (1993) Constructing the 'Post-industrial' University: Institutional Budgeting and University Corporate Linkages. In P.G. Altback & B.D. Johnstone (eds) *The Funding of Higher Education; International Perspectives*, vol. 1, Garland Studies in Higher Education, New York, Garland Publishing.

Richardson, J. (2000) Remote Study at your Convenience, *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, April 15, p. 46.

Rooney, D. & Hearn, G. (1999) Of Minds, Markets and Machines: How Universities Might Transcend the Ideology of Commodification. In S. Inayatullah & J. Gidley (eds) *The University in Transformation: Global Perspectives on Future Universities*, Greenwood, Westport.

Rowan, L., Bartlett, L. & Evans, T. (eds) (1997) *Shifting Borders: Globalisation, Localisation and Open and Distance Education*, Geelong, Deakin University Press.

Sinclair, J., Ironside, M. and Seifert, R. (1996) "Classroom struggle? Market oriented education reforms and their impact on the teacher labour process", *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 641-661.

Scott, P. (1995) *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, Buckingham, The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Slaughter, S. & Leslie, L.L. (1997) *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press.

Smith, C., Knights, D. and Willmott, H. (eds.) (1991) *White-Collar Work: the Non-Manual Labour Process*, Macmillan, London.

Smyth, J. (1991) Theories of the State and Recent Policy Reforms in Australian Higher Education, *Discourse*, 11(2), 48-69.

Smyth, J. (ed.) (1995) *Academic Work*, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Thorp, D. (2000) Real cost of online learning, *The Australian – Higher Education Supplement*, July 5.

Thurow, L. (1985) *The Zero-Sum Solution: The Route to Economic Growth*, New York, Simon Schuster.

Trow, M. (1994) Managerialism and the Academic Profession: The Case of England, *Higher Education Policy*, 17(2), 11-18.

Usher, R., Bryant, I. and Johnston, R. (1997) *Adult Education and the Post-modern Challenge*, Routledge, London.

Warner, D. & Crosthwaite, E. (1995) *Human Resource Management in Higher and Further Education*, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.