'Universities, Academics and Students - The Ground Rules Have Changed': Power Dynamics in the Teaching Relationship in Universities

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The title of this paper is a quote from a vice-chancellor of an Australian university, one of the participants in this occupational case study of academic labour in market-oriented universities. The paper explores the changing academic labour process in the context of university work which is increasingly geared to commercial imperatives and consumer sovereignty. The consequences for the labour process are work intensification, a shift in power from producers to consumers, and the fragmentation and Taylorisation of academic work. The study draws on: interviews with academics, academic managers and industry commentators; analysis of university documents; analysis of government policies; and participant observation.[1]

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDENT-AS-CUSTOMER METAPHOR

The commercialisation of higher education in a consumer society provides the context for the construction of the student-as-customer. The 'customer' is fundamental to current management paradigms (Baldwin, 1994) with client focused cultures assumed to be 'win-win' for organisation and customer alike. The marketing services literature identifies that students have already transcended academic and administrative university structures and have assumed a role in which they take greater control of the purchase experience and greater involvement in the delivery of the product (Mieczkowska, Hinton and Barnes, 2001). In market-oriented universities, administrators have extended this to the construction of the student-as-customer in what has become an economic exchange with students now paying tuition fees, in some cases up to $2,000 per subject. However, metaphors are not value neutral. They are agents that influence how we interpret action within a particular context. Just as Burawoy (1979) uses the metaphor of a game to explain the context and process of the contradiction of control, resistance and co-operation, so too university administrators use the student-as-customer metaphor to interpret action, drive practice, and generate values and cultural change. Academic interviewees identify this language as being at the heart of cultural change in their workplaces. A common response is, 'It's just too hard... learning is seen as a commodity, a purchase to be made and this has really changed academic work'.

University managements use marketing and total quality management (TQM) to legitimise and give effect to the student-as-customer metaphor. University marketing staff use the metaphor to divert organisational goals and resources into efforts to satisfy customers at a profit, coupled with a willingness to change products or services better to satisfy customer needs. There is nothing sinister or conspiratorial in this, rather it goes to the heart of the marketing mindset (Bloom and Novelli, 1981). However, the implication identified in this research is that student needs and wants should be

satisfied, and that educational processes and the academic labour process have to adapt themselves. This may not be in the long-term interests of student-customers, nor of academic labour.

Like marketers, TQM specialists also use the student-as-customer metaphor to direct organisational processes and resources, albeit a focus on the delivery of a quality service which is actually defined by the customer in the first instance (Peters, 1987). The service in higher education is, in effect, the outcome of the academic labour process, with labour finding itself revalued according to customers' criteria. This is consistent with general trends in quality management where the definition of quality has developed from 'quality is excellence', to 'quality is value', to 'quality is conformance to specifications', to 'quality is meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations' (Reeves and Bednar, 1994, cited in Pariseau and McDaniel, 1997: 205). A common theme from interviewees was, 'In a way students are my customers (particularly MBA fee paying students), but we need to lead them in what they need to know...but there's been a change in the last ten years with them now telling you what they want to learn'.

It would therefore seem that the application of business metaphors to conceptualise and direct educational practice is problematic (Schwartzman, 1995) given that discourses of consumerism actually shape action (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Debates about the commercialisation of higher education have focused on access, the reshaping of educational delivery and re-engineering of education institutions. Little attention has been paid to the broader social ramifications of those policies in Australian society or how they effect change in academic work (Thornton, 2004:33; Coaldrake and Stedman, 1998:164).

Are there unintended consequences of inappropriately transferring a familiar institutional pattern to relationships of a very different character? For Passmore (1997), such is the case with the term 'customer', derived from the current model institution of the shopping market, with its distinction between producers who want to sell at the highest price and customers who wish to pay as little as possible. Passmore maintains that use of the term 'customer' in agencies such as hospitals and universities transforms these agencies into places where medical care and training are sold as part of normal commercial transactions. The logical extension of this is that patients and students have consumer rights, and if they have the cash they have the right to purchase that service. Similarly, if they do not have the financial wherewithal, they cannot purchase the service. To Passmore the thought that medical assistance and education should be available only to those who can afford them is unacceptable in a humane society. So, too, is the potential for sellers, if sales are falling off, to lower prices and similarly, for universities to lower standards to retain numbers. An unintended consequence of this may be the release into the community of incompetent doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers and teachers. These concerns are supported by the Chief Justice of New South Wales, the Honourable J. Speigelman who has expressed concerns about the 'new public management' approach which tends to reduce citizens to consumers. While he acknowledges the merits of organisations meeting consumer or client needs, he stresses that one's status as a consumer is only a subset of one's role as a citizen. He urges Australian universities to recognise that consumers have desires or needs, but citizens have rights and also duties (Spiegelman, 2002: 12). For Spiegelman, the greater good is served by a perspective of citizenship which is of greater significance than the perspective of consumerism.

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 power from producer to consumer, which in turn effects the transformation of the power 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. 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 off-shore 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 contracts for staff servicing electronic forums and communications; and the introduction of performance management for academics incorporating mandatory satisfactory performance in teaching and research. Academics reported that academic work has been refashioned with a change to hours, remuneration and the control of work which swings the balance of power towards consumers and away from producers. This is consistent with Knights, Nobel, Willmott and Vurdubakis' (1999b: 10) contention that this shift from producer to consumer has occurred in society generally and is more or less permanent.

The fragmentation of academic work is another feature of changing power relationships in academic work. A managerialist approach from market-oriented universities runs contrary to a focus on quality, and is conducted in the name of 'quality' and 'value-for-money'. This approach uses sessional, part-time and casual staff in response to management's pre-occupation with the cast of staff salaries. The fieldwork data suggest that flexible delivery is a key catalyst in this process. One development has been the creation of tutor positions attached to the large, undergraduate, resource-poor subjects to deal efficiently and effectively with the high volume of communication (e-mails, chatboards, voice-mail, phone calls) generated by student-customers. The academic labour process is split between a full-time career academic in the core, who withdraws access from student-customers and assumes a co-ordinating/lecturing role; and a contract tutor who is left with the 'donkey work' in the workforce periphery, who may be the main contact for up to several thousand students in the subject. Such positions are usually 'teaching-only', usually: 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 ten 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 academic who are operating with the security and resources of the core, and the 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 on the basis of flexible delivery, with the unintended consequence of the creation of an academic under-class.

E-Learning and On-Line Teaching

Where the pursuit of value-for-money and consumer expectations of quality intersect, there is another dimension of change to 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 working under the direction of administrative 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. Interviewees at one academic workplace 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 the Forum Master, an IT administrator in the on-line learning centre.

The Forum Master controlled the opening and closing of the forum (the academic's virtual classroom) attached to a subject (usually closed thirty days after the conclusion of the formal teaching period although students still have an expectation of service from the academic in that thirty-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; and 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% of messages, students posted 55%) 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 Forum Master and reported to management.

On-line teaching has in effect fractured the traditional academic authority over the content and delivery of material which goes to the heart of the academic labour process, as well as facilitating the surveillance of an academic's e-classroom. It is a weakening of academic labour's traditional power in the labour process and 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, Knights and Willmott, 1991: 3). It is also consistent with Jones' (1999) research into call centres, which found that the new technologies were justified on the basis of improving the quality of product. However, this was achieved by improving the quality and quantity of management information on what staff do and the rate at which they work, thereby facilitating increased management control and monitoring of labour and the work process.

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 this trend. 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 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 academic labour's performance. As one academic said, 'The [student survey] score is whether or not the student has been serviced enough - maximum input from us, minimum effort by them.... It's a reaction to personal factors such as their marks'.

Customer satisfaction surveys are now an integral part of university TQM 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' direct control over academic employees as staff respond by self-censorship and increased responsiveness to

student-customer demands. Failure to do so may bring labour into conflict with both student-customers and management, and have consequences for career prospects.

In that survival in a highly competitive higher education industry is strategically linked to customer focus (consequent on broad patterns of financial and operational change driven by government), management seeks to serve student-customers' interests in an attempt to secure their custom. This flows through to the substantive outcomes and conditions of employment for academic labour achieved by legitimising the student-customer through formal organisational processes and the development of corporate culture which leads labour to internalise the student-customer concept. These processes include: performance appraisal of academics by student-customers using surveys; student-customer complaints and appeals processes; enterprise bargaining in which management seeks 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 offshore 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 labour's right to determine academic standards, particularly at the level of the individual student.

Consumer Sovereignty

The 'soft marking' issue is a symptom of the re-engineering of processes and culture as a response to the interests of different customer groups. This research has not addressed the issue directly, however, it was an issue raised by interviewees who expressed concern at the advocacy of academic managers on students' behalf and the consequent pressure on labour from academic managers to be flexible in their assessment standards. Interviewees cited cases such as: direct advocacy by management to pass a failing final-semester, full-fee paying international student; pressure by management to pass students who have come to the university as part of a commercial contract with a corporate client for the university to deliver a training package for their employees; the over-riding by academic management of an academic's decision not to offer supplementary exams and assessment in particular cases; and management's disapproval of failure rates, irrespective of the height of the scholastic benchmark and their chastising of academic labour for their failure.

Academic interviewees commented that management (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 academic labour leads labour 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 management and involved in lengthy and difficult appeals processes without the support of their management. In this way new cultural norms are being established which legitimise consumer sovereignty and integrate the customer into decision-making frameworks. Organisational processes are thus implemented by management 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 twenty-four hours and there was a one week turnaround on assessment'. From this example, it can be seen 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 from the fieldwork institutions identified that teaching academics with more than ten years service (usually in the thirty-five-plus age group) generally express outright rejection of the student-as-customer, seeing the metaphor 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, but I know students see themselves as customers'. Many academics in this older age group had experience of the binary system prior to the Dawkins reforms (1988) and 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 greater flexibility for universities are leading to a small core group of academics receiving higher pay and benefits and a larger peripheral group of contract workers with lower pay and benefits, less security, and diminished prospects of career advancement; user pays 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 internationally.

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 perceive 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', 'students have an inflated sense of authority'.

These last comments reflect the trickle-down effect of the marketisation of the industry to the chalkface, with academic labour being viewed as an asset from which increased productivity and flexibility is demanded by employing institution and student-customer alike. 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 academic labour. 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 ten years experience in the industry 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 clearly 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 university sector as a whole. In the words of one young academic, '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 with longer service 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 control and resistance. 'Circling the wagons' (a phrase introduced 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 subject outline in a pre-emptive strike by developing it into twenty-five-plus page document which details 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, however it was 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 co-ordinator 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 co-ordinator's attendance at 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 co-ordinator of a large foundation subject, which has up to twenty-five 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 the communications technology were particularly common and took a variety of forms. Some academics reported that they limited electronic access to them by refusing to 'boot up' everyday, and opted for selective days on which they will 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 this time around, 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 had covertly turned off their telephone voice-mail, unbeknown to their management. It was common to find the following response,

> '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…I turn on the light and leave the office for four or five hours'.

A dean reported that one academic employee in his faculty was still refusing to use a computer.

FUTURE TRENDS

Control over standards is linked to general concerns about academic freedom which is fundamental in any democratic society where universities have a significant role in challenging the status quo and promoting social change. Under the current funding arrangements for Australian universities, the Government insists that universities must offer all their staff the option of moving to individual contracts: Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) which are a new feature of employment relations in Australia. In 2005 Australian universities registered 432 AWAs, compared with seventy-eight the year before (Morris, 2006: 31). The move to individual contracts will bring about the weakening of collective enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) which are currently the dominant bargaining framework in the higher education sector. In the name of flexibility, the Government is seeking to promote individual contracts and exclude unions from the negotiation of conditions of employment so that universities will form 'a new relationship with their employees' (Andrews, 2005: 41). The 2005 legislation identified a system which, according to the Minister, had:

> a need for greater flexibility in agreement making rather than compliance with a floor price often determined by the NTEU; little opportunity to recognise and reward high achievers; long and complex processes to manage under-performance; the need for flexibility in staff arrangements to deliver courses in response to new and changing markets; and the need for flexibility to tailor remuneration packages to individuals (Andrews, 2005: 41).

One consequence of the 'new relationship' may well be a reduction of academic freedom, albeit an illusive term yet to be afforded a universally accepted definition (Tierney, 2001). It is at the core of the organisation of academic work as one would expect with autonomous craft work in which the artisan/s retains decision-making over all aspects of production be it at an individual or collegial level. Bergquist (1992: 42-43) notes that

academic freedom is one of the dominant norms of collegial culture, offering academics the right to upset the existing power structure in the name of social change. There are concerns that the existing mechanisms which protect Australian academics and their employment security may be dismantled in favour of individual contracts which contain clauses designed to promote the commercial interests of the institution over traditional freedom of speech for academics in the labour process. Researchers are already noting the self-censorship which academics are adopting as part of a survival strategy in market-oriented universities. For example, a 2001 survey of social scientists by the Australia Institute had 17 per cent of respondents reporting that they had been prevented from publishing contentious results, and 49 per cent said they had been reluctant to criticise institutions that provide research grants and other support (McDonald, 2005: 41). In the future it is likely that the commercial interests of universities (particularly strongly market-orientated institutions) will dominate labour's interests when it comes to academic freedom. Given that those commercial interests are allied to consumer sovereignty, one might expect the curtailment of academic freedom to be even stronger, with the taken-for-granted assumption of academic freedom in the labour process subjugated to the interests of the customer.

The significantly changed nature of the academic labour process in market-oriented universities can be described as follows: There have been changes in the formal conditions of employment, such as working hours and rewards. There is greater external control imposed by administrators through performance management geared to consumer satisfaction. There are increased demands on academics' time by student-customers who have direct access to academics and administrators through electronic communication. This often results in academics being drawn into administrative or trivial tasks which have traditionally been at the periphery of academic work. There is greater surveillance of academic labour by student-customers and university management who use the electronic communication as a means of control over labour. There is the consequent reduction in academic labour's traditional responsible autonomy. There is a change in workplace values and orientation driven by managerialism, with the subjugation of academic occupational culture to corporate culture. In short, there is a diminution of academic freedom, be it an outcome of managerial regulation or self-imposed censorship.

However, as with most occupational and organisational changes, there will be winners and losers. There will be opportunities for academics who adopt the new commercial orientation and meet managements' requirements of labour flexibility and customer satisfaction. Compliance with organisational key performance indicators and performance measures of customer satisfaction, acceptance of consumer sovereignty and a willingness to meet student-customer wants may reap financial benefits (bonuses and supplements consequent on student evaluations) and accelerated career progression. For those academics whose orientation is individual and career focused, rather than collegial and disciplinary based, the changing labour process in a commercial context lends itself to individual AWA employment contracts. Performance measures geared to consumer satisfaction can be prescribed in the contract (e.g. response times to student-customer communication, turnaround times for assessment marking, minimum student-customer satisfaction levels, restriction of academic freedom). In an AWA these can be linked to specific rewards and career progression, all bringing financial benefit. As consumers themselves in a consumer society where consumption has come to dominate production as the means of status, and as workers in an industry which is less secure than it once was, younger academic labour may find this package attractive.

CONCLUSIONS

This research suggests that if the student-as-customer metaphor comes to dominate university teaching and administrative processes, it may ultimately lead to conflict between academic labour, student-customers and administrators, which has the potential to undermine the foundations of educational delivery. We should try to find a compromise between consumer sovereignty on the one hand and the needs of academic labour on the other. New forms of decision-making need to be developed which meet the needs of employing institution, academic labour and student-customer, and recognise the complexities of the pedagogical exchange, yet do not undermine the beneficial outcomes of the best forms of academic work. The control of the labour process is at the heart of universities as 'autonomous, self-directing, peer-review and professional authority based institutions' (Newson, 1993: 9). The mechanism which most universities have developed for negotiating a match between organisational goals and individual work has been performance management. The imposition of performance control systems without recognition of the impact of student-customers on the labour process still denies the reality of the changing power relationships underpinning academic work. Acknowledging the reality could lead to better employment outcomes and quality of working life for academic labour, improved customer service for student-customers and increased retention rates and hence earnings for universities.

The commercialisation of higher education, reinforced by legislative changes in the sector and consequent financial, structural and industrial-relations reforms, have significantly changed the balance between: teaching and research; academic and student; managerialism and collegiality; and the regulation over the labour process imposed by university administrations (including academic managers) and the semi-autonomous freedom of academic labour. The reality is that these changes cannot be rolled back, even if there is a different government or political context. They are now infused into organisational and occupational cultures in Australian universities, albeit to varying degrees. The challenge for the sector is to ensure that the consequences of these changes are fully identified and understood. This occupational case study shows that academic managers and administrators, operating within an increasingly strong commercial framework and focused on the imperatives of the customer-focused 'win-win' management paradigm, have failed satisfactorily to confront the intersection of product and labour markets within their universities, and the consequences for the academic labour process. Neither a marketing nor a TQM paradigm can be used to fully explain the complexity of the academic labour (teacher)-student interaction. Such explanations can be enhanced by drawing on the rich literature of industrial and occupational sociology.

END NOTE

1.   The study uses: participant observation, interview, 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 characterised by polytechnics in the United Kingdom and former colleges of advanced education in Australia. Faculties of business were chosen from within those sites, because of their strategic business and client focus, and a student cohort from business and industry which has a reputation for demanding efficiency, effectiveness and value-for-money. All of the respondents who were approached were full-time academics and academic managers employed in universities on the east coast of Australia. All agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted with twenty-seven academics from vice-

chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, business faculty deans and associate deans, senior lecturers and lecturers between 1999 and 2004. In addition, a university marketing manager and a communication-media manager were interviewed. Additional interviews were conducted with a dozen specialists on higher education and university teaching. Also 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. We express grateful thanks to all those who facilitated this research.

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