A Study Of Two Higher Education Institutions Seeking University Status: A Cultural Shift
Brian Hemmings, Charles Sturt University, Australia
Doug Hill, Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract

The paper reports the way in which two teaching-led higher education institutions sought to increase their research capacity with a view to obtaining university status. This study took the form of a collective case study that had as its focus the changes associated with moving from a dominant teaching culture to one recognising the importance of the teaching-research nexus. Multiple sources of evidence were used to identify the way in which the culture of the organisations changed, the approaches adopted to support and produce change, barriers to change, and outcomes of the change process.

Keywords: Christian higher education, researcher development, culture and change

Introduction

The authors of this paper report on the outcomes of a collective case study of two higher education institutions (HEIs) involved in the process of changing from a teaching-led culture to one in which more staff members are actively involved in research and publication. The senior managers of the two HEIs are taking steps to have their respective institutions gain university status. One HEI is located in the UK (referred to as UK College) and the other in Australia (referred to as Aus College).

Typically, HEIs that are in the process of transition to a university face many challenges (Field & Gounko, 2012; Geddes, Stonyer, Reid, Dreyfus, & Hodson, 2004). The challenges identified include:

- drawing on limited public resources;
- introducing profitable programs;
- competing with well-established universities;
- setting appropriate standards;
- developing staff capacity to meet new demands;
- retaining and exploiting existing strengths;
- developing a university culture;
- forging a strong nexus between teaching and research;
- attracting new staff to complement existing expertise;
- refocusing in terms of purpose as an institution;
- avoiding relegation to the lowest tier of universities;
- exploring new found freedom to determine the curriculum;
- reshaping staff performance frameworks;
- changing the public image of the institution;
- managing staff changes; and,
- communicating and leading a new vision and mission.
These challenges all have a cultural component. Gardiner (2000) described how the cultures of predecessor institutions persisted in newly created universities in Australia and how these ideas, practices and values produced tensions and acted as barriers to change. Change is particularly difficult in institutions that have long traditions and reputations built on those traditions. This applied to both HEIs that are the subject of this paper.

Both HEIs are relatively small. Aus College had 1460 students enrolled in 2012 and UK College, 1800 in 2012. The institutions started out as church-run teacher training institutions and commenced degree programs in several other discipline areas well before the turn of this century. The culture of a teaching-led institution reflects its prime purpose by valuing relevance, teaching excellence, and pastoral care. Most universities are more diverse and have different cultures.

A culture keeps its people together, shapes their behaviour and may include a distinctive world-view. Geertz (1973, p.5), used a web metaphor to describe the term ‘culture’ and illustrate its pervasive nature by stating “.... man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”.

The culture of a university is created, transmitted, and maintained by the messages that are received about how people are expected to behave, what they are expected to do and think, and how they should be expected to be treated within the university environment. Wallace, Schirato, and Bright (1999) summarised, for students, the traditional nature of university culture in the Australian context. Whyte (2009, p. 78) claimed “…universities are the institutions in society that are the most completely defined by their culture”. Some of the values that are embedded in university cultures, such as independence, creativity, skepticism, and diversity make it very difficult to implement change (Donoghue & Kennerley, 2008). Once a university college becomes a university the very structures that are set up are likely to reduce the pace of change.

During the noughties decade the student population became more diverse and students’ expectations of what and how they wished to study changed. Smith, Ling, and Hill (2006) claimed the Australian universities needed more flexible modes of delivery in order to meet the needs of contemporary learners. Ehlers and Schneckenberg (2010) provided reasons why university cultures are in need of radical change to embrace the sustainable integration of learning technologies. Besides the issue of ensuring quality of teaching including enhancing the role of learning technologies and innovative practices, universities face the challenges of delivering relevant courses, excelling in research and making a valued contribution to key stakeholders and the broader society. Bexley, James, and Arkoudis (2011) have described the contemporary challenges faced by universities in reconceptualising academic work and regenerating that workforce. Their report began with the following quotation:

“Even though there is a spoken acknowledgement that all three (teaching, research, and service) are important, every academic knows there is a hierarchy, with research sitting at the top... I think academic institutions forget that we need a blended balance of strong teachers and strong researchers in order to make the university viable and profitable - and we can't expect that we'll get both out of one person who has any sort of work-life balance!” (p. i)

Locke (2012) covered many of the same issues in the UK context and highlighted the importance of the relationship of teaching and research. This means that the task for HEIs wishing to become universities is now even more problematic. They not only have to meet the challenges of qualifying to become universities but, once there, have to face that sector’s dilemmas outlined above. Fortunately for HEIs making changes at this time there is a growing recognition of the importance of teaching to meet the needs of students within a changing social, technological, and economic environment.

The HEIs

The two HEIs were chosen for their similarity in origin, initial purpose, and desire to achieve university status. A brief introduction to each HEI follows.
UK College

This specialist HEI was founded in the mid-1800s by the Church of England in order to train women as teachers to work in elementary schools, with men eventually admitted more than a 100 years later. Since that time, pre-service training has remained its main focus, shaping its identity to the present. UK College now has broader undergraduate and postgraduate programs, including a range of other education and arts and humanities courses. The institution continues to derive its distinctive culture from its Christian foundation, heritage, and traditions. It has maintained its independence and has a strong reputation and presence within its own drawing area. UK College’s current vision is to be a leader in learning, to inspire excellence, and to enrich the lives of its students and staff and the communities it serves.

UK College made a case for receiving university status in mid 2012. It was granted full university status later in that year and now is embarking on the process of meeting many of the challenges described above.

Aus College

This Australian college of higher education was founded in 1897, to serve its Protestant Christian denomination by training teachers for its own schools. Since the 1950s, Aus College has offered courses in teaching, business, and theological studies. Degree and master and doctoral programmes, including the disciplines of science and nursing studies, were added later. From 2000, there have been further developments, including more emphasis on staff credentialing and research output, supported by funded research centres, an academic press, and collaboration with the wider research community. Aus College also has maintained links with a sister institution in the USA where the higher education provided by this denomination is seen as different from mainstream higher education in mission and culture (Thorman, 1996).

The college continues to be governed by its church and strives to maintain the distinctive teachings and traditions. These essential characteristics include identity, mission, and lifestyle (Geraty, 2005). The HEI acts in accord with writers such as Garver (1996) who emphasised the importance of participating in the life of a supportive community of believers. Members of the college community are surrounded by artifacts and participate in activities that support the identity and mission of the college. Its vision and mission are respectively: ‘To be the preferred Christian private university in Australia’; and ‘To foster a Christian learning community that is founded on quality research-based higher education and that prepares students for lives of service’. The vision has been an important driver of change within the institution for a range of reasons, including enhancing its status, increasing student numbers, gaining access to additional research funding, and attracting high calibre staff and students.

There are no immediate plans to apply for university status. However, preparation is well underway for such an application.

The context

The context in which the changes taking place within the two HEIs included competition for funds, students and status at a time of greater availability of information such as rankings for teaching, employment research output, and the influence of social media.

The Robbins Report (1963) examined the relationship between teaching and research in the UK context and concluded that “[t]here is no borderline between teaching and research; they are complementary and overlapping activities. A teacher who is advancing his general knowledge of his subject is both improving himself as a teacher and laying foundations for his research. The researcher often finds that his personal work provides him with fresh and apt illustration which helps him to set a subject in a new light when he turns to prepare a lecture” (p. 183).

Both HEIs accepted this nexus between teaching and research, as reaffirmed by Baldwin (2005), at a time when this view was being challenged. For example, Scott (2005) claimed “[t]he relationship between teaching and research is amongst the most intellectually tangled, managerially complex and politically contentious issues in mass higher education” (p. 53). When reviewing the situation in Australian universities, Bexley et al. (2011) made similar
comments and supported the possibility of different career trajectories for academics, as described by Hemmings and Hill (2009).

The two HEIs had similar cultures arising from their Christian foundation, heritage, and traditions and their long-standing focus on pre-service teacher training. Both shared a distinctive teaching-led culture with a strong sense of community, independence, and purpose. While there have been many accounts of the transition of HEIs to university status (see, for example, Field & Gounko, 2012; Geddes et al., 2004), there have not been studies that have had a similar cultural focus in small institutions where the sub-cultures of the small number of areas of study are less important than that of the organisation as a whole. This is the opposite of the case in large universities where the cultures and structures related to the various faculties makes change difficult (Miller 2010). This study was confined to the largest and longest standing area of study in the two HEIs, education, as carrier of the distinctive cultures.

Method

A case study was defined by Yin (1994) as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context...[and] relies on multiple sources of evidence” (p. 13). The case, in this study, was a group of academics in two comparable HEIs undergoing transition from a teaching-led culture to one that had a greater emphasis on research and would meet the criteria for recognition as universities. The information gathered was treated as a single collective case study (Stake, 1995) as the purpose of the study was to examine the ways in which individual academics managed the changes associated with expectations of greater involvement in research and publication. This study set out to describe the experiences and views of the participants during a period when the two institutions were striving to achieve greater research output.

This case study involved the use of multiple sources of evidence collected in a variety of ways including:
1. Face–to-face interviews;
2. E-mailed responses to questions;
3. Researcher observations;
4. Conversations with key stakeholders to confirm or elaborate tentative inferences;
5. Analysis of the literature relating to the two institutions;
6. Examinations of current documents and archival records; and,
7. Observation of physical artefacts.

The use of data from the above sources, together with the previous experience of the researchers in this field, helped ensure the validity of the enquiry process. A data set, comprising mainly of sources 1, 2, 3 (see above), was analysed within an essentialist framework. This analysis was conducted in accord with an approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The focus of the analysis was the culture of the organisation, the way in which it was changing, the approaches adopted to support and produce change, barriers to change, and outcomes of the change process. Additionally, a check was made on the strategies/tactics used to enhance research output by comparing accounts of the two research leaders and the ten participants.

The antecedent culture

Teacher-training colleges traditionally favoured the recruitment of staff from among teachers who displayed exemplary practice in the school classroom. For this reason the culture of teaching-led college had many similarities with that of the schools they served. In many cases college teachers returned to the classroom for a period of refreshment or, less commonly, permanently. The culture of a school is not static but is constantly being shaped through interactions with a range of stakeholders and reflections on and responses to a changing social, political and economic environment. However, schools are mostly conservative and change is slow. Teachers operate within a cultural context that influences every aspect of their working life. This is true for both school and college teachers.
The change strategies

A long-term strategy to reach the goal of university status, adopted by both HEIs, was to increase research output to the level expected of smaller universities. This strategy was implemented using a variety of tactics that were reviewed and refined as necessary. The tactics used have been grouped under four headings.

Creating opportunities and support for research-related staff development
- Arranging publication workshops to develop writing skills
- Giving time and financial support for staff to undertake appropriate higher qualifications
- Including relevant student research projects, supervised by staff members, in HEI courses
- Introduction of leave schemes that allowed staff to visit and work in research-intensive institutions
- Making funding available for conference attendance and presentations
- Organising mentoring and coaching schemes
- Promoting research seminars/colloquia
- Providing opportunities to get started by writing for in-house publications
- Retraining staff members
- Setting up research teams and centres

Direction and actions by management to promote research
- Advocating a utilitarian approach whereby the research focus is on informing practice
- Being flexible in relation to arrangements that allow staff participation in research
- Celebrating individual successes in research and publication
- Communicating information about the process and progress of change
- Critically examining the culture of the organisation, questioning shared assumptions, values and beliefs and acknowledging changes
- Encouraging staff members to draw on personal research in designing and teaching courses
- Including research output as part of performance management
- Involving staff members in strategic development planning that included research
- Making the development of students as enquirers as a key priority
- Managing the process of change in ways that ensure that staff members are not overwhelmed or exhausted
- Recognising, supporting, and rewarding those actively engaged in research and publication
- Reminding staff members that teaching is likely produce better student outcomes if they are actively involved in relevant research
- Research output made an important criterion for promotion
- Setting research targets
- Striking a better workload balance in relation to research, teaching, and other academic or service-related activities.

Actions by leaders/supervisors/experienced colleagues designed to enhance research-related practice
- Challenging staff members with the possibility that the research could alter what they believe and what they would subsequently do in their practice
- Encouraging participation in external research networks
- Encouraging staff to gradually work up through the hierarchy of journals when publishing
- Facilitating collaboration and networking internally
- Helping staff members align research with their own teaching
- Working through individual conflicts about time devoted to teaching and research
- Working side by side with other more experienced and published researchers

Staffing related actions
- Appointing people to act as researcher role models/champions
- Balancing the effect of making new appointments of research active staff with the need to maintain the quality of teaching and staff esprit de corps
The Clute Institute
International Academic Conference
Paris, France 2013

- Recruiting staff with doctorates and experienced researchers to establish a critical mass
- Retrenching or not renewing contracts for staff members who do little research

The above statements have been taken primarily from sources linked to the ten participants. The two leaders with responsibility for enhancing the research capacity of the respective HEIs were asked to identify the strategies/tactics that had been implemented. This made it possible to verify the consistency of perspectives of staff and research leaders. It was found that 85% of the strategies/tactics nominated by the two research leaders were acknowledged in the responses of the participants. Those that were not recognised were related to the broader institutional context. Three examples are given below:

1. Researcher undertaking a comprehensive audit of research expertise, research aspiration, perceived barriers to research, research opportunities, and research training requirements;
2. establishing an agreed institutional understanding and definition of research and what it means to be a research-er and research-active while considering the full role of the academic or lecturer in higher education; and,
3. recognising that to become a university you need to be ‘university-like’ in three areas and to target those areas.

The communication of such information is important as a key goal of change management and “… the alignment of people and culture with strategic shifts in the organisation, to overcome resistance to change in order to increase engagement and the achievement of the organisation’s goal for effective transformation” (The University of Adelaide, 2010, p. 4). In this context it is particularly important to understand the academic culture of the institution (see, for example, Kezar & Eckel, 2002) and the way in which peer groups and collegial networks influence the way in which information is communicated, interpreted, and acted upon as this culture is perpetuated by example and peer support. In this case study the level of effective communication was remarkably high.

The barriers to change

Significant barriers to change were associated with the culture and traditions of the institution, the competing expectations of participants, students, managers, supervisors and others, and demands on resources.

Actions designed to produce change usually encounter entrenched beliefs and dispositions that result in people behaving and feeling quite differently: some become passive, others put varying efforts into trying to change, while some become quietly critical, some actively resist change, and a few actively resist and become very unhappy and vocal in their opposition. Reasons for resisting change are many and varied (Johnson, 2001) and can include:

- a clear vision is not communicated;
- a lack of appropriate ongoing staff development, follow up, and monitoring;
- an organisational culture that values the status quo;
- change required is too much or too fast;
- failure to address the concerns of individuals;
- insufficient resources;
- lack of a powerful champion to lead the change;
- little trust in those advocating change;
- not believing that the change is achievable;
- questioning whether the change will result in the desired outcome;
- self-protection; and;
- threats to status when the development of expertise that others already display, is required.

It is particularly common for people to have some negative feelings towards changes that they see as imposed upon them. It is also true that a change in thinking is often a necessary first step before actively engaging in something new such as conducting research. Change is slow and difficult in higher education due, in part, to the decentralized and inherently conservative nature of such institutions (Miller, 2010). While many barriers were encountered, the tactics employed in the HEIs were effective in reducing their impact.
The outcomes

General cultural shifts

A culture in which the nexus between teaching and research was more or less taken for granted by many has slowly evolved

Conversations about research have become more common

Developing a track record in research is now seen as a means of adding to one’s institutional credibility and career prospects

It has become accepted that many new members of staff would be recruited on the basis of their demonstrated expertise in research

Journals other than strictly professional become more important as both sources of information and opportunities to publish

Less new staff members are recruited directly from schools and thus the support for a teaching-led culture has diminished

Research and publication gains a more discernible and recognised profile within the HEI

Research and publication linked to the perceived standing of the HEI in the wider education community

Staff members noted that the culture of the HEI had changed and now included an implicit expectation that staff will engage in some scholarly activity, research, and publication

The culture of the HEI is changing from one in which research knowledge is used mainly to inform students to one in which new knowledge is created and applied

The process of and experience in doing research becomes more obvious to individuals and is shared with others

Outcomes valued by individuals

Collaborative research results in deeper and valued relationships among participants

Gaining a doctorate whilst employed in a HEI provides opportunities for employment in an established university

Neophyte researchers value and actively seek mentoring and coaching

Small communities of practice with a focus on research developed for mutual support

Staff members learn a lot in the workplace by observing and talking to others who research and are subsequently using this knowledge and receiving feedback

Staff members who are teaching-led begin to see research that is relevant and supportive of their teaching as attractive

Staff members wishing to upgrade their research knowledge and skills valued being able to choose from a variety of means including undertaking doctoral studies, becoming a member of a research team, and supervising student research projects
The value of opportunities for study, travel, and leave to develop expertise in research becomes more highly prized

Sources of support

A pervasive faith-based culture, where the tradition of sharing, caring and assistance are the norm, has helped facilitate a transition to active engagement with research

Dialogue related to research helped many people to recognise that some of what they had been doing was a form of research, particularly when the focus was on effective practice, involved qualitative techniques and had a direct application to schools

Engaging in research has encouraged critical thinking about priorities and professional practice

Leaders who are champions of research

The induction of new researchers now indicates the support available from mentors, supervisors, colleagues, teams, and interest groups

Difficulties/barriers

Developing expertise in the process of writing and publication posed problems

Increased tension between time for research and teaching as more staff members begin to engage in research and question their priorities

Making time for research results in changes in accessibility of staff to students and other staff members

Significant barriers to change were associated with the culture and traditions of the institution and the competing expectations of participants, students, managers, supervisors, and others

Some members of staff had been attracted to the HEI because of its former teaching-led culture

Some members of staff who are not actively involved in research feel left out and disenfranchised

Some staff members who begin to engage in research feel ill prepared for the task

Staff members grappled with changing the time allocations for various activities in order to make room for research in a busy schedule; that is, altering priorities

Those new to research often struggled to find research topics that matched their interests and expertise and the time and other resources available

Discussion

This collective case study of two HEIs, with a shared and distinctive teaching-led culture, revealed that a variety of tactics designed to increase research and publication outputs were effective. While there were obvious barriers to cultural change in both institutions a culture of sharing with a strong sense of community, independence, and purpose helped to overcome these barriers. As a result of this change it was evident that staff members were well on the way to incorporating research and publication activity as a normal part of their work and accepted that by so doing would improve the quality of their teaching. The latter was a key factor in making a cultural shift away from a dominant teaching-led tradition.

It is likely that the small size of both HEIs was a critical factor in achieving a cultural shift. In such institutions champions are able to exercise a potent influence in ways that would not be possible in larger
institutions. For this reason, it may not be possible to generalise the findings of the study to other institutions that are larger, have different heritages, and do not have the same faith-based traditions.

Despite the above caveats, it is possible to identify a number of implications for other HEIs wishing to make a similar journey. These include: one, the opportunity for staff members to converse freely and openly about their career and about ways in which it might develop through appropriate professional learning; two, changing the work environment to recognise and acknowledge the importance of research and publication; three, building on the strengths of the existing culture; four, highlighting the teaching-research nexus; and five, setting realistic publication targets and creating incentives to help meet these targets.

One of the strengths of this empirical study was the manner in which multiple sources of evidence were compiled to provide a rich description of the process of change in two comparable settings. The use of this technique served to enhance the validity, reliability, and credibility of the findings.

This study has built a firm platform for future research work concerned with the transition of specialist HEIs to university status, particularly in Australia and the UK where such status confers benefits to the institution and its staff. The emphasis in this study on the way in which culture influences individual acceptance of change recognises the importance of tradition and the reluctance to give up that which has been and is still valued. Future studies might profit by giving attention to this aspect.

Acknowledgements

Funding sourced through the Faculty of Education, Charles Sturt University Research and Development Fund and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University.

Biographies

Dr Brian Hemmings is Sub-Dean (Graduate Studies) in the Faculty of Education at Charles Sturt University, Australia. He also holds the position of Associate Director of the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE). Brian’s research work focuses on research capacity building, early career academics, and lecturer self-efficacy. This work is underpinned by person-environment interaction theory and social cognition theory. This work has led to publications in the Journal of Further and Higher Education, Tertiary Education Management, and Higher Education Research & Development.

Dr Doug Hill is an Adjunct Associate Professor of the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) at Charles Sturt University, Australia. Prior to this appointment Doug worked at Charles Sturt University in its Research Training Organisation unit. Doug’s research interests concentrate on evaluation, research capacity building, and Christian higher education. His most recent publications appear in the journals titled: Issues in Educational Research and Tertiary Education Management.

References


