

The Changing Nature of University Governance and Accountability Management: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Australian Academics

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ABSTRACT

Globally, universities are facing complex issues that often lead to transformational change. Among the changes, university governance and accountability management have been noted as areas of reform. The main drivers are globalisation, burgeoning knowledge-based economies, rapidity of new technologies adoption, and global competitiveness. The impact of these drivers and subsequent reform is ultimately reflected in the changing nature of academic work being undertaken by academic staff. Academic staff are inclined to negatively reflect on their experience of the changing nature of their academic work. This paper reports on a study conducted in Australia that explores the lived experiences of sixteen academics working in a range of public universities and experiencing transformational change.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to support inductive and open generation of new thinking to emerge from the data. The data collection method consists of in-depth, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. The study utilises an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to accomplish a detailed exploration and analysis of the lived experiences of the participants. The findings indicate that the changing nature of university governance and accountability management, which is now influenced by corporate structures, impacts the work of academic staff. The findings of the study have the potential to enable university leaders and managers to better understand the challenges academic staff confront in relation to the changes to university governance and new accountability management systems. Our research also presents participants' suggestions of ways to create, maintain and sustain work environments in universities today.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is structured into five sections. The introduction reviews literature on changing university governance and performance management. A description of the research design and data analysis follows whereafter the data is presented and discussed. The conclusion provides a summary of the findings of the study and shares participants' suggestions for improvements.

Empirical studies reveal that since the 1980s, university governance, incorporating the structure, processes, and authoritative decision making within universities in Australia and

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many other countries worldwide, have changed.^{1 2} Before this, leadership and university-related decision making was based on the collegial decisions of academic staff.³ With the change in university governance away from this collaborative style, many academics have been relegated to being one of many stakeholders⁴ and, as such, are no longer central in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the focus on stakeholders, performance management, and increased accountability are notions that have emerged with the influence of corporatisation and neoliberal ideologies, which have been apparent from the 1980s in higher education circles.⁵

Prior to the 1980s, universities delivered predominantly to a student elite, and the government funded a limited number of students and universities. During the 1980s, with the onset of the massification of higher education, introduction to corporatisation, neoliberal ideologies, global education markets, and a decrease in government funding, Australian universities became competitive and were expected to find their own resources. These changes have resulted in radical transformations to universities' fundamental missions, goals, and objectives; core values and culture; which subsequently affect the nature and scope of academic work.⁶ Hence, contemporary university governance is characterised by a corporate structure with top-down management featuring performance management of institutions, individual academics, researchers and with prescriptive targets for academics. With this cultural shift, academic freedom and academic autonomy have been threatened.⁷

The literature also reveals that workload allocation processes in universities are intricately linked to the output of universities and, as such, it is considered significant that

¹ Scott, Peter. "Compliance and Creativity: Dilemmas for University Governance." *European Review* 26, no. S1 (2018): S35-S47.

² Taylor, Arthur. "Perspectives on the University as a Business: the Corporate Management Structure, Neoliberalism and Higher Education." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 15, no. 1 (2017): 117.

³ Mora, José-Ginés, and Maria-Jose Vieira. "Governance, Organizational Change, and Entrepreneurialism: is there a connection?". *Entrepreneurialism in universities and the knowledge economy: Diversification and organizational change in European higher education* (2009): 74-99.

⁴ Bleiklie, Ivar, and Maurice Kogan. "Organization and governance of universities." *Higher Education Policy* 20, no. 4 (2007): 477-493.

⁵ De Zilwa, Deanna. *Academic units in a complex, changing world: Adaptation and resistance*. (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010).

⁶ Parker, Lee. "University corporatisation: Driving redefinition." *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 22, no. 4 (2011): 434-450.

⁷ Scott, Compliance, 35-47

academics' time spent at their work, and subsequent output, needs to be monitored and managed.⁸ Ironically, when leadership power in universities is not used productively to motivate other academics but, instead, used to dominate and control, academics tend to withdraw into a mode described as *zombification*, which is described in the literature as characterising a mode of survival.⁹ What this means is that with these challenging changes in university governance, and accountability management, many academic staff feel disempowered¹⁰ and ultimately counterproductive.¹¹

Another conspicuous feature of university governance seen in Australian universities is the trust of university management upon the template-style, metric-based performance measurements, which they believe will enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of academic work. This, on the other hand, is indicative of mistrust of academics' capability to do their work, on their own, without being measured and managed.¹² This typically reinforces a culture that deprofessionalises the role of the academic. It is in this space our research study is conducted.

The purpose of this study is to explore academics' lived experiences, to deepen the understanding of the nature of changing university governance and its effects on university academics and their work. The study examines the use of corporate-style mechanisms on accountability management and academics experiences and perceptions on the use of such mechanisms.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to enable the research to be inductive and open to the potential of generating new thinking emerging from the data. The study employs an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to accomplish a detailed exploration and analysis

⁸ Kenny, John. "Re-empowering academics in a corporate culture: An exploration of workload and performativity in a university." *Higher Education* 75, no. 2 (2018): 365-380.

⁹ Ryan, Suzanne. "Academic zombies: A failure of resistance or a means of survival?." *Australian Universities' Review, The* 54, no. 2 (2012): 3.

¹⁰ Kenny, Re-Empowering, 2018). 365-380.

¹¹ Woelert, Peter, and Lyn Yates. "Too little and too much trust: Performance measurement in Australian higher education." *Critical Studies in Education* 56, no. 2 (2015): 175-189.

¹² Woelert, Peter, and Lyn Yates. "Too little and too much trust: Performance measurement in Australian higher education." *Critical Studies in Education* 56, no. 2 (2015): 175-189.

of personal meaning and the lived experiences of participants,^{13,14,15} which has enabled the researcher to engage with participants' responses at a particular idiographic level. IPA is informed by three key concepts of the philosophy of knowledge: *phenomenology*—study of conscious experience and self-awareness, *hermeneutics*—method of interpretation, and *idiography*—explication of individual cases and events.

The data collection method of this study consists of in-depth, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with sixteen academics employed at public universities located in South-Eastern Australia. The variables representing participants in the study are presented in Table 2.1 and include gender, the structural organisational variables of the type of university a participant belongs to as an academic, a participant's academic classification level, a participant's years of experience as an academic, and a participant's area of discipline. This range of variables reflects the diversity of academics.¹⁶ Collectively this builds the participant profile. Participants were selected through convenience sampling to ensure a broad representation based on the identified variables.

The table also indicates the Australian university groups a participant's university belongs to. Australian universities are classified into four groups based on similar interests, age, origin, and location. The four groups are Group of Eight (Go8), Australian Technology Network (ATN), Innovative Research Universities (IRU), and Regional Universities Network (RUN). Universities that are not in any of these groups are labelled as ungrouped universities.^{17 18}

A single interview was conducted with each of the 16 participants lasting from sixty to seventy-five minutes. The interviews were transcribed, and member checking enabled the transcripts to be validated prior to analysis. Transcripts were coded according to the short form of participants' profession, "University Academics," eg. UA 1, to UA 16, and the numbering

¹³ Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin. "Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research." *Psychologist* 18, no. 1 (2005): 20-23

¹⁴ Smith, Jonathan A., and Mike Osborn. "Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain." *British journal of pain* 9, no. 1 (2015): 41-42.

¹⁵ Eatough, Virginia, and Jonathan A. Smith. "Interpretative phenomenological analysis." *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* 179 (2008): 194.

¹⁶ De Zilwa, Deanna. *Academic units in a complex, changing world: Adaptation and resistance*. (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010).

¹⁷ Australian Education Network. "Australian universities." <http://www.australianuniversities.com.au>

¹⁸ Moodie, G. "Australia's University Groupings."

representing the quoted reference in the transcription, eg.UA1, 38.

Table.1 Participant profile

Variable		U A1	U A2	U A3	U A4	U A5	U A6	U A7	U A8	U A9	U A10	U A11	U A12	U A13	U A14	U A15	U A16	TOTAL
Participant's Gender	Male	✓	✓	✓			✓				✓	✓	✓	✓				8
	Female				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	8
Years of experience as an academic	2-5 yrs		✓													✓	✓	3
	6-15 yrs	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			6
	16-20 yrs.								✓	✓								2
	21 + yrs.			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										5
Academic Position	Professor				✓	✓	✓	✓							✓			5
	Associate Professor								✓									1
	Senior Lecturer	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				7
	Lecturer		✓						✓									2
	Assistant Lecturer															✓	✓	2
The grouping of Australian public	Go Eight (Go8)					✓	✓	✓	✓									4
	Australian Technology Network (ATN)													✓	✓		✓	3

Discipline	Innovative Research Universities		✓		✓												2	
	Regional Universities Network											✓			✓		2	
	Ungrouped Universities	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓					5	
	Arts Education and	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	10	
Business														✓			1	
Medicine and Allied		✓														✓	2	
Sciences			✓				✓	✓										3

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were analysed using IPA to investigate participants’ lived experiences of the nature and scope of the changing university governance and accountability management. From the themes that emerged, two categories are reported in this paper: changing university leadership; and accountability management and performance measurements.

Changing university leadership

The literature uncovers that since the 1980s, there has been a shift towards enhancing institutional autonomy by strengthening institutional leadership to build competition and efficiency in Australian universities. Subsequent changes have enabled university leadership to increase power, gradually replacing decision-making responsibilities in universities that were previously carried out by academic staff as collegial initiatives.¹⁹ A common theme emphasised in all participant responses is how changes happening within university leadership impact upon

¹⁹ Mora & Vieira, Governance, 74-99.

the work of academic staff.

The recruitment process for senior managers has changed significantly. Participants noted the change and differences they experience is due to *those positions largely now by appointment rather than by election or by turn-taking* (UA3, 38). Eighty-seven percent of participants specifically commented on changes they had experienced in senior managers' attitude and behaviour, and considered such changes of senior managers to be linked to the fact that senior managers are now appointed externally. In some universities, faculty academics are not given the opportunity to be elected to these positions, even when they reach a level of seniority. Changes of appointment seem to have created a different kind of collegial atmosphere. This is important, as articulated by one participant who explained that,

[Y]ou speak perhaps in a different tone of voice to somebody who's been appointed from outside to somebody who's taking their turn at leading the faculty because it might be your turn next. You are a lot gentler if there's that understanding that people will do those jobs for a certain time (UA3, 39).

Relationships, interactions, collegiality, and ways of communicating between academics and senior managers have also reportedly changed. One participant considers the fact that externally appointed senior managers being more controlling, and not wanting to discuss matters with other academics as similar to creating an atmosphere of *a managerial culture within academia* (UA3).

The efficiency and suitability of senior managers by external appointment and not from within the academy has created much doubt and apprehension in participants' minds.

Where they [senior managers] are appointed beyond their level of ability, they don't do a very good job, and they're arrogant and bossy, and that's resented because what academics value most of all is their autonomy (UA5, 56).

The suitability of appointments has been noted in international literature as a source of great concern and evidence is provided of how some universities are being dominated by administrators from corporations who have no academic experience.²⁰ Five participants were of the opinion that when unsuitable people are appointed to managerial positions, they could destroy universities (UA3; UA5; UA8; UA9; UA11).

²⁰ Taylor, Arthur. "Perspectives on the University as a Business: the Corporate Management Structure, Neoliberalism and Higher Education." *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 15, no. 1 (2017): 117.

The arguments discussed in the previous paragraphs about the change in the recruitment process of leadership in universities, and as a consequence how managerialism is affecting academics, is further supported in the lived experience shared by a participant:

The academics in the university had to take legal action because they could not resolve a workload issue with their previous Dean (UA3).

Relating this story the participant explained his experience of meeting the new Dean for the very first time in a Supreme Court.

We went through a period where we had a dean who was quite intolerant of staff attitudes. We had senior members of staff breaking down in tears in our staff meetings because they couldn't take the stress of the amount of teaching they were being asked to do. They were doing sixty to seventy hours a week of work, and that was too much....eventually, that dean was replaced. And the new dean came in when we were halfway through a legal battle on this (UA3, 64).

Expressing concerns about remuneration inequality within universities, and the demeaning manner some senior managers treat academics highlighted a link between the two. For example, one participant said:

[N]ow the 'managerial class' are the ones who assume they have the power because they are often paid more and can tell others what to do. The managerial-class of people has increased exponentially within university, so we now have more managers than academics (UA, 5).

Relating to the salaries of senior staff such as vice-chancellors, pro vice chancellors and senior managers, participants expressed they are too high, and unjustified, and this contributes to their changed behaviour towards other academic staff. As one participant explains:

Vice Chancellors' salaries have crept up and up, and we now have at least nine in Australian universities who are paid over a million dollars in salary (UA5, 64).

The growing gap between the *managerial class executives* and other academics has become more pronounced with the ballooning of university management remuneration. It has also led to other issues such as managerial class executives' lack of understanding of what other academics are going through and an attitude of indifference.

What really upsets me greatly is the gap between what occurs with the senior executive of the University and what we actually do, and their complete lack of understanding of what we do (UA11).

Academics are *experts in their field*, and they do not like to be intimidated, *hounded and harassed constantly and treated like children, by arrogant and bossy senior managers* (UA5).

This was a general outcry of the participants. They said,

Academics may leave because they don't want to put up with that, or they will be disaffected, and they will disengage. They will not want to work for the institution, and they will do the absolute minimum and not come in (UA5).

Another complaint voiced by academics is,

The management seems to think that briefing people with information about their intended strategic directions is actually consultation, but it's not. They tell you that this is what we're doing rather than genuinely consulting with academic staff. So, I expect the gap is getting bigger (UA11).

In summation, interviews with the academic staff highlighted evidence of the changing nature of governance in Australian universities, and how those changes are linked to transformations within university leadership. The participants' comments referred to recruitment of senior managers by appointment instead of by election; remuneration inequalities between senior managers and academics; and changing communications and interactions between senior managers and academics.

Accountability management and performance measurements

With the change in university governance, new forms of auditing, accountability, and evaluation are used to measure performance of university academics in Australia. The phrases 'accountability management' and 'performance measurements' are used interchangeably in corporate and managerialism vocabulary, and "new public management" (NPM) reforms, mean the same thing²¹.

Participants' personal stories reveal their perception that new forms of measurement are a threat to academic freedom and could hinder and damage innovative thinking, innovative teaching, and research. For example,

due to complexities in processes, procedures, templates, standardisations and numerous forms to complete and measurements to adhere to, academics may choose to repeat what they have been doing previously, rather than being innovative and doing something new (UA2).

University academics recalled unpleasant incidents relating to performance measurements. While explaining the type of performance measurement mechanisms used in her

²¹ Dubnick, Melvin, and H. George Frederickson. "Public accountability: Performance measurement, the extended state, and the search for trust." (2011, 4).

university, one participant became distraught and emotional as she related her story of how,

She always makes sure that she matches her percentages, for example, 40% of teaching, 40% of research, and 20% of service engagement. But being passionate teachers she and her colleagues do extra work because that's what teachers usually do without complaining. Yet, in the current performance and accountability management system in her university, academics are compelled to focus only on research output, which she considers to be a wrongful and inappropriate measurement model. Her colleague lost her job although she was an excellent teacher because she fell short in her research output (UA9).

Eight participants' commentary concerning performance measurement was that although the consequences of not adhering to stipulated measurements were severe, it is not a fair system.

we're getting busier having our time filled, not necessarily with the big main tasks of teaching, research or even service, but lots more admin and paperwork, lots more doing things so that people can see what you are doing rather than doing the doing... the current trend is about people having to prove that they are doing work or people having to prove that they're not being lazy, to me, that doesn't make a lot of sense... it turns our work into these sequences of six-minute lots or fifteen minute lots, which is not what it is (UA14, 33 - 35).

Performance measurements do not effectively capture all of the work and associated activities performed by academic staff. For example, academic staff spend a vast amount of time attending to the administration of teaching using communication with students via email. Similarly, academic staff spends time on pastoral care undertakings. But *those activities do not get captured in the performance measurements-only the numerical values do* (UA2). As one participant explains:

They [university management] measure your output on a little calculator... if you fall below it then you'll be in trouble, and people have lost their jobs because of that....they will measure to a decimal point your research output, but they are very happy not to measure your workload (UL9, 67).

Another performance measurement that academics are anxious to accomplish is publishing articles in a "*good journal*" (UA3, 74). Relating to this requirement as an academic, twelve participants shared their experiences and sounded stressed, because of the time constraints they encounter due to their increasing responsibilities of teaching, and lack of time to write journal articles was reportedly a challenge. They emphasised that the type of work they *do doesn't necessarily just happen, but thinking, writing, crafting and investigating is involved with that kind of work, which takes time* (UA14, 52). Two other significant discrepancies noted,

relating to publishing journal articles are, that the definition of what a “*good journal*” to publish is not clear, and the *senior management does not have a clear understanding of how the journal impact factor (JIF)*– a measure reflecting the yearly average number of citations to recent articles published in that journal–, *and the journal h-index* –a measure of the quality of a journal that can be calculated using data from Web of Science, Scopus or Google Scholar–*works for different disciplines (UA3, 76)*. For example,

In the science disciplines, the rotation time from submitting an article in a science journal to getting it published is usually very quick. In an education journal, it takes about twelve to eighteen months to get something published. This difference seems to be more pronounced when academics are requested to provide details of significant things to be reported to the university council. The senior management requests details of any articles published in journals with an impact factor of more than five. However various fields, such as education, rarely meet this mark. They also request details of any grant over half a million dollars. That’s also a rare thing in education and some other disciplines (UA3, 78).

As one participant affirmed: *[I]t shows a certain insensitivity by senior management when they are not able to talk in phrases which are disciplinary aware (UA3, 78)*. The next section provides a summary of this study and participants’ suggestions for improvements.

SUMMARY

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of sixteen academic staff working in a range of public universities in Australia. The respondents revealed that performance measurements and accountability management utilised inadequate measurement models, together with practices that have detrimental effects on academics. Unsurprisingly participants have advocated a return to the pre-1980’s model to resolve the negative impact the change in university governance and performance management are having upon the academic staff in Australian universities.

A suggestion relating to the changing nature of governance influenced by corporate-style structure was to rebuff *corporate ideas* and *corporate people* who drive universities. But this is challenging when universities have to rely on their own funds generation and budgeting and not just get funds from the government or any other source. The literature suggests a right balance between both corporate and collegial cultures has the potential to serve as an effective

governance model.²² It's a balancing act between furthering public education by means of managed budgeting and business development mechanisms.

Voicing their concerns relating to the recruitment of senior managers, participants suggested universities adopt more thoughtfulness when appointing senior managers. Reducing wages so that they are not focused on earning those wages by making money was another suggestion. Improving the attitudes and behaviours of senior managers towards academics was recommended to prevent academics from feeling intimidated and undervalued in their workplace.

Regarding changes in accountability management and performance measurements, participants suggested that academics should come up with their own indicators and their own service roles rather than being constrained by corporate-style, bureaucratic forms and documentation. Most importantly, participants suggested that university management should continue to create time for research and collegiality and that all academics should receive equal opportunity to do research and teaching.

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²² Christopher, Joe. "Tension between the corporate and collegial cultures of Australian public universities: The current status." *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 23, no. 7-8 (2012): 556-571.

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