CHANGE MANAGING THE TRANSITION FROM A RESEARCH QUANTITY TO A RESEARCH QUALITY CULTURE INCORPORATING BENCHMARKING METHODOLOGIES IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Barbara J. Cargill, Faculty of Business and Enterprise, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, Hawthorn, 3122, Victoria, Australia, +61 3 9214 8534, bcargill@swin.edu.au
Miles G. Nicholls, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001, Victoria, Australia, +61 3 9925 1574, miles.nicholls@rmit.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the means by which an Australian university business faculty might manage the transition from a quantity based research culture to a quality based one. This transition has been necessitated by the Australian government's foreshadowed Research Quality Framework (RQF) that will soon be implemented and will be used to determine research funding to universities. Hitherto, research funding in Australia was based on the quantity of research output. However, the new transition from quantity to quality will be difficult for many schools and new approaches to managing this change are required. These change management approaches are discussed in this paper and include benchmarking.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian government made sweeping structural changes to the higher education system in 1989 creating many 'new' universities. In the process, government had produced a context where institutions were all expected to compete for research funding on a more-or-less level playing field, given just a short window of catching up for the 'new' universities. Clearly, to access the funding, new universities needed to become both research active and competitive, and quickly. Business schools of many new universities had been strongly oriented to high quality teaching and to consultancy, but few were 'research mature' in that they historically had virtually no research profile. By 2004, government was foreshadowing a further shift in research funding policy, to being more *quality* oriented. Now, it is anticipated that research will be funded only where it can be shown to be good quality work with 'impact'. This new evaluation poses deep challenges for many schools that have only recently established a level of general research quantity that can be benchmarked favourably against much more research-mature faculties and schools.

This paper examines the change management processes most evident in the first transition to generating research *quantity* in some Australian business schools, noting the levels of adaptive learning that apparently took place. It then explores the challenge of the next transition to that of *quality* research output, and notes the different nature of this learning challenge, and the different strategies that might be employed more intentionally for successful change.

The First Transition - A Quantity of Research Output

Refereed research publications have frequently been used as a proxy for research output *per se* (see [1] [2]). However, research participation was also important as getting that broad base of participation indicated a changed or changing research-oriented culture, the first transitional stage in many ways.

High(er) volume of output in total has been sought, since Australian government funding guidelines rewarded publication output along with doctoral completions and grants monies. Some early efforts by various schools to utilise small financial incentives and 'bounties' on completed refereed papers achieved little in that they did not deal with the competing demands being made on already heavily work-loaded staff. More sophisticated efforts set minimum output expectations and devised careful mentoring arrangements for research beginners. They then utilised workload models to accommodate time allowances for the minimal research output, and made more generous time allowances *a posteriori* for those who demonstrated capacity to publish more than the minimum levels (see [3] [4])

In summary, the key element of many of the more successful programs of change was the designed tight linking of rewards, time allowances, policies and leadership example, all of which pointed to the desirability of research activity. In one school, *per capita* publication output was raised from 0.2 to 1.6 just four years later and a participation rate from 22 % to 90% in the same time frame [3]. In this instance, the improvement was achieved by a complex set of policies and mechanisms that tied all human resource culture change elements with clear research targets. Notably, the change regime in this case was largely devised by and fairly forcibly implemented by a management team, with only modest amounts of collegial participation and consultation, since it was a change agenda that moved many academics well beyond their comfort zone.

Was adaptive learning taking place? Certainly, there was some evidence of collective learning and change, evident in the rapid growth of number of publications, and expanded number of participating academic staff, many of whom had produced published research for the first time in their careers. Benchmark data was fed back to all academics in that school, both data about their collective longitudinal progress, and data, where available, regarding their positioning against similar schools, both national and international reference points. Benchmarking was deemed an important element of learning, in that all learning requires feedback in order not to deteriorate to trial and error activity. Such feedback data is as an essential component to stimulate personal reflection, to monitor progress, to challenge and stimulate renewed efforts, and to excite and reward accomplishments ([5] [6] [7]).

The Benchmarking of Research Quantity – A Dual Role

Benchmarking *per se* as [8] indicates can be at a number of levels. Ahmed and Rafiq [8] also summarise a number of different techniques or approaches that can be used for benchmarking. Benchmarking research output is normally limited to looking at either the total publication (usually journal) output or journal output *per capita*. Murphy [1] benchmarked research publications of the 'quality assured' type. However, little benchmarking with respect to research *output* appears to have been undertaken for the other two output categories of research namely research grants and higher degree completions. The benchmarking used in the first transition included all three of the above research categories all on an annual basis.

The benchmarking exercise served to provide an indicator to the school's management team of what 'fine tuning' was needed to the existing strategies developed to attain the school's research objectives (see [4]). Beyond this, benchmarking also served another purpose as a change management tool in its own right. Collective data, compared with some other purportedly more prestigious institutions/schools, allowed faculty to see that their performance was better, and that 'prestige' *per se*, or lack of it, was not the issue. This provided feedback that signalled the improvement being pursued was not unattainable, since it is known that challenges that seem altogether unrealistically difficult can impede learning and limit motivation to chase performance goals [5]. Progress also generated performance-related increases

in annual budget allocations, which was viewed very favourably by all, and became an incentive in itself. Most academics in the school were very motivated by seeing greater financial resource coming into the school, since that eased certain other workload pressures. Benchmark data kept that incentive prominent.

At the individual level, transparent benchmark data was also made available internally regarding the research achievements of all *individual* academics. For many, this simply spurred competitive instincts and there was some evidence of highly stimulated competition between academics who wanted the 'carrot', the school's researcher of the year prize. The 'race' for some was very positive and self-fuelling. However, competitive instincts can also become somewhat destructive to collegiality. This is not uncommon in professional environments where Bradley *et al* [5] note that feedback data is often challenged for validity, accuracy and credibility, but once all three aspects are assured, will often be accepted as competitively stimulating for improved performance. Bradley *et al* [5] also note however, that benchmark data made publicly available at the individual level can have a negative impact, especially where seen as punitive, or potentially so.

The New Transition – A Quality of Research Output

With the emphasis now on quality and participation, some of the business schools that had reached their desired research quantity goals now found themselves wanting in terms of quality (as measured under the RAE in the UK) along with other indicators which will almost certainly include research income and higher degrees by research completions all assessed for quality every five years. This cycle highlights the need to have a mechanism that allows schools to monitor and track progress over this time period, as they don't have the 'official' indicator (research funds) until the end of the cycle. In the first transition, funding was based on an annual assessment and 'reward'.

This switch to quality does not suggest that total quantity of research output is now undesirable, but that it is secondary to the primary need to generate research output that can be *quality* and *impact* assessed. The metrics of quality and participation also indicate the general *depth* of the research output. A healthy profile would be to see anything between 35% and 90% or all academic staff within a school generating high quality work. Still, a different set of change management strategies is required in order to adapt to the new challenge.

What is now required for business schools in this new challenge, are change management strategies that are not only effective in continuing the 'quality climb', but that are also timely. One speedy way to improve quality research output is to 'buy' academic staff who have proven quality publication and grant-winning capacity. This is being done, or being attempted by many 'new' universities now. It has been a strategy in motion for many schools for the past five years, but it has limitations. The corollary strategy has been to 'grow' one's own academic staff into research by making provision for many to complete doctoral programs and to commence publication from the material generated therein. This has also been effective to a point, and many more new universities now have business schools largely staffed by individuals who now either hold doctoral qualifications, or are well advanced in their quest to complete them. Both of these strategies are 'top down' management initiatives as they require substantial commitment of resources. They do not necessarily require a great deal of concurrence from academic staff, and yet, it is that very concurrence and internalised motivation that is needed to effect the 'quality' transition. Sturdy &Grey [8] suggest that if we continue to see change as being managed by managers, and not as being managed by the people of the organisation most affected, we will inevitably reach a 'stuck point' akin to what many business schools now experience. Changing the routines of

organisational behaviour [10] is actually the province of the organisational members, and the politics of engagement of participants suggest we may need more staff action and less management planning at this stage ([11, pp578-580], given that the first transition has been undertaken. As Sturdy & Grey [9, p657] see it, we need to remind ourselves that change has a socially constructed nature and that the academics will need to actively construct the change for it to become their reality.

This suggests that control for handling this next transition must in large part be handed back to academic staff groups [9] [11] [12, p317] [10, p627]. If quality goals are made clear and if management creates the 'template' by clarifying available resources and unmovable constraints, academic groups may well be able to creatively devise schemes within their own midst to get better quality outcomes in short time frames. They may opt for schemes like uneven distribution of resources such as time allowances and funds to allow certain colleagues whom they know to have greatest potential to chase quality targets on their collective behalf. If school managements decreed such inequitable distributions, they could expect some degree of hostility or resentment for forcing such perceived favouritism. The return to a more democratic, genuinely participative style may be the only way rapid shifts in organisational routine can be achieved and change internalised without undue resistance. This is counter-intuitive for many managers when faced with a crisis, which the potential loss of research funding and credibility surely represents. School leaders who are able to see that this particular transition requires them to step back and share problems rather than force remedies, may just be doing the best thing.

The Benchmarking of Research Quality in the New Transition

Again, as in the first transition, benchmarking as a form of learning feedback is required for two main reasons. Firstly, it can enable the school to track its performance with respect to research quality/participation improvement. Benchmarking will ideally be a very 'public' exercise with academic staff of a school using it in an internal, constructively competitive and generic context. It should be noted that the personal benchmarking impact in this 'new transition' has less significance, since the financial significance associated with obtaining good research quality rankings under the proposed government research quality framework (RQF) almost overrides everything else. Secondly, benchmarking serves again as a change management and learning tool *per se*. Academic staff, according to early observations, tend to see the bench marking as 'security blanket' when the movement is favourable, and a harbinger of doom if it indicates a backwards step. Thus, knowing the annual results of benchmarking in this situation will directly influence the research behaviour of academic staff and should generate incentive to press on where the challenge remains seen as 'do-able'.

The annual benchmarking indicators used for *research quality* are again aligned with the three main areas of research activity (and essentially what will most likely count in the new government funding model, the RQF). As Murphy [1, p45] indicates "Benchmarking has become recognised as an important tool in the pursuit of continuous quality improvement". However, in terms of benchmarking research *quality*, very little work has been done. The benchmarking methodology used here (see [14]) is a new approach that allows a full quality measure encompassing publications, research grants and high degree completions to be combined into a single performance index on an annual basis. This allows monitoring and change management on an annual basis (bearing in mind that the RQF is undertaken on a five year cycle). Participation is again easily defined.

References

A full list of references is available from the authors.