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The Changing Demands of Academic Life in Ireland

Abstract

Purpose: The consequences of institutional change for faculty is an under-researched aspect of the higher education (HE) sector in Ireland. This article reports on the changing demands of academic life in Ireland.

Design/methodology/approach: A case study of the School of Business at the largest university in Ireland, University College Dublin, set out to determine the extent to which HE change is impacting on faculty. The research, involving twenty-eight interviews with faculty and manager-academics, covered the five-year period since the appointment of a new President in 2004.

Findings: The research provides evidence of an increasing focus on more explicit research output requirements; the growth of routine administration and teaching and learning compliance requirements; and the greater intensification of work and working hours.

Research limitations/implications: While the university was at the forefront in implementing large-scale institutional change in Ireland, further research is needed to explore the issues raised in this article in the context of other Schools and the remaining six Irish universities.

Originality/value: Few empirical research studies have been conducted in Ireland on how institutional change is impacting on the working lives of faculty. This article serves to shine a light, for the first time, on the perspectives of faculty regarding the changing demands of academic life in Ireland.

Keywords: role, faculty, research, performance, Ireland, workload

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

Institutional change is a much more prevalent feature of the Higher Education (HE) sector in Ireland. While the international body of literature provides us with considerable understanding of how HE change is impacting upon higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves, the consequences of such change for the traditional values of academic life and work is an under-researched aspect of the Irish HE sector. To address this gap in understanding, a case study of the largest university in Ireland, University College Dublin (UCD) was undertaken and its aim was to determine the extent to which change in HE has impacted on faculty. This article reports on the changing demands of academic life in Ireland. The research examined the teaching, research and service dimensions of the role of faculty, changes in their administrative responsibilities and general workload and the changing emphasis on performance outcomes and accountability. The findings highlight the increase in routine administrative duties and work intensification being experienced by faculty and the increased emphasis being placed on research productivity. By way of introduction to

the case study findings, a brief overview of the current debates in the literature around the changing role and working life of the academic is presented next.

The changing academic workplace

While much of the current debate on academic life generally paints a rather pessimistic picture, Tight (2010a, p.111) acknowledges the emphasis now being placed on the more 'challenging and under challenge' nature of academic life. Indeed, the literature tends to depict the profession as one currently in crisis (Hyde *et al.*, 2013) and where faculty have become subject to increasing demands (Ylijoki, 2005). In particular, the 'increased expectations for measurable outputs, responsiveness to societal and student needs, and overall performance accountability' is undeniable (Houston *et al.*, 2006: p.17). Despite Qualter and Willis' (2012, p.127) suggestion that HE now represents 'a fast-changing, complex and demanding arena in which to work', the difficulty in determining the impact of internal and external change on the day-to-day work of faculty is acknowledged (Enders, 2004).

Academic work has traditionally incorporated teaching, research and service (Houston *et al.*, 2006). However, concerns not only around the intensification of academic work (see Deem, 2007), but also around the growing expectation that faculty increase their research productivity (see Miller, 1998; Ramsden, 1998) and the increasing amount of administration they are required to engage in (see Murphy, 2011) all combine to create a more demanding working environment. Among the administrative responsibilities and demands that are now increasingly falling to faculty include grade entry (Lea, 2009) and 'compliance requirements and information requests; administrative duties associated with the introduction of new systems and changes to University policies...' (Houston *et al.*, 2006: p.25). However, the poor use of an academic's time in such a manner (Gornitzka *et al.*, 1998) has been noted. Indeed, while greater attention has been drawn to faculty control over working hours (Bentley and Kyvik, 2012), the question of whether they have experienced an increase in working hours as a means of dealing with greater workloads has been posed (see Kyvik, 2013). Research conducted in the UK by Tight (2010b) suggests that, while working hours have not increased since 1970, there may be a perception among faculty that workloads have increased due to the amount of time now being spent on administration. Yet, while faculty may be aware of the existence of bureaucratisation and consider it detrimental to academic life (Lane and Stenlund, 1983), the precise views of faculty in this regard in the context of the Irish HE sector have been under-reported to date.

Managerialism, as evidenced in the UK, has resulted in an increased emphasis being placed on academic workloads and on monitoring the performance of faculty (Deem and Brehony, 2005). Indeed, one of the apparent difficulties faculty have encountered with the notion of managerialism is its focus on outputs and a 'management by objectives' approach (Newby, 1999: p.111). Among the purported negative effects of increasing managerialism include a sense of disillusionment and a decline in institutional commitment on the part of faculty (Winter *et al.*, 2000) and a lowering of morale (Lea, 2009). While research conducted by Fredman and Doughney (2012, p. 41) highlighted the impact of this growing managerial culture in academia on job satisfaction, faculty were nevertheless content to improve their productivity in circumstances where they retain 'control over their work'. While the traditional lack of accountability pressures on faculty and the inherent trust placed upon them to

perform to a satisfactory level of output has also been noted (Altbach, 2000), the accountability agenda that has emerged in the public sector may very well be impacting upon academic life (Murphy, 2011).

The literature notes the increasing tension between greater institutional autonomy and declining individual autonomy (see Hellstrom, 2004). Indeed, attempts to align the goals of the institution with the work of faculty has often been interpreted as an attempt to exercise control over this group of staff (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999). Among the institutional changes having an impact on academic freedom are managerialism (Rostan, 2010), the increasing influence of the market (O'Hear, 1988), and the increasing performance-oriented nature of the sector (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Also, the complex force of globalisation impacts upon all elements of education systems (Eggins, 2003), including 'policy-making, governance and organisation and academic work and identity' (Vaira, 2004: p.484). Globalisation may be expected to impact upon the day-to-day work and life of faculty through the growing research productivity pressures on them resulting from increasing competition between institutions and the emphasis international university rankings now place on research output. Finally, from the perspective of faculty, changes in the curriculum and moves towards modularisation also have the potential to negatively impact upon autonomy (Henkel and Kogan, 1999). One could also question whether the increasing prescription of learning outcomes (Barnett, 1994) and the setting of course outline guidelines for staff and the more meticulous scrutiny of these (Taylor *et al.*, 1998) has contributed to a decrease in faculty autonomy. While much of the literature appears to imply a deliberate attack on autonomy, it is unclear whether faculty themselves perceive it in this way.

The case study presented next will, for the first time, shine a light on the perspectives of faculty in Ireland on the extent to which the demands of academic life there are changing.

Case Study

While the changed character of Irish HE today has been noted (Higher Education Authority, 2008), the OECD recognised the potential impact HE change there could have on faculty and academic life (2006: p.173):

At this period of major change and adjustment it is difficult to engage the full communities of the universities with the broad university-societal interface issues. It may well be that the increasing specialisation of academic work, coupled with the significance for career progression of peer-reviewed published research, as well as the general workload, are deterring university staff from active engagement with policy-type issues which do not directly impinge on their work. This may be a necessary consequence of the way of life of large-scale universities, but it could lead to an impoverishment of the character of academic life.

What has been relatively unclear so far in the Irish HE context, despite much anecdotal evidence, is the extent to which sectoral and institutional changes have been impinging upon the life and work of faculty. To determine how both institutional and School level changes have impacted upon faculty at the UCD School of Business, a case study was conducted. The case study approach is effective in comprehensively

investigating real-life situations (Seale *et al*, 2004). It allows the researcher to gain an extensive understanding of the case, whilst recognising the contextual imperatives involved (Punch, 1998). It is appropriate where the researcher wishes to broadly define the topic under study; where the phenomenon and organisational context cannot be separated; and where the researcher wishes to draw upon multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1993). An intrinsic case study (see Stake, 2000) formed the basis of this research and one can expect the development of 'thick description' as a result of this approach (Geertz, 1973). In striving for 'thick description', the author sought to gather a full description of the research participants' views on the topic and to gather detailed narratives of their experience of the issues researched. Despite the advantages of case studies as a research approach, a number of criticisms have also been suggested, including its subjective nature and the difficulty in generalising from a single case. Despite the valuable contribution a case study may make, as described above, Bryman (2004) suggests that the purpose of case studies is fundamentally misunderstood where generalisability is viewed as the intended outcome.

The research, involving twenty-eight interviews with faculty and manager-academics, covered the five-year period since the appointment of a new President (Vice-Chancellor) in 2004. The interviews were with: nineteen faculty across the College Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor ranks (A1-A19); five Heads of Subject Areas (H1-H5); three School Directors (D1-D3); and the Head of School (Dean). Only the research findings relating to the role of, and changing demands on, faculty are presented in this article and considerable use is made of direct quotations from faculty as a means of revealing their voice.

Following the President's appointment, the university implemented a large-scale programme of institutional change that resulted in sweeping changes in management and governance structures. The aim of this change programme was to become a research-intensive university, to create a dynamic academic structure that would support interdisciplinary research and to strive for excellence in teaching and learning. One of the most significant changes at the time was the re-structuring of the entire university and the creation of five Colleges and thirty-four Schools. The primary aim of this re-structuring are best summed up by the below quotation from the newly appointed President at the time.

.....we have a sub-optimal level of collaboration between individuals working different disciplines, and this has a negative impact on research collaboration. We have many more academic staff performing administrative duties than is necessary, so one of the benefits of the restructuring will be to free up our talented academic staff to do what they do best – research, teaching, discovery and creativity.

The modularisation of all undergraduate and graduate programmes also formed part of the change programme. This curriculum reform resulted in a more formalised approach to the documentation of module content, learning outcomes and assessment strategies and the implementation of information technology systems, such as the Module Descriptor and Curriculum Management tool to facilitate such documentation. At the same time, a new grade approvals process was introduced resulting in the need for faculty to engage with all aspects of the process, including grade entry. Furthermore, many of the practices surrounding the appointment and

management of faculty were overhauled, including the internal promotions scheme that provided much greater clarity regarding promotional benchmarks.

The case study findings are presented in two sections below: (1) the traditional and changing role of the academic and; (2) changes in workload and increased performance pressures.

The Traditional and Changing Role of the Academic

The traditional role of the academic very much reflected the pre-Humboldtian university model (i.e. where teaching represented the predominant activity). While faculty acknowledged that their traditional role involved the classic trio of teaching, research and service, many (particularly those with the longest service) saw their role, when they joined the university, as predominantly teaching, with H2 commenting that 'teaching was all you did'. Others suggested that the role was 'not just to teach' (A16), but to 'get people excited about a subject area, to understand the world through a particular lens whatever the subject area was or is and to communicate that excitement to students' (A6). It was acknowledged that, traditionally, there had been 'very little emphasis on research' (H5); with a minority of faculty engaged in such activity. Instead, the role had tended to revolve primarily around 'teaching and service to students' (H1).

Since the implementation of the change programme, a move towards the Humboldtian university model has become increasingly evident (i.e. where teaching and research are integrated and where there is no demarcation between roles and resources with respect to both of these activities). D2 indicated that clearer expectations have been established regarding the need for faculty to be 'performing on all three' elements of the role for promotion purposes. Indeed, D2 suggested that, in the initial stages of the change process, the predominant emphasis was on research, with 'less emphasis on quality of teaching and contribution', but that a 'more rounded approach' is now being taken. While there is an acceptance that performance on all three aspects of the role is now important for promotion, A6 noted that 'what we would really value is in the classroom and the research'. While one senior academic (A19) noted that, historically, staff may have talked about research, but 'never publication', the increased emphasis on research *output* was highlighted by many as a more significant feature of academic life now. This emphasis on research output was noted by A14 as partly 'a consequence of accreditation' requirements within the School, but also 'a consequence of the President's promotions criteria'. It was suggested that it is not 'tenable anymore to say that you'll stay here as an academic and not do research' (A9). While D2 suggested that 'there's an over-reliance on research as a criterion for promotion', the reluctance of the School 'to adopt the notion of researchers versus teachers' was highlighted by A19 and he likened this to 'someone running a building site where everyone has got to be equally as good as a carpenter as a painter as a plumber'. However, while unquestionably an increasing emphasis is now being placed on research output, it was accepted that this very much depends on the individual academic and their desire to be promoted. A14 commented that:

.....if you elect to not engage in research, I think the consequences are asymmetric – you're not going to lose your job, but you're not going to advance.

With this increased emphasis on research came a change in focus for faculty who had been employed within the School for many years and who joined the university when the role expectations were very different and who were 'now being asked to do things which they weren't really asked to do when they started' (A3). This academic noted that 'perhaps their research skills have withered away at this point and that then leads to a feeling of disenchantment in that they feel that the goalposts have moved'. Yet, a number of typically early-career faculty welcomed this greater emphasis on research as it was what they 'signed up for' (A7). Indeed, it was acknowledged that they joined the university at a time when 'the game was changing' (H3) and they were of 'the understanding that research was going to be important' (Dean). D3 commented that if you enter academia now with the goal of 'being a very good researcher', then academic life is 'better' because research is 'more clearly rewarded'. However, despite the clear push to improve research output, two academics highlighted the lack of support for research, one in terms of administrative support and the other in terms of being given sufficient time to engage in such activity.

In terms of teaching, some faculty suggested that the implementation of the change programme – while formalising the role of faculty and introducing more structure to the 'set of things you have to do for the teaching' (A16) – has not, to any great extent, impacted upon their day-to-day role and the way in which a module is delivered. It was suggested, though, that while teaching remains important, it 'has suffered as a priority' and that 'other things are seen as more valuable' (A17). Another suggested that recognition for teaching is 'not as explicit as is the recognition of the importance of research' (H4).

With respect to the service role, varying views emerged. D3 acknowledged that, previously 'you did administration as part of a duty', but that staff 'don't see administration at all as being relevant and they're only forced into it now'. One faculty member felt that an increased emphasis is now being placed 'on being a good citizen and contributing to the overall well-being of the School by taking up positions of responsibility' (A18). However, another suggested that the requirement to engage in this area has not changed 'dramatically', but that it has become more 'formalised' in the context of the promotions system (A15). A certain degree of cynicism was noted by some faculty who commented that where staff now become involved in service duties it is so they can 'tick the box' (H3) for promotion purposes. Yet, one academic suggested that engagement in service is 'rewarded less and valued less' (A10), with a 'lack of recognition' in terms of teaching remission for staff heavily involved in service activities (A5).

Many faculty acknowledged that there has been a growth in 'routine administrative work' (H5), with one commenting that this 'has really exploded enormously' (H5). Some faculty commented on the amount of time now spent on administrative duties, with one suggesting that 'administrative interactions take up at least a third' of his time (A14). Among the reasons cited for this were the absence of administrative support and teaching assistants to help faculty with grading and also the 'academic governance requirements' surrounding the teaching and learning process (D1). Indeed, A10 noted that the 'largest change in terms of the work itself' is in the 'reporting and management systems, information processing systems'. It was also suggested that faculty experienced difficulty in dealing with the new systems for managing grade entry and that they view this whole system as a 'big old

administrative machine' (D3). Indeed, it was noted that the curriculum reforms introduced 'greatly increases the volume of really very routine administration that academics, including senior academics, are involved in on a day-to-day basis' (H5) – in particular, the need to develop module descriptors and the expansion in the grade approvals process. In the words of D1:

I'd say what's impacted most on academics are the new systems of academic governance in terms of the modules, the grading machine, Gradebook opening, closing, the Programme Boards, the exam boards....all of that.... I think it's impacted upon them because, basically, they've had to do all of their own results and do all their own inputting and write their own module descriptors..... So I think that the teaching has become a lot more complex from an administrative point of view.....

Changes in Workload and Increased Performance Pressures

A variety of views emerged on the extent to which the workload of faculty has changed. The introduction of a School workload model was acknowledged as a positive development by some faculty. The implementation of the first phase of the workload model, which introduced a standard annual teaching load of four modules across the School, did result in an increase in workload for some faculty, but for most, the teaching workload remained unchanged. It was acknowledged that what the workload model did was introduce a more formalised teaching allocation process and this incorporated a greater degree of fairness and transparency. It also provided an incentive for faculty 'to get the research out there' (A15) as it allowed for teaching remissions to be granted for research publications.

In exploring the extent to which greater work intensification has become a concern for faculty, those interviewed generally acknowledged that 'the job has gotten much more intense' (D2) and 'those that are fully embracing all aspects of the job would work longer hours now' (A3). Yet, two academics noted that, while their workload had increased, it represented a career choice, with one suggesting that it was of their 'own volition' (A19). The greater intensification of work they had been experiencing was a personal choice designed to help them achieve their individual ambitions for promotion. One academic noted that some staff are working 'phenomenal hours' (A17), but that this is not being done for the university itself, but because faculty are 'embedded in particular communities' (A17) and 'get some sense of meaning, some sense of value from that sort of thing' (A17). In terms of research workload, it was suggested that while the 'expectations on research' (A4) have increased, the 'research workload' (A9) is dependent on each individual's research ambitions and promotional aspirations.

The research also explored the extent to which those interviewed have been experiencing greater performance pressures. In general, H4 noted the increased 'emphasis on individual performance and CV development and doing research and making sure you get your CV into a state where you're in the running for a promotion'. More specifically, those interviewed reported more of a focus being placed on 'exacting performance' (H4) from staff in terms of 'much higher levels of teaching outputs in terms of volume and much higher in terms of research outcomes' (A14) with a target of at least one research publication each year now being brought to bear on faculty. Indeed, A3 commented that 'the demands on academics – if you

want to be a serious academic – have increased dramatically’, with A8 suggesting that ‘the life of an academic is definitely relatively more pressurised’ now. However, the degree to which increased performance pressures with respect to research output are evident is very much intertwined with the promotional process, with A13 suggesting that ‘there’s no pressure on us to produce any articles’ and that beyond the promotions system, no increased emphasis on the performance of academics is evident. Yet, A16 suggested that this ‘fundamental transition to a performance culture of publication’ is actually ‘a good thing’ and H1 noted that the increased emphasis on performance was a good development because ‘many faculty members have failed to contribute in the way that they should’.

Furthermore, a number of faculty highlighted the greater time pressures being experienced where tight grading deadlines are set as part of the new grade approvals process, with one academic noting that this ‘puts enormous pressure and demands on people, particularly people teaching large courses’ (H5). Indeed, A6 noted that ‘what is valuable for us is time and they’ve definitely been taking the time away’. A6 suggested that where this was particularly evident was in the reduced amount of time now available for reading and that ‘spending an afternoon reading’ is ‘almost like a luxury’. A16 noted the ‘conflicting, competing, paradoxical demands’ being placed on faculty in terms of the ‘compression of student time’ and the push ‘to have quality performance’, while, at the same time, increasing student numbers and revenue streams was highlighted as a source of increased pressure on faculty. The increased expectation that faculty will utilise more continuous assessment in their courses was also seen as a source of added pressure and, indeed A6 commented on the increased administration this creates and the lack of ‘adequate infrastructural support’, such as invigilator support for in-class assessment.

Finally, the research explored the extent to which faculty members are witnessing greater measures of accountability. In general, it was acknowledged that ‘there’s a much greater audit culture in academia’ (H1) and that the importance of ‘outputs’ (A16) is becoming a more ‘incremental and louder and louder message’ (A16). While the absence of performance reviews presents an obstacle to greater individual accountability, the majority of those interviewed noted that there has been more of an attempt to introduce accountability mechanisms in recent years and that this is still ‘in progress’ (A10). However, A15 suggested that while increasing accountability is being sought, ‘it’s still a relatively light touch’ and that, in the context of promotions, ‘you impose your own accountability’. Where accountability pressures have become more evident, they have manifested themselves in a number of ways, including the requirement for faculty to complete a form detailing how they spend their time and also the implementation of the workload model which ‘requires academics to contribute in a more transparent way across the three headings – teaching, research and contribution’ (H4). The workload model, in combination with the implementation of ‘prescribed lists of journals’ to be targeted (H5), has resulted in a greater ‘degree of accountability of individuals and groups than would have been the case in the past’ (H5). One academic commented that:

There’s sort of an individualisation of it now. It’s even in the design of it – that we input the marks, we do the module descriptor – every action I take has my electronic footprint – proof of what I did and when – so there’s a lot of that kind of paper trail accountability (A16).

Conclusion

Over the past decade, change has become a much more prevalent feature of the HE sector in Ireland. The research reported in this article took place against a backdrop of increasing pressures emanating from globalisation, a more concerted effort to ensure greater efficiency and accountability, declining government resources being allocated to the sector and increasing competition between institutions. However, what has been unclear in the Irish context is the extent to which these kinds of pressures have been impacting upon faculty. Through a case study of the UCD School of Business, the changing demands of academic life for faculty in Ireland has been highlighted. Of particular significance has been the shift in emphasis that has taken place, from the pre-dominant focus on the teaching function to a much greater emphasis on research and publication outputs. Increased work intensification being encountered by faculty was noted, with some suggesting that this can be explained by changes in the grade approvals process, tighter grading deadlines and increased pressure on academics' time generally. The case also highlights the growth in routine administrative duties and increased bureaucratisation that has resulted from the information technology infrastructure implemented to support a modular environment and the increased teaching and learning compliance requirements that have emerged in recent years. These administrative requirements have, to varying degrees, placed greater demands on faculty members' time. While the increasing focus on performance and outputs was identified by the research participants, some faculty suggested that the increased intensification of work was something that they had quite happily imposed upon themselves given their own promotional ambitions. In conclusion, the case study points to the changing demands of academic life in Ireland, yet, our understanding of the pervasiveness of such demands on faculty across the entire Irish HE sector requires further theorisation and research. Of particular value would be a comparative case study of how faculty across the seven Irish universities are responding to the multitude of pressures arising from sectoral and insitutional change. Of interest, also, would be an examination of the implementation of workload models in Irish universities and the extent to which faculty performance and research output has indeed improved in recent years.

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