

From mentoring to monitoring: The impact of changing work environments on academics in Australian universities

John Buchanan^a, Sue Gordon^{b*} and Sandy Schuck^a

^a*University of Technology, Sydney, Australia;* ^b*The University of Sydney, Australia*

Abstract Universities in many western nations are experiencing increasing performance measures for academic accountability. This paper maps the pitted pathway that has led Australian universities from mentoring to monitoring, and from performance enhancement to performance evaluation, and reviews implications for teaching and learning in higher education. We explore understandings of good mentoring and its effects, and examine the social and political climate out of which quality assurance processes have arisen, to articulate the aims and philosophies underpinning these approaches. Drawing on the published literature, we critique processes that have as their main goals monitoring rather than mentoring, and performance evaluation rather than performance enhancement. From our perspectives as teachers in higher education in Australia we raise issues for consideration, including the tensions between practice and promise, and the roles of mentors and monitors in promoting growth or compliance. We discuss criteria and models for evaluating mentoring and monitoring.

Keywords: Quality of higher education; Mentoring; Monitoring; Performance measures

* Corresponding author. Mathematics Learning Centre, Carslaw Bldg. F07, The University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.
Email: s.gordon@usyd.edu.au

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Introduction

Higher education in many western countries appears to be experiencing a change in culture related to budgetary constraints, calls for greater accountability and competition for students. The changing higher education environment has been described as an “inhospitable environment for good teaching and learning” (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p. 71). This paper argues that where mentoring of academics was once an important part of the process of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, over the past decade mentoring has been replaced by monitoring and that the processes for enhancing performance have given way to processes for evaluating performance.

A clear example of this change in culture in Australian higher education can be seen in the way that supervision and mentoring have been formalised. Ten years ago, many Australian universities had ‘performance enhancement’ processes, which had, as their stated aims, the development and mentoring of academic staff. The meetings were confidential to the mentor and mentee and were kept separate from any supervision process (illustrated in Scott, 1998). Today, mentoring of academic staff is undergoing a process of transformation. Staff activity is monitored and mentoring is increasingly assuming an auditing function, in accordance with universities’ strategic plans. Examples of the bureaucratisation of mentoring include the submission of work plans and student evaluations as indicators of staff performance. These monitoring procedures are documented in university policy statements.

This paper is a conceptual analysis of the processes and policies that exist in Australian universities today purportedly to enhance teaching and learning. Drawing on the published literature, we critique current evaluation processes applied to academics through considering how they differ from effective mentoring. We do this by examining accepted understandings of good mentoring, how effective mentoring of academic staff is implemented, and whether it improves teaching and learning, and then review the quality assurance processes operating in universities internationally to articulate their aims and underlying philosophies. We investigate the purposes of both mentoring and monitoring and raise issues for discussion from our perspectives as teachers in higher education in Australia.

The process of mentoring

First we review what is meant by mentoring, its goals and purposes and demonstrated value. Having a shared understanding of the purpose and characteristics of mentoring enables a clearer analysis and critique of the process and policies currently in operation in higher education.

Anderson and Shannon (1995) suggest that the core characteristics of mentoring are that it is intentional, nurturing, insightful, supportive and protective. They develop these ideas further by proposing other essential characteristics of mentoring: serving as a role model, sponsoring the mentee, and having an ongoing caring relationship. Similarly, Fullerton (1998) refers to five roles of the mentor: model, acculturator, sponsor, supporter and educator. These characteristics and roles all indicate an important goal for the mentoring process: the support and guidance of the mentee or protégé. The concept of 'relationship' is highlighted in this derivation and there is no

sense of opposing goals or cultures in this process of the mentor “using power in the service of the mentee” (Fullerton, 1998, p. 3).

However, an alternative view of mentoring, arguably the prevailing one for staff in higher education, casts the mentor as the agent of the institution. This view suggests the following questions. Is the mentoring process aimed at institutional cultural convergence or diversity? Does the mentoring process welcome the mentee to the place or put the mentee in their place? The answers have implications for the capacity for learning and experimentation not only of the ‘new’ academic, but also for the institution.

The variety of understandings of mentoring is taken further in the literature. Roberts (2000) proposes that since everyone has a unique and idiosyncratic understanding of mentoring, an exploration of mentoring must begin with ‘bracketing’ one’s presuppositions about the concept. By sampling the literature from 1978-1999 and applying an inductive, phenomenological approach, Roberts (2000, p. 162) characterised mentoring as follows.

A formalised process whereby a more knowledgeable and experienced person actualises a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning within a less experienced and knowledgeable person, so as to facilitate that person’s career and personal development.

A number of positive consequences of mentoring appeared in this literature sample (Roberts, 2000, p.160) including:

1. the discovery of latent abilities
2. performance improvement
3. retention of staff
4. growth in mentee confidence
5. personal growth of mentor and mentee

6. increased awareness of role in the organisation
7. increased effectiveness in the organisation
8. self-actualisation
9. a resonating phenomenon; protégés become mentors themselves.

The above list suggests that mentoring of academics in higher education is seen as primarily benefitting the mentee in terms of personal growth, confidence and career development. Evaluations of the success of mentoring often consider promotion rates, research performance and the way that mentoring may affect career pathways (Kirchmeyer, 2005). Less emphasised are the benefits to the mentor and measurable benefits to the organisation, although benefits to both are implicit in several of the above outcomes.

In any discussion of staff mentoring it is important to recognise that career enhancement is only one aspect of the process. In Kram's seminal work (1985) mentoring is acknowledged to serve two categories of functions: career functions and psychosocial functions. Career functions are those that concern supporting career advancement and are the ones that are measured in the studies discussed by Kirchmeyer. Psychosocial functions are those that provide acceptance, confirmation and support, i.e. "activities that influence the protégé's self-image and competence" (Chao, 1997, p.17). These are more difficult to measure, but arguably are more important in achieving many of the consequences noted by Roberts (2000) above. The psychosocial aspect of mentoring is critical and should not be neglected if mentoring is to have positive consequences for personal growth and self-actualisation. We argue that by moving from mentoring to monitoring, academics lose the psychosocial support that is such an important part of effective mentoring.

The rise of performance measures in higher education

In this section we discuss the changing nature of universities and the consequent impact on academics of this change. We start by examining the way globalisation and external performance measures have affected university management processes and policies.

Universities are facing more and more constraints on their independent operation. Newson and Buchbinder (1988) outlined some of the forces at work in creating service universities, including fees for students, increased government demands in the context of reduced funding, the relative ease of computer-generated student feedback questionnaires and similar tracking devices, ‘tied aid’ from governments — termed ‘steering at a distance’ by Kickert (1995) — as well as performance indicators, the need for corporate sponsorship, the adoption of corporate models, increased competition and a more highly educated and critically aware public.

Concurring with the above argument, Zumeta (1998, p. 8) noted that:

what might be termed cultural critiques of higher education seem to mesh neatly with fiscal pressures and broader political forces to make it considerably easier for public officials to be critical of higher education and, by extension to press that it tow [sic] the line closer to the desires of those elected.

Sosteric, Gismondi and Ratkovic (1998) point out that the performance-based slice of the funding pie is relatively small, and may require much effort to generate. They observe the irony of this given its driving aim is to increase efficiency. In another irony, the more that universities succeed at this, the more will be expected of them. Structurally, culturally, and perhaps discursively, universities have distinguished themselves — or camouflaged themselves — with corporate characteristics. The ivory tower has become the glass office block.

In Australia, universities' self-assessments were formally linked to external monitoring and federal government funding in 1999 with the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. This signified a shift in the power distribution in auditing performance, and changes in the academic performance evaluation process, from an autonomous, self-critical exercise undertaken voluntarily, to an externally monitored surveillance exercise; a shift that was met with suspicion or outright hostility by many academics. The process remains contentious to this date even while policies, benchmarking of criteria for quality, and procedures for performance review continue to be developed within institutions and government departments. A number of researchers (Hardy & Smith, 2006; Kayrooz, Ackerlind & Tight, 2007) note the gradual change from scholarly values to entrepreneurial ones, or a drive towards what Strain (2003, p. 217) calls "unscrutinized utilitarianism". According to Zumeta (1998, p. 16), academic freedom is jeopardised by "the most intrusive forms of academic micromanagement".

Huisman and Currie (2004) propose that global trends have affected quality assurance and with them accountability mechanisms in higher education since the eighties. Like Newson and Buchbinder(1998), they note the growing trend of governments to ensure value for money for taxpayers, alongside the introduction or proposed introduction of 'user pays' student fees and loans, the globalisation of higher education and the increase in technology, which facilitates communication and international interactions. These trends impact the way higher education is positioned and understood in the global arena in complex ways. Further, the ways that current trends in higher education affect performance measures and mechanisms depend on the approaches and ideologies of national governments.

Other factors are visiting change upon universities. Among these are the pressure for education to return short-term profit, and the varying ability for different disciplines to do this — computers versus classics, for example (Barnett, 2004). Other factors, listed by Barnett (2004), include competition, digital technologies and state sponsored evaluation mechanisms. Based on Readings' *The University in Ruins*, Barnett (2004, p. 64) describes the “university of excellence” as “a non-ideological state ... emptied of all serious purpose” and meaning.

In a conceptual analysis of accountability and its impact in Europe and the United States, Huisman and Currie (2004) differentiate between professional accountability systems — which afford high degrees of autonomy to individuals and rely on tacitly accepted norms of good practice and collegial integrity — and political accountability systems, where national governments ‘allow’ institutions considerable autonomy in assessing performance while increasing their obligations to report on and justify how resources are used and to what effect. This changing relationship between governments and universities is cited by Huisman and Currie (2004, p. 547) as a critical factor leading to the rise of accountability in many countries and poses the question: “Are accountability policies failing universities?”.

The above question arises as a result of the impact of these policies on the practices and psychosocial dimensions of academics. The conclusion from the case studies by Huisman and Currie (2004) is that imposed performance measures and reviews do not change the day-to-day behaviour of academics nor lead to increased quality of learning for students. On the contrary, in their worst manifestations, they could threaten institutional and individual autonomy.

Support for the above conclusion is found in an examination by Knight and Trowler, (2000), who reviewed the effects of the changing nature of higher education in a

number of countries, including the USA, UK, Canada and Australia. They suggest that changes have in large part been detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Some of the factors that they see as negative forces caused by current changes are the following:

1. Work intensification. Greater workloads, due to smaller staff numbers and increasing pressure to publish and obtain competitive research funding, has led to less time and energy for teaching improvement.

2. Greater accountability. More time has to be spent on providing documentation on academics' activities; this has a negative effect on morale, implying that academics are not to be trusted, and also uses time that could be more constructively spent.

3. Loss of collegiality. Opportunities to discuss teaching practices with colleagues over a convivial cup of coffee are minimised by time constraints and managerial climate.

The reconstruction and 're-territorialization' of teachers within a globalised education arena also highlights the problematic nature and complexity of teachers' agency (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). Teachers' obligations are increasingly shaped by quality assurance and accountability within corporate-like environments. This dynamic promotes a culture of compliance that depletes teachers' agency, restricting their social voices and impelling teachers to abdicate from their broader ethical responsibilities to society and the development of their teaching profession. Instead, teachers are directed to meet externally imposed obligations and perform like "education units" (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007, p. 437). Teachers at all levels of education are critical in implementing and determining the outcomes of educational change and policy reforms yet: "policy checks the profession by insisting that teachers

can be treated like a quality product, updated, shaped and remodelled to fit the demands of delivering education” (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007, p. 436).

The above dynamics conspire to coerce and constrain academics, called as they are to an increase in accountability (du Gay & Salaman, 1992) and productivity, or performativity.

Studies identify a range of possible reasons for the “frequently hostile responses of academics to quality assurance processes” (Anderson, 2006, p. 162). Potential explanations include “issues relating to the distribution and exercise of power, differences in defining and understanding the notion of quality, concerns about the effectiveness of quality assurance processes, doubts about the reliance on quantification often associated with quality assurance mechanisms and the time spent complying with quality requirements” (Anderson, 2006, p. 162). In particular, two elements of quality assurance in higher education elicit particular concern for Australian academics: student satisfaction surveys and performance appraisal processes. (For a discussion see Schuck, Gordon & Buchanan, 2008, in press.)

Vidovich and Porter (1999, p. 574) investigated the league tabling of universities in Australia, and noted that there “appeared to be more of an acquiescence to a fait accompli than a wholehearted embracing of the notion”. They went on to observe that the quality assurance committee involved in this process “was able to ‘smooth over’ enough of the negative reactions to gain sufficient acceptance of the Quality Assurance program to establish its position in the higher education landscape, facilitating the process of normalization of ‘quality’.” Echoing the conclusion of Huisman and Currie (2004) for institutions studied in Europe and the USA, Anderson (2006, p. 161) sums up the Australian position: “While the academics in this study appeared unreservedly committed to quality research and quality teaching, they

remained unconvinced by the forms of quality assessment employed in their universities”, considering them at best, as an unproductive addition to the workload, or a game to be played, and at worst, as antithetical to quality as excellence in teaching and research. The power of this process of adaptation to changes in circumstances or ‘habitat’ is not to be underestimated.

In the Australian context, one argument put forward for increased scrutiny on ‘quality’ is that the increase in number of higher education institutions is financially unsustainable (Vidovich & Porter, 1999). We dispute this assertion. Despite the correct assumption that education is expensive, there are no calls for its contraction. More professions now require a tertiary qualification than in times past, thereby increasing demand.

As professional autonomy has yielded to accountability, mentoring has morphed into monitoring. This has manifested in accountability of academics both to their managers and to their students. Do student feedback questionnaires provide a yardstick, or just a stick? Grey (1994) asks the question and sees their potential for the former and their realisation as the latter. Just as such mechanisms have been accused of providing distracting and misleading information, so too, questions must be asked of monitoring processes such as performance accountability. What survival behaviours is such a climate generating? A case in point is the debate in recent years about the pressure on academics to lower standards for international fee-paying students (Devos, 2003). Sosteric, Gismondi and Ratkovic (1998) are critical of universities developing their own performance rationales to pre-empt governments in the hope of retaining more control over the process, and they liken this phenomenon to a Trojan Horse. And yet, this process may well be a survival mechanism.

Universities may have been metaphorically fat in the past. Zumeta (1988, p. 8) wryly observes some of the critiques of academe, including “administrative bloat ... faculty workloads perceived to be light, unbalanced (away from undergraduate teaching) and generally unmonitored.” Changes away from some of these alleged conditions are not necessarily unhealthy in themselves; good educators embrace critical reflexivity. It could be argued that universities are leaner now. If this is so, it is important to investigate at what point such leanness may compromise health. Increasing the student-to-staff ratio is one measure that trims the budget but this is likely to lead to reductions in educational quality.

Knight (2006, p. 38) points out problems with quality enhancement in higher education “which may or may not be by-products of governmental preoccupations with quality assurance”. As well, the work of ‘specialist’ educational professional developers to implement quality enhancement policies in higher education institutions is problematic and uncertain. In part, Knight (2006, p. 35) suggests that the problems are associated with a weak research base; unlike the body of empirical work on school environments and their effectiveness, “we know little about environments that favour the professional learning associated with teaching quality enhancement in higher education”. Further, professional formation is complex, based on practice and lived-in experience and largely non-formal. Knight (2006) suggests that teaching quality enhancement thus requires more than technical solutions; it needs to be better conceptualised and better informed by research data and scholarship. Understanding quality enhancement as a form of professional learning may be a starting point for systemic, inter-professional approaches to creating workplace affordances that favour such learning. Supporting this, we propose that to transform teaching quality rather

than simply monitor it, we need to transform the situations in which teaching ‘lives’, that is, the structures, support networks, and working environments of academic life.

Where to from here? Monitoring the process of monitoring

Maskell (1999, p. 158) asserts that “we need to divorce ourselves ... from the crippling and delusional idea that education is a service industry like dry cleaning”, while Hayes (2003) calls us to a pursuit of knowledge that is fearless and favourless. Nevertheless, if we accept that monitoring is here to stay, criteria are needed to evaluate this process. One way to evaluate mentoring and monitoring relationships in higher education is to consider each of these as a partnership between academics and managers. A useful framework for understanding partnerships was proposed by Brady (2006). The dimensions that emerged as critical in his study of a partnership between a school and a university were:

- credibility
- communication
- trust
- democracy

These principles sit well with models of mentoring we have discussed. We propose that they be considered as criteria for evaluating systems of accountability.

Finally, we return to a fundamental question: What is the purpose of monitoring and quality evaluation? Harvey and Newton (2004) maintain that methods of ensuring institutional accountability are well defined in many countries, and include self-assessment and performance indicators, peer review and public reporting. However, the true purpose of the measures remains elusive, veiled or even unexamined. If it is the quality of the learner experience that is the focus of evaluation approaches, “most

approaches seem to examine the provision” (Harvey & Newton, 2004, p. 150), that is, the form rather than the substance. The rhetoric and documentation is on the process of improving student learning; however, the ‘dominant’ methods of implementation emphasise accountability, compliance and political control. We ask: to what extent are our higher education institutions and national governments addressing the challenges of real improvement in education today rather than engaging in tactics for political reasons?

To ensure that real improvement in education occurs, we suggest that institutions look at enhancing teaching in ways that recognise its complexity. Literature concerning ways in which teaching is thought to improve learning indicates agreement that ‘deep’ approaches to learning (Gibbs, 1994) are supported by approaches that promote learner autonomy, involvement, collaboration, development of conceptual understanding and active participation — conceptions of teaching that focus on learners and their learning rather than on the teachers and their teaching (Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999). These principles, surely, apply to the learning of academics as well. Further, Knight and Trowler (2000) argue that any attempt to enhance the teaching of higher educators will have little effect if it is not located within the department within which the academic is placed. As Vidovich and Porter (1999, p. 580) point out, “quality is context-specific, and must be defined locally”.

Drawing on these arguments we propose a need for localised academic mentoring, that is, mentoring that takes account of the context and relationships that exist at the departmental level. Knight and Trowler (2000, p.79) believe that “interactional leadership” is effective in supporting change in teaching. They explain that such leadership is “directed collegiality” and suggest that “it is the role of departmental

leaders to act in a way that is sensitised to current practices, discourses and meaning construction in their departments”. In this description of leaders who can effect change in teaching and learning, they characterise such leaders as culturally sensitive, good listeners, and responsive to the needs of others. We believe that these characteristics are the ones we described earlier in our discussion on mentoring.

Knight and Trowler (2000, p. 79) further note that when lecturers feel “[that] they have control over their teaching, that teaching is valued and that they have room to take chances”, then this assists them to move towards student-centred teaching that supports deep approaches to learning. We argue that while mentors are able to demonstrate context-sensitive awareness, foster relationships and allow lecturer autonomy, monitoring through university accountability processes does not encourage such features to occur in teaching. Moreover, if deep approaches to learning are promoted through teaching that emphasises the student rather than the teacher, and that encourages student engagement, participation, autonomy and academic risk-taking, we should provide similar environments to promote deep approaches to learning, innovation and even academic risk-taking by university educators.

Harvey and Newton (2004) advocate a critical social research approach to evaluating the impact of quality evaluation and one that focuses more directly on the object of education: the learner and the learning experience. If quality assurance is to enhance student experience rather than primarily monitor academics and institutions, it is necessary “to understand not only how academics and institutions respond to quality evaluation, but also how institutions manage the quality enhancement enterprise, and how academics themselves engage with improvement practices” (Harvey and Newton (2004, p. 160). This could include reviewing a ‘clustering’ of examples of case studies of good practice and developing discipline specific approaches.

There will always remain the argument that conditions for tertiary educators were too cosy in times gone by, and perhaps they were. Survival of the fittest is a compelling if unsettling metaphor. If we accept the inevitability or desirability of such a regime, we need to understand that the surviving fittest will fit the criteria we set. If we misapprehend the criteria for fittest, we will engineer a university organism that is not the fittest to serve its students and the community — the very thing such processes are supposedly designed to do.

Teachers in higher education cannot simply escape change and reform, nor, suggests Sharrock (2007) do they desire to do so. The challenge remains to apply collective knowledge about mentoring and monitoring to improve learning. Processes to enhance the quality of higher education should capitalise on the existing assets of expertise and enthusiasm of higher educators.

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