Research as a second career: Research culture
in a VET setting

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Abstract

As the tertiary sector internationally is being asked to be accountable for its research outputs, those who teach in the VET sector are faced with the pressures of meeting not only the demands of tertiary teaching and tertiary level research activity but also the requirements that they are engaged in partnership activity that is appropriate to their business, industrial or commercial area. An additional factor is that many who work in the VET sector have first developed credibility and excellence in a first career in their area prior to entering a second career as a teacher at a tertiary level.

This paper details the results of a major research study of the impact of change on a VET institution in New Zealand. Faced with an openly competitive situation in the early 1990's, the institution introduced its own degree programmes. This brought a requirement that those teaching the programme be engaged with research. The stages through which the institution attempted to introduce an academic research culture are described and the impact on its credibility and performance analysed. Not only did staff have to engage in research activity, they also had to consider the relevance of what they did to their mission of delivering quality vocational and applied education. At the same time, the credibility of the institution with its community of practice was a source of tension as the institutions worked to meet the demands of research and at the same time reflect their commitment to their profession.

After a decade of dedicated effort on the part of the institution, the New Zealand government, following closely in the footsteps of other governments, introduced the Performance Based Research Fund that placed the institution firmly at the bottom of the "league table of tertiary research". The paper concludes by outlining the reaction of other VET institutions that stayed outside this process to their seeming advantage.

The Study

The Auckland College of Education[1] is a vocational education institution that has for over one hundred years prepared teachers for work in early childhood centres, primary and secondary schools. A study of change at the Auckland College of Education over the period 1985 to 2000 (Middleton, 2002) focussed on five areas of change: mergers and amalgamations, internal restructuring of the administrative and professional structures, the experience of a degree taught jointly with the University of Auckland, the development of a provider degree and the development of an academic research culture which is the focus in this paper.

The motivation for much of these changes was a quest for status in a tertiary environment that had become competitive and in which teacher education had become contestable. After existing for over a hundred years in a protected environment, the College was faced with the encroachment into its traditional territory by degree-granting institutions. Through legislation, the government had provided for institutions other than universities to teach degrees and central to the teaching of degrees was a legislated requirement that they be taught by

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[1] On 1 September 2004, the Auckland College of Education merged with the School of Education, University of Auckland, to form the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland.

"teachers engaged in research" and this generated a focus on strengthening research at the College.

The interest in merger and amalgamation was driven in large measure by the perceived need to attain the imprimatur of a university and this was felt by both staff and students. The restructurings were premised on the need to establish a curriculum focussed "faculty" structure rather than one based on the traditional education sectors (early childhood, primary and secondary). The joint degree was thought to provide an opportunity for the College to maintain its identity but to give its qualification the status of a university degree, an attempt which was always problematic and did not survive its first five-yearly review. Attention then turned to the development of a provider degree which the College would teach in its own right and this brought renewed purpose and urgency to the efforts to develop an academic research culture.

While study focussed on the impact of the five areas of change outlined above, this paper is restricted to the issue of a research culture and its development and practice of in this vocational education setting.

Developing an Academic Research Culture

Status is as much a function of how one sees oneself as it is something that is conferred from outside. The motives within the College for developing an academic research culture might not be aligned closely to the views of members of its community while the College was motivated to a large extent by the anticipated increase in status as a tertiary institution.

The question of what constitutes valued activity in a vocational education setting is of prime importance. This issue is related to the place of research in colleges of education and perhaps in most traditional vocational education institutions. Sullivan (1997) raised the difficulty of building into staff workload equations different kinds of work that academic staff undertake and establishing a balance between them. This study showed that quantifying the academic workloads of staff is exceedingly difficult and fraught with contention. Sullivan (1997) further noted that the quality assurance statements used by a university described their expectations of teaching, research and administration. Even the rhetoric that is used in such discussions is questioned.

> Why is it not considered strange in academic circles to speak of research
> opportunities and in the same breath to talk about teaching loads? …Why is
> it that professors will complain of the effort given over to teaching when it
> allows less time for pursuing their 'own' work? (Lucas, 1996, p.195).

Millard (1991) also used the term "myth" when entering the debate (pp.138-143). He accused those who subscribe to the "Research-Publication Myth" as oversimplifying the issues. While acknowledging that the primary criterion for promotion is the "scholarly record" (in other words publications), teaching is not always ignored. He asserted that neither research/publication nor teaching/learning was the sole business of the higher education institution. He also noted that it does not always follow that good researchers or scholars are necessarily good teachers nor is research and scholarship the best preparation always for teaching.

Tensions in Vocational Education

While the distinction between "research" and "scholarship" might seem to be only of semantic importance, the pressure of combining the research imperative with the demands of professional involvement in schools has been identified as one of the central challenges resulting from a college/university merger (Alcorn, 1995, p.27). It is clear that in locating

vocational education programmes, such as teacher education, within a university, success as a vocational educator depends not only upon effective teaching, advising and supervision, but also upon a substantial increase in research activity (Smedley, 1997, p.2). For instance, a comprehensive investigation of teacher educators in the United States (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996) documented heavier workloads and less research activity by staff linked to school supervision. It also noted the low status, promotion and tenure opportunities granted workers in this area. Such findings highlight the central importance of this issue in any move from college-based teacher education to university-based teacher education and the need to continue to shape definitions of valued activity which support the partnership activities which are important professional and academic imperatives associated with teacher education. Smedley (1997) asserted that the relatively low rate of publication by Australian teacher educators threatens to retard the development of an accepted knowledge base and stated that "this low rate is linked, ultimately, to heavy demands upon teacher educators, demands that will grow as partnership innovation expands" (p.12).Involvement with schools and the wider professional school community (e.g. professional associations, teacher conferences, refresher courses and so on) demands professional activity from college lecturers that goes beyond the conventional definitions of research.

The question that arises from this situation concerns the relative value placed on elite teaching compared with that placed on elite research (Nance & Fawns, 1991). In the context of the merger negotiation between the Auckland College of Education and the University of Auckland a table (see Figure 7.2) was developed that explored some of the aspects that lent credibility to professional education programmes within the school and university communities (Grudnoff & Middleton, 1998, p.8).

Maximum Credibility with the School Community	Maximum Credibility in the University Community
Close relationship with the school community.	Close relationship with the world of university scholarship.
Staff appointed to teacher education positions who have a reputation as quality classroom teachers.	Staff appointed to university positions who have advanced qualifications and either proven or perceived ability as researchers and tertiary teachers.
Staff commitment to research that: • Increases the understanding of classroom teachers • Explores issues related to teaching and learning	Staff commitment to research that: • increases theoretical understanding • pushes boundaries of knowledge
Expertise in curriculum subjects through: • involvement in national curriculum development • involvement in school based curriculum development • ability to support teacher professional development • understanding of how novice learners achieve in the curriculum • ability to deliver the curriculum to novice learners	Involvement in curriculum subjects through: • involvement in national curriculum development • development of new knowledge and understanding • publication of curriculum related research • ability to both undertake and supervise research in curriculum areas • teaching and research of a subject beyond the levels of the curriculum
Staff involved in professional activity that includes: • presentation of papers at teacher conferences • publication of papers in teacher journals • participation in teacher professional development	Staff involvement in professional activity that includes: • research activity that meets the ideals of academic rigour • publication in refereed journals • participation in academic conferences
Staff that understand the process of preparing beginning teachers and developing in them an understanding of and a commitment to the learning of others.	Staff skilled in developing a diverse group of learners largely responsible for their own learning.
Staff skilled in developing and articulating a theoretical underpinning.	Staff skilled in developing and articulating a theoretical underpinning.
Staff able to supervise professional practice as reflection.	Supervision of research students.
Quality teachers	Quality teachers

Analysis of Status Factors (Grudnoff & Middleton, 1998, p.9)

Structural Provision to Promote Research

As a result of the restructuring, the position of Dean of Learning and Research Development was introduced. This unleashed an acerbic and forthright analysis of the prevailing academic culture of the institution. In the study noted earlier, Ducharme and Ducharme (1996) showed that staff engaged in teacher education undertook less research activity than their university colleagues generally. As stated above, the balance between research, teaching and school partnership activity is very much a matter of what constitutes <u>valued activity</u> in an institution (Grudnoff & Middleton, 1998) and that is, in any final analysis, a question of institutional culture (Kuh & Robinson, 1995) and what has been called, in the situation of a relationship between institutions, "the different institutional culture phenomenon" (Mahoney, 1990, p.16). While there may be a view that the research/publication versus teaching debate was both tired (Boyer, 1996) and rather overstated (Millard, 1991, pp.138-143), it remains as one of the defining characteristics that is used to describe the quintessential qualities of a university and to delineate the distinctions between a university and a vocational education institution such as the Ccollege. This had previously led to considerably increased research activity among college staff in a New Zealand post-merger situation (Alcorn, 1995, p.27; Smedley, 1997, p.2).

While traditionally research was not seen as a priority within the colleges (Keen, 2001, p.83) it was not the case that there was no research. There was, but those who engaged in it did so as individuals and somewhat out to the side of their "key roles". A previous Principal of the College reported that he had to provide written assurances to the New Zealand Department of Education that the research activity of a staff member (who subsequently would become one of New Zealand's most respected educational researchers) would not adversely affect his teaching duties (Personal Communication, 29 November 2001).

The new Dean of Learning and Research Development wrote a paper in which she painted a picture of a culture characterised by an almost anti-intellectual perspective. Colleges perhaps were historically expected to be anecdotally located within chalky classrooms rather that in the theory-driven atmosphere of the academy In her new role, Maeve Landman initiated discussion on the academic nature and culture of the Auckland College of Education. Among those contributions was a discussion paper presented to the Academic Board, *ACE as an Academic Community* (Landman, 1995). In that paper Landman addressed two concerns, enhancing staff competence and the organisational culture of the College. She described the culture of ACE as being on the one hand "Balkanised" and on the other anti-academic.

> It may be, however, that what we face is an evolved culture where 'we' don't want to be academics (too consumed by theory, too remote from the chalk-face) and anything other than giving all in front of (a relatively) small class or supervising students in school is possibly regarded as a management plot to extract more surplus labour value from exploited workers whose goodwill is being taxed beyond reasonable limits. This is expressed as the anxiety that **we can't research, we don't have time** (Landman, 1995, p.2). [*original emphasis*]

She followed this forthright analysis with the claim that she could not detect in the culture of the Auckland College of Education at that time, any sense of the importance of academic activity and even some cynicism towards it where it did occur. There was, she claimed, a feeling that it was the institution that benefited from such activity especially where there is little opportunity for internal or external mobility. She acknowledged that this analysis was "crudely stated" and conceded that there were many positions between the polarities she drew. What Landman was discussing was the nature of the College from an academic point of view.

In New Zealand there was little expectation that a vocational education institution such as a "teachers college' would have an academic research tradition and culture. So any pressure to change in this regard was one that was top-down as the need to have a research culture in order to teach degrees was an external pressure. There was also among staff a general feeling that this direction was desirable in spite of their experience of working in a teachers college/college of education. Landman further teased out this institutional phenomenon as she outlined the issues as she saw them at that time. Foremost amongst these were the structural weaknesses in the professional culture of teachers. Claiming support from the literature, Landman saw the weakness of this culture being expressed in …

> … the lack of control over entry into the profession and professional conduct; hierarchical structures that historically endorse paternalistic institutional practices; and an ambivalence about the value of the academic nature of teachers' labour – typically a tendency to dismiss the language of theory as 'jargon'. These features are reflected within this institution (Landman, 1995, p.3).

She followed this with an analysis of the climate within the College that she described as lacking opportunities for academic and intellectual exchange, offering limited means of contributing to policy development, exhibiting a narrow over-emphasis on academic activity such as **research** (which is often addressed in the "arena of industrial relations" rather than through "collegial deliberation") and maintaining an overwhelming confidence in the validity of the "way we do things" that "fosters a lack of our confidence as **academics**" (p.3) [*her emphasis*]. To overcome these perceived deficiencies, she then described a possible structure for the Academic Board to consider, a structure "that properly informs institutional direction and fosters an organisational culture and staff competence that are consonant with a higher education institution" (Landman, 1995, p.4).

In turning her attention to the Academic Board, Landman saw it as overly (but properly) concerned with programme/course approval and in scrutinising initiatives within the College. Its meetings she claimed "can, despite great industry and laudable intentions, procedurally descend into just-endurable tedium" (Landman, 1995, p.5) and she proposed changes that would "revitalise the Academic Board as the final forum of pedagogic and other academic developments;… locating it as the nerve-centre of academic debate" (Landman, 1995, p.5).

In summary, the College was at something of an academic cross-roads. It could continue to woo its community of practice by being seen as practical and well-placed within classrooms, or it could attempt to increase its status as an academic institution worthy to be placed within the tertiary academic environment. This carried risks with it – on the one hand such a direction might alienate its communities of practice while on the other if the attempt was less than successful, status only as a second-class tertiary education institution might result. The worst scenario would see both results!

A further issue in this area was the degree to which the College subscribed to the definition of research that was promulgated by New Zealand Qualifications Authority (2001) as part of its processes for meeting the requirement that degrees be taught by staff engaged in research. This looser and more encompassing definition certainly had made it possible for the College to mount an application for a provider degree and to link the development of an academic research culture to the kinds of activities that prevailed in a College. There is a further irony in the fact that having encouraged the growth of degrees in New Zealand through this more permissive definition, the government then developed a research grading system for the purposes of funding (the Performance Based Research Fund[2]) that specifically excluded the very activities earlier included ion the definition.

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[2] Commonly referred to as the PBRF

The writer recently commented on this aspect with regard to the release of the Performance Based Research Funding assessment results (Middleton, 2004).

> NZQA sought to assist those with provider degrees meet the legislated requirement that degrees should be taught by groups engaged in research through developing a definition of research that was liberal and which allowed a wider range of scholarship and applied activity to have some status as "research". Within limits, consultancy and professional practice were legitimised as research activity by this definition.

> We now have the situation where it is entirely possible to meet the requirements of the NZQA definition and still score poorly in the PBRF round! Despite the coy definition of "R", many teacher educators who have worked diligently within the NZQA definition for the past decade or more, simply didn't make the cut. (p.16)

Issues of Definition

There was a continuing insecurity over settling on a definition of research which troubled the College for many years, but this issue is not one that exclusively affects teacher education within universities. The general emphasis on published scholarship and the relative lack of importance placed on teaching has been described as a key issue for higher education in America (Lucas, 1996, pp.197-199) even though the traditional and prevailing attitudes and viewpoints have not gone unchallenged. Boyer (1990), in a widely read report, stated that it was time to go beyond what he called "the tired old teaching versus research debate" (p.16). Rather than the traditional categories he proposed a view of scholarship based on four areas: discovery, integration, application, teaching (Boyer, 1996, pp.131-132). He explained each of these as follows: scholarship of discovery is the conventional traditional key purpose of scholarship recognised by everyone as scholarship; the scholarship of integration is the work that places new knowledge into the existing frameworks of knowledge and understanding; the scholarship of application is the work done to show the application of knowledge both new and old into applied fields such as medicine, education and so on; and the scholarship of teaching is interpreted in a wide sense that includes publications (1996, pp.131-132). What he suggested is that the traditional categories no longer served the purpose of reflecting valued activity in a higher education institution. The College moved towards producing an annual *Research Report* that adopted an amalgam of the wider definitions of research such as those of Boyer and NZQA.

Growing the Supply of Researchers

Putting all that aside, the College had to face the fact that very few of its staff actually had the background and skills to undertake research at a high level despite the loose manner in which the term was used in courses to describe a wide range of predominantly low level activity. In the study, the responses to questions about definitions of research showed that College staff preferred views of research that were action/practice oriented, conducted in a participatory manner and which contributed to the body of knowledge related to teaching and learning. There was an acceptance that research should be scholarly, intellectual and structured and an expectation that research by College staff would be disseminated throughout the profession. While the College had moved towards a clear and shared understanding of the importance of research, a tension had developed between the traditional university model of research and the looser definition espoused by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. This was in part due to the number of staff improving qualifications and in the process being involved in "conventional" and "pure" research.

An interesting issue was raised by the emphasis on developing research expertise among the staff. This was approached by putting resources into assisting staff to upgrade qualification by undertaking study at a higher degree level. This resulted in two key effects. The first was that once staff were "inducted" into the university traditional model of research they were disinclined to want to give the "lesser" New Zealand Qualifications Authority definition the credibility that it needed. And secondly, despite the considerableresources the actual configuration of staff qualifications did not change at all for the first ten years of this effort. A single resignation could often negatively balance years of effort of a single staff member to achieve higher qualifications. It took some time for a realisation to develop that the College would not achieve high level research status with its existing staff and a policy developed of appointing staff with a research background. While there was agreement that research was important, there was a wide range of opinion about the extent to which the academic research culture had become embedded in the life of the College.

In some respects, for instance the undertaking of research for conventional qualifications and for publication, sedimentation into the culture of the institution of the research culture was well advanced. In other areas, however, (e.g., in relating personal research to teaching and giving full expression to the NZQA definition) the change was less well advanced. Enough had happened to indicate that the "new" institution was emerging. This "new" institution would be one in which there was a much clearer focus on the academic nature of teacher education and on the importance not only of research in a teacher education institution but also of research degrees and research experience for teacher educators.

The Second Career Researcher

A university researcher has typically developed a career over along period of time and often from an early stage. First degrees are followed by higher research degrees and teaching. Research and its associated publication emphasis, enable such an "academic" to have developed a substantial reputation and record by mid-career. On the other hand the vocational education researcher often comes to the activity after a successful areer in the area of expertise – teaching, nursing, metal fabrication and so on. And they bring into their second careers as vocational educators, the credibility of their community of practice. Associated with this is a strong desire to retain the links with this community and to continue partnership activities with it. There is, as a result of this, a real tension between teaching, partnership activities and research.

At an institutional level, such partnership activities are the very basis on which credibility with industry, business and commerce is based. Vocational education relies on it for its credibility and it is the relationship between such activity and research that will provide a direction for development in the vocational education sector.

Resisting the lures of status

The New Zealand Government introduced a grading system for research that will be progressively used to allocate research funding which will increasingly be separated from funding for teaching. The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (2003) describes the scheme as intended to to help focus national research efforts and resources around the areas and things which are "done well and encourage high performance". Between 2004 and 2007 the PBRF will progressively replace the current EFTS (equivalent full-time student) 'top-up' funding for research. The new model has three elements to reward and encourage the quality of researchers (60 percent of the fund), reflect research degree completions (25 percent of the fund) and to reflect external research income (15 percent of fund).

Vocational education institutions faced the dilemma of joining this scheme in order to contest for relatively small amounts of funding (since the top-up research funding for vocational education institiutions was not significant) and risk reputational damage of the inevitable low rankings when the results were published (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004) ranking departments by discipline areas and institution or remaining outside the scheme. Twenty of

the twenty-two institutes of technology and polytechnics in New Zealand opted for the latter and simply decided that the fund was not related to the core busines of vocational education.

This went back to the valued activity argument – teaching was important, clearly, but research was of a kind that was more closely related to partnership activity with business, indistry and commerce tthrough consultancy style activity, through joint research and development activity, through project work and so on rather than through blue skies and pure research. This principled stance was rewarded by the government with the establishment of a second fund to support links between vocational education institutions and business, industry and commerce.

The Auckland College of Education opted to be part of the scheme. Only two of its academic staff achieved a rating as "active researchers" and despite fifteen years of hard effort, it was rated very low and was among the bottom nine institutions – all of which were vocational education institutions (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004).

Conclusion

The study revealed the huge difficulties faced by a vocational education institution when it sets for itself the goal of developing credibility in the conventional research community of the university. The recent merger of the Auckland College of Education has brought the issues to the point where, put brutally and simply, the distinctions between the university research community and the College staff are stark and will have now to be worked through. The merger of other colleges in New Zealand has shown that this can be done but the result is something that resembles more closely the research environment of the conventional university than it does that of a vocational education institution with its applied orientation and its array of interactions with its communities of practice.

Vocational education has been placed under pressure from a research point of view by the competitive and free market environment of the 1990 and, in New Zealand at least, there is developing a realisation that this encouraged a drift from its core mission – applied and vocational education that produced job-ready graduates to meet the needs of a productive economy and a cohesive society.

Chasing the lure of pure research might siomply have been a momentary dustraction from that mission. Resisting the sirenes takes both courage and an acceptance that they are a myth.

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