

Curse of corporate culture

Meetings, marketing and mission statements are usurping research and teaching, writes **Sarah Russell**

Until recently, it would have been unthinkable for academic staff at any university to attend seminars on 'Marketing Strategies' or 'How to use the university logo'. Now such corporate activities are common in our public universities, particularly the newer universities.

Debates about the changes within our public universities have concentrated on the older, established universities. These universities have a long tradition of scholarship and intellectual independence. It is not surprising that academics within established universities, and their alumni, protest against the shift towards corporate ideologies. Within newer universities, however, corporate ideologies are accepted, seemingly uncritically.

Earlier this year, academic staff at a newer university attended 'branding' seminars to learn about the university's latest 'brand development projects'. More recently, academics at the same university attended a 'Strategic Planning Day'. They spent the entire morning discussing 'marketing strategies'. The afternoon was spent learning how to do business with industry. These activities appear to signal the acceptance of public universities as commercial enterprises.

Newer universities entered the university system during a period of major restructuring. During the restructure, tertiary institutions such as Colleges of Advance Education and Institutes of Technology were transformed into universities. As a result, many staff members from former teaching colleges were promoted beyond their qualifications and capabilities. This is evident in their lack of academic publications and research activities.

Without traditional academic skills, leaders at newer universities tend to adopt business, not academic, roles. Rather than build solid research programs in their faculties, they often strive to develop business partnerships. These business partnerships can have serious implications for research.

In one noteworthy instance, a business/research partnership developed between a university department and a religious institution. The academic appointed to work in the partnership had built a strong research track record. When the research findings were published, they were not welcomed by the religious institution. In this instance, the head of the academic department supported the business partnership, not the independence of the researcher and the research findings.

In the absence of strong academic leadership, newer universities often rely on modern corporate practices. There appears to be more energy

devoted to selling an image rather than developing genuine academic substance. Academic staff have become accustomed to glossy, self-promoting brochures, corporate plans and restructuring. At one newer university, academic staff are greeted each morning by an online business cartoon. These 'Daily Business Cartoons' are unashamedly corporate.

With all the meetings, marketing and mission statements, newer universities certainly have a lot of colour and movement. However, if you scratch beneath the surface, you will find that corporate practices have not necessarily facilitated strong, independent research cultures within our newer universities.

Rather than build research programs, academics working within a corporate culture are expected to chase money. This involves networking with people from potential funding bodies. Rather than bring money into the university through high quality academic research programs, staff are encouraged to 'win' grant money by selling themselves in the 'marketplace'.

This opportunistic activity is most evident when academics compete for commercial contracts. These short term commercial consultancies are not intended to help academics to build strong research programs. Instead they are intended to bring money, sometimes big money, into the university. However, unlike research grants from the Australian Research Council and National Health and Medical Research Council, commercial consultancies rarely promote independent research.

It is clear that universities have changed. While academics within established universities resist these changes, the newer universities accept the 'business' of education. But at what cost?

The most noticeable change is the growth of university bureaucracies. To support a corporate culture, university bureaucracies have become gigantic. Campuses are filled with layer upon layer of administrators. As a result of these bureaucratic layers, academic activities such as teaching, research and publishing have become onerous.

The joy of being an academic, and making a contribution to knowledge, is being slowly eroded.

Another change is evident in academic appointments. When a senior academic position at a newer university was advertised recently, the Chair's job description referred only to 'business acumen'. There was no mention of research, publishing or teaching. Without a commitment to high quality scholarship, academic leaders with business acumen are selling our newer universities down the river.

With genuine academic leadership, academic staff can invest their energies into the business at hand: research and teaching. Strong research cultures will encourage research dollars to flow, students to enroll and reputations to grow. With strong research and teaching cultures, the integrity of the academic community at our newer universities will prosper.

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