

THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMIC PROFESSION IN 2007

A FIRST ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY RESULTS

Hamish Coates^{*}, Leo Goedegebuure[#], Jeannet van der Lee[#] & Lynn Meek[#]

March 2008

*** Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne**

Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy, University of New England, Armidale

CHEMP
CENTRE_{for}
HIGHER
EDUCATION
MANAGEMENT
& POLICY



Australian Council for Educational Research

Introducing Colin and Cheryl: the average Australian academics

In this section we present a preliminary overview of the outcomes of the Australian CAP survey. We must emphasize that this indeed is a first run through the data, that a full analysis has not been possible due to the limited time available since the closing of the survey, and that we still are in the process of coding the open questions. We therefore can only present some initial results.

Since our responses are evenly distributed across males and females, and representative of the target population, we have chosen to present the results not in terms of the “average Australian academic” but rather in the persona of Colin and Cheryl (two popular names in 1960, the average year of birth of our respondents). When they are addressed as a couple, the outcomes pertain to the overall mean score on the item; when addressed separately, the outcomes obviously reflect the male and female positions. Percentages in brackets in the text indicate the mean score. The reader is referred to the questionnaire for the individual questions and their relevant response categories. This questionnaire is available from <http://www.une.edu.au/chemp/projects/cap/resources.php>

Background characteristics

Colin and Cheryl both are married (82%), with their partner having experienced tertiary education (54%). It is noteworthy, though, that quite a number of their female colleagues are single when compared to the men (22% versus 9%). Neither is married to an academic (78%). Whilst almost half of the Australian male academics would have a full-time working partner (49%) and almost a third a part-time working partner (30%), three quarters of the female academics have a full-time partner (77%). Colin and Cheryl have two children and speak English as their native language. Colin has had no major career breaks (91%), whilst quite a few of Cheryl’s female colleagues have had interruptions in their career (44%). On average these have been 4 years (sd 4.524). By and large they are the first academics in their families. Our survey results show that 27% of the respondents have a father with a tertiary education background, with 20% of the mothers having tertiary experience.

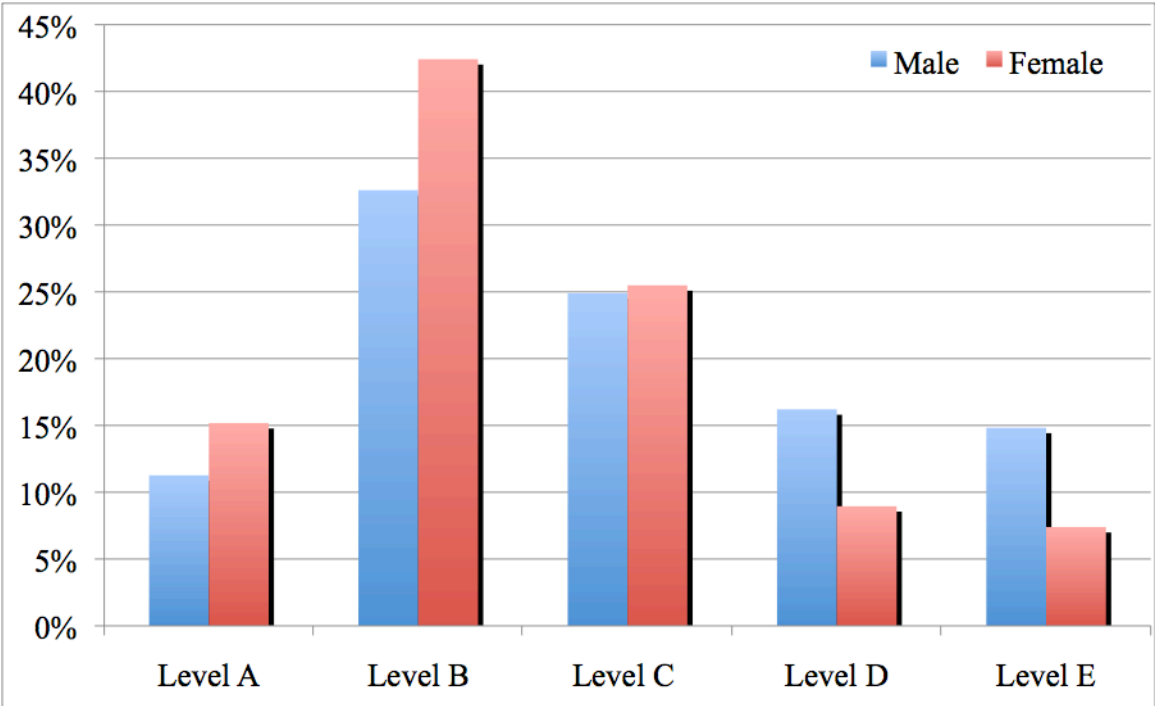
Colin and Cheryl received their bachelor degree from an Australian university (63%) in 1985, although quite a number of their colleagues have first degrees from overseas universities. The majority of these are from British (32%) and US (14%) institutions. Overall, 97% of Australian academics have a bachelor or equivalent degree. Though this may seem a bit strange – 3% of the academics not having a first degree – this can easily be explained by people having obtained a first degree in Europe where prior to “Bologna” many first degrees would be at the Masters level. Colin and Cheryl got their Masters degree in 1991 (66%), also from an Australian university, but once again have many colleagues who obtained a Masters elsewhere (32%), predominantly from the UK (29%) and the US (23%). As to the doctorate, our colleagues (73%) obtained this in 1996 in Australia (71%), with once again those having received their doctorate from overseas institutions (29%) being mainly

from UK (37%) and US (22%) universities. It also is worth noting that on average, female Australian academics have obtained their respective degrees two years later than the average academic.

For many in Australian academe (73%) getting the doctorate means writing a thesis/dissertation, without a prescribed set of courses (12%), fairly independently on the basis of their own topic selection, supported by a doctoral fellowship. In their quest for the doctorate, they have received little training in teaching, have not sat on university committees, but have been involved in research projects with senior colleagues.

Colin has worked 14 years in approximately three higher education institutions, mainly on a full-time basis since his first degree. Cheryl’s career is somewhat shorter, being 11 years. Both currently are full-time employed (85%), though part-time employment is somewhat more common for female Australian academics than for men (19% versus 7%). As to their contract, both are permanently employed, either tenured (50%) or on a continuous basis (12%). However, in terms of ranks, Australian male academics are more likely to occupy the higher academic ranks (levels D and E) than female academics as is shown in the following figure.

Figure 1: Academic rank by gender



Job satisfaction

Overall, Colin and Cheryl would appear to be rather satisfied with their academic life. They score very high (14%) to high (41%) on the direct satisfaction question, whilst only 13% indicate low or very low (7%) job satisfaction. This picture is confirmed by fairly strong disagreement with the statement “If I had to do it over again, I would not become an academic” (mean 3.60, sd 1.296 on a scale of 1-5, with 1=strongly agree), and an almost neutral score on the statement that the current job is a source of considerable personal strain (mean 2.65, sd 1.258).

These survey results are the more remarkable when we take into account the fact that many Australian academics are of the opinion that working conditions in higher education have deteriorated. Almost two thirds of the respondents believe that this is the case, with a very even distribution between those who think it has much deteriorated and those who think this has been very much the case. Only some 9% feel that working conditions have improved since the start of their career.

This deterioration does not appear to be related to the physical facilities provided by Australian institutions. Classrooms, laboratories, research equipment, office space and computer and telecommunications facilities are not considered poor (scores range from 2.39-2.81, with 1 being excellent and 5 poor) whilst library facilities and services are perceived as good (mean 2.04, sd .982). Colin and Cheryl are more critical when it comes to secretarial support (m=3.42, sd 1.283), teaching support staff (m=3.30, sd 1.211), and research support staff (m=3.42, sd 1.225).

In light of this, it is perhaps not unsurprising that Colin and Cheryl are somewhat cautious in their advice to young persons to start an academic career. The mean score on the statement “This is a poor time for any young person to begin an academic career in my field” is 2.77 (sd 1.387).

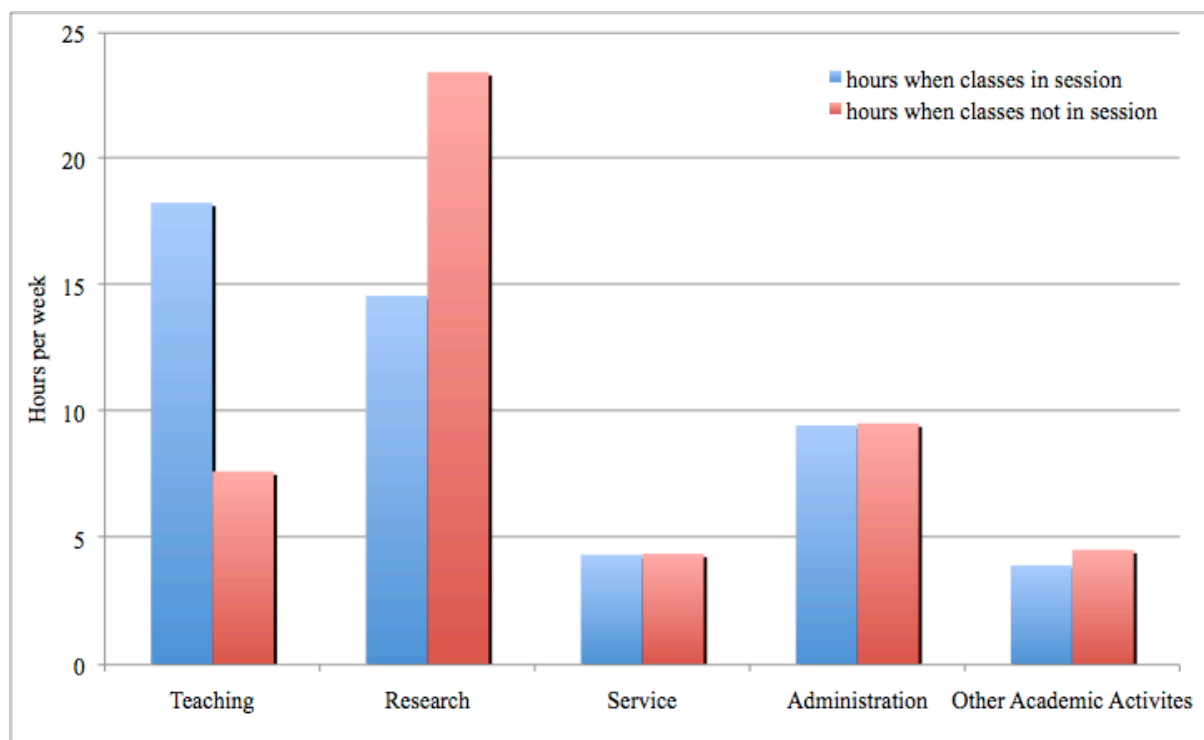
The fact that our colleagues are quite satisfied with their jobs does not mean that they are not considering changing them. Only a quarter of Australian academics have not considered making major changes in their job. Most popular, which is a bit surprising given the overall job satisfaction, is to consider working outside the sector (38%), followed by a move to another institution (33%). A quarter of Australian academics has considered leaving the country for an overseas academic position, whilst 15% has considered a management position. Colin would appear to be a bit more inclined to consider a move to management than Cheryl (55-45%), as would be his thinking about moving overseas (55-45%).

However, intentions are not the same as action. Only 11% has undertaken concrete action to move out of higher education, 12% to obtain an overseas academic position, 19% to change institutions, whilst 9% has undertaken action to move to a management position in their institution.

Working in an Australian university

Colin and Cheryl spend quite a few more hours on their work than what they are contractually obliged to do. Irrespective of whether classes are in session or not, on average they spend 50 hours per week on their jobs. When classes are in session, obviously a good deal of time is spent on teaching (18.3 hrs, 36%), though they still find time to do research (14.6 hrs, 29%). Administration throughout the year takes up close to 20% of their time. When classes are not in session, research activities increase (23.5 hrs, 47%), although some time still is devoted to teaching (7.7 hrs, 15%). A summary of this is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Time spent on activities when classes are in and out of session



This pattern of activities appears to quite well reflect Colin and Cheryl's academic interests, which are geared towards the research side of the spectrum. The majority of Australian academics express a preference for research over teaching, with only 7% indicating a preference for teaching. Of those preferring research, 40% lean towards or have a strong preference for research (29%). These preferences, however, are not matched by their perceptions on the availability of research funding, which is considered rather poor (mean score 3.50, sd 1.169).

Teaching

When teaching, Colin and Cheryl spend most of their time on undergraduate programs (m=59%, sd 32.824), with the remainder divided between master and doctoral programs (means: 27%, 22%).

Undergraduate classes on average have some 220 students (sd 259.313), with 37 in master classes (sd 63.913) and 5 in doctoral programs (sd 10.755).

As to their teaching activities, not surprisingly they engage in lecturing/classroom instruction (67%) as well as individualized instruction (58%), supported through electronic communications with students (66%) and are involved in the development of course materials (63%) and curricula (54%). Face-to-face interaction with students outside of class also takes place on a regular basis (61%). Project and lab work occur less frequently (37%, 30%). A quarter of Australian academics is involved with distance education, whilst a clear minority is active in off-shore teaching (14%).

Colin and Cheryl are quite outspoken about informing their students of the implications of plagiarism and cheating (m=1.66, sd .930) and about the fact that their grading practices strictly reflect levels of student achievement (m=1.85, sd .934). As one would expect given the peculiarities of Australian higher education, they agree that the number of international students has increased since they began teaching (m=2.00, sd 1.167).

As to their approach to teaching, practically oriented knowledge and skills are emphasized (m=2.03, sd .970), teaching is reinforced by their research (m=2.04, sd 1.091), values and ethics are discussed (m=2.07, sd 1.081), and they include an international perspective (m=2.14, sd 1.049). Nevertheless, Colin and Cheryl complain a bit that they have to spend more time than they like teaching basic skills due to deficiencies of their students (m=2.39, sd 1.169).

Quality appears to be on the agenda as well, with encouragement to improve instructional skills in response to teaching evaluations (m=2.37, sd 1.107) and with the availability of adequate training courses to enhance teaching quality (m=2.59, sd 1.070).

Research

Much of the research being done by Australian academics appears to be on an individual basis (79%), although Colin and Cheryl indicate that they do have collaborators (88%), also at other Australian institutions (70%) and overseas (61%).

Perhaps somewhat surprising given that almost half of our response population (43%) belongs to the so-called Group of Eight institutions, according to Colin and Cheryl their research is much more characterized by an applied/practical orientation than by a basic/theoretical one (respective means of 1.96, sd 1.072 versus 2.62, sd 1.273). Being multi-disciplinary in nature (m=2.07, sd 1.134), it is both international in scope and orientation (m=2.23, sd 1.267), socially oriented (m=2.39, sd 1.349), and not much geared towards the commercialisation of outcomes (m=3.93, sd 1.304). The latter is

supported by the fact that only 14% of Australian academics indicate that they have been involved in technology transfer. Clearly, for a better understanding of these outcomes, some further analysis along the lines of institutional type, disciplinary background and field of study needs to be undertaken.

In terms of outputs over the last three years, Colin and Cheryl mainly write book chapters and/or academic articles ($m=7.80$, $sd\ 12.083$) and present papers at conferences ($m=6.22$, $sd\ 7.342$). Research reports ($m=2.92$, $sd\ 5.427$) and newspaper/magazine articles ($m=2.96$, $sd\ 8.746$) feature somewhat less, but nevertheless appear in line with focus of their research discussed above. Clearly, given the large standard deviations further analysis of these outcomes is needed as well.

In line with the funding and incentive regime in Australia, the majority of publications are peer reviewed (67%), and is co-authored with other Australian colleagues (52%). Not surprisingly in light of the relative lack of availability of high impact academic publication outlets in Australia, a large proportion (45%) is published overseas. Although 61% of our respondents have indicated that they collaborate with international colleagues, this appears not to lead to vast numbers of joint publications: 20% of the publications co-authored with overseas colleagues.

As we have seen in terms of teaching and warning about plagiarism, Colin and Cheryl are also very outspoken in the sense of their research complying with ethical guidelines ($m=1.27$, $sd\ .608$). They strongly adhere to the principle that research results should be freely available to other researchers and the community ($m=1.58$, $sd\ .825$) and are quite neutral as to the influence of external sponsors or clients on their research ($m=2.75$, $sd\ 1.381$). Somewhat surprisingly, given the previous responses on commercialisation and technology transfer, they indicate that their institutions emphasize commercially-oriented research. Most probably, though some further analysis is needed, this can be explained by the addition in the questionnaire of “or applied research” since we have seen earlier that the applied nature of Australian research is a quite striking feature. By and large Colin and Cheryl do not feel that restrictions on the publication of results from both public and privately-funded research have increased during their career (means of 3.55 and 3.43 respectively), though they are of the opinion that high expectation to increase research productivity ($m=2.05$, $sd\ 1.073$) and to a slightly lesser extent expectations of useful results ($m=2.37$, $sd\ 1.191$) are a threat to the quality of research. They do not support the notion that research funding should be concentrated (targeted) on the most productive researchers ($m=3.24$, $sd\ 1.212$), but are quite clear about the fact that pressures to raise external research funding have increased since they began their careers ($m=1.58$, $sd\ .915$).

The latter is an interesting observation if related to the sources of funding and the percentage of respondents that indicate that they have received funding from these sources. The major funders for Australian academic research appear to be the research councils (49%, $sd\ 37.681$), with 41% of our

respondents receiving grants from them. Institutional funding follows this (44%, sd 41.101), though clearly many more academics benefit from this (61%). Government agencies appear as the third source of funding being responsible for 32% of the funding for 34% of Australian academics. Industry, foundations and international organizations play a significantly smaller role (20%, 17%, 10% respectively) though there is still quite a substantial group benefiting from this (26%, 24%, 20%). It should be noted that 3% of respondents reported that a proportion of their research is "self-funded".

Management

When it comes to influence, Colin and Cheryl as individual faculty members perceive that they have quite a bit of influence over the establishment of international linkages – in fact they are the key players here (42%), though institutional managers are seen to be influential in this area as well (32%). Also in terms of setting internal research priorities, they believe that they have a good bit of influence (23%), but not as much as institutional managers (35%).

The overall picture that the survey shows when it comes to influence at the institutional level is one of shared powers between institutional/unit managers and faculty committees, with the exception of setting budgetary priorities which very largely is seen to be in the hands of the managers at the institutional (56%) and faculty (21%) level. Interestingly, the influence of government or external stakeholders on internal management is considered to be marginal, with the possible exception of research evaluation. Whether the latter is the result of the proposed introduction by the Howard government of the Research Quality Framework that now has been abandoned by the Rudd government, probably will remain an untested hypothesis.

Students also are seen as marginal players, with the exception of evaluating teaching. Teaching evaluation, in fact, is the one aspect of institutional management that has the most “spread influence” over all actors.

For Colin and Cheryl, this means that they feel they have a fair bit of influence over what goes on at the departmental level, a little at the school level, but not very much at the institutional level. Most illustrative in this respect are the scores on the “not at all influential” category: 22% at the department level, 48% at the school level, and 67% at the institutional level.

Despite our observation about “shared powers”, for Colin and Cheryl one of the defining characteristics of their institution is a top-down management style ($m=1.93$, $sd\ 1.084$) with cumbersome administrative processes ($m=1.87$, $sd\ 1.051$), and a strong performance orientation ($m=2.16$, $sd\ 1.035$). Collegiality is not very apparent with respect to decision-making processes

($m=3.55$, $sd\ 1.090$), and communication between management and academics is not considered to be very good ($m=3.50$, $sd\ 1.165$). A characterisation that often is associated with managerialism.

When it comes to these managers, our respondents are quite reserved in their judgements. With the exception of their view that their university should play an active role in the local community ($m=1.86$, $sd\ .835$), they are more or less neutral on the statements provided to them. Clearly, some further analysis is needed to make sense out of the data on institutional management.

Conclusion

For many observers within and outside the Australian higher education system, change has been profound and sometimes quite dramatic. The results of the national survey amongst Australian academics support this. There has been much change, conditions are perceived to have deteriorated, there is much pressure to perform, and there is a perception of managerialism within the sector. Yet, the survey results also show that this is but one side of the coin of Australian academe. The other side is one of job satisfaction, of relative autonomy, of international collaboration, and of involvement.

The apparent fact that Australian academe is multi-faceted as such comes as no surprise. But it is clear that our preliminary analysis has only skimmed the surface. A second analysis along the variables used for explicit and implicit stratification (see methodology.pdf at <http://www.une.edu.au/chemp/projects/cap/>) no doubt will shed further light on the complexities of the sector. They will answer some of the more obvious questions such as does rank influence perceptions, is tenure related to job satisfaction, is the nature of research related to the type of institution, does the discipline play a role? An obvious other analysis is to compare the 2007 results with the 1996 Carnegie survey results.

It will take a good deal of time and analysis to fully reap the wealth of information contained in the Australian CAP data. But once done, we are convinced that it will seriously enhance our understanding of the sector. An essential component to this also will be to benchmark our data to the overall international data set. For it is only through such an international comparative analysis that we truly can understand the uniqueness as well as the commonalities of Australian academe.