The reality of being a researcher in a New Zealand university

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Abstract

Internationally, market-driven imperatives and externally imposed performance indicators have driven higher education (HE) institutions to focus on research performance and growth. The consequences of these changes impact on academic staff who are expected to be productive and develop researcher profiles. While these increasing demands are part of a strong international trend, Mapp (2009) has noted that it is particularly evident in New Zealand. During the last 10 years, a shift from a focus on research development, towards one on individual researcher development, has been evident. This move recognises the need to build and sustain research capabilities in order to meet increasingly stringent research targets, as well as provide support for academic researchers.

A New Zealand research study sought to explore how researchers experience their current researcher status within this dynamic context. An integrated case study approach was selected, since the study in question involved a specific context and the academic's assessment of their own needs, as well as the conditions and interactions that support those needs. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection was employed using an online survey and focus groups. Analysis involved descriptive analysis of the quantitative survey data and iterative thematic analysis of the survey open-ended responses and the focus group transcripts.

The findings emphasise the need for careful development of a university's research support infrastructure that acknowledges the demands on researcher practice. The primary concern for researchers is adequate time to undertake research effectively. As academics, they appear challenged to find sufficient time outside of teaching and administrative tasks. Staff also identify that research support is not equally available across the university and in some schools there is less value and acknowledgement given to individual researchers. If a university aims to build and sustain researcher capability and capacity, then these factors signal areas that need adjustment and supplementation. Newer researchers identify isolation as a significant challenge, one which could be

addressed through support and mentoring from more experienced colleagues. This process of sharing expertise and skills would not only enhance the university's research culture but also increase the sense of a collective research community. Adept middle managers/leaders could provide a positive link between a university's strategic direction for research and a broader, more responsive approach to researcher challenges and needs.

References

Mapp, W. (2009), *Research, Science and Technology Priorities for New Zealand*, major policy speech made on 12 August, www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/major-policy- speechresearch-science-and-technology-priorities, accessed 18 January 2011.

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