

Call in the professionals

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Teaching has not kept up with research when it comes to evaluating academic performance, writes
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Academics have long resisted being managed. The University of Melbourne existed for 80 years before its first paid vice-chancellor was appointed, after decades of resistance from the professors. Attempts to measure, monitor or assess academic performance are criticised as "managerialism". In universities the practice of management is converted into an ideology that must be resisted.

Though academics still have a high degree of autonomy by general workforce standards, the trend is towards more scrutiny and accountability. Surveys of student satisfaction and outcomes have been conducted regularly since the 1990s.

The recently launched MyUniversity website makes these survey results easily accessible to prospective students. With most student places now contestable between universities, student opinion has major financial implications. The quantity and quality of research output affects academic reputations and government funding.

These market and government incentives flow back to academics through university administrations, which organise internal policies to maximise their institutional performance. Academics complain when their performance is evaluated by measures that they believe under-rate their work, and are outraged when their jobs are threatened as a result. There is a continuing ugly dispute at the University of Sydney, which has decided to retrench academics with too few recent publications.

Critics of academic performance measures are broadly right that teaching and research are not easily reducible to quantitative evaluation. Nor do performance indicators necessarily measure the most important outcomes. We can compare student satisfaction between courses, but we cannot compare how much students are learning.

An academic who publishes a few groundbreaking papers over a career contributes more than one who produces dozens of mediocre papers, but the system favours quantity over quality. Performance indicators usually only imperfectly measure one aspect of a multi-dimensional activity. They tell just part of the story.

Where complex judgments are required about methods and outcomes a "professional" model of employment is desirable. Professionals are given considerable scope to determine how best to go about their work, with other professionals from the same field best placed to judge performance.

The professional model of employment requires a high level of self-regulation, so that clients can trust that their interests will be protected. In well-developed professions such as law and medicine professional entry requirements are demanding, codes of practice exist, and there are remedies when the codes are breached.

On the research side, academia has developed as a profession. Entry standards have increased over time. It is now difficult to get a permanent academic job without a PhD. A system of peer review (academics evaluating each other's work) acts as an internal quality-control mechanism. University promotions depend heavily on research performance, but typically not in a crude way. Many aspects of performance can be taken into account.

Unfortunately, the teaching side of academia has not developed as a profession to anything like the same extent as research. And compared with long-established professions, university teaching is early in its transition from amateurism to professionalism.

The lack of teaching professionalism starts with occupational entry requirements. In a recent survey conducted by the centre for the study of higher education at Melbourne University, more than 70 per cent of academics indicated teaching training was not mandatory at their institution.

A third of academics in the same survey had never received any training in teaching. The contrast with education for children is marked. Schools started insisting on teaching qualifications decades ago.

University teaching is often not seen as a worthwhile career in itself. There is resistance to "teaching only" academic positions, which make up only about 4 per cent of academic employment. Survey evidence shows Australian academics are more likely than academics in other countries to favour research over teaching. Teaching is still seen as a secondary activity, not deserving of the attention research receives.

Monitoring of academic activity is in part a response to these weaknesses in the academic profession. Despite their limitations, performance measures can identify real problems.

There is a problem if students say they are not getting enough feedback on their work, or that teaching staff are not explaining course content clearly. The dismal results of the first nationwide end-of-course teaching survey, in 1993, showed the "trust us" approach of academics was not working. If academics had developed a proper professional ethos around teaching they might have legitimate grievances about "managerialist" scrutiny and accountability. But without this professional ethos, it is necessary to protect the interests of students.

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