THE IMPACT OF PERFORMANCE INDICATORS ON
THE WORK OF UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS: A STUDY OF FOUR
AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

JEANNETTE TAYLOR
BAppSc, MBA

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
Murdoch University

1999
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

In 1988, the Australian Federal Government released the document *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* which was intended to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the higher education sector. This paved the way for the application of performance indicators (PIs) across higher education, most notably the creation of a link between PIs (called the Composite Index) and the research component of the annual government funding to universities. Although PIs for teaching became popular, funding for the teaching component was not directly attached to PIs and remained largely based on student enrolments.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of university academics in Australia on the effects of research and teaching as a result of the introduction of funding based on research PIs. The academic literature suggests that PIs can bring about desirable effects but it also warns that their imposition, particularly by the government on universities, may lead to unintended and undesirable effects, such as goal displacement and strategic manipulation, which may be designed to enhance apparent research performance. To guide the investigation, it was hypothesised that the government’s PIs which focus on research will be integrated into the universities’ internal policies; will encourage universities to place a high priority on the research activities funded by the PIs; will lead to significantly more paperwork; will contribute to a significant change in the approach to research but not to teaching; and will result in academics adopting negative attitudes towards PIs.
Two basic sources of information were obtained to evaluate these hypotheses. First, the administrations of selected universities were consulted, and staff interviewed, to gauge the degree of change that had been implemented by the universities. Second, a questionnaire was constructed in order to assess academics’ attitude towards PIs, and their perceptions of an association between PIs and their institutional reward system. The questionnaire also assessed changes in research, teaching and paperwork activities.

The universities selected characterised the different kinds of universities found in the Unified National System of the Australian higher education system. One hundred and fifty-two academics from these universities were surveyed by the questionnaire. Thirty percent of these academics participated in a structured interview. The disciplines from which the academics were selected for participation included arts/humanities, science, and professional studies which included a natural science based profession and a social science based profession. In addition, a case study of one of these universities was carried out.

The institutions were found to have reorganised their internal policies to incorporate and focus on the PIs in the government’s Composite Index. The academics surveyed were generally found to have negative attitude towards their institutional PIs, although staff of higher rank had relatively more positive views. Reasons for their dissatisfaction
included the inability of PIs to capture the various dimensions of academic work and privileging research over teaching. For a majority of the academics, the introduction of PIs was associated with a rise in paperwork load and a change in the approach to research in terms of focusing on publications and external research grant applications, particularly those counted in their institutional PI-based funding schemes. The time devoted to these activities, as well as the number of publications and grants for which they were expected to apply, have significantly increased. It was found that staff did use various strategies to maximise their PI scores, such as writing shorter papers in order to increase the quantity of publications. The proportion who changed their approach to teaching was also sizeable; most of them were concerned about getting students through their courses with minimum fuss by having lower ambitions for students and pandering to their superficial needs. However, the proportion who changed their teaching was significantly less than those who changed their research. One possible reason could be the lack of special incentives to increase their emphasis on teaching.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARC
Australian Research Council

AVCC/ACDP
Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee/ Australian Council of Directors and Principals

CAUT
Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching

CQAHE
Committee of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

CTEC
Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission

CVCP/UGC
Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/ University Grants Committee

DEET
Department of Employment, Education, and Training

DEETYA
Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs

HEC
Higher Education Council

ISBN
International Standard Book Number

NBEET
National Board of Employment, Education, and Training

NCG
National Competitive Grants

NHMRC
National Health and Medical Research Council

OECD
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
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<td>Australian Research Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>AVCC/ACDP</td>
<td>Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee/ Australian Council of Directors and Principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAUT</td>
<td>Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching</td>
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<td>CTEC</td>
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<td>CVCP/UGC</td>
<td>Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/ University Grants Committee</td>
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