# SUPPORTING CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Universities in Australia face a range of challenges as they renew curricula. Several of these arise from the federal government's compliance monitoring entities which focus on academic standards and quality assurance. In addition, the sector is experiencing increased emphasis on research performance and postgraduate education. Against this backdrop, this paper examines academic leadership, management and staff development, and considers the implications of these processes on construction management higher education. This paper draws on data gathered from surveys, interviews and focus groups with leaders in construction-related academic disciplines across Australia, and provides a critical review of their attitudes and concerns. The data were analysed in terms of themes relevant to leadership and management, and highlight issues for the future of the construction management discipline.

*Keywords:* academic leadership, construction management, staff development

## CONTEXT

The higher education sector in Australia has changed dramatically in recent decades. Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) identified the most important *change forces* affecting academic leaders in rank order to be "decreased government funding, growing pressure to generate new income, balancing work and family life, managing the pressures for continuous change, having to deal with slow and unresponsive administrative processes, finding and retaining high-quality staff, and increased government reporting and scrutiny" (p. xiii). Successive

governments have reduced funding to support mainstream teaching of undergraduate students. In addition, the processes by which teaching quality is assessed have also changed with successive governments.

Other challenges face academics in general and those in the construction sector in particular. They need to adapt to rapid developments in information and communications technology, and the litigious nature of some cohorts of students. These challenges are set against the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce. According to Loussikian (2016) "Less than 1 per cent of all full-time equivalent positions created at Australian universities in the past decade have been tenured teaching and research roles, with casuals now making up nearly 80 per cent of all teaching-only positions." (p.1)

Scott et al (2008) note that little has been written about leadership in business and industry. They observe that "much of it is neither empirical nor tested for its applicability to the distinctive operating environment of a university" (p. viii). This paper provides insights into the current state of construction management (CM) tertiary education.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This paper is based on an investigation (Williams, Sher, & Simmons, 2010) that was designed to identify and understand the factors that significantly impact on both a CM academics' day-to-day and longer-term activities. A substantial amount of data were collected but were not reported on in the aforementioned publication. This paper explores these data through the lens of the lived experiences of CM academics.

A mixed-method research methodology (MMR) was adopted. Qualitative data from an online survey were used to confirm some of the findings of interviews and focus groups. MMR was used to triangulate as well as to complement the quantitative survey results with those of the interviews and focus groups. All full time CM academics employed in the Australian higher education sector were invited to complete the survey, and a response rate of 54% was achieved. The survey included 137 items in a range of formats including Likert-scale options, ranking of options, choice from a range of options, as well as free format responses.

Following an analysis of the survey data, focus groups and interviews were conducted with the academics and Heads of School of 11 of the 12 universities delivering CM programs at the time (Williams et al., 2010). The audio recordings of the focus group discussions and the interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo (QSR, 2008). The findings that relate to academic leadership, management and staff development are described and discussed below.

## CAREER PATHS OF CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT ACADEMICS

When asked if they had worked in more than one university (Figure 1) during their academic career, 55.5% answered in the affirmative, 38.1% stated that they had worked in one only, and 6.4% did not answer this question. Participants who had moved universities were asked if they had moved inter-state. One third of participants answered that they had, whilst 19% had not and 47.6% of participants did not reply to this question.

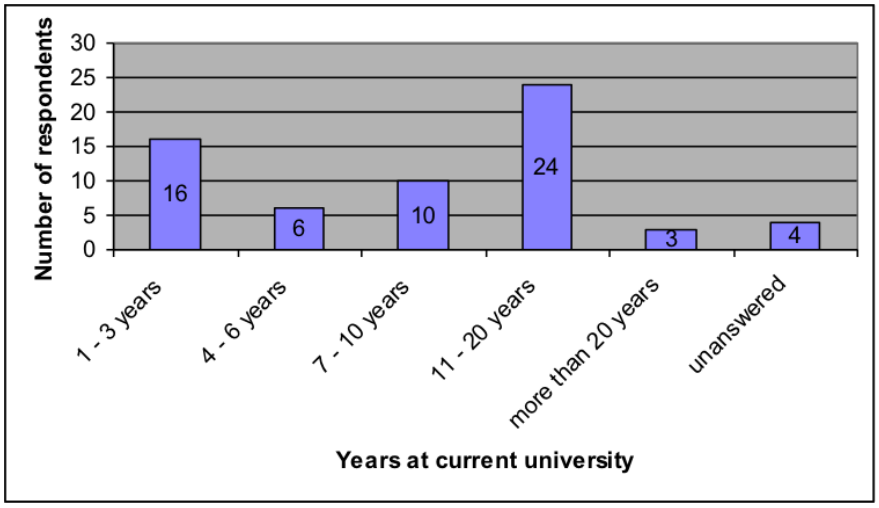



Figure 1: Length of time participants employed in their current university

Two thirds of participants had been teaching in their primary discipline for between 5 and 20 years (20.6% between 5 and 10 years, and 46% between 11 and 20 years). Fewer (12.7%) were novice teachers with up to four years experience. While 14.3% had taught for more than 21 years, 6.3% did not specify the extent of their experience.

The data indicated that 28.6% of academics had not been promoted, while a third had been promoted once, 15.9% had been promoted twice, 7.9% three times and 7.9% four or more times. 6.3% of participants did not answer this question. Those who had been promoted were asked to indicate the academic level from which they were promoted and the level they were promoted to for each promotion. Their responses are shown in Table 1, Table 2,
Table 3 and

Table 4.

Participants identified the following issues as those that had significantly affected their careers: research, bureaucracy, administration, difficulties getting promoted, poor leadership, teaching, lack of respect for construction disciplines, low pay, casualisation of teaching, unsupportive professional institutions, funding and their curriculum. Positive influences

were seen to be mentors and colleagues, good management and experience overseas.

Table 1: First promotion of construction management academics

| Gender | From… | To… | Number |
|---|---|---|---|
| Males | Assistant / Associate Lecturer | Lecturer | 11 |
| | Lecturer | Senior Lecturer | 21 |
| | Senior Lecturer | Associate Professor | 1 |
| Females | Assistant / Associate Lecturer | Lecturer | 5 |
| | Lecturer | Senior Lecturer | 1 |

Table 2: Second promotion of construction management academics

| Gender | From… | To… | Number |
|---|---|---|---|
| Males | Lecturer | Senior Lecturer | 6 |
| | Senior Lecturer | Associate Professor | 8 |
| | Senior Lecturer | Professor | 1 |
| Females | Lecturer | Senior Lecturer | 2 |

Table 3: Third promotion of construction management academics

| Gender | From… | To… | Number |
|---|---|---|---|
| Males | Senior Lecturer | Associate Professor | 2 |
| | Associate Professor | Professor | 5 |
| Females | Senior Lecturer | Associate Professor | 1 |

Table 4: Fourth promotion of construction management academics

| Gender | From… | To… | Number |
|---|---|---|---|
| Males | Associate Professor | Professor | 1 |
| Females | Lecturer | Senior Lecturer | 1 |

Participants were asked to consider the factors contributing to the low rate of promotions amongst construction management academics. The aspects they identified are described below.

## Contribution of teaching to promotion prospects

Several participants noted that their prospects for promotion were limited, especially if teaching was a major component of their workload. In this regard, one participant wished for "Better opportunities for promotion within the universities especially for those academics who are mainly interested in providing good education." Furthermore, several participants observed that the teaching-related promotion criteria espoused by some universities were regarded as inferior to those of research. For example one academic said "Even so-called teaching universities, they'll put the

spin that teaching is important. But the promotional prospects are very dependent on research. So let's not kid each other."

Another academic said

> "Focusing on teaching here is not going to do you any good at all if you're going for a promotion, as we found out; three occasions failed, two occasions failed to get promotion because not enough research. Not teaching research, this is research, research."

HoSs held similar views, as the following quotes show:

> You show me someone who's promoted from associate professor to professor based on extraordinary, excellent - whatever adjective you want to use - teaching, and okay research, then I'll show you a very rare object."

> "The University's strategy… has made it very clear that it's aiming to move up the pecking order and teaching is very important but it's not really rewarded even though if you look at all the documentation it talks about promotion. Teaching is a very important part of promotion but it's almost impossible to get promoted unless you do very well in research."

Notwithstanding these observations, some participants noted that promotion practices at some universities were changing and that account was being taken of teaching performance, as an academic noted:

> "I've sat on the promotion committee every year since I've been here, except the year I applied. At the beginning when I first came here, there was no way that you would get promoted if you didn't have a PhD and didn't have publication(s), and a really good research track record. Just absolutely no way. Now it has changed. There is a greater support for teaching."

In addition, one HoS described the promotion process as follows:

> "... we require them, and all the unis are the same, require them to achieve a threshold across the three basic areas of teaching, research and administration and to excel in one of them. And it's usually research that they're looking to be the point of excellence. But it doesn't have to be. People will be promoted on the basis of teaching excellence but they will still have had to achieve the threshold in research and so on... "

Participants therefore generally believed that the teaching performance promotion criteria in place at their universities were ineffective. They were of the view that their research performance was all-important. This

situation may be changing as some noted that their universities were acknowledging teaching performance as a promotion metric.

### PhD requirement

Academics are expected to have doctorates, as research capacity is a basic requirement of contemporary universities (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Marginson, 2002). Academics generally consider it necessary to complete a PhD or MPhil. While this might be viewed as staff development and a path to leadership, many academics regarded it as a necessity. In this regard a Head of School (HoS) said "We've got seven staff here and the staff that haven't been promoted haven't got PhDs. It's as simple as that." Another HoS said "I've never seen anyone promoted except from level A to level B. I've never seen that happen. And it won't happen for anyone until they have their PhD." Similarly, an academic participant said "... if you're not doing a PhD definitely you will not be promoted" and a participant stated that "without a PhD there is no future (career progression wise) regardless of my ability".

No dissenting observations were made about the need to obtain a research higher degree. Not having a PhD was seen as an inhibitor to construction management academics being promoted.

### Research output

Several participants noted that promotion also depended on their research outcomes. For example, one participant said:

> "... there's no question about the fact that not only do you have to publish…..So it is driven – research drives the promotional prospects of the people... Any university will judge a staff member's promotional prospects by PhD and research outcomes. In fact, research grant applications and success."

Similarly, a HoS noted that "... promotions (are) very largely are driven by research performance."

Another participant noted the disparities between the funding of other disciplines and that of construction management disciplines. This was seen to exacerbate the challenges construction management academics faced in being promoted. This academic said:

> "We are in an industry which doesn't by its nature have lots of money for its research. Where if you look at any form of medical industry and there is research money for them all over the place."

Funding for research was seen as a compounding issue. A participant observed that a "(t)eaching career is now attached to research and (the) limited capacity of the industry to fund adequate research... will hinder (construction management) academics to climb the academic ladder."

These observations highlight the need for construction management academics to have a research track record to be promoted. However, the modest funding opportunities and the relative youth of the discipline were seen to compound the difficulties these academics faced.

**Succession planning**

Many participants observed that it was difficult to recruit academics with the required combination of academic qualifications and industry experience. For example, one HoS said "I think the inability to attract in general good quality academic staff with solid industry experience as well as academic experience... is the biggest challenge."

Furthermore, an academic said "We have gone beyond the stage now where there was a sort of surplus of good people to call upon. I think we are at the stage where it is very difficult to find good teachers."

The reason frequently mentioned for this shortage of staff was the pay difference between industry and university. Graduate construction managers were earning substantially more that academics and this made the lifestyle of university lecturers financially unattractive:

> "Well, one of the reasons why it exists is because industry people can earn a heap more money in industry than they would do as academics. Half of my students earn more than I do. So I'm talking about prior to graduation. So I don't think there's an awful lot of incentive to come into academia."
>
> "Staffing is a real issue. The salary levels, compared with what industry's paying. There's no attraction for an industry professional to come – to turn around and become an academic."

To address the shortage of lecturers, several participants mentioned that overseas applicants were finding employment in Australia. However, whilst these academics might have post-graduate qualifications, they were unlikely to be familiar with local conditions. In this regard some HoSs said:

> "You have to go (overseas) to source (academic staff). The problem is of course then the work experience becomes dubious. There are a lot more potential candidates overseas, particularly in our region that have PhDs, but won't necessarily have the relevant work experience."
>
> "... it's very hard to attract people... So when we advertise for staff (we get applications from) maybe a local applicant and maybe not. We tend to get some from… and some from other places. But they have little or no industry experience and they certainly have very little knowledge of the Australian experience. So that's hard."

In summary, most HoSs agreed that recruiting appropriately qualified staff was a significant challenge. Staff also recognised this as a challenge for the discipline. The dearth of local applicants had resulted in the appointment of overseas applicants, and this trend was likely to continue.

### Workload concerns

Leadership and management roles in schools involve excessive workload much of which is bureaucratic in nature. Academics observed that the volume of administrative works is the greatest factor preventing them from considering becoming a leader or manager. Moreover, they maintained that this situation worsens with seniority, with management typically being only bearable at program or degree level, becoming more difficult at the level of Head of Discipline or Department and almost impossible at the level of Head of School or Dean (Ostwald & Williams, 2008). Staff generally believed that to undertake these roles a person needed to give up their teaching or research careers, their chances of promotion and their quality of life. Most schools had little or no succession planning in place because no one was willing to take on these roles.

## DISCUSSION

There is little empirical evidence of tried and proven approaches to leadership that apply in university settings. Furthermore, there are no past studies of leadership and management of the construction management discipline in Australia with which to triangulate the present data. Some past studies of academic leadership and management are relevant in the present context. Indeed, almost the complete range of opinions reported here have strong parallels to those recorded in past research into academic leadership and management (Rowley & Sherman, 2003; Sarros, Gmelch, & Tanewski, 1997a, 1997b). Past studies into academic leadership and management positions have also suggested that high levels of personal stress are common (Gmelch, 2000; Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Gmelch & Seedorf, 1989). This lends credibility to the majority of the interview and focus group data. Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is not to construct an argument against taking up a leadership or management position; it is clear that people are needed in these roles. However, based on the responses recorded, it is clear that the roles of Dean, Head of School and Head of Discipline are especially onerous in the specific context of the construction management discipline. One of the primary reasons for this is that, in the past, universities have valued and promoted the autonomy of individuals, the derivation of authority from academic standing, and the sovereignty of an individual's research. Inevitably, these values, along with an ambivalence to administrative tasks on the part of academics, has come into conflict with successive governments' agenda for universities (Marginson 2002, Ostwald & Williams 2008). The emphasis on performance and accountability has led to increased workload pressure and lower morale.

The egalitarian and collegial structures of the past are being replaced with autocratic and managerial systems (Marginson & Considine 2000).

All of the changes described above and which manifest so clearly in the demands on academic leaders and managers are brought into focus when considering staff development.

## CONCLUSION

This study was founded on the observations of CM academics at a specific stage of their careers. It was based on the resources they had available at the time, the environment in which they found themselves and the students enrolled in their courses. It is likely and expected that these conditions will change with time but this does not undermine this study. It provides a snapshot against which future developments may be measured.

Academic leaders in construction management clearly feel overloaded, mired in bureaucracy and burdened with the expectation that they will keep their teaching and research active while being a leader / manager. What is evident is that the demands of leadership leave little scope for innovation and may even deter some staff with an interest or skills in teaching from aspiring to leadership and management positions. This means that many new staff have their attention swiftly diverted from seeking staff development in teaching and learning by their higher degree studies. This also contributes to staff not perceiving teaching as a viable career path. Certainly, the findings of this study identified that changes in promotion criteria that recognise teaching are gaining momentum, but this was countered by the belief that research remains the primary means for career advancement.

The question must be asked whether the current academic system is able to ensure the delivery of the types of education programs that provide the range of learning experiences needed in CM education. It is apparent from this study that it is unlikely that academic leaders will drive this delivery. Administrative and quality assurance tasks detract from their ability to focus on curriculum issues. Coupled with academic managers' lack of capacity to commit to teaching/curriculum innovation is a parallel lack of willingness to take on this responsibility

Where there is little prospect of change in resourcing and no willingness amongst academics to take on a leadership role, it is likely that the status quo will continue. This will not enhance student learning. One aspect that offers some hope is that, as more staff complete research higher degrees, there may be new capacity to devote to teaching innovation, the pressing issue of teaching quality and its management, and an even larger pool of potential applicants for leadership and management roles.

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