Reactive or Proactive? Universities in Action on their Ageing Academic Workforce

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the extent to which academic staffing, specifically ageing of academics, are portrayed in the audit reports of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) for 2006 - 2009. The purpose is to determine whether the response by universities to the ageing academic workforce through these AUQA reports is reactive or proactive. The 21 universities’ audit reports revealed, first, that universities engage in a mixture of career management practices. Second, university variations exist in their response to their ageing academic workforce. Third, only modest progress on academic staffing matters has been made following AUQA Cycle 1 audit reports. Overall, although almost half of the audit reports address the ageing academic workforce, the universities’ response tends to be reactive.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Strategic Human Resource Management, Organisational Sustainability, Career Management, Academic Staffing, Ageing Academics.

Universities contribute significantly to Australia’s economic growth. Education is Australia’s third largest export industry directly behind coal and iron ore (Universities of Australia, 2009). Furthermore, it is argued that ‘universities are expected to be powerhouses of knowledge, innovation and research and as such contribute directly to the economy, culture and society of all Australians’ (National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), 2007:2). In spite of this, the sustainability of universities is being challenged with the ageing of its academic workforce. Among the workforce sectors, education is experiencing the most rapid age increase and has among the oldest workers. Over 40% of all Australian academics are aged 50 and over (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2008), signalling that a large proportion of academics will exit the workforce within the next decade. This paper considers the human resource management (HRM) challenge that this phenomenon poses for university management:

How are universities responding to its ageing academic workforce?

The paper reports the extent to which academic staffing, specifically, ageing of academics, are portrayed in the audit reports conducted by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) for 2006 – 2009. AUQA is the principal national quality assurance agency in Australian higher education (AUQA, 2009). The purpose is to determine whether the response by universities to the ageing academic workforce
through these AUQA reports is reactive or proactive. There are three parts. The first part outlines Australian universities in the context of other organisations who are responding to an ageing workforce. The methodology and research findings form the second part, while the final part is the conclusion.

**Australian Universities in the Context of Organisations Responding to an Ageing Workforce**

The ageing of Australia’s population and workforce, like other Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) developed countries, provides both challenges and opportunities. Consequently, OECD (1998:2) emphasize that there is a need to understand better the capacity of labour markets to adapt to and to enhance, ageing workforces. Opportunities include utilizing the knowledge, experience and skills of the older workforce more innovatively and challenges include promoting and encouraging older workers to continue working for the benefit of both the individual and the organisation.

Education is experiencing the most rapid age increase and has among the oldest workers compared to other industry sectors. In 2001, the average age of all Australian workers was 38.6 years compared to an average of 43.3 years in the education sector (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). In 1996 academic staff aged 55 and over was around one in eight and has increased to one in four by 2008 (DEEWR, 2008). Table 1 shows the percentage of full-time and fractional full-time academics aged 50 years and over in selected universities in 1997, 2002 and 2007 compared to the national average for the same age cohort (DEEWR, 1997, 2002, 2007). Over the 1997 – 2007 period, there is a pattern of an increase in the ageing academic workforce across the selected universities. In 1997, 38% of the selected universities exceeded the national average statistic of 32% for academics aged 50 years and over. By 2007, this had increased to 71% of the selected universities. However, four universities from the Group of Eight (Go8), (a coalition of eight Australia’s oldest and leading universities that are internationally recognized for scholarship and research excellence) (http://www.gr8.com.au) were below the national average statistic in 2007 and it remained relatively stable over the ten year period. The younger age profile in these universities may be due to the high level of research-intensive short-term employment contracts. The Australian Catholic University (ACU}
National) had the highest percentage in 1997, 2002 and 2007, at 45%, 59% and 64% respectively, while Southern Cross University (SCU) had the highest increase of 30% from 1997 to 2007.

INSERT TABLE 1

The ageing of academics is not confined to Australia. Across most OECD countries (30 member countries are represented), the average age of academics is 45 years, which is also the average age for Australian academics. However, in comparison, the lowest average age is 38 years in the Czech Republic and Turkey, while Italy has the oldest average age at 55 years (OECD, 2008). According to Vincent-Lancrin (2008), 45 years of age is not considered ‘old’, and Italy is the only country in which the ageing of academics is problematic, as 63% of academic staff will have to be replaced by 2020 if their numbers are to remain constant (p62). In light of this, should it be such a pertinent issue for Australian universities to respond to its ageing academic workforce?

Recognition and response to the challenges and opportunities with Australia’s ageing population in general is varied. Recognition exists at both State and Federal Governments. Strategic documents such as Too Young to Go: Mature Age Unemployment and Early Retirement in NSW (NSW Committee on Ageing, 2001); National Strategy for an Ageing Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001); and Economic Implications of an Ageing Australia (Productivity Commission, 2005), aim to prompt and encourage organisations to respond to the needs and benefits of an ageing workforce. However, recognition and response to an ageing workforce at the organisational level is mixed. It is argued that ‘policy and practice concerning older workers has been fragmented, piecemeal and reactive’ (Patrickson & Ranzijn, 2005: 736). This raises the question as to whether organisations are reactive or proactive to an ageing workforce.
An appropriate framework for the concepts ‘reactive’ and ‘proactive’ is Miles and Snow’s strategy typology (Miles, Snow, Meyer & Coleman, 1978). According to Miles et al (1978), organisations that are ‘proactive’ display a typical pattern of response to the environment that is both consistent and stable. Three strategic types of organisations are proactive: ‘Defenders’ who deliberately enact and maintain a stable environment; ‘Prospectors’ who are almost the opposite of ‘Defenders’ as they enact in a dynamic, growing environment, seek out opportunities and take risks and ‘Analyzers’ who combine the strengths of both ‘Defenders’ and ‘Prospectors’, who minimize risk while maximizing the opportunity for growth. Organisations that are ‘reactive’ tend to exhibit a pattern of adjustment to their environment that is both inconsistent and unstable. Such organisations are termed ‘Reactors’, as they respond to changing environments in an ad-hoc fashion. Reasons why organisations become ‘Reactors’ may be due to top management not clearly defining the organisation’s strategy; the organisation’s structure and processes may not fully fit the chosen strategy and there may be a tendency for management to maintain the organisation’s current strategy-structure relationship despite changes in the environment, so the organisation takes whatever actions are necessary to meet immediate needs (Miles et al, 1978).

The ageing of academics is just one of the many challenges facing universities in a constantly changing landscape. The recent review of Australia’s higher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) recommends an expansion of the higher education sector, teaching and research to meet the demands of a rapidly moving global economy. The federal government’s response and plan to this review, is to have 40% of all 25 – 34 year olds with a bachelor level or above qualification by 2025. The concern is many of the best academic staff are being lured overseas (DEEWR, 2009). The federal government’s student expansion plan is contingent upon several factors, including the sustainability of universities and their academic workforce.

The next decade presents a time of critical vulnerability. Although academic staffing has been on the research agenda for several decades, the approach taken by universities has varied. Policy makers at both the
system and the institutional levels have largely ignored staffing (Kogan, Moses & El-Khawas, 1994:9).

Additionally, there is fear that universities are taking a reactive response to the ageing of academics:

NTEU fear that short-sighted institutional policies and strategies aimed at minimizing staffing costs will result in the loss of substantial intellectual capacity within the Australian university workforce, which may in turn threaten the future viability of a quality higher education sector (NTEU, 2007:10).

A strategic proactive HRM approach to academic staffing is warranted. This approach emphasizes a fit between the organisational environment with its outside environment. The need is to match HRM strategy and organisational strategy (Baruch, 2004). It is argued that strategic HRM should simultaneously promote fit and flexibility to meet the needs of a changing environment (Wright & Snell, 1998). This strategic alignment should lead to high organisational effectiveness and performance (Holbeche, 1999). According to Brockbank (1999), strategically reactive HRM, focuses on linking HRM policies to implement clearly formulated business strategies and by managing change, while strategically proactive HRM focuses on creating future strategic alternatives for a greater competitive advantage by linking internal processes with ongoing changes in the marketplace. In a dynamic and global economy, universities ought to be strategically proactive in order to remain competitive.

Method

This study reports the extent to which academic staffing, specifically, ageing of academics, are portrayed in AUQA audit reports for 2006 – 2009. The purpose is to determine whether the response by universities to the ageing academic workforce through these AUQA audit reports is reactive or proactive. This study builds on the initial stage of investigation of a larger study on the career management for older academics (Larkin & Neumann, in press). The initial study examined the extent to which universities represent organisational career management practices for academic staff in public institutional policy documents accessible on-line. The findings from this study revealed that universities only partially represent organisational career management practices for academic staff. Lacking in particular in public documentation was evidence of succession planning and mentoring programs.
The list of ten career management practices derived from the review of a wide range of organisational career management practices (see e.g. London & Stumpf, 1982; Gutteridge & Otte 1983; Baruch & Periperl, 2000; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Baruch, 2003) forms the framework for the examination of the selected AUQA audit reports. They are: performance appraisal; retirement preparation programs; succession planning; mentoring; special programs for populations of unique circumstances such as gender and age; secondments; professional development; academic promotion; career development; and study programs (Larkin & Neumann, in press). As in the first study, this study will focus at the institutional level as it is the level at which HRM policies are developed to enable alignment with institutional strategies and objectives.

AUQA was established as a not for profit company in 2000 by the group of Ministers of Education of Australia and each of the six States and two territories, acting jointly through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (AUQA, 2009:5). AUQA is a core part of a total national quality assurance framework for Australia, responsible for quality audits of higher education institutions and accreditation authorities. One of AUQA’s objectives is to arrange, manage, monitor, review, analyze and provide public reports on the quality of outcomes in Australian universities (AUQA, 2009). The AUQA audit combines university self report with documentation for audit panel assessment with site visits and interviews. Audit panel members are from AUQA’s Register of Auditors.

The process for this study commenced with accessing the AUQA website homepage. Only the audit reports for universities for the period 2006 – 2009 inclusive were selected. Public documents are a valuable source of information in qualitative research and help researchers understand central phenomena (Creswell, 2008). The content of these audit reports were analysed by utilizing the list of ten career management practices framework derived from the initial study. Content analysis is considered to be a research technique for making valid inferences from texts that ultimately satisfy external criteria determined by the researcher (Krippendorff, 2004).
Sample

Twenty-one universities’ AUQA audit reports (see Table 2) out of the total of 39 Australian universities were accessed for 2006-2009. The sample was categorized by geographical location and university grouping. Their geographical locations are: Australian Capital Territory (ACT); NSW; Victoria (VIC); Queensland (QLD); South Australia (SA); Western Australia (WA) and National. The university groupings are: Three main university groupings that are formal and self-selected: Group of Eight (Go8) (http://www.go8.com.au); Australian Technology Network (ATN) (http://www.atn.com.au) and Innovative Research Universities (IRU) (http://www.iru.com.au). Universities not in the three main university groupings are listed in a fourth group termed ‘Other Universities’.

INSERT TABLE 2

The selected AUQA audit reports for 2006 – 2009 inclusive are based on different audit cycles. AUQA audits are initiated by AUQA and the AUQA Board approves the schedule of audits in approximately a year in advance. AUQA Cycle 1 audits commenced in 2001 and were completed in 2007, with the Australian National University (ANU) being the last institution to be audited in this cycle. The major aim of Cycle 1 audits was to consider and review the ‘whole of the institution’, its policies and procedures that monitor and achieve the university’s objectives. The Audit Panel also seeks evidence of achievement of and performance against academic objectives and these are expressed in relation to themes. All AUQA audit reports contain a summary of findings and more detailed comments. They include commendations that are commendable practices; recommendations that relate to areas the Audit panel believes require improvement and some suggestions of possible approaches are offered by the Audit panel and affirmations (a sub-set of recommendations) that relate to areas the Audit panel believes require improvement but have already been identified by the auditee. The audit report is the output of a complex
and collaborative panel process and once it is approved by the AUQA Board, it is sent to the auditee for public comment prior to its public release on AUQA’s website (AUQA, 2009).

Approximately five years after the first audit is conducted, AUQA reviews the auditees’ responses to the audit. AUQA Cycle 2 audits commenced from 2008 and the focus is to determine whether recommendations and affirmations in the AUQA Cycle 1 audit report have been implemented as a means of ‘closing the loop’ from Cycle 1. In addition, AUQA Cycle 2 audits address two thematic areas in consultation with the auditee, informed by an assessment of academic risk, with attention to benchmarking activities and their effect on standards and outcomes (AUQA, 2009:26).

Findings

The focus of analysis for this study is only on academic staffing, specifically ageing of academics, portrayed in the AUQA audit reports for 2006 – 2009. The findings highlight that all of the 21 universities’ AUQA audit reports address academic staffing across a wide range of HRM issues such as: recruitment; retention; career development; gender and age balance and succession planning. Almost half of the AUQA audit reports address an institution’s ageing academic workforce.

Three major findings emerged from this study. First, universities engage in a mixture of career management practices, but not all of the ten career management practices were covered by the 21 universities. This is consistent to the finding from the initial study (Larkin & Neumann, in press). The only career management practice that was covered by all of the universities was performance appraisal, but the Audit Panel comments ranged from commendations about effective implementation (see e.g. The University of Melbourne (Melbourne), 2006; Monash University (Monash), 2006) to recommendations requiring a more systematic and consistent implementation (see e.g. The University of Notre Dame, Australia (UNDA), 2008; SCU, 2008).
Across the remaining nine career management practices, there were varied comments and details. In the initial study, there were no identifiable succession planning programs in place from examining the on-line and web-based publicly available policies and documents. However, this was not the case when examining the AUQA audit reports. The issue of an ageing workforce and the need for succession planning featured in almost one third (six) of universities: (see e.g. ACU National, 2008; The Flinders University of South Australia (Flinders), 2006; Murdoch University (Murdoch), 2006; The University of New South Wales (UNSW), 2006; University of Sunshine Coast (USC), 2007; University of Western Sydney (UWS), 2007). Audit panel comments stressed the importance of workforce capability planning, urging universities to adopt a strategically proactive HRM approach to academic staffing. Some examples include: ‘[urgent] recommendations to address workforce planning issues proactively…replacing an ageing staff and succession planning’ (ACU National, 2008:11); ‘affirms Flinders attempt to strengthen workforce planning systems, including the development of systematic succession planning processes’ (Flinders, 2006:21). It is worth noting, that five of the six universities’ academic workforce aged 50 years and over exceeded the national average in 2007. There were no obvious variations across location or university grouping.

Although the career management practice of retirement preparation programs was found to be represented by over one third of selected universities in the initial study, it was not covered by any of the AUQA audit reports. There were also no references to secondments, which was the second highest represented career management practice in the initial study. Career development was one of the least presented career management practices in the initial study and also received limited coverage in the AUQA audit reports. Some examples include: the need for career pathways for future academic leadership roles (The University of Adelaide (Adelaide), 2008) to the need for systems to attract, support and advance early career academics (Murdoch, 2006; UNSW, 2006, UNDA, 2008). Mentoring was identified as a HR practice to be completed with induction and as part of a strategic HR capability plan (Central Queensland University (CQU), 2006; Flinders, 2006). Comments from the Audit Panel emphasize the need for a more
co-ordinated and strategic approach to its HRM (Monash, 2006), reinforcing the need for universities to take a proactive approach to their human resources.

Nearly half of the AUQA audit reports discussed a heavy reliance on casual/sessional staff: (see e.g. ACU National, 2008; CQU, 2006; UNSW, 2006; UNDA, 2008; SCU, 2008; USC, 2007; Swinburne University of Technology (Swinburne), 2008; University of Technology Sydney (UTS), 2006; Victoria University (VU), 2006; UWS, 2007). Although not identified through the on-line public documentation, AUQA recommendations ranged from the need for universities to address the proportion of casual/sessional to permanent staff (see e.g. CQU, 2006; VU, 2006) to the need to provide adequate support and development for these staff (see e.g. UNSW, 2006; UTS, 2006).

As a second major finding, the analysis shows that there are differences amongst universities in their response to ageing of academics. Almost half of the AUQA audit reports cover ageing of academics (see e.g. ACU, 2008, The Australian National University (ANU), 2007; University of Canberra (UC), 2009; Flinders, 2006; Murdoch, 2006; SCU, 2008; USC, 2007; UTS, 2006; VU, 2006; UWS, 2007). However, three universities had urgent recommendations by AUQA to address workforce planning, in relation to ageing, emphasizing the importance of staff capability and the preservation of corporate memory (see e.g. ACU National, 2008, UC, 2009, SCU, 2008). Importantly, these recommendations were detailed in AUQA Cycle 2 audit reports and were outcomes from a review of each university’s progress in addressing recommendations made in AUQA Cycle 1 audits. Action is evident at ACU National (2008), with a series of planned activities and a staff renewal program targeting the Faculty of Education. However, at UC (2009:6),’ AUQA affirms the university’s intention to develop its capability plan’ and at SCU, (2008:2) ‘recommends the university develop and implement a university-wide workforce plan as soon as practicable’. Additionally, evidence in the AUQA Cycle 1 audit reports include: ‘AUQA affirms the attention UWS is giving to aligning human resources with strategic priorities for its future through projects such as Our People 2015’ (UWS, 2007:41). It would reasonable to infer that these universities are
reactive, particularly given that since 2002, over 40% of their academic workforces are aged 50 years and over (see Table 1). Thus, an ageing academic workforce is a pertinent issue for Australian universities and they should not prolong their response to the challenges of this phenomenon. A proactive response is crucial.

The third major finding is the modest progress towards academic staffing as compared to AUQA audit Cycle 1 reports (see e.g. ACU National, 2008; UC, 2009; SCU, 2008). As mentioned earlier, one of the objectives of AUQA Cycle 2 audits are to review the university’s progress, in other words, to ‘close the loop’ on recommendations from Cycle 1 audits. However, few universities have ‘closed the loop’ in progressing academic staffing matters, thus increasing risks to academic standards and the achievement of quality outcomes (SCU, 2008:2). The issue is whether the current and proposed plans will minimize the risk.

Overall, the findings indicate that in the 21 AUQA audit reports, universities are addressing academic staffing to a certain extent: almost half of the reports addressed the ageing academic workforce; half of the reports discussed the heavy reliance on sessional/casual staff; one third of the reports covered succession planning and career development and mentoring was covered to a limited extent. Location and university grouping did not appear to bear any weighting on the findings. The universities’ response to the ageing academic workforce tends to be reactive, given that the strategies and plans are directly in response to the organisational risks associated with an ageing academic workforce.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the extent to which academic staffing, specifically, the ageing academic workforce, are portrayed in the AUQA audit reports for 2006 – 2009 and determined whether the response by universities through these reports was reactive or proactive. The findings of this study offer an insight into the extent to which universities portray academic staffing at an institutional level. Although almost half of
the AUQA audit reports address the ageing academic workforce, over two thirds of the AUQA audit reports did not cover succession planning, even though succession planning is considered to be a valuable strategically proactive HRM practice. In light of these findings and given the proportion of academics over 50 years of age (see Table 1), one could reasonably speculate that the 71% of universities are ‘Reactors’ in their response to the ageing of academics. ‘Unless an organisation exists in a ‘protected’ environment, it cannot continue to behave as a Reactor indefinitely’ (Miles et al, 1978:558). The findings reveal that there was no one university that was proactively responding to an ageing academic workforce. This could be because universities are pre-occupied with responding to continually changing government policies or with strong competition for student numbers in a tight and competitive funding environment. It could also reflect a level of inexperience in taking initiatives in relation to academic staffing as well as naïve pre-conceptions on ageing and professional competence. Thus, it would seem appropriate for universities to regard academic staffing, particularly, ageing of academics, as a proactive HRM strategy that aligns with the institution’s strategies and objectives.

To conclude, the findings show in general, universities’ responses to the ageing academic workforce tend to be reactive and characteristic of Reactors. Given the age profile of each of the universities, this presents organisational risks. The statistics are a crucial signal for the attention of university management to respond proactively and work towards one of the more consistent and stable proactive strategies of Defender, Prospector or Analyzer. One of the HRM challenges for universities is to work collaboratively with its older academics, in order to develop appropriate HRM strategies that are not just responsive, but are innovative and flexible. It is therefore in the university’s interest to respond proactively to the ageing academic workforce and to work in partnership with older academics to address this phenomenon. This is reinforced by Hugo (2008:7) who states: ‘the ‘crunch’ in academic retirements has not yet arrived (it is still a decade away), but that is no cause for complacency. A considerable lead time will be needed to put in place the policies and strategies needed to meet the looming shortfall of staff’.
REFERENCES


Table 1: Selected Australian Universities Percentage of Full-time -time and Fractional Full-time Academics aged 50 years and over compared to DEEWR average (DEEWR, 1997, 2002, 2007)

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<td>45%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>64%</td>
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<td>Central Queensland University</td>
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Table 2: Selected Australian Universities by Geographical Location by University Grouping *

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* denotes the AUQA audit report year in brackets