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**THE ACADEMIC WORK
ENVIRONMENT IN
AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES: A
MOTIVATING PLACE TO
WORK?**

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*Working Paper 73/00
November 2000*

Abstract

This paper presents findings relating to academics' work environment perceptions and work attitudes in Australian universities. Findings relate to a correlation field study of the academic work environment designed to understand how university work environment characteristics relate to full-time academics' work attitudes and job performance.

Academics reported both positive (motivating) work environment characteristics (i.e., role clarity, autonomy, job challenge, task identity, supervisory consideration) and negative (demotivating) characteristics (i.e., role overload, role conflict, low job feedback, low participation in decision making). Respondents indicated strong positive opinions to sectoral changes such as the rise of managerialism in academe, academic entrepreneurialism and institutional pressures. Academics reported strong levels of job involvement and neutral organisational commitment. Item analysis indicated academics were willing to exert considerable effort on the university's behalf (positive commitment) but felt the university did not inspire the best in them in terms of job performance (negative commitment). Commitment responses indicated an imbalance in the 'psychological contract' between the academic and his/her university. The paper concludes by discussing the positive and negative aspects of university work organisation.

THE ACADEMIC WORK ENVIRONMENT IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES: A MOTIVATING PLACE TO WORK?

INTRODUCTION

According to Ramsden (1998, p.361), "most academics today remain relatively contented with their work while being increasingly dispirited, demoralized and alienated from their organizations". Previous studies of the academic work environment in Australia support the contention that academics are intrinsically motivated by their disciplines and related teaching and research tasks (Lacy & Sheehan, 1997; McInnis, 1996), but extrinsically demotivated by work context factors such as structural arrangements and corporate management processes (Lacy & Sheehan, 1997; Mahony, 1996; Taylor, Gough, Bundrock, & Winter, 1998). Ramsden (1998, p.361) argues that changing the perceived environment of Australian universities (i.e., poor morale and declining commitment) is "likely to produce disproportionately large results" in terms of institutional productivity and profitability. But which aspects of the work environment need to be changed to encourage higher levels of academic motivation and performance? Answering this work design question is the focus of this study.

This paper reports the work environment perceptions and work attitudes of full-time academics (n=1,041) within eight Australian universities. Three research questions are addressed:

1. Which work environment characteristics do academics rate positively and negatively across the survey sample?
2. Which demographic characteristics account for significant differences in academics' work environment responses?
3. What is the level of academic motivation across the survey sample?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Following previous psychological climate (James & Sells, 1981; Jones & James, 1979; Lysons & Ryder, 1989) and perceived academic work environment studies (Mahony, 1996; Sarros, Gmelch, & Tanewski, 1997, 1998; Taylor et al., 1998; Winter, Taylor, & Sarros, 2000; Wolverson, Gmelch, Wolverson, & Sarros, 1999), this study focused on the perceived work environment to understand and explain an individual academic's motivation and work performance. Academics were asked to report on their: (1) personal and professional characteristics, (2) work environment, and (3) work attitudes. The study's Conceptual Model is shown in Figure 1.

Personal and Professional Characteristics

Two personal (age, gender) and nine professional (qualifications, position, hours, contract, uniservice, hedservice, function, discipline area, unitype) characteristics variables were designated antecedent variables for cross-sample analysis purposes. Previous academic-related research has included these demographic variables to highlight differences in work stress, morale, and motivation between academic staff (Blix, Cruise, Mitchell, & Blix, 1994; Copur, 1990; Currie, 1996; Sarros, Gmelch & Tanewski, 1998).

Work Environment

The immediate work environment was conceptualised in terms of: (1) role stress characteristics (role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload), (2) job characteristics (job challenge, autonomy, task identity, feedback), (3) supervisory characteristics (considerate supervision), and (4) university structural characteristics (centralisation, formalisation) that directly and indirectly shape academics' experiences, attitudes, and behaviour on a daily basis.

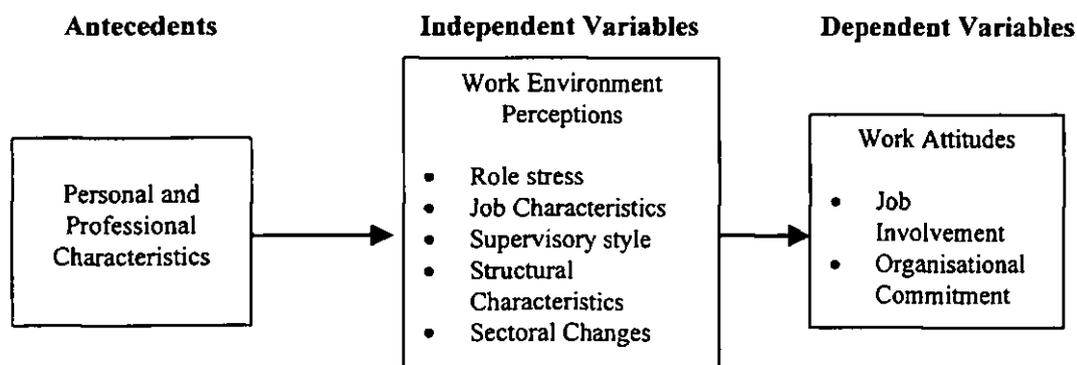


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Previous research has established these work environment conditions as psychologically meaningful and significant for most individuals across a range of occupational groups and organisations (Brown, 1996; Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Hellriegel & Slocum, 1974; James & Sells, 1981; Jones & James, 1979; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Spector, 1986) including Australian academics (Lysons & Ryder, 1989; Sarros et al., 1997, 1998; Winter et al., 2000; Wolverson et al., 1999). To explore academics' attitudes towards corporate reforms in higher education, academics were asked for their responses to large-scale sectoral changes such as the rise of managerialism in academe (Winter et al., 2000) and increased academic entrepreneurialism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Work Attitudes

Academics' evaluations of the work environment were measured by two broad work attitudes: job involvement (Kanungo, 1982) and organisational commitment (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). Job involvement and organisational commitment are well-established indicators of an individual's motivation at work (Brown, 1996; Mayer & Schoorman, 1992). An academic involved in her/his job "implies a positive and relatively complete state of engagement of core aspects of the self in the job" (Brown, 1996, p.235). An academic expressing commitment to the university indicates a willingness to remain a member of that institution and to exert considerable effort on its behalf (Mowday et al., 1979, p.226). Studies have shown that job involvement and organisational commitment are distinct constructs (Brooke, Russell, & Price, 1988; Mathieu & Farr, 1991).

METHOD

A correlational field study research design was selected to examine the relationships between antecedent (demographic), independent (work environment) and dependent (work attitude) variables at a single point in time (Creswell, 1994). Surveys were administered to stratified samples of academics in eight university work environments utilising a two-stage proportional sampling design. In stage one, 36 publicly funded universities were designated primary sampling units and divided into four categories: (1) sandstone research institutions; (2) regional universities; (3) generalist metropolitan universities; and (4) universities of technology. Two universities were then randomly selected from each of the four university groups to ensure adequate numbers for cross-sector analysis purposes. In stage two, 6,932 full-time staff in the eight selected institutions were designated secondary sampling units and stratified by position (five levels) and discipline area (five areas) using staff listings provided in the 1998 issues of each institution's Calendar.

Data Collection and Analysis

A self-administered mail survey, the Academic Work Environment Survey (AWES), was designed, pre-tested (18 academic participants at various levels across four disciplines), piloted (e-mail and hard copy in

two universities) and administered to a stratified random sample of 2,630 academics in eight universities between August and September 1998. A total of 1,041 usable surveys were returned (effective response rate of 39.6%). Respondents answered on five-point Likert scales (1= never true to 5 = always true; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; 1 = very small impact to 5 = very large impact).

For the purpose of this paper, data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) to describe academics' work environment perceptions and work attitudes. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA), t-tests and Scheffé post-hoc tests indicated significant differences in overall mean scores at specified levels of significance.

Sample

Most of the 1,041 respondents were male (67%), aged between 40 and 59 years of age (70%), and married (75%). In terms of professional characteristics, the majority of respondents were full-time (92%), tenured/ongoing (76%), held a doctorate (65%) and were engaged primarily in teaching and research (75%). No statistical differences were found between the final sample and target population in terms of academic positions ($\chi^2 = 1.45$, $df = 4$, $p > .05$) or discipline areas ($\chi^2 = 0.66$, $df = 4$, $p > .05$).

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for all work environment and work attitude variables. Alpha coefficients ranged from .58 (task identity) to .92 (consideration). Twelve of the fourteen scales exceeded or approximated Nunnally's (1978) .70 criterion for adequate reliability. Construct validity was supported by scale correlation coefficients showing similar signs and degrees of magnitude as reported in the survey pilot ($n=189$) conducted eleven months earlier (Winter et al., 1998).

Positive (Motivating) Work Environment Characteristics

Role Ambiguity

Academics overall reported low role ambiguity ($M=2.10$, $SD=1.39$), a motivating work environment characteristic for various occupational groups since it indicates the organisation has in place structural mechanisms to guide employee behaviour (Glisson & Durick, 1988; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). Academics reported strong role clarity in terms of "knowing what (their) responsibilities are, being "certain about how much authority (they) have in (their) jobs" and "knowing exactly what is expected of (them)". A significant negative correlation between role ambiguity and organisational commitment ($r = -.36$, $p < .01$) supported the hypothesis the less role ambiguity academics perceive, the higher their organisational commitment.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha Reliabilities, Means^a and Standard Deviations for Work Environment and Work Attitude Variables^b

Variable	Items	α	Mean	SD
Role Characteristics				
Role Ambiguity	5	.83	2.10	1.39
Role Conflict	3	.61	3.13	1.52
Role Overload	3	.71	3.81	1.48
Job Characteristics				
Autonomy	5	.73	4.37	1.10
Task Identity	2	.58	4.38	.99
Feedback	3	.70	2.52	1.59
Job Challenge	4	.83	4.33	1.10
Supervisory Characteristics				
Consideration	14	.92	3.30	1.56
Structural Characteristics				
Hierarchy of Authority	5	.76	3.02	1.57
Participation in decision making	5	.84	2.88	1.69
Formalisation	3	.69	3.74	1.41
Sectoral Characteristics				
Higher Education Changes	12	.85	3.90	1.31
Work Attitudes				
Job Involvement	10	.87	3.31	1.51
Organisational Commitment	7	.86	3.03	1.55

^a Mean responses grouped as 1 = strongly negative (mean under 2.50); 2 = negative (2.50 to 2.90); 3 = neutral (2.91 to 3.09); 4 = positive (3.10 to 3.50); 5 = strongly positive (mean over 3.50)

^b N = 1,041

Analyses of variance indicated differences in role ambiguity mean scores by position ($\chi^2[4,1012]=17.46$, $p<.01$) and university type ($\chi^2[3,1039]=13.04$, $p<.05$). Lecturers (M=2.30) reported significantly more role ambiguity compared to professors (M=1.81, $p<.05$). Academics in universities of technology (M=2.45, $n=230$) expressed higher levels of role ambiguity compared to academics in other university types (M=1.98 to 2.04, $n=809$, $p<.05$).

Job Characteristics

Respondents strongly agreed that task identity (M=4.38, SD=0.99), job challenge (M=4.33, SD=1.10), and autonomy (M=4.25, SD=1.10) job characteristics truly reflected their current work environments. Similar standard deviations across the three measures suggest a high level of agreement across the sample. Academics reported they often saw "projects or jobs through to completion" (task identity), "felt tasks at work were challenging" (job challenge) and that jobs provided "the opportunity for independent thought and action" (autonomy). Significant positive correlations between these job characteristics and organisational commitment ($r=.24$, $.39$, $.25$, $p<.01$) supported the hypothesis the more task identity, job challenge and autonomy academics perceive, the greater their organisational commitment.

Significant chi-square values indicated differences in job challenge scores by academic position ($\chi^2[4,1012]=28.18$, $p<.001$), discipline ($\chi^2[4,1038]=24.08$, $p<.001$) and university type ($\chi^2[3,1039]=17.05$, $p<.01$). Lecturers reported significantly lower levels of job challenge (M=4.12) compared to academics in all other positions (M=4.38 to 4.58, $p<.05$). Academics from the health sciences reported higher levels of

job challenge ($M=4.57$) compared to academics from engineering ($M=4.15$) and business discipline areas ($M=4.10$, $p<.05$). Academics in universities of technology ($M=2.27$, $n=230$) reported lower levels of job challenge compared to academics in sandstone ($M=4.42$, $n=317$) and metropolitan ($M=4.49$, $n=269$) universities ($p<.05$).

Supervisory Consideration

Respondents rated their immediate supervisor as exhibiting a considerate and supportive leadership style ($M=3.30$, $SD=1.56$). Supervisory consideration is a positive work environment characteristic since considerate supervisors are known to help others solve work-related problems, facilitate skill development and encourage creative achievements (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). A significant positive correlation between supervisory consideration and organisational commitment ($r=.40$, $p<.01$) supported the hypothesis the more supervisory consideration academics perceive, the greater their organisational commitment.

A significant chi-square value of 21.18 indicated differences in consideration mean scores by university type ($\chi^2[3,1031]=21.18$, $p<.001$). Academics employed in universities of technology indicated significantly lower levels of supervisory consideration ($M=2.89$) compared to academics in sandstone ($M=3.46$), metropolitan ($M=3.46$), and regional ($M=3.33$) types of institution ($p<.05$).

Negative (Demotivating) Work Environment Characteristics

Role Overload

Most respondents rated role overload, a stress characteristic indicated by excessive work/time pressures, positively ($M=3.81$, $SD=1.48$). Academics rated "too much work for one person to do" and "I am (not) given enough time to do what is expected of me in my job" as their most stressful overload characteristics. Role stress is a deleterious environmental condition since it moderates an employee's willingness to exert effort on behalf of their organisation (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). A significant negative correlation between role overload and organisational commitment ($r= -.21$, $p<.01$) provided support for this proposition.

Analyses of variance indicated significant differences in role overload scores by position ($\chi^2[4,1012]=11.46$, $p<.05$), contract status ($z[926]=3.14$, $p<.001$) and function ($\chi^2[3,1034]=15.76$, $p<.01$). Academics in associate lecturer positions ($M=3.40$) reported significantly lower levels of role overload compared to academics in senior lecturer positions ($M=4.00$, $p<.05$). Tenured academics ($M=3.90$) indicated more role overload compared to staff employed on fixed-term contracts ($M=3.50$, $p<.001$). Academics in teaching only work roles ($M=3.30$) reported significantly lower levels of role overload compared to academics in teaching and research roles ($M=3.90$, $p<.05$).

Feedback

Academics overall reported low levels of feedback on their job performance ($M=2.52$, $SD=1.59$), a demotivating characteristic according to job/work design studies (Fried & Ferris, 1987). Respondents indicated they did not "receive feedback from their supervisors on how well they were doing their jobs" and did not receive "information about how their job performance would be evaluated". A significant positive correlation between feedback and organisational commitment ($r=.34$, $p<.01$) supported the hypothesis the less feedback academics perceive, the lower their organisational commitment. Differences in feedback were reported by university type ($\chi^2[3,1032]=9.66$, $p<.001$). Academics in universities of technology reported lower levels of feedback ($M=2.27$, $n=230$) compared to academics in research ($M=2.71$, $n=317$) and metropolitan ($M=2.80$, $n=269$) universities ($p<.05$).

Participation

Academics also reported low participation in university decision making ($M=2.88$, $SD=1.69$), a condition associated with low levels of employee commitment and work performance (Spector, 1986). Low participation was reported in terms of participating in decisions on "new university policies" ($M=2.20$, $SD=1.58$) and decisions that "influence departmental policy" ($M=2.35$, $SD=1.67$). The relationship between participation and job involvement ($r=.18$, $p<.05$) and participation and organisational commitment ($r=.29$, $p<.01$) was positive and statistically significant supporting the hypothesis the less participation academics perceive, the lower their job involvement and organisational commitment.

Differences in participation mean scores by gender ($z[1013]=3.23$, $p<.01$), position ($\chi^2[4,1011]=310.36$, $p<.0001$), contract status ($z[925]=6.73$, $p<.0001$) and function ($\chi^2[3,1033]=23.99$, $p<.001$) at specified levels of significance were recorded. Female academics ($M=2.12$, $n=333$) reported significantly lower levels of participation compared to their male ($M=2.44$, $n=681$) counterparts. Professors ($M=4.18$) reported significantly higher levels of participation compared to all other academic positions (1.52 to 3.45, $p<.05$). Similarly, associate professors reported significantly higher levels of participation ($M=3.45$) compared to academics at lower level positions ($M=1.52$ to 2.24) and significantly lower levels of participation compared to professors ($M=4.18$, $p<.05$). Academics employed on fixed-term contracts ($M=1.72$, $n=220$) reported significantly less participation compared to tenured staff ($M=2.54$, $n=706$, $p<.05$). Academics in teaching only work roles ($M=1.74$, $n=99$) reported significantly lower levels of participation compared to academics in teaching and research ($M=2.34$, $n=780$) and administration/other roles ($M=2.83$, $n=138$, $p<.05$).

Sectoral Changes

Academics overall expressed strong positive opinions to large-scale system changes to the Australian higher education sector ($M=3.90$, $SD=1.31$). Respondents indicated strong positive responses to "business-related 'managerial' practices replacing collegiality in the academic community" ($M=4.09$, $SD=1.39$), increased emphasis on "academic accountability and institutional efficiency" ($M=4.04$, $SD=1.35$) and "academic entrepreneurialism and fee-raising activities" ($M=4.04$, $SD=1.38$). The relationship between sectoral changes and organisational commitment was negative and significant ($r=-.16$, $p<.05$) supporting the hypothesis corporate management practices lowers academic commitment.

Indeterminate Work Environment Characteristics

Formalisation

Respondents rated formalisation, the extent to which the university relies upon rules, procedures, and policies to coordinate academic work activities, strongly positive ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.41$). However, weak and non-significant correlations between formalisation and work attitudes provided no support for the motivational impact of this structural variable.

Work Attitudes

Table 1 indicates academics reported positive job involvement ($M=3.31$, $SD=1.51$, $n=1,039$) and neutral organisational commitment ($M=3.03$, $SD=1.55$, $n=1,039$). Tables 2 and 3 present the means and standard deviations of the ten job involvement and seven organisational commitment items respectively.

Job Involvement

Academics reported strong levels of engagement with their jobs. Of the ten job involvement measures (see Table 2), five were positive (three strongly positive), two were negative and three were neutral responses. Respondents strongly agreed they were "very much involved personally" in their jobs (JI4), liked "to be

absorbed in (their) jobs most of the time” (JI10) and did not “feel detached from (their) jobs” (JI8). Academics expressed limits to their job involvement reporting negative opinions to the statements “I live, eat and breathe my job” (JI5) and “most of my interests are centered around my job” (JI6).

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Job Involvement Items

Job Involvement Items	Mean^a	SD	Valid N
I am very much involved personally in my job. (JI4)	4.62	1.03	1038
I like to be absorbed in my job most of the time. (JI10)	3.63	1.58	1036
I have very strong ties with my present job which would be very difficult to break. (JI9)	3.39	1.68	1032
I consider my job to be very central to my existence. (JI7)	3.10	1.76	1036
Most of my personal life goals are job-oriented. (JI2)	3.01	1.75	1033
To me, my job is only a small part of who I am. ^b (JI3)	2.93	1.79	1027
The most important things that happen to me involve my present job. (JI1)	2.92	1.66	1031
Most of my interests are centered around my job. (JI6)	2.79	1.73	1031
I live, eat and breathe my job. (JI5)	2.26	1.66	1034
Usually I feel detached from my job. ^b (JI8)	1.65	1.24	1029

Note: JI = Job Involvement

^a Strongly negative (Mean under 2.50), Negative (Mean 2.50 to 2.90), Neutral (Mean 2.91 to 3.09), Positive (Mean 3.10 to 3.50), Strongly positive (Mean over 3.50).

^b Reverse-scored item.

Organisational Commitment

Table 3 indicates respondents expressed strongly positive responses to three commitment items (OC2, OC4, OC7) and negative responses to four commitment items (OC1, OC3, OC5, OC6). Strong commitment was expressed in terms of “really caring about the fate of this university” (OC2), “being willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected to help this university be successful” (OC7) and being “proud to tell others that I am part of this university” (OC4). Positive responses represented core dimensions of the affective commitment measure (Mowday et al., 1979). Academics responded negatively to the statements the university “inspires the very best in the way of job performance” (OC6), “is the best of all possible universities for which to work” (OC5) and expresses similar values to my own (OC3).

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations of Organisational Commitment Items

Organisational Commitment Items	Mean ^a	SD	Valid N
I really care about the fate of this university. (OC2)	4.22	1.39	1016
I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected to help this university be successful. (OC7)	4.04	1.43	1031
I am proud to tell others that I am part of this university. (OC4)	3.78	1.50	1032
I talk about this university to my friends as a great place to work. (OC1)	2.87	1.66	1036
I find that my values and the university's values are similar. (OC3)	2.55	1.55	1029
For me, this is the best of all possible universities for which to work. (OC5)	2.50	1.50	1032
This university really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance. (OC6)	2.46	1.55	1034

Note: OC = Organisational Commitment

^a Strongly negative (Mean under 2.50), Negative (Mean 2.50 to 2.90), Neutral (Mean 2.91 to 3.09), Positive (Mean 3.10 to 3.50), Strongly positive (Mean over 3.50).

Positive and negative commitment responses suggest an imbalance in the 'psychological contract' between academics and their institutions (Rousseau, 1995; Tipples & Krivokapic-Skoko, 1996). Academics perceive an inadequate effort-rewards exchange (i.e., their effort and university loyalty not matched by institutional recognition and rewards). A perceived imbalance is also indicated by value incongruity (i.e., universities express dissimilar values to academics). A lack of congruency between university work structures and academics' values and job expectations suggest there are insufficient linkages to meet the changing demands of university environments.

CONCLUSION

Positive aspects of academic work include high levels of task identity, job challenge and autonomy. Engaging, meaningful, complex work activities satisfy academics' personal growth needs: a critical psychological state associated with important outcomes such as organisational commitment. Another positive work environment feature is role clarity. Academics report that clear, planned goals exist for their jobs and they are certain as to what their responsibilities are. Considerate supervisory styles also provide academics with the psychological support needed to cope with complex job demands. Hence, role ambiguity is reduced and commitment to the organisation increases (Gaertner & Nollen, 1989; Zeffane, 1994).

However, low levels of job feedback counterbalance these positive job/role characteristics. Academics report they do not receive information about how well (or not) they are doing their jobs. This suggests academics do not know when and how to change their job performance to attain desired work outcomes. The recent introduction of performance appraisals for all levels of academic staff (as part of the move towards enterprise bargaining) may alleviate this problem by providing, at the very least, an annual assessment and feedback of job performance. Academics also reported high levels of role overload similar to other reports of academic role stress in Australian universities (Currie, 1996; Sarros, Gmelch, & Tanewski, 1997, 1998; Taylor et al., 1998; Wolverson et al., 1999). As universities continue to search for efficiencies in a sector characterised by declining public funding and corporate reform, it seems likely work intensification will continue to exert a negative impact on the quality of academic worklife.

Strong levels of job engagement and positive job identification indicate academics are intrinsically motivated by their job tasks. Academics do not express a sense of separation or alienation from their jobs.

Rather, academics feel psychologically disconnected from their institutions. Such cognitive dissonance may reflect the fact that the collegial model of governance has been replaced by a managerial, top-down model of governance in Australian universities (Marginson, 1999). Hence, low levels of academic participation are indicative of the demise of the committee 'pluralist' system of university decision making and the rise of the 'unitarist' executive control system. Here "decisions are controlled not by legislative style meetings but by plans, targets and formulae subject to executive technique" (Marginson, 1999, p.7). As Marginson has observed, these mechanisms "operationalise executive power" making it possible for senior leaders to "play a key role in the daily running of universities" (1999, p.10). In practice, managerialist forms of university work organisation direct academic energies towards organisation goals efficiently.

But managerialism comes at a significant human cost (Solondz, 1995), particularly for those academics with a strong sense of professional identity (Curry, 1996; Nixon, 1996). Managerialist work practices do not engender a favourable, academic motivational climate: one that encourages continuous learning, imagination, experimentation and creativity. Consequently, many academics express frustration and low quality of worklife as universities push to create more competitive and individually accountable workplaces (Winter et al., 2000). So how do institutions create more motivating work environments? As Ramsden (1998, p.362) points out, the key to improving motivation and performance in our universities lies in more effective leadership. To reduce perceived gaps in academic-institutional expectations, leaders at the work-unit level need to continue 'treading the tightrope' of meeting senior managers' goal expectations whilst simultaneously encouraging a work climate that values individual staff's ideas and contributions. This means recognising the imperatives of mass higher education while maximising academic autonomy and rewarding job involvement. Given the important relationship between work performance and perceptions of control (Spector, 1986), leaders should act to ensure that academics feel they are listened to and have some say in the way they do their jobs.

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