

An attitudinal study of academic staff in the humanities and social sciences

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Abstract

This research note compares the attitudes of academic staff in the humanities and social sciences in New Zealand reported across two studies (2003 and 2019). Attitudes were evaluated through the ratings and rankings of 56 statements. It is argued that the changes in attitudes reported across the two surveys are a social reality, not just the product of the research instrument. In this article, I compare changes in the ratings and rankings of six statements relating to issues of professional control and being rated by non-academics, as well an enhanced commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* [Treaty of Waitangi] and greater diversity in hirings.

Keywords Attitudinal study; Academic staff; Professional control; Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Methodology

In 2019, I conducted an attitudinal web-based study of academic staff in the humanities and social sciences in universities in New Zealand. The study was intended to reproduce a mail-based approach undertaken in 2003 (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005). The initial study was in significant part shaped by the introduction of the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) and the challenge it posed to forms of professional control. 'Control' here reflects the extent to which a profession exercises authority over esoteric knowledge/expertise and has forms of autonomy over the reward and sanction of its practitioners. Halsey & Halsey (1992) identified a range of threat to academics as a profession. The sense that PBRF is a threat to academics as professionals permeated much of the early writings on the research evaluation (Cupples & Pawson, 2012; Curtis, 2004, 2007; Roberts, 2006; Smith, 2005).

The population of the initial study was conceptualised as academic staff likely to be evaluated through three PBRF panels: Social Sciences, Humanities and Law, and Education (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005). The rather complex

'eligibility' criteria for the research evaluation (it was compulsory for all staff deemed by the Tertiary Education Commission) was operationalised by identifying academic staff holding the ranks of Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004; 2019). These people were identified by reviewing the published university Calendars for 2004, web-based profiles of academic units mentioned, and the teaching and research profiles of around 5% of academic staff.

Despite the limited response rate in the initial study (that is, 617 questionnaires returned and assessed as meeting the parameters of study from 1779 sent out (response rate = 34.68%), it was decided to again attempt a census in 2019. The rationale was that, while this would again be a non-random approach—precluding any inferential statistics—it would further give voice to academics and enable comparison between the studies. It was strongly anticipated that the web-based study would have a better response rate than the initial mail-based approach, because of assumed greater ease of completion and return.

In both instances, the studies attempted a census, in that questionnaires were sent to all staff identified in the two populations. Developing a sampling frame for the follow up study reproduced the initial study but with several complications. First, in the interim most universities had introduced the academic rank Distinguished Professor. Second, the Education Commission had created two new Panels—Māori Knowledge and Development, and Pacific Research—which crosscut the initial conception of the humanities and social sciences (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004; 2019). Once again, the reading of Calendars was augmented by an investigation of the web-based profiles of academic units and of the teaching and research profiles of around 5% of academic staff.

By coincidence, 1779 academic staff were invited to take part in both studies. The 2003 study produced 617 questionnaires returned and assessed as meeting the parameters of study. The 2019 study produced only 337 questionnaires (response rate=17.81%). Even in 2003, when a mail-based approach was used (participants received letters at their workplaces and responded via self-addressed envelopes), it was hoped that the response rate

would be far better than 34.68%. Indeed, part of the reason for the study being repeated in 2019 was a belief that the ease of completing an online survey (coupled with the ability to automate reminders to participants—there were two) would result in an enhanced, even a much enhanced response rate. Yet the response rate was 17.81%, less than half the original.

The questionnaire remained consistent. There were three blocks of questions: (1) 56 statements to be rated; (2) two text boxes; and (3) biographical material. The first two blocks were unchanged from the initial study, while the third block of questions included a non-binary option in the gender question (#58) and introduced new questions (#66, #68, #69). The questionnaire is found in the Appendix.

Findings

For the 56 statements, a closed question format required a rating of in terms of a scale from 5 to 1: (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree =4, Neutral =3, Disagree =2, Strongly Disagree=1). In 2003 the ratings ranged between 4.49/5.00 to 1.58/5.00; in 2019 between 4.40/5.00 and 1.53/5.00. This rating allowed the statements to ranked as ordinal data, measuring relative agreement with the statements.

Table 1 is structured in terms of the rankings from the 2003 study and from the 2019 study. The ranking of statements is from 1st to 56th. The ‘Change’ column shows movement in ranking between the two studies between 2003 and 2019. For example, statement #20: ‘Academic positions should combine teaching and research’ was rated 4.49 / 5.00 in 2003. This ranked it first. The statement was rated 4.40 / 5.00 in 2019. This ranked it as third. Thus: 1-3 = -2. The statement dropped two places in the comparative rankings.

Table 1: Change in ratings and ranking of statements, 2003-2019

Statement	2003	2019	Change
Academic positions should combine teaching and research	4.49	4.40	1-3= -2
Sabbaticals are important for good teaching and research	4.45	4.59	2-1= 1
Academics deserve better pay and conditions	4.30	3.95	3-8= -5

The funding of conference attendance is crucial for good teaching and research	4.29	4.26	4-4= 0
NZ academics have much to contribute internationally	4.20	4.47	5-2= 3
Administrative work has become an unreasonable burden	4.12	4.20	6-5= 1
Students should be asked to rate the effectiveness of teaching	4.06	3.46	7-22= -15
Teaching is undervalued	4.05	3.87	8-9= -1
Tenure is crucial for good teaching and research	3.79	4.02	9-6= 3
Greater inter-disciplinarity is a positive development	3.78	3.84	10-10= 0
The number of students I teach and supervise has increased	3.77	3.84	11-10= 1
There should be greater inter-disciplinarity	3.73	3.65	12-15= -3
There should be a greater appreciation of multiculturalism	3.67	3.97	13-7= 6
Academics are highly productive	3.60	3.84	14-10= 4
Secondary students are poorly prepared for the tertiary sector	3.59	3.63	15-17= -2
Socio-economic disadvantage is the most important equity issue	3.51	3.63	16-17= -1
Collegiality is in decline	3.49	3.56	17-20= -3
Tertiary education should be free	3.45	3.84	18-10= 8
Academic freedom is under attack	3.40	3.55	19-21= -2
New Zealand delivers world-class tertiary education	3.37	3.76	20-14= 6
The esteem in which NZ research is held internationally has increased	3.28	3.32	21-25= -4
Inter-disciplinarity is an increasing feature of the tertiary sector	3.27	3.63	22-17= 5
Rulings requiring minimum class sizes stifle creativity and innovation in teaching	3.27	3.36	23-24= -1
There should be a greater emphasis on traditional scholarship	3.27	3.20	24-29= -5
I am pessimistic about the future of the tertiary sector	3.23	3.39	25-23= 2
Academics are ably represented by their union	3.19	3.04	26-33=-7
I am optimistic about my career	3.15	3.21	27-27= 0
My research endeavours are well supported	3.08	3.21	28-27=1
My institution fosters my career development	3.06	3.08	29-31=- 2
Attracting international, full fee paying students is vital for future of the tertiary sector	3.04	3.14	30-30= 0
Research is undervalued	3.00	2.82	31-34= -3
The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be given priority	2.93	3.65	32-15= 17

The Performance Based Research Funding initiative is beneficial	2.90	2.47	33-44= -11
It is very difficult to publish NZ research internationally	2.83	2.61	34-42= -8
Student feedback and surveys on effective teaching are just popularity polls	2.76	3.22	35-26= 9
I am optimistic about the future of the tertiary sector	2.72	2.68	36-38= -2
The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be downplayed	2.69	1.99	37-50= -13
I am pessimistic about my career	2.69	2.86	38-34= 4
Now is a good time to be an academic	2.65	2.65	39-40= -1
Equity initiatives come at the expense of quality	2.62	2.24	40-47= -7
There should be minimum class sizes at the postgraduate level	2.58	2.80	41-36= 5
New Zealanders should have preference in gaining academic jobs	2.58	2.64	42-41= 1
The main function of the tertiary sector should be teaching	2.56	2.39	43-45= -2
The main function of the tertiary sector should be research	2.56	2.58	44-43= 1
The funding and other support of teaching and research is improving	2.49	2.25	45-46= -1
The tertiary sector should focus on meeting the demands of the knowledge economy	2.35	2.67	46-39= 7
Women should have preference in gaining academic jobs	2.33	2.79	47-37= 10
Māori should have preference in gaining academic jobs	2.32	3.08	48-31= 17
There should be greater use of contract teaching	2.27	1.89	49-51= -2
There should be a greater focus on wealth generating aspects of research	1.86	1.84	50-53= -3
Most academics should focus exclusively on teaching	1.86	1.75	51-54= -3
Most academics should focus exclusively on research	1.85	2.01	52-49= 3
Research and teaching in NZ is usually just reinventing the wheel	1.84	2.08	53-48= 5
The tertiary sector should be run like a business	1.70	1.63	54-55= -1
Academics are an overpaid profession	1.60	1.87	55-52= 3
NZ academics have little to contribute internationally	1.58	1.53	56-56= 0

Changes in rankings of statements are, in overall terms, low-to-middling (an imprecise term, but used in discussion of the strength of correlation, for example). This estimation is made using a version of the measure of variance: hypothetically, the biggest possible change in a

statement's ranking from 2003 to 2019 is both a rise from being ranked fifty-sixth to ranked first or a drop from being ranked first to ranked fifty-sixth. Both produce a change of 55. Similarly, the next biggest possible change in ranking from 2003 to 2019 is a rise from being ranked fifty-fifth to ranked second or a drop from ranked second to ranked fifty-fifth. Both produce a change of 53. If we repeat this approach for all 56 statements (and only record change, not plus or minus as signs of directionality) then the biggest overall change is 1568. This can be thought of the possible variance. The observed variance between the two studies was 229 (see Table 1). Imprecisely, low-to-middling variance. It is argued that low levels of variance between studies constitutes stability, at least at the level of the research instrument.

Most change in rankings is located in the middle range (i.e., the product of ratings: Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2). It seems reasonable that this middle range is constituted by the statements that academics care least about. In contrast, for the statements that academics arguably care most about (i.e., the product of ratings Strongly Agree = 5, Strongly Disagree = 1) there is noticeably less change in rankings. It is argued that most of the instability (variance in rankings) is located in the middle range, in the realm of statements that academics care least about. For example, only one statement falls out of the initial top ten; only one statement rises upwards from the initial bottom eight.

Here the claim is that such relatively stability at the top and bottom of the range reflect the ongoing, temporal, business-as-usual concerns of academics, especially if further attention is paid the ratings and rankings of the largest movers (see Table 2). To extend this point, a second claim is that the largest movers should be understood as suggestive of responses to new developments in the university sector. There is insufficient space for discussion here but clearly a discussion of the largest movers needs to include some discussion of context. The largest movers are highlighted below.

Table 2: Ratings and ranking of statements – largest movers

Statement	2003	2019	Change
Students should be asked to rate the effectiveness of teaching	4.06	3.46	7-22= -15
The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be given priority	2.93	3.65	32-15= 17
The Performance Based Research Funding initiative is beneficial	2.90	2.47	33-44= -11
The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be downplayed	2.69	1.99	37-50= -13
Women should have preference in gaining academic jobs	2.33	2.79	47-37= 10
Māori should have preference in gaining academic jobs	2.32	3.08	48-31= 17

Table 3 indicates that the distribution of change in ranking indicates how overall change variance between the two studies was centred on relatively few statements.

Table 3: Distribution of change in rankings

17 statements dropped or rose 0-1 in the ranking
17 statements dropped or rose 2-3 in the ranking
8 statements dropped or rose 4-5 in the ranking
5 statements dropped or rose 6-7 in the ranking
3 statements dropped or rose 8-9 in the ranking
6 statements dropped or rose 10 or more in the ranking

Discussion

Professional control: On the Performance-based Research Fund and being rated in general

The initial study (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005) was shaped by the introduction of the PBRF in 2003. It is difficult now to capture the sense of angst about the research evaluation in the academic community in the lead-up and following the submission of Evidence Portfolios in 2003. Given the initial attitudinal study was developed in the context of studying concerns about a loss of professional control (Ashcroft & Smith, 2008), it was somewhat surprising that the rating of the statement 'The Performance Based Research Funding initiative is beneficial' was located near the middle of the rankings in 2003 (33/56).

Subsequently, two themes emerged to account for this lower than anticipated rating. First, the PBRF used mechanisms of evaluation that were

based on forms of peer review (Curtis, 2007; 2008; 2016; Shore, 2015; Shore & Davidson, 2014). This constituted an extension, rather than a disruption, of forms of professional control by a 'new managerialism' (see, for instance, Lerner & Le Heron, 2005). This sense of continuity of control was enhanced by the absence of redundancies in universities that could be directly attributed to the individualised staff ratings which the PBRF evaluation generated. Rather, universities gamed the eligibility criteria in later research evaluations, to the extent that the Tertiary Education Commission changed its reporting criteria (Curtis, 2016). Second, the sampling methods used in both studies undoubtedly obscured the effects of an intensifying core and periphery academic labour market (see below).

However, the drop in the ranking and rating of the statement 'The Performance Based Research Funding initiative is beneficial' in 2019 is suggestive of lingering concerns about a loss of professional control, probably in combination with the highly rated (i.e., business-as-usual) statement 'Administrative work has become an unreasonable burden'. Perhaps, after four cycles of the PBRF and another scheduled in 2024, this issue is not so much a loss of professional control but an expression of perceived diminishing returns. Clearly, this cannot be the entire story. Whereas the evaluation processes of the PBRF might be seen as not antithetical to long-established academic practices (but very burdensome), the significant drop in the ranking of the statement 'Students should be asked to rate the effectiveness of teaching' reflects a disbelief in the capacity of non-academics to evaluate academics.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi and shifting preferences in hiring for academic jobs

The rise in the statement 'The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be given priority' and drop in the statement 'The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be downplayed' in 2019 are pleasing confirmations of internal-reliability. More importantly, they reflect a rise and a drop from the middle range toward the top and bottom rankings.

In this sense they are noteworthy, and potential measures of change in the sector, because they suggest a change in the attitudes of academic staff

towards Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The shift in the statement 'Māori should have preference in gaining academic jobs' is also significant in this regard. The rise in the statement 'Women should have preference in gaining academic jobs' in 2019 suggests an enhanced, possibly broader, commitment to diversity in academic hirings. The extent to which these constitute separate strands of a commitment to redress and diversity is, however, not clear (Walker, 2020).

Earlier it was reasoned that the PBRF is seen as a burden and as offering declining returns rather than as a threat to professional control (which was arguably the case in 2003). However, where being rated (for example, by students) remains a threat to professional control, it is arguably doubly disliked as burden and as a threat. It is useful to keep the concerns around professional control in mind when assessing a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and shifting preferences favouring diversity in hiring for academic jobs. That is, universities have also shifted ground since 2003. It is asserted here (although there is not space to quantify it) that universities have formally increased their commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and diversity, especially in academic hirings. This is well-documented throughout their mission statements, branding and marketing. No progressive or enlightened attributes need be assigned to senior management in this respect, as institutional positionality can be assessed in terms of responses to messaging in the form of state funding. For example, recently funding premiums for the completion of Māori students have increased and there are new Vision Mātauranga initiatives in terms of external research income (Kaiser & Saunders, 2021; Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2019). Putting aside the fact that the boundary between senior academic and senior management is not fixed, and that the views of academic staff might influence university strategy, there is an overlap between institutional positional and lingering concerns for professional control (with a possible caveat, see below). Thus, an increasing commitment to the Treaty and diversity or even 'post-colonialism' (Barber & Naepi, 2020) in the attitudes of staff demonstrates that academic concerns around professional control neatly map institutional efforts at positioning (Bowl, 2018). In terms of the bottom (economic) line, in the New Zealand context such positionality constitutes responses by senior

management to state funding decisions (Curtis, 2016). This is not to say that the attitudes of staff are primarily instrumental, rather that the professional aims of academic staff and the institutions in which they are employed are highly compatible. It could be contended that they are mutually reinforcing.

Conclusion

The 2003 and 2019 attitudinal studies of academic staff outline stability in terms of the top and bottom rated and ranked statements; what might be thought of as the business-as-usual concerns across time. Where change is most obvious, it is contextualised in terms of an alignment between concerns for professional control and institutional positionality. This brings us to the caveat mentioned earlier. The selection methods used in both samples undoubtedly obscured the effects of any intensifying core and periphery academic labour market between 2003 and 2019. This is a result of a focus on the academic ranks—Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor/Distinguished Professor—which will almost entirely be held by permanent staff. As a result, this study could not explore any three-way relationship involving senior management and academic staff who are positioned at the core and at the periphery of the academic labour market. This needs future research given significant contextual shifts where the proportion of academics working at the periphery has grown and it would be interesting to know the extent to which these members of the periphery feel the same as their more privileged colleagues (Stringer, 2018).

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Statements (order randomised in web-based study)

Instruction: Please rate the following statements in terms of a scale from 5 to 1: (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). Closed questions.

	Statement
#1	The main function of the tertiary sector should be research
#2	The funding of conference attendance is crucial for good teaching and research
#3	There should be greater inter-disciplinarity
#4	NZ academics have little to contribute internationally
#5	The Performance Based Research Funding initiative is beneficial
#6	Academics are ably represented by their union
#7	I am optimistic about the future of the tertiary sector
#8	Student feedback and surveys on effective teaching are just popularity polls
#9	I am pessimistic about the future of the tertiary sector
#10	There should be minimum class sizes at the postgraduate level
#11	My institution fosters my career development
#12	Students should be asked to rate the effectiveness of teaching
#13	Most academics should focus exclusively on teaching
#14	Academics are highly productive
#15	Collegiality is in decline
#16	Research and teaching in NZ is usually just reinventing the wheel
#17	New Zealanders should have preference in gaining academic jobs
#18	There should be a greater focus on wealth generating aspects of research
#19	The tertiary sector should focus on meeting the demands of the knowledge economy
#20	Academic positions should combine teaching and research
#21	New Zealand delivers world-class tertiary education
#22	NZ academics have much to contribute internationally
#23	The number of students I teach and supervise has increased
#24	Research is undervalued
#25	Equity initiatives come at the expense of quality
#26	Academics are an overpaid profession
#27	Greater inter-disciplinarity is a positive development
#28	The main function of the tertiary sector should be teaching
#29	The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be downplayed
#30	Secondary students are poorly prepared for the tertiary sector
#31	Academics deserve better pay and conditions
#32	I am pessimistic about my career
#33	Rulings requiring minimum class sizes stifle creativity and innovation in teaching
#34	Socio-economic disadvantage is the most important equity issue
#35	Māori should have preference in gaining academic jobs
#36	The esteem in which NZ research is held internationally has increased
#37	There should be greater use of contract teaching
#38	There should be a greater emphasis on traditional scholarship
#39	Most academics should focus exclusively on research
#40	Administrative work has become an unreasonable burden
#41	There should be a greater appreciation of multiculturalism
#42	The integration of Treaty issues into the curriculum should be given priority
#43	Now is a good time to be an academic
#44	It is very difficult to publish NZ research internationally
#45	The tertiary sector should be run like a business
#46	Tertiary education should be free
#47	Attracting international, full-fee paying students is vital for future of the tert. sector
#48	Sabbaticals are important for good teaching and research

#49	Academic freedom is under attack
#50	Teaching is undervalued
#51	Tenure is crucial for good teaching and research
#52	The funding and other support of teaching and research is improving
#53	My research endeavours are well supported
#54	Inter-disciplinarity is an increasing feature of the tertiary sector
#55	I am optimistic about my career
#56	Women should have preference in gaining academic jobs

Text boxes

Instruction: Open Questions.

#57	What do you consider to be the most worrying developments for the tertiary sector?
#58	What do you consider to be the most encouraging developments for the tertiary sector?

Biographical material

Instruction: Please provide some biographical material. Closed questions, various formats.

#59	What is your age?
#58	To which gender identity do you most identify?
#60	To which ethnic identity do you most identify?
#61	Are you employed on a permanent or fixed term contract?
#62	Are you employed on a full-time or part-time contract?
#63	Where did your highest degree or diploma come from?
#64	How many years have you been employed at your current University?
#65	How many years have you been employed as an academic?
#66	To which academic status do you most identify?
#67	What is your academic position?
#68	To which academic subject area do you feel you are most closely aligned?
#69	To which subject area did you submit your PBRF evidence portfolio?