

IDEALISM CONFRONTS REALISM: UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS COPING WITH CHANGE



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Abstract

Pressure to improve competitiveness and increase economic efficiencies across higher education in Australia has impacted on academics' workplace roles, health, well-being and level of stress. This study examines the impact of change on academics at an Australian university, including strategies used to cope with the increasing diversity of workplace roles. The study explores the stress and coping relationship, the measurement of coping, and the selection and effectiveness of coping strategies. This research study is located within an interpretivist theoretical framework that draws upon the traditions of symbolic interactionism to bring meaning to the data. The study utilises predominantly qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with sixty-nine academics, for the collection of data, analysis and discussion of results. Academics utilise a multiplicity of responses to cope with ongoing change in the workplace. While numerous coping strategies were used, the study highlights the importance of the nature of the relationship between those actions, personal goals, and the extent to which academics were willing to modify their personal goals and strategies in order to better cope with workplace demands. It was found that personal beliefs and values are important contributing factors in academics' level of acceptance and approach to coping with change. Due to the complexity of change, coping should be studied within the context in which it occurs and preferably over a significant period of time. Qualitative methodologies ably capture the dynamic nature of the coping process.

Keywords: Organisational change, coping, academics, higher education

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1. Introduction

Since the late 80s and early 90s, higher education the world over has undergone substantial change. Almost twenty years on, many universities are still facing challenges related to economic pressures, changing government priorities, and numerous reviews (Kolsaker, 2008; Murphy, 2011). In Australia, the outcomes of the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) have been keenly felt by many institutions trying to contribute to the need to ensure Australia remains internationally competitive to support national economic and social growth, and in maintaining ‘a high standard of living, underpinned by a robust democracy and a civil and just society.’ The growth in global markets and subsequent need for skills and innovation, the limited supply of people with undergraduate qualifications and therefore inability to keep up with demand, and evidence of the declining quality of the higher education experience are major factors underpinning the need for reforms across the post-compulsory education and training sector (Bradley, 2008).

Ongoing pressure to increase economic efficiency has been evidenced in fundamental transformations, extensive restructuring and cultural reorientation (Onsman, 2011; Trowler, 1998) and the changing role of universities has significantly impacted on workplace practices and level of work satisfaction of academics. Larger class sizes, new technologies, the increasing diversity of the student population, and burgeoning administrative requirements have left many academics reeling from the ongoing changes. This is counter to the need of individuals to have the ability to exercise some control over their workplace environment in order to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and achievement (Thompson, 2002).

Ineffective organisational change can be costly, not only in terms of financial cost but also as a result of the psychological impact on individuals (Best et al. 2005; Wood et al. 1998). This can have a deleterious effect on an individual’s health and well-being, often leading to increased pressure, anxiety and stress. Sutherland and Cooper (2000) identified longer working hours, time pressure and role overload as primary work related stressors and negatively impacting on organisational effectiveness as a result of increased in jury, turnover, job performance, and absenteeism. Unfortunately, most workplace intervention strategies focus on the improvement of individuals to adapt to continuing external demands, with the implicit assumption being that organisations are incapable or unwilling to modify the change process. From this perspective, the responsibility resides solely with the individual to either adapt to, or resist, ongoing workplace stressors.

In increasingly competitive and turbulent times for universities, academics are challenged to adopt new strategies in response to ongoing change in the workplace and this, at times, requires a reassessment of personal and professional goals and considerable energy

and stamina, especially when workplace changes are out of alignment with personal beliefs and aspirations (Kieffer, Schinka, & Curtis, 2004). A deeper understanding of the management and impact of organisational change within institutes of higher education should contribute to reducing some of the organisational and psychological costs.

2. Relationship Between Stress and Coping

Coping is generally considered to be a dynamic, multifaceted construct comprising thoughts, feeling and actions used to deal with problems encountered in everyday life; it is often used interchangeably with such terms as ‘adaptation, mastery, defence or realistic problem-solving’ (Frydenberg, 1997, p. 28). This reflects the emphasis towards positive strengths-based models that focus on health and wellbeing, prevention and productivity rather than on deficits or disability models (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). Although considerable differences exist regarding the meaning of coping, most accept that the stress - coping process is highly individualistic. Both the amount of stress experienced and the manner in which coping is approached are important, while low perceived control, lack of predictability, and lengthy exposure to stress are more likely to result in an adverse stress response (Carpenter, 1992; Tytherleigh et al., 2007).

To some, stress defies objective definition and should be regarded as an interactive process between the individual and the environment and gives consideration to an individual’s characteristics, situational variables, and the appraisal of the situation (Lazarus, 1966). Both the individual’s perception of the demands of the environment and their perceived capability to respond to the demand determine the effect of the stressor. Importantly, the identification of concerns or life experiences as stressors is dependent on individual interpretation and experience; ‘potential stresses only become real stresses when they are perceived as threatening’ (Frydenberg, 1997, p. 17). As well, the ability to retain a positive state of mind has been found to be important in negating stress and facilitating coping (Seligman, 1992; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Much remains to be learnt regarding the specific use of individual coping strategies, the manner in which strategies are selected and implemented, and the interplay between stress and coping.

3. Qualitative Approaches to Research on Coping

Contexts and problem situations are complex and often dynamic and multidimensional in nature and, at times, the coping solutions adopted only create more problems. In this regard, qualitative approaches to research in this area are beneficial in that they provide deeper insights about the way in which individuals generate additional

problems when coping and are more effective than quantitative measures in their ability to explain the relationship between coping strategies and situational and personal outcomes.

Considerable variation exists in regards the number, nature and combinations of strategies used and may include: situational requirements, time constraints, personal skills, judgments and choices, and access to external resources.

When statements about coping are considered in purely semantic terms and in isolation from other contextual data, the usual problem-focused and emotion-focused categories emerge (Oakland & Ostell, 1996). Quantitative approaches to the measurement of coping tend to capture 'static snapshots' of what should be regarded as a dynamic process between the individual and the situation and as such, do not adequately assess coping as a transactional process. Coping is often protracted and unpredictable, particularly when other people are involved, requiring the coper' to not only be aware of their goals but also to be cognisant of the goals and previous actions of other people when determining a course of action. This may necessitate the modification of initial strategies. Individuals may also need to develop specific knowledge or skills in order to cope with specific work-related problems. Naturally, the time required to acquire these competencies will vary considerably between individuals and will probably require the use of other strategies, such as emotion-focused ones, until developed.

A further limitation of coping studies utilising quantitative measures, such as coping inventories, is that they provide information regarding the frequency with which a specific coping strategy is used, whereas research utilising qualitative data has demonstrated that coping efficacy, rather than type or frequency of a strategy, is crucial and an important factor regarding outcomes. The relationship between the adoption of specific coping strategies and their success is complex.

4. Research Design and Methodology

This research study is located within an interpretivist theoretical framework that draws upon the traditions of symbolic interactionism to bring meaning to the data. The study utilises predominantly qualitative research methods for the collection of data, analysis and discussion of results. In -depth interviews were conducted with sixty-nine academics from across the Faculties of Education, Arts and Sciences and Health Sciences at an Australian university during a time of considerable restructuring and change, This paper reports on one element of the overall longitudinal study of organisation change.

This research study is guided by and seeks answers to the following questions:

How and to what extent does significant organisational change impact on academics' personal and professional lives?

What strategies do academics use to adapt and cope with change within the workplace?

5. Results and Discussion

An analysis of the personal impact of organisational change on academics was conducted to ascertain if academics occupying different levels within the organisational hierarchy utilise similar or dissimilar strategies when responding to change. The results indicate that specific strategies are not unique to any particular organisational level and that all academics utilise, to a greater or lesser extent, a variety of strategies to assist them.

The specific strategies identified from the data have been classified into three broad groupings: Proactive, Reactive and Counter-active. These groupings depict the extent to which a specific strategy is useful in assisting or hindering the individual to respond to the workplace changes.

5.1. Proactive strategies

Proactive strategies are defined as those that allow academics to take an active role in workplace change, such as formulating policy that brought about change, or to contribute through the provision of professional support and assistance to others, both staff and students. From this perspective, responding to change is a constructive process in which individuals attempt to shape their workplace environment so that they are more able to 'bring them under control'. Proactive strategies identified in this study include: Reinventing, Networking, Positioning, Shaping, and Mentoring. Accepting that academics do actively engage in the construction of their environment, organisational change should ideally be possible across all levels of the organisation, although within hierarchically arranged structures this is not always the reality. It might be expected that those individuals situated at the higher levels of the organisation, due to their position and formal power, would have more opportunity to use Proactive strategies. Through the use of Proactive strategies, individuals are more able to become part of, rather than merely responsive to, the change process.

5.2. Reactive strategies

Reactive strategies are identified as those utilised by individuals to manage, rather than construct, the changes within the changing workplace environment. Engagement in any

number of these strategies should result in productive outcomes for the individual and the organisation, although similar considerations as discussed above still apply here and the effectiveness of these strategies for individuals remains dependent on many factors, including gaining recognition for endeavouring to change behaviour and now participate in more organisationally valued activities, and possibly being the beneficiary of more formal rewards. It was found that a variety of strategies was adopted by academics to assist them manage the increased workload, the longer hours, the burgeoning paperwork, and the expectations to engage in professional writing and research. Reactive strategies include Refining, Extending, Rationing, Leaning, Reconstructing, Prioritising, and Distracting. Through the use of realistic Reactive strategies, academics may be better able to maintain or restore a balance between the frustration and anxiety generated by the changes, and a growing acceptance that the changes may be 'worth putting up with'. Some of course, decided they are not.

5.3. Counter-active strategies

Unlike Proactive and Reactive strategies, the use of Counter-active strategies tends to hinder or act against individual or organisational achievement. Counter-active strategies tend to move the individual further away from, rather than towards, the workplace environment. Counter-active strategies include: Regressing, Retreating, Ignoring, Severing.

5.4. Effectiveness of strategies

Both Proactive and Reactive strategies are productive when considered in terms of working towards achieving organisational goals, but will vary in terms of level of effectiveness for individuals. As shown in the qualitative analysis, many factors impinge on the extent to which specific strategies eventually become effective including the perceived length of time required to maintain a particular strategy. For example, while a considerable number of academics were prepared to work harder in the short term, thus being productive in terms of organisational and individual outcomes, many were unsure they had the necessary stamina to continue working at such a pace indefinitely. The pace and work overload also left many experiencing high levels of stress and exhaust. The level of commitment of many academics to the concept of the University increased their resolve to continue when faced with increasing workloads and frustration, while a small number of academics remained motivated from a sense of duty rather than personal commitment to the organisation.

Although the use of Counter-active strategies is viewed as working against individual professional development and the achievement of organisational goals, they may be productive in terms of reducing the individual's level of anxiety; for example, retreating from the workplace, usually to home, as often as possible. This highlights the complexity in determining the value of specific strategies and their possible long-term benefits to the individual.

Although retreating has benefits to the individual in providing some relief from work place stress, and may even be productive in terms of achieving personal goals and measurable outcomes such as conference or journal papers, when measured in terms of organisational health, continued use of this strategy has the potential to be detrimental to the organisation over time. Other strategies, such as 'acting on a decision to leave the organisation' may in fact prove to be quite productive for the individual in the long term if the new position offers greater rewards and satisfaction, but detrimental to the organisation in terms of loss of corporate memory, experience and intelligence. The Regressing strategy involves channelling energy and time into the teaching and care of students while negating the need to engage with the changing university priorities including research. While being supportive of students is important, continuing to focus on this strategy at the exclusion of others may become unproductive in terms of the academic's profile within the changing university environment. It is important to note, however, that an acceptance to change behaviour does not imply a total commitment to the changes and, while academics modified their workplace behaviours, they did so for numerous reasons, including the belief that the changes were transitory.

Engagement in a specific behaviour or activity even if disliked has been shown to eventually lead to an acceptance of that behaviour or, in some cases, even a likeness for it. It is quite possible that as academics engage in Reactive coping strategies they may come to gain satisfaction from this and even start to enjoy participating in them.

Several academics sought relief and distraction from the pressures of the workplace by increasing the amount of physical or leisure activity engaged in throughout the week. Leisure activities or pursuits, such as walking the dog, or attending the local gymnasium or drama group were mentioned. Adoption of this form of strategy is regarded as productive in that it tends not to distract from the daily working routine and should help to reduce tension and anxiety more generally.

5.5. Use of strategies across academics levels

From the results displayed in Table 1, academics at all levels appear to utilise a whole range of strategies as evidenced by the spread amongst the three academic levels: D (Professor/Assoc Prof), C (Senior lecturer) and B (Lecturer). In all, 178 responses describing the various strategies used were provided by the 69 academics, 40 responses from the 17 level D academics, 70 responses from 24 level C academics and 68 responses from the 28 academics at level B.

Table 1. Strategies adopted by academics across organisational levels

| Strategies | Levels | | |
|----------------------------------|--------|----|----|
| | D | C | B |
| Proactive Strategies | | | |
| Reinventing | 6 | 7 | 9 |
| Positioning | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Shaping | 3 | 3 | 1 |
| Mentoring | 2 | 10 | 5 |
| Reactive Strategies | | | |
| Accommodating | 3 | 11 | 6 |
| Enhancing | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Extending | 3 | 3 | 5 |
| Rationing | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Leaning | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Reconstructing | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Distracting | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Counter-active Strategies | | | |
| Regressing | 6 | 6 | 15 |
| Retreating | 1 | 4 | 6 |
| Ignoring | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Severing | 6 | 8 | 5 |

Regarding the results presented in Table 1, several points are worthy of note. Firstly, it is apparent that a significant number of academics across all levels of the organisation are utilising Proactive strategies, especially Reinventing and Mentoring, when responding to the workplace changes. The number of academics actively engaged in Reinventing themselves through modifications to past practices and adoption of new behaviours in keeping with the expectations of management and the changing emphases of the institution, augurs well for the future development of the University. The ability of academics to continue in this manner will depend on the encouragement and support they receive from management, including incentives to build on the process already begun.

Many level C academics assumed a mentoring role to assist less experienced staff to cope with the change. An explanation for this might be found in the fact that many level C academics had been recent beneficiaries of promotion; the rise in status often resulting in improved opportunities to participate in the change process.

Greater levels of control and opportunities to take a constructive role left these academics more positive towards the changes and presumably with more excess energy to divert to the support of others. Level C academics were also more noticeable in their readiness to adopt Accommodating (Reactive) strategies to ensure the effective management of their working environment.

Many academics across all levels showed they had begun to modify their practice through the adoption of various Reactive strategies. This trend could be indicative of a developing interest in the changing emphases within the workplace or to a greater or lesser extent, a growing resignation and acceptance that change 'is here to stay' and therefore, in order to remain with the University, there will need to be some changes to workplace practices and style of operation. The tendency to engage in Reconstructing strategies, such as converting negatives to positives to gain some control of the processes of change, obviously proved to be useful for many academics as shown by its acceptance across all levels within the University.

Amongst the Counter-active strategies, the trend by level B academics to adopt Regressing strategies is disturbingly high, but in keeping with the high levels of disillusionment towards the changes overall. For these academics, the desire to revert to practices more aligned to the service orientation of a teachers' college model still retains its allure and at this stage, still remains more satisfying than engaging in work that is more sympathetic to University workplace expectations. This approach by level B academics, more so than academics at other levels, might be seen as a further reflection of the intensity of the impact of the changes at the lower levels of the organisation. The perceived inadequacies of the rewards offered by management for changing practices resulted in these academics preferring to seek refuge and to obtain continued work satisfaction in familiar workplace practices, such as caring and supporting students. While there were 15 level B academics who described Regressing strategies (Counter-active) there is some balance in the finding that 9 level B academics described Reinventing strategies (Proactive). A serious Counter-active strategy is to sever the working connection with the University. 19 academics described their response in this way. Table 2 provides details of the responses.

Table 2. Breakdown of severing response

| Severing | D | C | B |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Plan retirement | 3 | 3 | 1 |
| Plan to leave for another job | 3 | 5 | 4 |

Within the 169 responses from the 69 academics, some 33 academics were categorised as either planning to move away from the organisation through retirement or seeking other employment, or were engaged in retreating from the workplace. Another relatively small number of academics attempted to cope with the workplace changes by effectively denying they existed or ignoring requests from management.

Obviously with 19 of 69 academics (27%) admitting to their intention to retire or leave for another job, staff turnover could present a serious issue to management in the immediate future. These academics were reasonably evenly spread across the levels. An important observation was that the number of academics retreating from the workplace increases the lower the level within the University (Table 1, only one level D but 6 at B). Academics furthest from the decision-making processes appeared least able or most unwilling to manage the changes; their idealism was confronted by organisational realism.

Within the three main groupings (Proactive, Reactive and Counter-active) it is accepted that academics will, from time to time, vary their strategies in order to manage and cope with the changing pressures impacting on them in the workplace. Movement across the categories is expected, and some academics may resort to the use of Counter-active strategies if engagement in new actions is found to be unproductive in terms of personal satisfaction or more formal rewards.

6. Conclusion

Ongoing change presents a considerable challenge for those vested with the responsibility of managing organisations and ensuring they remain dynamic and profitable while still retaining the commitment and motivation of those individuals working within them. It is therefore imperative that a deep understanding of the processes and impacts related to any organisational change be considered carefully before the commencement of the change process.

High levels of stress within the workplace are known to lead to unhealthy and unproductive environments. While economic and political pressures have tended to dictate the nature and extent of change across the higher education sector in Australia, there remains a compelling need for organisational leaders to remain cognisant of the impact of any change

on those who are most likely to be seriously affected. Of importance, is the development of a deeper understanding of the way in which individuals, and academics in this study, might have been supported to become more actively and positively engaged in the change process.

Coping with any change is a dynamic and complex process not easily reducible to simple measures. Context has been shown to be important and worthy of further research, especially in regards qualitative approaches within specified environments, to assist unravel the complexity of the process.

While some certainty exists that change within the higher education sector will continue, there is a need for vigilance in monitoring the effect of government policies and reforms on institutions of higher education and especially on the work of academics, given the important role universities play in building just and equitable societies formed around the values of trust and social justice.

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