

SOME STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN THE ERA OF THE BOLONGA PROCESS

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Universities across the world are undergoing rapid, and often significant, change to compete in an increasingly global environment. The Bologna process of higher education reforms has had its impact not only across Europe but globally given the pressure on universities to compete and to provide students with transferable qualifications in the quest for borderless education. As part of the process universities have been encouraged to differentiate themselves, particularly in terms of being research focused or teaching focus. As a result, many universities are putting in place strategies to boost their research output. With a view to contributing to the discussions by the International Advisory Board of the Department of Public Administration at Babes-Bolyai University, this paper overviews some of the strategies put in place by Australian Universities in order to improve the research output of their academic staff and provides some university marketing based suggestions for Babes-Bolyai University.

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Introduction

The Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999 by Education Ministers of 29 European countries and modified by two ministerial meetings in Prague in 2001, and Berlin in 2003 with commitment from more than 40 countries (Kwiek 2003). Over 4000 universities are bound by the Declaration (Corbett 2004). The process aimed to create two consistent levels of education (undergraduate and Post graduate) studies which would be applied to all signatory countries enabling student transfer and mobility between universities while at the same time, encouraging life long learning (Tauch 2004). These principles have had an impact throughout the world and Australian universities have also responded to the reforms in an effort to become 'Bologna compatible'.

Along with the structural changes required by the Bologna process, governments internationally are focusing new measures on accountability and performance on universities. Importantly, many of these measures focus on the individual academic and these metrics will increasingly determine not only the general quality ranking of universities in the system but of individual academics too. For instance, in the United Kingdom the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) occurred in 1986 and has been repeated every four to five years since (Guena

and Martin 2006). In 2001 the exercise required every university department in the UK to report on the following:

- an overall staff summary – with information on all academic and support staff, whether or not described as ‘research active’ staff;
- details on research-active staff whose work was to be evaluated;
- publications and other public outputs – for each research-active member of staff, up to four items could be submitted;
- an overview of research students and research studentships;
- details of external research income, including amounts and sources;
- a description of the research environment, its structure, policies and strategies; and
- general observations and additional information (including indicators of excellence) (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2001).

Australian universities are under other pressures for change too. In recent times there has been a focus on research productivity led by the Australian Federal government. The vast number of Australia’s 37 Universities are owned and funded by the federal government through its Department of Employment, Education and Training. Most research funding is provided by government through the calculation of a Composite Research Index (the total research output of the university) and through a range of competitive grant schemes, the most significant being the Australian Research Council (ARC) and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) awarding bodies (Abbott and Doucouglialis 2003). Universities which do not receive research grants stand to lose an important arm of funding and it is likely that in the future, these teaching-only institutions, will increasingly have to fend for themselves through student fees and commercial ventures. The posited shift to universities considered ‘teaching only’ will be a significant change to the Australian higher education system as previously university accreditation was based on being both teaching and research active (Moses 2004). In response, many Australian universities have implemented strategies to boost their research output and gain greater success in grant applications.

This paper emerges from discussions of the International Advisory Committee to the Annual Conference of the Department of Public Administration at Babes-Bolyai University. The paper will overview some of these strategies and then move to a discussion on potential marketing strategies for Babes-Bolyai University, Romania.

Increasing Research Output

It is a common goal of all universities that research output be increased. This is a lofty goal and for many universities with high teaching loads and increasing student numbers, it is a great challenge. Canvassing strategies utilized in Australian universities, this paper provides a range of suggestions for increasing research output through the development of research centres and their charter including research training; encouraging promulgation of Doctoral student research; maximising staff research; using strategic partnerships to enhance collaborative research; increasing staff with Doctoral qualifications; dealing with high student numbers; and devising marketing strategies to advertise research strengths. These will now be considered below.

1. Research Centres

Department Research Centres are often sites which encourage collaborative research and grant writing through the inter-mixing of academic staff from different disciplines. As this does not happen by itself the Research Centre requires terms of reference and a management reporting system to ensure its objectives are met. The Research Centre should have a stable management structure comprising at least a Professorial level academic and an administrative assistant. The program offered by the Research Centre can then be managed through this structure. Some strategies for utilizing a Research Centre as part of a strategy to increase staff research include the following:

Provision of Research Training

Research training should ensure that all research active staff are trained in social research techniques and understand the quality journals in their area. Specialist training in statistical methods and other forms of innovative research design could also be provided by this unit. Other important training initiatives include:

First, research training which brings together both experienced and new researchers is a prominent and collegial way to foster research productivity. One such program is the journal writing workshop. The best model utilizes a skilled facilitator and two expert readers (one a methodology expert) who assist in a joint process of reviewing and coaching up to 12 members of staff to convert their working papers into journal articles. All staff attendees must submit a working paper prior to the workshop. Rather than being a passive information seminar, the journal writing workshop is conducted in four sessions across two weeks where all staff write their journal article.

Second, where a Department has the benefit of a range of experienced and inexperienced staff, a research mentorship scheme provides excellent research training. In general, these schemes involve an established researcher who coaches and assists in writing articles, or conducting a research program, with a junior staff member.

Third, project management training for conducting research programs ensure that staff are able to write better grant applications and also to manage a longer term research project in a timely manner.

Rotate staff through the Research Centre (with relief from teaching)

Rotating academic staff through the Research Centre for periods of one month through to a year, matched with teaching relief can serve to provide time to conduct and writing up research and to apply for grants in a supervised manner.

2. Doctoral Students

Doctoral students can be utilized strategically by university departments to highlight research strengths of the institution or to build up research in a particular area.

Doctoral Student Research

Doctoral students contribute greatly to university research output but often these students do not get the opportunity to publish while they are enrolled. Active mentoring of Doctoral students by their supervisors or by the Head of the Research Centre is one way of ensuring that dissemination of results occurs, usually through conference and journal submissions.

Strategically important areas

Doctoral students should contribute to strategically important research. They should be selected on the basis of their topic's synergy with existing areas of research or should be encouraged to take on a research project which complements work done by the university.

3. Staff Research

The challenge for academic staff who have both teaching and research responsibilities is to maintain high quality research outputs while balancing often heavy teaching loads.

Staff research incentive schemes

A staff research incentive scheme provides financial rewards for journal articles, book chapters and conference papers. Funds are placed into individual staff research accounts and can be accessed only by the researcher for an approved purpose. The money from the scheme could be used to 'buy out' teaching, hire a research assistant, pay for professional memberships or journal subscriptions, or fund conference attendances. At one Australian university, the incentive scheme differentiates between journal and conference publications. It operates to privilege refereed journal publications and

book chapters providing up to \$3000 for each publication to the author (pro-rata for joint authors). Refereed conference proceedings are paid at \$1000 per article. In this way, staff behaviours in this university, have been shaped away from conference to journal submissions. Further, apart from encouraging greater research output the scheme has developed researchers' track records which assists in grant success.

Grant applications are also rewarded (regardless of whether the grant is later won). A grant application to an external source attracts a reward of \$1600 and successful grants are awarded up to \$5000 on a sliding scale from \$1000 based on the awarded amount. Again, in the five years since the introduction of the scheme, grant applications (and success) have improved considerably.

Study Leave

One Victorian university has restructured its academic study leave provisions to include both short and long term placements. Short term placements can be used to engage with international partners undertaking strategically important research

4. External Engagement

Babes-Bolyai University, like many universities has an International Advisory Committee comprised of notable academics from a range of countries. This provides an excellent opportunity to increase research productivity through external engagement.

Comparative Studies

Comparative studies represent a source of sought after research for international journals. In collaboration with members of the international advisory committee these projects can include the conduct of comparative surveys which are then jointly written up for publication.

Visiting Professors

Currently, Babes-Bolyai University utilizes visiting professors for teaching. Given that many of these academics are researchers of some note, it would be strategically important to request that all visiting teaching professors have a research project with members of Babes-Bolyai staff. When the professor arrives to deliver the teaching some time can then also be devoted to assisting in the research process and in any writing of journal submissions.

5. Leveraging research impact

Romania is a small country and its research may not be viewed as significant in an international context. This is the same for Australia so research partnerships will enhance both partners chance of getting publication outcomes.

Research Teams

Research teams targeting a specific conference to present their findings have the potential to make a significant impact on the research area. First, comparative projects should have a research team from both nations comprising of academics who each have a particular focus in the research area. The strategy is for the team to each create a paper from the joint project and submit to a single stream in a key conference to disseminate the results of the project.

Each member should have ownership of a distinct area of the project. The team as a whole will then present as a single track stream in the conference. This should be done with careful planning:

- a. read each other's papers for quality and to ensure that papers stay within the research theme
- b. negotiate with the conference organizers to have all the papers appear in a dedicated stream. That way, all papers will be scheduled together;
- c. have an agreed code for the presentation of papers – similar style of overheads, upbeat and professional presentation etc;
- d. negotiate with a relevant journal to publish the entire stream

Significant Partnerships

Babes-Bolyai has a prominent international advisory committee comprised of members of prestigious universities from across the world. This strategic alliance places Babes-Bolyai at a competitive advantage in terms of attracting partner universities or research students. This strength should be advertised as part of the internationalization of research and teaching. This can also be used to promote activities to attract students from across the border. In particular, the following aspects of the research output of Babes-Bolyai should be emphasised:

- a. comparative research;
- b. International English language publications and conferences;
- c. Prestigious top-500 partners
- d. High number of PhD staff and partners involved in teaching and research

6. Increase the number of staff with PhDs

A concern from many universities is that research output cannot grow until a sufficient number of staff hold PhDs. Certainly in Australia, it is not possible to apply for the major government grant programs if you do not hold a PhD. Therefore alongside of the strategies to improve research output, is this strategy to increase the number of staff with Doctoral qualifications. While many universities will find the strategies below to be cost prohibitive, they nevertheless will have a benefit at the end.

Staff Doctoral Programs

Many Australian Universities have generous schemes for staff undertaking Doctoral studies including providing them with a lower teaching load. If there is little local capacity for enrolling staff into Doctoral programs, they should be encouraged to enroll in PhD programs at partner universities. This should be negotiated with the partner institution so that staff obtain benefits such as: fee discounts, availability of teaching at the partner institution while they are stationed there; or the ability to take some of the study period by distance education.

Visiting Professors can also act as PhD supervisors so that when they arrive at Babes-Bolyai to teach, they can supervise their students as well.

It is not just academic staff who require Doctoral qualifications. Many industries are moving towards professional recognition of higher degrees including Doctorates. The public sector is one such entity. Prominent Alumni from industry should of course be encouraged to teach a unit into the course and while so engaged, should be encouraged to take on Doctoral studies as part of life long learning. In this way, Alumni can also contribute to the research effort of the Department.

7. Strategies to cope with high student numbers

Commonly, one obstacle to high research output remains high teaching loads faced by staff. In Australia, a number of strategies are used to assist in the delivery of programs so that academic staff can be released for research duties.

Alumni

As discussed above, Alumni represent an opportunity to attract industry players into academia for teaching and research. Industry engagement is a key goal of most universities in modern times. In some cases Alumni can be utilized to conduct part or all of a particular unit. This way the students will connect with the sorts of jobs they might have after graduating. It may also increase the chance of Alumni contributing to case study research and it may encourage Alumni to take on PhD study. Importantly, it may free academics from teaching that part of a unit so that they may work in the Research Centre.

Alternative Modes of Delivery

Whilst it is not in the mission of all universities to specialize in alternative delivery modes, many units can be vastly improved through student centred learning modes such as web based exercises

(perhaps Front Page or WebCT). For these sessions, students would access a computer laboratory and complete the tasks set for them. Further, units can be constructed so that some unit content is replaced with web or distance education packages. Finally, some units can be conducted as entirely web or distance delivered.

Another form of alternative delivery is the intensive or block mode. Here, units are run for one week, in office hours, prior to the commencement of semester. For the staff member, it means commencing the semester with one less unit to teach (thus providing more time for research) and for students, the ability to take an extra subject each year if they wish and finish their program earlier.

More drastic measures of dealing with high teaching loads include rationalizing the number of unit offerings so that economy of scale operates. This might include closing down small units or combining similar units.

8. Marketing Strategies

The preceding section canvassed some strategies which may assist in growing the research base of the university. In this section, we consider the use of marketing initiatives to indirectly influence research output and prominence of research at the university.

Strengths in Public Administration

The Department of Public Administration, Babes-Bolyai has a significant strength in its positive relationship with the government of Romania. This dialogue provides a considerable strategic opportunity for the university to engage further in research and consultancy in the area of Public Administration. In turn, this engagement can serve to gain publicity for the university and its programs and research. Some suggestions for cooperation and engagement include:

- a. issuing joint press releases about topical matters, research outcomes, collaborative ventures
- b. contribute to analysis of the news and try to get a regular feature in the papers
- c. Document Alumni successes for the media
- d. Establish a newsletter for the public sector which includes research and commentary from Department staff and international advisory committee

Engagement with Secondary School

Secondary Schools are the source of university students but far too often there is little link between the two sectors. Academics are in an excellent position to assist Schools in the development of their students and the future careers their students may take. This might not be restricted to University Open days but might include:

- a. guest presentations on careers or lectures on topics they are studying at School
- b. joint projects with Schools or running of academic events
- c. Open Day activities

Discussion and Conclusions

A range of strategies for directly or indirectly increasing academic staff research output have been canvassed in this paper. These have included the development of research centres and research training; strategically using Doctoral student research; facilitating staff research through teaching release and other programs; encouraging collaborative programs with partner universities; increasing staff with Doctoral qualifications; dealing with high student numbers; and devising marketing strategies to advertise research strengths. Clearly, these solutions come with costs. This paper has not attempted to undertake a cost benefit analysis of the suggestions it makes although it is likely that benefits in research investment can take years to realize. This is particularly so for staff who are still some years from attaining their Doctorates. Nevertheless, all universities now find themselves in a global marketplace and research productivity is likely to become a key quality issue for the future from which university status is gauged.

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