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The influence of organisational features in high-ranked universities: the case of Australia

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the influence of major institutional components, academic support mechanisms and organisational climate on scholarly productivity in high-ranked universities. Qualitative data were collected from senior academics working in high-ranked Australian universities. The data were examined using thematic descriptive and content analysis techniques. The results indicate that academic support practices help save time by providing excellend knowledge related to new pedagogies and research preparation and by offering project management support. Results also show that a participatory work environment and fair institutional policies and practices generate intrinsic and extrinsic incentives to enhance academic role performance. Accordingly, to promote their institutional prestige, university managers should operate selective financial and human resource investment strategies. To elevate the ranking of their institutions, they need to establish essential academic support structures and institute multi-directional communication networks with less bureaucracy, simplified hierarchical structures, effective reward systems, well-designed career planning and informative performance reviews.

KEYWORDS
University rankings; high-ranked universities; organisational features; support practices; organisational climate

Introduction

In tandem with achieving scientific and technological advances, higher education in the twenty-first century has been deeply affected by privatisation, corporatisation, managerialism, mass (even universal) education and internationalisation. These compounded factors have led to the formation of a global tertiary education market (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). In this challenging arena, higher education institutions compete with both national and international rivals for funding of their work (Mok & Cheung, 2011). Therefore, universities need to promote their institutional brand globally in order to influence student choices and to engage the attention of various funding bodies and endowment providers (Papadimitriou & Ramírez, 2015).

One influential marketing strategy used by universities to attract students and successful staff from all over the world is highlighting their international ranking (Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber, 2015). Despite their criticism on the ranking criteria and methodologies, many researchers agree that international rankings mainly show the
Finally, the participants revealed a direct and indirect relationship between scholarly productivity, institutional resources, collegial interactions and organizational climate. The Professor of Social Sciences expressed these connections as follows:

We tend to find that the climate, the resources and the colleagues are very important to productivity, perhaps more so than money. I mean money drives some of those things, but the climate, resources and people affect productivity. Then, the support responsiveness in the structure of management systems – first the management systems are supportive of an alliance of academic work. And when they are not, if that happens, it can hinder the productivity. Training provided to staff is very important, so people understand how to write an effective proposal, deliver an effective project, or be an effective teacher.

As a result, the participants affirmed that academic support mechanisms in their universities assist in increasing their individual performance as well as organizational productivity. Although none of them claimed that high productivity ensures high quality outcomes, they underlined that professional support from the related units provides advantages in obtaining competitive funds. With larger grants, they may carry out more groundbreaking research or develop innovative teaching methods and then publish in high-impact journals. These high-impact scholarly outcomes will, in turn, serve to secure the university’s place in international rankings by elevating their academic reputation and increasing the citation rates of staff. Their growing reputation will continue to attract qualified staff besides better students, both domestically and internationally. These students are more likely to find a job in a short time after graduation thanks to their universities’ reputation among employers. A high employment rate is generally seen as a sign of teaching quality and another output serving ranking performance.

On the other hand, the participants asserted that ‘universities in Australia have a very similar structure and units’ (Deputy Vice-Chancellor) in their organisational charts. The difference with developing universities probably arises from the academic support mechanisms functioning as integral parts of institutional governance and policies in the sample universities. It might be argued that the coherency among these institutional components, including academic support practices, helps to create a more positive organisational climate. Thereby, a positive climate will increase the professional enthusiasm, job satisfaction and organisational commitment of staff. These are generally accepted as the key features to achieve higher organisational performance. However, none of the participants, especially those with managerial duties, claimed that everything was perfect, ‘in fact, many things we need to improve’ (Dean). It can be said that the policy of continuous improvement in high-ranked universities, at least in the research sample, forms a self-feeding loop on ‘the road to academic excellence’ (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

**Conclusion**

The focus in this article was not to evaluate the ranking methodologies or criteria related to university performance. Instead, it aimed to explore academic support practices and the major components of organisational climate in high-ranked Australian universities. The relevance of effective institutional support and a positive
campus climate on sustaining and improving university rankings in the eyes of current senior academics were discussed through face-to-face interviews.

Senior academics in the study group firstly mentioned that their universities provide various funding opportunities and training to empower their teaching and research activities. Second, they elucidated the expert support for project management and media connections through teaching-learning institutes, research offices and media advisory units. Similarly, Coates et al. (2009) indicated that professional, financial and administrational support offered via these mechanisms were an important part of the work environment in attractive universities. These support practices create opportunities for the professional development of academics, and professional development opportunities as part of job resources are significant factors in an academic’s work engagement and scholarly productivity (Altunel, Kocak, & Cankir, 2015). However, the senior academics claimed that the main effect of institutional support mechanisms on academic productivity was to save time by providing pedagogical improvements, offering useful project preparation tips, assisting in narrowing the search for suitable fund options, decreasing administrative duties and expediting external contacts.

Contrary to the researcher’s initial assumption, the senior academics did not see academic support practices and organisational climate as separate institutional features. They actually evaluated academic support practices as a factor influencing their climate perceptions. Campbell and O’Meara (2014) also found a similar result, at least at departmental level, by indicating institutional resources, professional development opportunities, collegiality and work climate as among the institutional features that directed the faculty’s preferences and actions. Furthermore, the major determinants of organisational climate perceptions by the senior academics were (top-level) leadership, management structure, institutional norms, personal motivators and interpersonal relations. These results are analogous to Arabaci’s (2010) exploration of the dimensions of the climate in universities (organisational structure, organisational image and commitment, organisational conflict, communication, rewarding, risk-taking and teamwork). Further, this matches the ideal factors for good organisational climate in academia (fairness, innovation, recognition, support and trust) proposed by McMurray and Scott (2013). According to Schulz (2013), academics’ perceptions of these climate factors are influential variables of their professional motivation, work performance and job satisfaction. In addition, the senior academics argued that a positive climate contributes to their performance by generating a suitable work environment to join high-risk institutional operations, empowering both disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, creating intrinsic motivators to reach higher career levels and constituting extrinsic directions related to institutional expectations.

It is clear that the components of a positive climate assist in the formation of a favourable work environment in the sample universities. It can be claimed that this favourable work environment is composed of coherent institutional governance, policies, norms and practices that enhance academic productivity as well as organisational performance (Miller, 2007; Parker & Guthrie, 2005). Higher organisational performance, including potentially visible outcomes such as sizeable volume of publications, more citation rates and better graduate employment rates, designate the university’s place in international rankings (Shin & Khem, 2013). Sitting in a higher position in the rankings promotes a university’s reputation, and their growing reputation will escalate their success, especially in obtaining more resources and attracting good students.
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