

**Report to ATEM Council
Peter Karmel Travel Grant 2007/2008**

Exploring the Academic-Administrator Divide: Myth or Reality?

1 Background

I was awarded the Peter Karmel Travel Grant in 2007 to undertake a research project with the title:

Exploring the Academic-Administrator Divide: Myth or Reality?

The project was intended to explore whether or not the surface indications that there is tension between academics and administrators in tertiary education institutions is reality or myth. This has been a long standing interest of mine, and my decision to apply for the Peter Karmel Travel Grant was driven, in part, in response to several conference sessions I attended in Australia and the UK.

These sessions all talked about partnerships as being the answer to the 'divide', but I have always been a bit dubious about the value of partnerships where the work of one partner was deemed by the other to be of lesser value. I knew from personal experience that the 'divide' exists to different degrees depending on goodwill and the quality of individual working relationships, so I wanted to collect some data that would help provide a clearer indication of whether the divide was actually a phenomenon that existed and was having a negative impact on university work, or whether it represented a retreat to stereotyping.

2 Project Implementation

The Travel Grant allowed me to travel to the UK and New Zealand, and within Australia to hold focus groups, workshops and interviews with participants. I deliberately chose to allow participants in the research to be self-selecting, primarily because this research is exploratory, and I wanted to be able to collect data that was not constrained in any way.

The methodology used to collect data was Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), a futures method which aims to surface often unspoken beliefs about an issue, and then to focus on how to re-build the issue in a more positive way. It is not a mainstream research method, but seemed to be understood quickly by participants in the research. I used the term 'divide' deliberately, as I hope it would generate discussion and reaction, which it did.

In the UK, I had a session included in the AUA Conference program which attracted around 80 people, including a journalist from the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) (see attached article) and the editor of the AUA Journal, Perspectives. In New Zealand, I conducted two focus groups in Christchurch and Auckland, which attracted about 15 people in total. In Australia, I held a focus group in Queensland at Griffith University, attended by 12 people. I also conducted three

interviews in the UK with senior managers, including the manager of the Governance and Leadership section in HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England).

Initial analysis of the data generated some preliminary hypotheses, which I decided to test further by running an online survey of ATEM members. This survey is currently open.

I will present initial findings at this TEM conference, and then finalise a paper on the project outcomes for publication in the Journal for Higher Education Policy and Management. I also intend to draft a paper for publication in a futures journal, using the project as a case study of CLA methodology in practice.

The journalist from the THES and the editor of Perspectives have also asked for reports on the outcome of the research.

I am happy to send any or all of these presentations/reports to Council members upon request. I have made this same offer to all research participants.

3 Preliminary Outcomes

Preliminary data analysis suggests that, in summary:

- the 'divide' is not unique to universities, nor professional tertiary education managers,
- the 'divide' is real, but multifaceted,
- it is experienced differently, depending on where you work in an institution, and the roles you occupy, and
- its impact is mediated by individual relationships:
 - *'you never forget the dirty teacups'*.

An emerging hypothesis is that the 'divide' itself is changing shape – from academic-administrator to faculty-central. There were many individual comments about how the lack of communication and understanding on the part of central administrators for what goes on in faculties 'on the ground' is leading to increased tension. In faculties, the data suggest that the academic-administrator relationship is generally quite positive and healthy, because of the local interaction and common goals that drive work at that level. Beyond faculties, however, there is mistrust and misunderstanding about motives and 'hidden agendas' of the centre. This was consistent across the UK, New Zealand and Australia.

One suggestion to facilitate moving beyond the divide that was made more than once was that administrative staff should work in both faculty and corporate areas to be able to understand both perspectives, and the often conflicting imperatives at work in both areas. In particular, the need for central administrators to be compliance driven (because of increasing external demands) and the resulting need to employ specialists in these compliance areas (eg quality, OHS, governance etc), who may not have worked in tertiary education before, seems to have created a cadre of workers who do not have an appreciation for the nature of academic work that comes from immersion in day-to-day work in faculties and areas such as student administration.

That said, personal relationships are critical to good working relationships, as is professional reputation. There is an 'interesting' question here that is emerging from the analysis – whether the way in which administrators perceive their identity and their roles affects their interpretation of the 'divide'. Those staff who appear to have built strong professional relationships wherever they have worked do not appear to view the 'divide' in the same way as those administrators who view their roles as compliance driven (eg 'tell me the rules and I will enforce them'), or who do not have the same level of professional reputation as other staff might have. This question could relate to Celia Whitchurch's identification of four types of professionals (my comments in italics):

BOUNDED

These managers are located firmly within organisational and functional boundaries. Their roles are relatively prescribed and pre-determined (*and therefore more compliance focused?*)

CROSS-BOUNDARY

These use an awareness of boundaries to perform cross-institution interpretive and translational functions and to build institutional capacity.

UNBOUNDED

These are most likely to be influenced by off-campus networks. They perform roles such as institutional research and development (*senior managers in faculties and corporate areas?*)

BLENDED

These have experience that allows them to carry out mixed portfolios and to contribute in areas that straddle professional and academic domains (*the emerging third space*).

There is, however, considerable work to be done to repair the impact of the 'divide' stereotype. Many anecdotes were shared by participants, with perhaps the most notable: *if you don't do teaching and research, then you are a parasite* (from the UK).

Moving beyond the divide will involve understanding better the types of relationships that are being established in what Celica Whitchurch describes as 'the third space' – an emerging work area in universities where academics and administrators come together to work on new projects and non-mainstream work. It appears that the type of work and the imperatives at play in this third space are creating more positive relationships based on 'parity of esteem' and collaboration than is the case in mainstream university work.

Perhaps a comment from one UK participant sums it up best: *we just need to discuss this more in our institutions.*

4 Budget Report

The original budget proposal was for a total of \$7050, actual expenditure was \$7049.63. The expenditure is shown in the table below.

Activity	Estimated Cost (\$AUD)	Final Cost (\$AUD)
Airfare to UK	2800	2600.51
Internal Transfer (train London-York-London)	400	190.40
AUA Conference Registration	750	1116.00
2 nights accommodation	400	830.32
Airfare to New Zealand	800	521.90
Accommodation (2 nights)	300	314.00
Meals/Incidentals	1000	1000.00
Consumables (paper, printing etc)	200	200.00
Accommodation (QLD)	0	276.50
TOTAL	7050	7049.63

5 Finally

Thanks to the ATEM Council for funding this research. I believe the outcomes will provide additional information about how academics and administrators work together that has not been published previously. The 'divide' is a topic of some interest in the sector, whether it is real or not, and working to understand what underpins people's perceptions of that divide will be critical if we are to move beyond it.

ATEM has a role to play here by working to open up the discussion about the types of effective relationships that need to be built across all university staff for universities and other institutions to be managed more effectively into the future.

Reference

Celia Whitchurch, [Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures](#), Leadership Foundation.