



## Research challenges for a complementary medicine higher education institution: Results from an organisational climate survey



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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Research and scholarly activity is considered a key feature which differentiates universities from technical colleges. The development of a research culture in a higher education institution (HEI) which primarily focuses on complementary medicine (CM) education faces unique challenges. However, little is known about the factors influencing research activity as they relate to institutions responsible for CM practitioner education.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional online survey of academic and operational staff was conducted at a dual sector private CM education institution in Australia. The survey included items examining respondent attitudes and beliefs about research, personal research experience, and future intended research activity. Statistical analysis determined descriptive frequencies. Backwards stepwise logistic regression was used to identify characteristics of faculty interested in enrolling in a higher degree by research (HDR).

**Results:** The survey was completed by 202 of 389 academics. Respondents perceived research as important to their personal professional goals (86.0%) although confidence in being able to undertake research was less common (56.5%). The perceived importance of publication of research to the respondents' personal professional goals was also notably high (80.0%) although confidence in their own ability to produce research publications was lower (52.9%). A number of key characteristics were identified for those interested in enrolling in a HDR including confidence in certain research methods and experience with publishing research.

**Discussion/Conclusion:** The findings from this analysis may prove useful to early career researchers, educational administrators and research leaders in CM organisations transitioning from a teaching institution to a research-focused academic centre of excellence.

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## 1. Introduction

Complementary medicine (CM), defined as a range of therapies, practices and products not historically associated with the medical profession nor included in the medical curriculum [1], has a complex relationship with new innovations through research [2,3]. Like many professions, research in CM relies on the work of academics in institutions such as universities to focus their research attention on the CM field [4]. Underpinning this requirement is a need for either non-CM researchers to take an interest in CM, or for CM practitioners to develop skills in research [3,4]. For the latter to occur there is a pressing need to strengthen

the research culture in CM, a change which requires practitioners to engage with research during their training and continuing into their career [4,5]. There is also a need for dynamic research cultures to develop within CM education institutions to ensure future research is sensitive to clinical practice [3]. However, given so many CAM education institutions are technical colleges which focus on teaching more so than research, this ultimate goal requires these large institutions to make the transition to universities [6].

### 1.1. The transition from technical college to university

Research and scholarly activity is considered a key feature which differentiates universities from technical colleges. Leaders of institutions which function as universities or are moving towards university status consider research excellence – a

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demonstrably vibrant institutional environment that has yielded exceptionally high quality research output whose wider impact is evident [7] – to be an important characteristic of their organisation. Technical colleges also function within the higher education landscape but focus more on training students to fulfil vocational outcomes rather than engaging with research at an institutional level [8]. General trends of change in the higher education sector are placing pressure on organisations to balance academic advancement and research output with business effectiveness [9]. Whilst the stratification between researcher and educator is growing more distinct within established universities [8], newer higher education institutions (HEIs) that are developing research activity are blurring the boundary between teaching and research and thereby strengthening the teaching–research nexus [8,10]. However, there is also a tension between teaching and research in contemporary HEIs due to the financial basis upon which organisations depend on student fees and as such any increase in research and scholarly activity requires difficult decisions by institutional leaders about where the faculty time needed to undertake research will be found [8,9]. In addition, there is a fundamental epistemological difference between technical colleges and universities within the broad range of HEIs whereby the former focus on research as an application in teaching and the latter embrace research as a process of generating new knowledge [11]. It is across these areas, namely, research versus teaching, and applying knowledge versus generating knowledge, that new HEIs which transition from technical college to university must traverse.

### 1.2. Challenges of research in HEIs

Academics in contemporary HEIs are often described as being expected to balance competing work demands [8,12,13]. Such demands include increasing time, workload and morale pressures and a greater emphasis on performance, professional standards, and accountability [8]. The large international study known as ‘The Changing Academic Profession (CAP)’ project has examined these trends closely and has found a number of factors, including an increasing expectation to provide evidence of the relevance of academic work, are effecting change within the global academic community [14]. These challenges are further highlighted in HEIs which were initially formed as technical training colleges and are maturing to align with university expectations [11]. These institutions, commonly seen in the CM field, usually employ experienced clinical practitioners as teaching staff with no criteria of appointment or contractual requirements related to research activity [8]. It is common among these staff that research is not seen as a task within their work function [8]. As such there is a need to transform these practitioner-educators to research-informed active inquirers capable of advancing knowledge in their field [8,10], a process referred to as *researcher development* [7]. Manifesting this transformation relies as much on motivating existing staff as it does on intellectual and structural changes to the organisation such as modifications to human resource policy and organisational structure [10]. The types of support needed for academic staff to develop research skills are both material and social [15] and there is a need to focus on the broad categories of behavioural development, attitudinal development, and intellectual development [7]. An important outcome from this transformation is a perceptual change whereby non-researchers start to view themselves as researchers [7].

Challenges also exist in the development of a research culture in HEIs. A research culture gives structure to a HEI and is linked to the physical environment of the HEI, the attitudes, values and profiles of those employed by the HEI, the level of courses offered (e.g. Bachelor, Masters, PhD), and support for research provided by the leaders of the HEI (4). The absence of a research culture is usually

the result of one or more of the following: a lack of formal research qualifications; fear and anxiety about writing; perceived lack of time, funding and momentum; a shortage of experienced researchers for support; student pressure for staff to perform as high quality teachers; and staff identifying as practitioners rather than research professionals [10]. These challenges often result in a substantive proportion of academic staff stalling in the early stages of research career development despite potentially long-standing careers as educators and practitioners.

The findings of recent studies suggest undertaking doctoral studies (and possibly other post-graduate research study) constitutes an important role in enabling staff to prepare for scholarly publishing [16]. However, the best outcomes from doctoral graduates have also been found to be partly affected by work-related social interactions and collaboration with colleagues within their discipline [16], an issue in transitioning HEIs where critical mass in research activity is yet to be achieved [8]. Some institutions have attempted to facilitate such interactions and collaboration by establishing social support networks such as writing groups [17]. In addition, the mentoring and networking support usually available to staff at established universities, and known to develop research knowledge skills and confidence in early career researchers [18], is also often deficient in new HEIs [8]. This has led to recommendations that new HEIs establish structured mentoring and networking programs [12,18], implement a range of reward and award systems to promote research activity by teaching staff [8], and provide specific and appropriate training and counselling [12,18]. Overall, in order that such programs and initiatives are targeted and responsive to the needs of the faculty they must be developed with full consideration of the characteristics, background and skills of those interested in pursuing a research career.

### 1.3. Higher education regulation and accreditation in Australia

The Australian higher education sector has been reviewed in recent years [19]. Most recently, reforms have resulted in the formation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) [20]—a government body responsible for the regulation of HEIs based upon the Higher Education Standards Framework [21]. Threshold standards drawn from this framework are applied to all organisations (including private HEIs) to formalise key elements of organisational diversity and capacity within the sector. The resulting categories into which organisations can be sorted include: Australian University of Specialisation; Australian University College; and Australian University. These categories reflect a hierarchy through which the organisation is recognised as a bona fide provider of quality higher education. Key factors which underpin the differences between these categories include the variety of study fields and levels of qualifications available through the institution, as well as the commitment to systematic advancement and dissemination of knowledge through research [22]. The outcome of these reforms is that for HEIs with history as a technical training college to be accredited within a university category with TEQSA, progressive organisational changes are needed including an increase in research activity and the development of a research culture.

### 1.4. Place and controversy of research in complementary medicine

The development of a research culture in a HEI which primarily focuses on CM education faces additional unique challenges. Commentators and academics from within CM have raised a number of concerns [2,23–25] with the prioritisation of research as promoted by the evidence-based medicine movement [26]. These concerns have led to preliminary research findings

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