Introduction

Monitoring research productivity in tertiary education institutions has become an important intellectual and financial imperative. Educational institutions which historically were more concerned with applied and vocational subjects, such as schools of nursing, are now obliged to compete for funding on the basis of research publication quantity and quality or face both financial and reputational damage. Staff in such institutions may feel disenfranchised; words like "research outputs" transform them into tools for production rather than creative thinkers and doers.

In many countries, nursing education is new to both the university and the tertiary sector. In the United Kingdom, most nursing programmes have come from hospital schools into "new" universities. In the United States of America (USA), whilst many nursing degree programmes are well-settled into the university environment, community colleges offer associate degree programmes. New Zealand, most nursing education programmes are delivered through the polytechnic sector. Previously training was provided by hospital boards and polytechnics gave the theoretical and educational support that the hospital-based teaching environment could not offer. By 1986, nursing accounted for three-quarters of full-time technical institute enrolments. The first Bachelor of Nursing degree programme for prospective New Zealand nurses was accredited in 1991 for delivery at Otago Polytechnic, with postgraduate accreditation following in 1997 at the same institution (Anderson, 1997). The polytechnic sector, like the "new" universities in the UK and community colleges in the USA, has lagged behind the universities in terms of research publications.

There is a large body of literature dealing with the challenges of writing for publication which does not base its findings and recommendations on empirical research, but rather on the assumed needs of neophyte researchers (e.g. Davidhizar et al, 2001; Rivara, 2001). Assumptions underpinning these articles are that researchers do not know how to write a convincing paper, do not know the rules of submission, and lack confidence to submit a paper for publication. These and other articles like them are pitched, unlike most academic writing, at the other, making liberal use of the second person, reinforcing a directive and authoritative voice, and implying a lack of understanding of the process by the reader.

At Otago, we wondered if this assumed naiveté on the part of the poorly-published staff members was the principal cause of low academic productivity, noting the absence of surveys of groups of individual researchers to determine what they felt kept them from publishing research findings.

Whilst the literature explored some of the challenges present in other transitional settings, such as the transformation of vocational colleges to the new universities (Bazely, 1994) and from a healthcare delivery focus to a research-oriented focus in nursing (Cooke and Green, 2000), we also conjectured that the circumstances in the emerging New Zealand polytechnic environment might be
unique to that sector. We were concerned with identifying the challenges facing individual researchers in the polytechnic sector with respect to writing for publication.

**Methods**

We undertook a survey at Otago Polytechnic to identify what research-active staff identified as the greatest barriers to writing for publication and their suggestions for improvement. After approval from the institution's ethics committee, we sent an anonymous questionnaire to each staff member participating in degree-level teaching or higher. Participants were asked to identify and rank the factors which constituted the biggest barriers to their own writing productivity, and also to identify and rank the factors which they felt would assist them the most in generating more publications. The questionnaire included close-ended, open-ended and ranking questions and also included space for general comments about writing at the institution.

**Results**

Seventy-seven of the 171 people contacted responded to the survey. Seventy-four percent of respondents reported that time was the main barrier to their writing productivity. Twenty percent stated they did not know how to get started writing, and a further 21 percent admitted being motivated by “other things.” Other major obstacles included not knowing how to go about getting published (13%), not having anything interesting to write about (9%), having a perceived inability to express themselves as they would wish (11%), and not liking writing (7%) (See table 1). Not surprisingly, given the prevalence of time as a barrier to writing productivity, 62 percent of respondents saw release time as a factor which would enhance their ability to produce written publications. Fifty-five percent felt that someone to read and critique their work would be valuable, while writing groups (28%), writing buddies (24%), an explanation of the submission process (20%) or having something to write about (20%) were the most likely to enable them to write. Ten percent needed “head space” and a similar number were interested in exploring other forms of writing, such as creative writing and authoritative writing for non-specialists. Many of the respondents gave more detail in their comments section about the impact of time constraints on the writing process. It is not just that time is required for writing - time is needed to keep up-to-date with the literature and actually to engage in the research which would underpin the written publications (See table 2).

**Discussion**

A number of publications (e.g. Gorman, 2004; Lee & Boud, 2003; Sackett, 2001) detail the various initiatives that might be taken to assist academics in developing writing and publication skills, including co-authoring, mentoring, writing retreats, writing for publication programmes, and writing groups. We are attempting to identify specific initiatives which match the issues brought up and suggestions made by the respondents to the survey. The initiatives we are considering address the issues of time, editorial and peer support, and do not imply major restructuring or the implementation of financially onerous modifications. We recommend three initiatives: use of assistants in a variety of academic tasks, establishment of a communal writing room with associated writing group activities, and introduction of systematic mentoring programmes to assist new writers. Teaching and research fellows and assistants, an integral component of the university sector, are not
part of the New Zealand polytechnic workforce. As Mancing (1991) points out, the absence of teaching assistants is one element which makes a tertiary staff member’s workload much heavier. Generally postgraduate students, these assistants unburden lecturing staff while gaining valuable experience of pedagogy, subject matter, and the administrative requirements of academe. Similarly, research assistants or fellows may be heavily involved with some of the more time-consuming tasks of the research process, such as sourcing material, gathering data, and contacting participants, both relieving staff members for other responsibilities, and learning the vagaries of research practice. This support may do more than just remove time-consuming tasks; it may also set clearer boundaries around the lecturer’s workload, which potentially opens up the “head space” referred to by respondents.

Where the employment of teaching and research fellows is not immediately possible, it may be that extending the scope of administrative support would assist attaining some of these goals. A concerted exploration of what lecturer time is dedicated to tasks such as streaming, entering marks, alphabetizing assignments, arranging material and rooms, filing and photocopying could result in specific administrative assistance with student assessment tasks or scheduling coordination by administration rather than academic staff. Similarly, librarians already an important role in the process of inquiry which is the basis of academic research (see Gorman, 2004), and might be able to source and pre-organize course material identified by teaching staff more efficiently.

A communal writing room with both quiet working space and group work areas would provide a number of the features desired by respondents. If the writing room contained computers which were preinstalled with editorial, reference and statistical analysis software, and which might either periodically or permanently be staffed with experienced academic writers, it could offer a number of advantages. On one hand, it would provide the physical space and tools for efficient writing (the “all my resources together” which one participant mentioned). On the other, it would create a home for the peer support network that was desired by many respondents. As Sackett (2001) points out, the writing room also serves an important role in protecting academics from employment other demands and is a tool for time management. “The most important element of time management,” he writes, “is setting aside and ruthlessly protecting time that is spent writing for publication” (p.98). However, in the absence of what he refers to as the “ruthless secretary” or the “respect of garrulous colleagues,” the geographical isolation of a designated space, where even email dares not venture, is a practical and effective way to ensure writing time and the productivity that ensues.

Creative use of this room might include the scheduling of support sessions, writing workshops, classes and peer-buddy groups. Writers’ groups have been the focus of a number of articles seeking to assist academics to publish, and have resulted in stimulating intellectual and professional growth (Galligan et al., 2003). The form of these groups varies from one report to another, but may be loose or structured, inter- or single disciplinary groups, with or without experienced academic leadership. Boud and Lee (1999) argue that writing is a starting, rather than an endpoint of the research process, and that it serves as a useful place for enhancing research development. “Writing groups”, they state, “reposition participants as active scholarly writers within a peer-learning framework” (p.198). Bazeley (1994) also argues that networking between inexperienced and senior staff can be “the best way for building up experience and confidence in new researchers.” (p. 129)

A writing room can thus offer a locus for training in the processes of both writing and submission, and a resource centre for documentation. One could easily imagine the room based in the campus library, which would provide both a physical distance from the hubbub of teaching responsibilities and proximity to various information resources, activities and skilled support in information location and
Finally, a concerted and systematic system of mentoring for new researchers could provide an important benefit. Sackett’s 2001 reflexive piece on the clinician-researcher details the concerted approach that a senior researcher could use to launch junior colleagues. It includes resources, opportunities, advice and protection. Opportunities, include, as Sackett writes, “the systematic examination of everything that crosses the mentor’s desk for its potential contribution to the scientific development and academic advancement of the person being mentored” (p. 95); it could also entail development activities like carrying out duplicate reviews with junior staff members, co-authoring, and introducing colleagues into academic networks. Mentors also nominate, support, and accompany their colleague, preparing them for the throes of external scrutiny and critique. The literature on mentorship as a factor in the increased productivity and vitality of academic departments is large, and refers to both centrally and departmentally-based mentors for inexperienced staff, and shows that mentored staff are more successful at publishing than non-mentored staff. (e.g. Steiner et al, 2002)
On a collective level, schools of nursing face a range of challenges with respect to holding their own in established research universities. In addition to sector-specific conditions, both junior and senior staff individually face a different kind of initiation to academic writing and productivity from their counterparts in 'old' universities. However, whilst acknowledging the difference in both context and structure, there are simple initiatives which could help staff to overcome the obstacles they have identified as impeding their individual ability to generate academic publications.

Click to see Table 1

Click to see Table 2

References

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Annemarie Jutel, RN, PhD has published widely on values in health care and on exercise. She is the editor of Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue, and is a peer reviewer for several scholarly journals. Annemarie teaches academic writing and clinical enquiry at the Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin, New Zealand.