

Prioritising Third Stream Activity: the gap between University intentions and academic perceptions

Introduction

Third stream activities, concerned with the generation use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments [1], are vital to the success of the HE sector. Universities are required to add both direct and indirect value to social and economic development [2] with impact studies monitoring the sector's contribution as part of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework [3].

The Lambert Review [4] emphasised that Third Stream activities should be seen as a core activity for HE. Many University Executives have responded to government initiatives through establishing Third Stream policies and infrastructures within their institutes. However, a decade later, Wilson's Review (2012) [5] provides troublesome reading, for whilst it identifies good practices and exemplary approaches, it highlights the continuing low take-up and patchy provision of Third Stream activity, along with 30 recommendations for improvement.

This paper discusses a study that is part of a wider project aiming to develop an effective approach to growing Third Stream activity in HE. The results presented highlight academics' perceived priority of the various streams of academic activity in their institutions and their limited involvement in, and awareness of, Third Stream activities.

Method & Participants

163 academics from Business Schools at Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities completed an on-line 20-question questionnaire in February 2012. Participants completed questions on the prioritization of the three streams of activity, and on awareness and perceptions of Third Stream activity, policy and infrastructure at their institutions.

59% of the sample were Lecturers/Senior Lecturers, 17% were Professors/Readers and 24% were academic managers (Associate Deans/Head of Departments/ Principal Lecturers).

Results & Interpretation

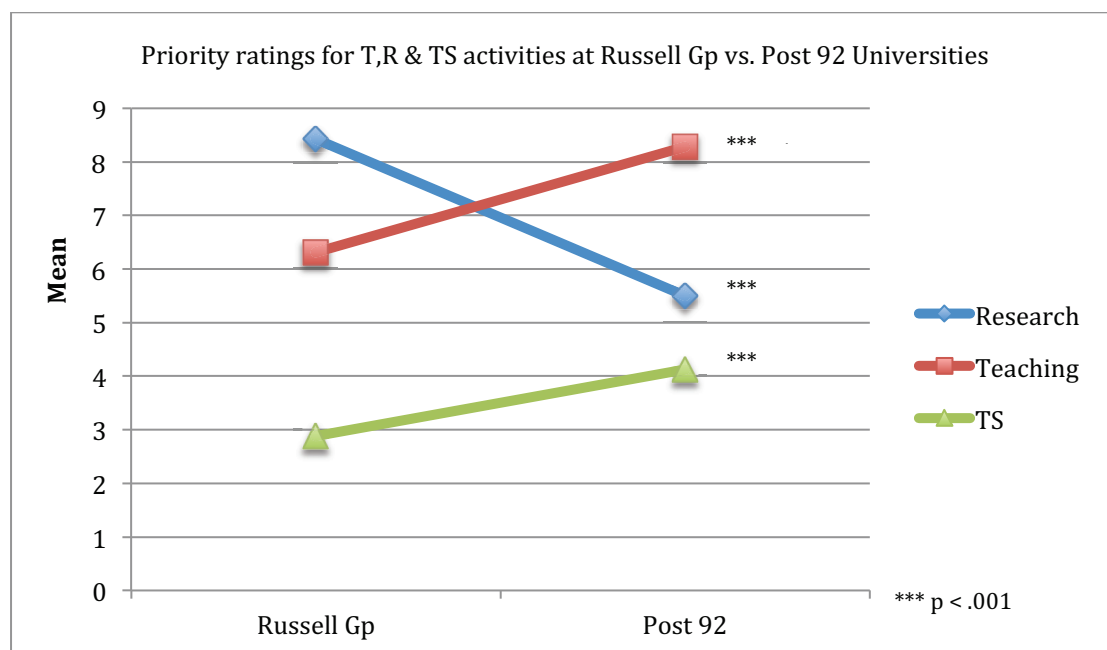
Prioritisation of Activity

Academics were asked to rate the priority that each of the three streams of activity have at their institution (1 = lowest rating, 10 = highest rating). Paired samples t-tests were used to calculate whether there were significant differences in the mean scores assigned to each stream. This was significant for research and teaching as priorities ($t(162) = -4.01$, two-tailed $p < .001$), indicating that teaching ($M = 7.66$) was given a higher overall mean priority rating compared to research ($M = 6.45$).

The t-test comparing mean differences between research priority and Third Stream priority was also significant ($t(162) = 10.59$, two-tailed $p < .001$), research ($M = 6.46$) prioritised significantly higher than Third Stream activity ($M = 3.72$). Significant differences also emerged in the priority ratings assigned between teaching ($M = 7.66$) and Third Stream activity ($M = 3.74$) ($t(162) = 16.98$, two-tailed $p < .001$). This confirms that teaching was prioritised more highly than Third Stream activities.

No significant differences were revealed between academic position and priority ratings for teaching, research or Third Stream activities with general agreement across all levels on prioritization.

Independent t-tests were carried out to calculate whether there were significant differences in priority ratings given to T/R/TS by Russell Group Universities compared to Post 92 Universities. As the following figure shows, unsurprisingly, Russell Group Universities had a higher priority for Research ($t(134) = 8.30$, $p < .001$), than Post-92 Universities ($M = 5.50$), with the opposite for Teaching Priority Ratings ($t(160) = -5.39$, $p < .001$), with post-92s rating teaching as a significantly higher priority compared to Russell Group Universities. However, the Third Stream Priority Ratings ($t(159) = -3.21$, $p < .001$) highlight that Post-92 universities rated Third Stream activity as a significantly higher priority compared to Russell Group Universities).



Participation in Third Stream Activities

Over 60% of academics had not participated in any Third Stream activities. No significant association was found between length of participation in third stream activities and University type (Russell Gp vs. Post 92) ($\chi^2(2) = 4.67$, $p = .10$). However, the percentages indicate that more Russell Group individuals (74.5%) had never participated in activities compared to Post-92 (57.1%).

Awareness of Third Stream Targets

Although only 15% of academic staff actually knew the target for Third Stream activities, there were significant associations between university type and knowledge of the target for consultancy activities. Chi-square cross-tabulation between university type and knowledge of the target figure for consultancy was significant ($X^2(1) = 6.36, p = .01$). Only 4.1% ($n = 2$) of individuals from Russell Group universities indicated that they knew what the target figure for consultancy activities were compared to 19.4% ($n = 21$) for Post-92 universities.

Discussion

Our results show a significant lack of academic engagement in Third Stream activity, with only 15% of our sample (which covered all levels from lecturer to Faculty management) knowing the Third Stream targets for their institution and less than 40% engaging in Third Stream activity.

With innovation and knowledge seen as fundamental to economic growth and Universities increasingly expected to be the primary provider or at least a significant contributor, Third Stream activity is key, however, the challenges are significant. Our study clearly identifies that academics do not perceive Third Stream to be of the same priority as teaching or research. And this difference in prioritization is vast, with research and teaching both being high priority and Third Stream at best semi-priority for post-92s and of low priority for the Russell Group universities.

Progressing Third Stream activity from low to high priority is essential. Whilst academics continue to view Third Stream as being of significantly less priority than research and teaching, low take-up of Third Stream activities will continue. The challenge lies in changing academic perceptions of Third Stream activity, requiring new approaches and models, both to embed Third Stream activity into the first and second streams, and to establish equivalence between Third Stream activity and the other streams in terms of academic career progression. Further, an academic-centric approach is needed, one where the needs and expectations of the academic, as well as the institution and the wider economy, are met. Our current work focuses on the development and implementation of a “grass-roots, buy-in” model, where we are looking at adapting attributes of Third Stream activity that inhibit and provide barriers (even if unintended) to academic engagement.

References

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