

Project Title: Exploring the impact of a *Professional Ethical Framework* on academics and other stakeholders in the university sector

Description

Increasingly around the world, universities and the academics working within them are experiencing political and economic pressures which threaten their independence. The *Professional Ethical Framework (The Framework)* is an innovative initiative to strengthen the status of the academy in the modern university and in doing so, help to protect the independence of universities.

The Framework articulates academic work as professional work with a responsibility for leadership in their universities. It aims to strengthen the academic voice as the basis for making universities more effective. In the modern corporate university, it advocates for shared governance by proposing a balance of power between corporate and academic leaders. While acknowledging both groups have a decision-making role in the modern university, it aims to describe the nature and essence of the academic role so it is clearly distinguished from the managerial role. This should help both academic and non-academic stakeholders to better understand the relationships in higher education and more clearly design forms of governance and decision-making processes suited to a university.

Further, long-standing concerns about equity issues in academia have been exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic (O'Meara et al., 2022). In the modern managerial university, increasing financial and accountability pressures have impacted on academic work, resulting in policy and resource decisions which can undermine its very essence. These decisions are often detrimental to more vulnerable academics, particularly those from minority backgrounds, in the early stages of their careers, lacking tenure or on short term contracts and females balancing home duties. Further, threats are apparent with the rise of authoritarian and right wing governments (e.g., [University World News](#)).

To be able to respond in any coherent way, academia needs to promote a professional identity that clearly articulates the uniqueness of the academic role and its value for society so we can convince other stakeholders of the need to protect the essence of this role.

Although developed in an Australian context, we believe *The Framework* has relevance to our academic colleagues across the globe and will make an important contribution to universities becoming more effective.

Research questions

The overarching research questions are:

What is the attitude of key stakeholders in higher education to The Framework? And How do these responses and opinions vary for different stakeholder groups?

Secondary research questions include

- 1. To what extent do they think The Framework achieves its aims?*
- 2. What impact do they see The Framework having on the sector?*
- 3. What are the key barriers they see to the acceptance and/or implementation of The Framework?*
- 4. What improvements do they suggest from their perspective?*

5. *To what extent does the Framework help individual academics to form their professional identity as they move through their career? How does this vary for early career (Students, in experienced academics i.e., 5 years, mid-career and established academics)*
6. *To what extent does The Framework present a basis for the development of some professional standards of practice for academia?*

Significance of The Framework

The Professional Ethical Framework is designed to articulate and re-conceptualise academia within the context of the modern managerial university, but, while consistent with existing ethical statements, it is very different and innovative. Uniquely, *The Framework* links leadership, professionalism, scholarliness and industrial issues as an interrelated whole. It articulates a values-set around which academia can unite as a professional group. It enshrines academic freedom and autonomy and will guide academics, in forging their professional identity. A stronger academic voice will better protect university independence and support their underlying social purpose.

The professional academic values of scholarliness, altruism, academic freedom, autonomy and collegiality embedded in *The Framework* are consistent with other existing statements of professional ethics (e.g., American Association of University Professors ([USAUP](#)), Australian Association for Research in Education ([AARE](#)), [UK Professional Standards Framework](#)). However, to our knowledge, *The Framework* is unique in several ways.

Firstly, it is premised on a balance of power between the academic and managerial leadership in the governance of universities and the explicit design of governance structures to enable power-sharing. While challenging university managers to be more collaborative, it also challenges academics, as a professional group, to be more engaged in decision-making by electing academic leaders who will ensure their university carries out its academic mission and to assume their share of accountability for the effectiveness of the university.

Secondly, it is intended to provide professional guidance to academic colleagues at all stages of their career, about the fundamental nature of their role. *The Framework* is designed to promote a professional identity for academia that recognises the autonomous nature of academic work and “normative” statements based on an “intrinsic values set” which aims to achieve common “ethical ends” (Neame, 2016, p.13). This is especially important for helping younger academics to form a professional identity (Archer, 2008) and for those in university **leadership roles** to retain a sense of their professional identity in the face of commercialisation and other competing pressures on them.

Thirdly, *The Framework* also articulates the scholarly characteristics of the academic role and the centrality of academic freedom and autonomy. This should help to also inform other, and non-academic stakeholders in the higher education sector about the reality of the academic role. It should help university management and government to recognise the limits beyond which their actions may become counter-productive.

Fourthly, unlike other statements, the *Framework* explicitly links conditions of employment to professional issues to ensure adequate resourcing and **provides the basis** for a set of research-based professional standards of practice. These are likely to be more powerful in identifying and justifying professional needs and enhancing the agency of individual academics.

Benjamin (2010) claims that academic institutions will function more effectively if they accept that the quality of (academic) work “depends on assurance of a delimited, but protected, sphere in which faculty can conduct their work on the basis of appropriate professional standards” (p.3). This suggests the Framework should be enshrined in “the terms and conditions of their appointments” (p.13) because, while academics have “ethical responsibilities to their profession and their institutions...only the latter are legally binding” (p.13).

Rationale: Literature review and *rationale for The Framework*:

Statements such as the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (2020) re-affirm the importance of universities for national development and emphasise the role of a university is to serve the advancement of Society through the provision of high-quality research and teaching.

These statements claim shared governance, institutional autonomy and academic freedom as fundamental principles that underpin universities. However, aside from broad statements on the importance of academic freedom and open inquiry, there is little practical consideration of the nature and complexity of academic work, nor advice on how institutions should actively support academics to carry out their role or participate in decision making.

As set out in more detail in an accompanying paper (Kenny et al., in review), in the 33 years since Boyer (1990) published *Scholarship Reconsidered* while the fundamental scope of academic work remains largely unchanged, as some combination of research, teaching and service, the context in which they work has become increasingly uncertain and complex (Barnett, 2004).

As Henkel (2005) points out “there have been profound epistemological, structural and cultural changes that have challenged the assumptions underpinning the working of academic systems” (p.97). The challenges require academics to justify previously taken for granted claims for autonomy and academic freedom as fundamental aspects of their work.

International evidence indicates the academic workforce has been “de-professionalised” in the managerial university, a process strongly linked to a loss of decision-making power and significant workplace changes such as the casualisation, feminisation and commercialisation of universities (Blackmore, 2020; Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012; Kenny & Fluck, 2022a).

As opposed to shared governance, research indicates the reality in universities is managerial dominance over decision-making and resource allocation through a preference for corporate hierarchical governance structures over collaborative approaches. This leads to a de-valuing of academic priorities relative to commercial and revenue raising activities (Bolden Petrov & Gosling, 2009; Kidd, et al., 2021; Rowlands, 2015; Yeatman, 2018; Yelder & Codling, 2004). Additionally, there is growing evidence of government and commercial interference in the academic process, resulting in reduced autonomy (Francis & Sims, 2022; Jayasuriya & McCarthy, 2021; SIFAC, 2022).

This results in a high degree of role confusion in the managerial university, with many academics taking on leadership roles within the hierarchy. There is a danger that less experienced academics, in particular, have known little else but the managerial university, may internalise the values of management within their professional identity and lose sight of the over-riding values of academia (Archer, 2008).

With the points above in mind, in designing *the Framework*, we recognised that both the managerial role and the academic role are necessary for a modern university to function well. This suggests we need to explore how these fundamentally different roles can interact in a respectful and productive manner. It also calls for fostering mutual trust which is clearly not evident in the literature, to enable shared governance and decision-making processes and more balanced power sharing to occur.

This literature suggests a fundamental re-thinking of how the academic role fits into the modern context (Barnett, 2004; Coates & Goedegebuure, 2012). The terms “professional academic” and “academic profession” appear often in the literature (see for example Ball, 2012; Barnett & Middlehurst, 1993, Billot, 2010; Henkel, 2005; Sutton, 2017). However, Williams (2008) suggests that in general, “higher education literature appears in the main to assume that academe constitutes a profession” (p.533).

Implicit in the rhetorical question below, posed by Barnett and Middlehurst (1993), is that the academy itself bears significant responsibility for many of the issues faced in modern universities:

If the professionalism of academics has come under attack, ...and if that attack has succeeded, to what extent is this outcome the result of a failure of academics to explicitly define their professionalism? (p.127).

The Framework aims to address this “failure” by identifying and articulating what is fundamental to the academic role and what unites the academy as a profession. *The Framework* proposes a professional identity for academia that recognises the complexities of the modern context while aiming to preserve the fundamental essence of the academic role. It is based on enhanced academic leadership, recognition of the uniqueness of the role, their contribution to the effectiveness of universities and how their work should be resourced and managed. It articulates the unique aspects of the academic role that are non-negotiable: i.e., the specific professional tasks all academics engage in because they are academics.

The structure of *The Framework* was derived from Ferman (2011) and through the synthesis of a wide-range of research from which its four interrelated themes emerged:

1. *Academics as co-leaders*
2. *The professional nature of academic work*
3. *The scholarly nature of academic work; and*
4. *Working conditions required to support academic work.*

The project, as described below, has been reviewed by and received approval from, the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee: Project ID: 27180. All necessary protocols and safeguards will be followed in order to adhere to the [Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#) and the associated standards and practices.