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Author
Moodie, Gavin

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Fish or fowl? Collegial processes in managerialist institutions

Gavin Moodie

Academic promotion is a curious fish. Most employees - including general staff in higher education institutions - would expect that an appointment to a middle management position (with responsibility for managing 20 staff and a budget of $2 million) would be made for the medium term if not indefinitely, and only after systematic selection from amongst candidates with extensive preparation for the post. On the other hand, they would expect that a pay increase for meritorious performance, if available at all, would be decided annually, largely at the discretion of the employee’s supervisor, following a largely informal process.

For academics, however, the position is almost completely reversed. As we shall see in greater detail below, appointment as head of a school or department is usually short term, still largely by an informal process for which the main qualification seems not to be management experience and expertise, but the confidence of one’s peers. Heads of school might be described in short hand as collegial appointments, although to a managerialist they would appear to be the amateurish appointment of amateurs. In contrast, academics’ pay increases for meritorious performance – academic promotions – are made after the most thorough scrutiny of applicants’ performance and academic merit.

This paper compares the processes for appointing heads of academic schools or departments with those for promoting academic staff in Australian higher education institutions. It considers the future of these largely collegial processes within increasing managerialist institutions.

Heads of schools

In Australian higher education institutions the basic academic organisational unit is commonly the school. Until the 1980s most universities’ academic activities were organised in departments, most of which were concerned with one discipline. Typically each department was responsible for a major sequence of studies taken towards an undergraduate degree that was the responsibility of the department’s faculty. The restructuring of higher education that took place in Australia from about the mid-1980s reformed basic academic units into schools - which are generally bigger than departments and comprise a range of cognate disciplines, and thus are better able to adapt to changing student demand. Over the same period general degrees such as the bachelor of arts, bachelor of science and bachelor of commerce were fragmented into more specialist degrees such as a bachelor of Asian studies, bachelor of biotechnology and bachelor of marketing, and in some but by no means all institutions responsibility for these degrees effectively – although not necessarily formally – lies with the schools of the same name.

Heads of school are thus responsible to their dean for their school’s planning, teaching programs, staff supervision and development, and student assessment as Central Queensland University puts it (1999), or as the University of New South Wales says more comprehensively (2000), heads are responsible for their school’s planning and leadership; for academic, financial and staffing affairs; and for physical resources allocated to the school. The University of Queensland (2002) acknowledges the dual managerial and collegial role of
the head of school in providing that ‘the head is expected to exercise appropriate leadership
and management skills within the collegial culture of the university, ensuring that legitimate
academic freedom is preserved and fostered’.

However, heads don’t have the sole responsibility for planning and leading their school. The
expectation is expressed most clearly but by no means uniquely by the University of
Queensland (2002) –

Heads are not expected to carry personally all of the administrative
responsibilities within their Schools. Heads will ensure that senior academic
staff, in particular professors, are assigned significant roles such as chairs of
school committees (e.g. Teaching and Learning, Postgraduate Studies or
Research Committees) or program directors. Senior academic staff are
expected to accept such roles, when requested, as their contribution to the
collegial leadership of the School.

A small school would have fewer than 10 staff, a medium school would have from 10 to 25
staff and a large school would have more than 25 staff. Heads of school are therefore senior
academic appointments. Thus, the University of Tasmania (2002) and the University of
Western Australia (2002) both provide that ‘deans shall normally look first to professorial staff
for potential candidates for the headship’ and the University of Newcastle (2002) similarly
provides ‘Before making a recommendation to the vice-chancellor, the pro vice-chancellor
shall consider first professors or associate professors in the school for appointment as head of
school’. While this is clearly universities’ preference, many formally allow heads of school to
be appointed from the ranks of senior lecturers.

Compensation for heads of school is typically a reduction of from 25% to 50% of a standard
teaching load and a salary loading of from 5% to 10% of a professor’s salary, or from
approximately $5,000 to $10,000 per annum depending on the size of the department. The
salary loading for heads of department at the University of New South Wales is almost double
other universities, from 11% to 18.5% of a professorial salary (UNSW, 2001). Curtin
University (2001) provides heads of school with a half-time research, teaching or
administrative assistant during their term according to their needs. The University of Western
Australia has one of the more sophisticated compensation arrangements –

Because heads of school maintain a significant portion of their academic
load it is important that the reward structure allows maximum flexibility in
choosing which part of the normal workload is reduced in order to take on
the new responsibilities.

Each school head, after consultation with school staff, will negotiate with
the dean, a personalised package which may include any or all of three
elements - a salary loading to a given value, research assistance and
teaching assistance. It is anticipated that the total value of the package will
be no more than $20,000. The salary loading portion should be no more
than 10% of an associate professor’s salary.

(University of Western Australia, 2002)
Very few institutions specify the selection criteria for heads of school beyond ‘demonstrated capacity to perform the duties specified for the position in the academic staff enterprise agreement’ (Curtin University, 2001). Charles Sturt University (1998) specifies several selection criteria under the headings of professional status, leadership, management, administration and communication. The University of Western Australia (2002) requires deans to identify appropriate appointees to head schools through a consultative process with the school using any school specific selection criteria and these standard criteria: academic and strategic leadership skills; academic credibility which arises from quality teaching and research; interpersonal skills including common sense, fairness, honesty and openness; organisational skills; and a demonstrated commitment to equity.

The University of Tasmania (2002) acknowledges the ambivalent nature of the head of school when it says that it is essential that the selected head has the confidence of both the senior executive of the university and of her/his colleagues. The dilemmas this poses for the appointment process were neatly expressed by Murdoch University (2002a) in its discussion paper on academic decision-making –

A method needs to be found which identifies staff who have the requisite skills and standing, and who enjoy the confidence of both the staff in the School and of the Executive Dean. It should not be an electoral process, nor should the appointment be solely at the gift of the Executive Dean. It is impractical to establish a selection process that relies on staff applying for the position, as it is not unknown for nobody to want the position and for a Dean to have to prevail on someone to accept appointment.

Nonetheless, Macquarie University has a pure electoral process for selecting its heads of school (2001), now somewhat unusually for an Australian university, and Charles Sturt, Deakin and the University of New England have a standard selection committee process for their heads of school. Most universities have an informal and unsystematic processes for the dean to consult members of the school on the selection of their head. Typical is the provision of the University of Melbourne (2001) –

Heads of departments are appointed by the vice-chancellor on the recommendation of the dean. While the methods by which a faculty chooses nominee/s for its head may vary, in all cases the dean should establish a collegial consultation process, a description of which will form part of the dean’s recommendation to the vice-chancellor. The vice-chancellor reports the appointments to the Academic Board and to Council.

Curtin University (2001) provides for the executive dean to consult staff on the appointment process, which may be appointment following external advertisement, internal appointment via selection panel or internal appointment via election by staff.

Terms of appointment of heads of school are typically from three to five years. While many institutions provide for appointments to be renewed, the University of Technology Sydney (2000) and the University of Queensland (2002) specifically limit heads to two consecutive terms.
Like many institutions, Curtin University (2001) expects heads of school to keep abreast of their field whilst performing their predominantly leadership and management role. Nonetheless, it has a strong requirement for heads to complete an executive leadership development program before the start of their term. The program covers strategic planning including ethics and equity, staff planning, financial and space resources management, compliance with legislative responsibilities, performance management and enhancement and grievance handling (Curtin University, 2001).

Academic staff promotion

The relative informality of the appointment of heads of school appointments – to academic middle management – contrasts with the heavy regulation of the reward for meritorious academic performance, in academic promotion. This is indicated simply by the size of the policies. Procedures for the appointment of heads of school are typically from three to five pages. Academic promotions policies are an average of 19 pages, or almost four times longer.

All academic promotions state that promotion is by merit, but what that means is elaborated at great length and in considerable detail. Typically institutions expected applicants to ascribe weightings within permissible ranges to their performance in teaching, research and service. Thus the University of New England (2002) specifies that applicants for promotion to associate professor or lecturer level D, which I take to be of comparable level to a head of school, ascribe weights in the range indicated for teaching and curriculum 25 – 60%; research, scholarship, creative achievement and professional activity 25 – 60%; and service to the university and the community 15 – 35%. Macquarie and Murdoch universities ‘use the relevant discipline profile which sets out that discipline’s specific expectations for teaching, scholarship and research, and service for each of the levels for the purposes of appointment, probation, performance management and promotion’ (Macquarie, 2002).

Murdoch University (2002b) expects that most academic staff will be appointed to standard teaching and research positions for which it specifies ranges of weightings very similar to UNE’s. However, it envisages the possibility of five other categories of academic staff: teaching support, research support, teaching mainly, research mainly, and university service mainly.

In 2001 Edith Cowan University (2002a) introduced a significant and novel reform of its academic promotion policy. This recognises five areas of academic work: teaching and learning, research and creativity, professional and community engagement, service to the university, and enterprise on behalf of the university. More originally and significantly, academic staff at Edith Cowan may be assigned to one of five roles, each of which has different ranges of weights for each area of academic work (2002b):

- teaching and research staff (standard academic staff members);
- academic leadership positions (such as heads of school);
- enterprise positions:
  ‘Enterprise recognises the demonstrated capacity of an academic to attract substantial capital or operating income for the university, or other tangible benefits that have helped to change significantly the academic profile of a scholarship or research area.

  ‘Enterprise also includes recognition of the strong and positive relationships that an academic has developed through professional engagement with external stakeholders,'
with the result that opportunities available for the university and its reputation have been notably enhanced. Such opportunities would be recognised as having university-wide significance, even if they impact largely on a particular school or research centre.

- the ‘teacher scholar’:
  ‘Teacher scholars are engaged in research, scholarly or professional activities but these may be more practically oriented and/or be reduced in quantity due to their greater concentration on teaching and teaching-related activities’.
- the research scholar or creative artist.

Applicants for promotion are expected to nominate academic referees, some of whom are expected to be external to the university if not international, and many universities also appoint external assessors for senior academic promotions. Typically applications for academic promotion are reviewed first by a faculty committee comprising heads or other representatives of schools and three or four ex officio members. This committee in turn recommends to a university promotions committee comprising deans or other faculty representatives and another three or four ex officio members.

Almost half the institutions have external members of the university promotions committee for associate professor or level D academics. Many universities provide for a representative from the local branch of the NTEU and from the equal opportunity officer to attend promotions committees as observers. About half the institutions interview applicants for promotion. About one third of universities specify a quota of promotions to associate professor, and some also establish quotas to promotions at lower levels. But in all cases promotions within any quota are on academic merit as judged by peers.

**Paradoxes**

Universities recognise two types of authority: the bureaucratic authority of hierarchy frequently associated with managerialism and the authority of academic expertise associated with collegiality. Many commentators have observed a shift from collegiality to managerialism in higher education institutions since the 1990s. Thus deans are no longer primarily representatives of their disciplines but of senior management (Marginson & Considine, 2000) as is provided, for example, in Australian National University’s enterprise agreement (2000).

Heads of academic schools are hierarchically defined as middle management, typically having responsibility for supervising 20 staff and managing a budget of around $2 million. But they are still largely collegial appointments, in both the core selection criteria of having academic standing and the confidence of their school colleagues, and in the consultative process adopted for their appointment. Unlike middle management positions in other vocations, academic middle managers are part time – they are expected to retain serious engagement with their field – and temporary: they are expected to return to full time academe after one or two terms of three to five years. The long term promotion prospects for almost all academic staff, including those who for a time might serve as head of their department, is in academic promotion. Academic promotion remains overwhelmingly by academic merit as judged by peers.
There are two possible explanations of the difference between the managerial processes and values of senior levels of Australian higher education institutions and the academic values and collegial processes at the middle and lower academic levels of institutions. One explanation would observe a pattern in the progressive professionalisation of university management over the longer term. Only since World War Two have vice-chancellorships been full-time jobs (Moodie, 1995). Deputy and pro vice chancellorships emerged as full-time positions only in the 1980s (Moodie, 2000), and the emergence of managerial deans dates to the 1990s. This analysis would acknowledge that heads of schools are currently quasi collegial appointments, but would foresee their conversion to managerial appointments as the commercialisation of higher education proceeds apace.

An alternative explanation is to posit a disjunction between the managerial processes and values at the higher levels of institutions and the academic values and collegial processes at institutions’ lower levels. The junction of predominantly managerial values imposed from above and predominantly academic values pressed from below is the head of school. However, this explanation would suggest that these posts remain largely academic because academic values and skills are needed to undertake institutions’ core work of teaching and research. The disjunction between managerial and academic values and processes puts heads of schools in a difficult but not impossible position: it is, after all, routine to observe that middle managers are at the crucial interface between policy and implementation in most large organisations.

Academic promotions remain overwhelmingly collegial in process and they largely apply academic judgment. However, Edith Cowan University’s description of the service role as service to the university and enterprise on behalf of the university may presage a reinterpretation of promotion criteria as teaching, research and service that serves the institution’s interests rather than that of the discipline or society more broadly. Thus, several universities’ exposition of the teaching criterion for promotion to level D refer to institutional roles and interests such as subject coordination and curriculum development (Curtin University, 2001; Flinders University, 2002; RMIT, 2002; UTS, 2002) and two universities seek ‘a positive influence on departmental [school/college] teaching as shown by mentoring of colleagues and the promotion of a learning environment’ (Flinders University, 2002; UWS, 2002). Arguably corporate values are starting to infect even academic promotions.

Alternatively, one may argue that teaching and service cannot be conducted and evaluated other than in an institutional context and that therefore it is necessary to include institutional roles in evaluating teaching and service for academic promotion. On this argument Edith Cowan’s new academic promotion criteria are an expansion rather than a reinterpretation of the traditional service role, an expansion signalling not increased managerialism but the increased seriousness with which Edith Cowan is now taking these roles for academic promotion. Again, one could posit a disjunction between academic promotions made on academic criteria – though in an institutional context – and general and senior management promotions which are clearly managerialist.

More evidence is needed to determine whether managerialism is starting to creep into the school level of Australian higher education institutions or whether a disjunction between managerial and academic values and processes is starting to emerge. But perhaps these developments are at least to some extent within the influence of school staff. The institutional interest is in the vitality of schools’ teaching and research, and increasingly, in the vigour of their community service. Clearly these depend on academic judgments for which one traditionally uses collegial processes. At this stage there is no obvious institutional benefit in
these judgments being made at the school level by managerial rather than collegial processes. Indeed, institutions do not yet have any managerialist mechanism or tool for making academic judgments at the school level: there is no performance indicator yet for teaching or research potential. It therefore seems at least possible to maintain strong collegial processes for making most decisions at the school level, which most affect most academics’ lives.

However, in the past collegial processes have been used at the faculty and institutional levels to protect areas that have lost their vitality and viability. They have also been used to protect under performing staff against measures to improve their performance. If collegial processes are used at the school level to protect subjects that become unviable and work practices that become unsustainable, schools will atrophy and managerialist change will again be imposed from above.

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