

**Group of Eight HR Directors Staff Equity Subcommittee Project
Consideration of Merit Relative to Opportunity in Employment-Related Decisions
Discussion Paper**

20 July 2010

This paper recommends a consistent approach to the incorporation of the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* within employment-related decisions for academic and professional staff within the Group of Eight universities (GO8). This paper has been developed by the GO8 HR Directors Staff Equity Subcommittee as a GO8 HR Directors project and is sponsored by Bob Farrelly from The University of Western Australia.

Executive Summary

Australian universities face considerable challenges relating to the sustainability and development of the workforce, particularly the academic workforce. These challenges include an ageing academic workforce, the Federal Government's new participation and equity agenda, the different approach taken by Generation X staff to careers, and the under-utilisation of highly educated and talented women and members of other under-represented groups. With an increasingly global employment market, strategies to ensure competitive attraction and retention will best position GO8 universities for the future. Failure to address these issues will compromise the capacity of GO8 institutions to achieve excellence in innovation, teaching, research and community engagement.

In contemporary universities, the traditional norm of full-time work and an uninterrupted, linear career trajectory no longer matches the profile of many staff, particularly those with established professional careers, significant external responsibilities, or with needs that demand accommodation in the workplace. The principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* in employment and performance-related decision making provides the Australian university sector with the opportunity to create workplace cultures that attract and retain the very best staff with a diverse range of personal characteristics, employment arrangements and career histories.

In contrast with a 'special consideration' approach that highlights the negative impact of personal circumstances on performance, *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* facilitates positive acknowledgement of what can be and has been achieved given the opportunities available. It is consistent with a performance development and evaluation framework in which the overall quality and impact of contributions and achievements is given more weight than the quantity, rate or breadth of particular achievements. It is not about diluting quality but rather re-examining the concept of merit (traditionally derived from a full-time, uninterrupted, linear career history), the associated normative expectations regarding the quantity, rate, consistency and breadth of outputs, and how these productivity factors may be affected by personal circumstances and working arrangements. For the purpose of this paper, use of the term "merit" requires awareness of

both participation in opportunities to amass merit (typically provided for in policies concerning workload allocation, and performance planning and development) *and* the evaluative judgement of merit (as provided for in policies regarding recruitment and selection, promotion, performance evaluation, and access to grants and awards, for example).

While some GO8 universities have incorporated the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* within selected employment-related policies and procedures, adoption and application is uneven and there is some uncertainty regarding disclosure and treatment of relevant circumstances. This paper therefore recommends a consistent approach to the application of the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* across the GO8 universities. This activity is consistent with the goals of the *GO8 Strategic Plan 2008-2012* to facilitate collaboration and to share information and views within the Group.

Recommendations

The GO8 HR Directors Staff Equity Subcommittee recommends that:

- GO8 HR Directors support a program of activities to incorporate the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* into all employment and performance-related decisions within GO8 institutions. Such a program would be expected to include senior commitment to the concept and its implementation, and the incorporation of the principle within relevant policies (including academic promotions, recruitment and selection, workload allocation, performance planning and evaluation, career development and progression, internal grants, awards, programs such as sabbatical/study leave and campus-wide comparisons of research output and activity).
- GO8 HR Directors support the development and publication within all GO8 institutions of (a) guidelines for staff seeking consideration of merit relative to opportunity, (b) guidelines for supervisors on incorporating consideration of merit relative to opportunity in all performance planning and workload allocation, and (c) guidelines for decision makers on how to assess merit relative to opportunity.
- GO8 Secretariat take action on behalf of their institutions to lobby external research granting bodies to recognise and take account of the impact of contemporary employment practices such as paid time for caring, career mobility, and flexible employment such as part-time work. It is recommended Go8 HR Directors put this request to the Go8 Secretariat and their Research Director colleagues to pursue.

Background

The Australian higher education sector is facing a number of challenges in terms of the sustainability and development of its academic workforce. Monitoring demographic trends within the higher education workforce, Hugo (2005) argues that Australian universities have an older age structure than the broader workforce. It is estimated that over the next five years, 24% of senior academics (Associate Professors Level D and Professors Level E) will retire and another 23% will follow in the following five year period. Australian universities are therefore likely to face a potential shortfall of qualified staff due the looming retirement of a large number of academics (Coates, et al 2009).

This shortfall of qualified staff will be exacerbated by the Federal Government's new participation and equity agenda which seeks to see 40% of all 25-34 year olds attain an undergraduate degree by 2025 (Australian Government, 2009). The move from 'mass' to 'universal' participation will place more demands on institutions to find suitable replacements for those retiring from academia and to grow their staffing base.

A recent study examining the attitudes and priorities of Generation X academics found that the long hours work culture traditionally associated with academia is under threat from this cohort who greatly value work-life balance. This research also suggests that when it comes to long-term career plans, Gen X academics are less interested in picking up their lives and families to pursue academic glory elsewhere, preferring instead a 'roots not rungs' approach. That is, they are more interested in establishing roots and building communities rather than climbing the career ladder (Helms, 2010). These findings have implications for future staffing arrangements in universities.

Other research notes that the current lack of diversity within the academic workforce, particularly at the senior levels and in disciplines such as science, engineering and technology, represents "a significant waste of human capital" (Bell, 2009: 29). Universities are not fully utilising or are failing to retain certain groups of staff (for example, highly educated and talented women) compromising the capacity of these institutions to achieve their stated goals.

One solution to these problems is the greater involvement and participation of women and other under-represented groups. Hugo maintains that the Australian academic workforce is noted not only for its ageing workforce profile but also for the under-representation of women, particularly at senior levels. While there have been improvements to the gender balance of academic staff, the Australian academic workforce is still one of the least balanced between males and females. Hugo states that "...demographic trends make it even more imperative that universities involve women to a much greater extent than in the past, purely from the perspective of the need to recruit sufficient high quality academics to replace the loss over the next decade" (2005:341).

Despite 25 years of federal and state equal opportunity legislation, the efforts of senior leadership and the introduction of institutional policies and programs, Australian universities continue to struggle with the achievement of equal opportunity. Much of the current literature argues that organisational norms continue to conceptualise the 'ideal worker' as someone who has no outside responsibilities to interfere with a commitment to work. Certain groups, including women, people with disabilities and Indigenous staff may be less able to comply with these formal and informal norms and therefore less likely to accrue achievements at the expected rate. Equity interventions must engage with basic work practices and processes and the norms that underlie them, in order to re-vision them in ways that are more inclusive and effective for organisations (Kolb et al, 1998).

One example of an equity intervention is the application of the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity*. An investigation of promotion policies and practices within Australian universities, sponsored by *Universities Australia* and undertaken by the National Colloquium of Senior Women Executives in Higher Education, found that policies which take into account career interruptions, part-time work and non traditional career paths are likely to enhance both women's and men's participation and success in the promotions process. The report recommends that all Australian universities include in promotions policies and guidelines *explicit* mention of promotion opportunities for part-time staff and directions for assessing non-traditional careers (Winchester et al, 2005).

The *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* principle provides the GO8 institutions with the opportunity to create workplace cultures that attract and retain the very best staff with a diverse range of personal characteristics, employment arrangements and career histories. It will also enhance their capacity to achieve the strategic goals of internationally-competitive excellence in research and innovation.

Understanding the Principle of *Consideration of Merit Relative to Opportunity*

Consistent with their obligations under equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation, universities have adopted the practice of merit-based assessment in employment-related decisions including appointments, access to career development and progression, and promotion. When evaluating merit within universities, the following factors are usually taken into account:

- the **quality** and **impact** of achievements, and whether these are consistent with expectations of performance at the relevant academic or professional staff level
- the overall **productivity** of achievements, including the quantity, rate, or consistency of achievements over time, and relative output across various areas.

While assessment based on merit might appear to be a fair and objective system for evaluating achievements, it becomes problematic when the conceptualisation of merit itself is imbued with a narrow and notional standard of performance. Traditional academic notions of merit have been based on the idea of a worker who has consistently been

available to work full time and has had an uninterrupted and linear career history (Cockburn 1991).

In contemporary universities, this traditional norm of (more than) full-time hours and an uninterrupted, linear career history no longer matches the profile of many staff, particularly those who come to the academy from an established professional career, with significant caring responsibilities or with disability. Universities now comprise staff with a diverse range of personal circumstances, career histories, and working arrangements. Relevant circumstances may include:

- Carer responsibilities for children, elderly parents, or ill family members
- Ill-health, impairment or medical conditions, whether temporary, episodic or permanent
- Part-time or flexible working arrangements
- Career interruptions and delays such as parental leave, time out for work in a different field and/or late entry to academia

Personal circumstances or working arrangements may affect career performance and progression because they affect the overall *time available* for employment-related activities and the capacity to undertake certain *types* of activity. These, in turn, may affect *productivity* (the quantity and rate of output) over time. All of these factors contribute to the accumulation of merit.

In contrast with a “special consideration” approach that highlights the negative impact of personal circumstances on performance, *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* facilitates **positive acknowledgement of what can be and has been achieved given the opportunities available**. It provides a performance development and evaluation framework in which the overall quality and impact of achievements is given more weight than the quantity, rate or breadth of particular achievements. It is not about diluting academic quality but rather re-examining the concept of merit and the associated normative expectations regarding quantity, rate, consistency and breadth of outputs.

Application of *Consideration of Merit Relative to Opportunity* in Employment-related Decisions

When the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* is included within employment policies and practices, individuals are invited to disclose relevant professional/personal circumstances and working arrangements. Employment-related decision makers are then provided with the opportunity to give appropriate consideration to these circumstances or arrangements and the effect they can have and have had on overall time available, the quantum or rate of productivity, the opportunity to participate in certain types of activities and the consistency of activities or output over the period of consideration.

Decision makers (such as supervisors or decision-making panels) can then appropriately plan for performance and make merit-based assessments that privilege the assessment of

quality, ensure that all relevant standards have been met, and take into account how individual circumstances can affect opportunity and productivity during a given period. When consideration is given to the opportunities that are available to accrue merit, individuals can be assessed fairly and holistically on a “whole-of-career” basis. This is to avoid inadvertent assessment against a notional standard of full-time, uninterrupted career progression where this does not apply. In this way, staff can be assessed on an individual basis in terms of how well they meet the relevant expectations and not on a comparative basis with other individuals in the pool. When decision makers are required to make comparisons between individuals (for example, in recruitment) the tendency to privilege the individual with the “most merit” should be avoided when the opportunities to accrue merit are not evenly distributed amongst the individuals.

Some examples of how employment decision makers have treated merit relative to opportunity are provided below:

- In an annual formal performance planning discussion, a staff member with part-time work due to caring responsibilities negotiates with their supervisor about workload and duties. They agree a plan outlining activities and performance goals, consistent with the academic level and part-time status, which will enable the staff member to further their career achievements across the breadth of academic endeavour.
- A staff member returns to work after a period of parental leave. This “career interruption” has affected research productivity both during the leave period and immediately afterwards as they re-establish research projects and networks. This time is accounted for when assessing the staff member’s overall productivity during this period.
- A part-time staff member describes how their attendance on campus for only three days a week allows them to make significant and ongoing contributions to a limited number of roles and committees within their faculty and discipline. In assessment, the staff member’s sustained and high quality service is acknowledged and they are not penalised for a lack of breadth of service.
- A staff member with sole caring responsibilities for their elderly parents is limited in their capacity to present at international conferences but lists a high citation rate for a small but appropriate number of publications in prestigious journals. Based on a holistic assessment, the academic promotions panel determines that the applicant has demonstrated the appropriate quality and impact of performance in the overall criterion of “research” and the staff member is not penalised for a relatively lower output in any single research-related activity or for their overall research output.
- A part-time professional staff member applying for a position at a higher HEW level demonstrates that their achievements are consistent, on a pro rata basis, with the expectations of performance that apply at that level to full time members of staff.
- A staff member describes how a significant illness in the years immediately prior to their promotion application has affected their overall productivity. In assessing the application consistent with a “whole of career” approach where there is not a requirement for a consistent level or type of contribution every single year, the panel acknowledges that performance of the requisite quality has been demonstrated, although recent output has been affected by personal circumstances.

- A candidate for a postdoctoral position is successfully selected following a positive assessment of their achievements. Despite constraints imposed by only being able to access part-time teaching, a delayed start to their postgraduate studies and the obligation to take a break from studies due to family ill health, the quality of the applicant's achievements was very high although the quantity was less than the unsuccessful candidates.
- A professional staff member competes for a higher level position. They more than meet the selection criteria and have highly relevant employment experience, despite having had significant time out of the workplace for caring responsibilities and some periods of working part time. The panel takes the applicant's employment history and personal circumstances into account when assessing their achievements and relevant experience and determines they are the best person for the role, despite the fact that another applicant with an unbroken career path on full-time hours had a greater opportunity to accrue merit.

Recommendations

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