What academics think about regular reviews of performance

Regular reviews of individual performance were an enevasive issue only two years ago. Following the release of the Throsby Report on the future of the University, and the creation of Academic Committee meetings, the issue of regular reviews with the issue of absolute tenure, seeking regular reviews as collecting evidence to revew tenure of staff. Yet the question of the extent of tenure and reviews is not necessarily linked.

Pressures for more public accountability are relatively new in Australian universities, although there has always been some form of accountabilty. At least in some institutions, the procedure at the point of selection for a position, when applying for promotion, is a supplement to the interviews and, or for research grants, and when submitting articles or other writings for publication.

The debate about the possibility and regularity of regular reviews might happen either by government offices or by internal adoption of the principles and practice. The debate in the public community of scholars frequently and regularly subject themselves to some form of peer review. Others, once they reach a "comfortable" peer position look little or no feedback for performance. There are any competitive activities, whether applied research or refereed publications, or grants or anything else. Internal accountability is not a demand which the institution institutes in only implicit in the review procedures.

At the University of Queensland a regular review of faculty, promoting and other aspects of the academic work of academic staff was approved in 1981 and formalized in 1983. The Academic Committee of the University, a group of staff were subjected to regular evaluations by the head of department. These informal reviews were designed to ensure that only the best get tenure after five years, i.e., also, and in addition, other criteria are met. In the annual appraisals the focus is on achievements and future objectives, and how assistance might be provided.

The debate in this University about the possibility and regularity of regular reviews was in 1981, I presume, as emotive as anywhere else. The staff Association at that stage seemed to have elicited more than the mass of academics seemed unconcerned and did not seem to regard the recommendations of the Throsby Report as a threat to their personal autonomy.

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II. Positive effects of reviews

2.3 Enliven the department, HoD to

2.4 Excellence and qualities of academic... would keep people on their toes,

Positive effect spreading from university.

A further question asked:

Generally improved performance,

What effects, do you think,

Clearer idea of and realisation of departmental goals.

Skills and workload.

Increase motivation and morale of staff.

some departments, at higher levels, in some departments

Pressure effect on staff as beneficial.

 aumento of people who actually...

bureaucratisation and more centralised control.

Increase productivity, this might decrease the quality of teaching and/or research.

The University looks for research - one area

It is clear from the above that staff are not very enthusiastic about reviews. Therefore, whatever the purpose of the reviews may be, it must be clearly defined before implementation.

It is the purpose of reviews to focus on one's strengths and weaknesses, and to the main missions of the university: research and teaching.

Staff themselves in answering the question of whether regular reviews and what effects they thought reviews might have, expressed many conditions under which a system of regular reviews might work, conditions which would prevent negative effects occurring, or would at least minimise them.

IV. Conditions which favour the acceptance of reviews of individual performance

From the interviews it can be con­cluded that this group of staff members - those that took very seriously the idea that reviews could be very threatening for experience from 1 year to 10 years, and in experience of tertiary education institutions in countries - is so diverse that no set of conditions will make any type of review acceptable to all.

A number of questions must be answered satisfactorily and a set of conditions must be fulfilled if staff are to cooperate with and openess to the reviews are sought. Each question will be answered by relating point staff made to these issues and then I will comment on them.

(1) Why conduct a review?

The purpose of the review needs to be clear without hidden agenda. The following points may have been considered in the interviews:

The motives of the administration should be perceived as justifiable.

This means that political and ideological considerations do not enter into the review but that the purposes are those for which the institutions were established.

The perceived potential negative effects of reviews have to be taken seriously and the proposed methods have to be checked

to ensure that they would not break or make academic life unstable.

Instead of increasing productivity this might decrease the quality of teaching and/or research.

The Department would pay more attention towards areas and... would have a small minority of people who

human resource management and centralised control were the main targets.

Some were very sceptical that a review would be conducted so the effect of this would be negative.

People who were concerned about their work would think. They came to believe that there would be no effect on those who try to get away with the minimum possible or are indifferent to the whole system which skews them from any disciplinary actions.

The perceived potential negative effects of reviews have to be taken seriously and the proposed methods have to be checked to ensure that they would not break or make academic life unstable.

Thus those questions combine a number of arguments, for and against reviews in universities, and are often extensions of the previous discussions.

Negative effects mentioned by respondents were grouped into the following categories:

No of mentions

Negative Effects of reviews:

1. On individual performance, security,

30 of respondents favour regular reviews, yet they are very aware of the potential damage they can do - to individual staff, to relationships within depart­ments, and to the overall missions of the university: research and teaching.

It is clear that the majority of re­pondents favour regular reviews, yet they are very aware of the potential damage they can do - to individual staff, to relationships within depart­ments, and to the overall missions of the university: research and teaching.

On the other hand people would

Sometimes one would receive on one's strengths and weaknesses.

This group of staff members that did not see reviews as potential threats to free and serious commitment to teaching and research.

The acceptance of reviews should not just be a confirmation of the purposes of reviews.

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It is possible that the majority of re­pondents favour regular reviews, yet they are very aware of the potential damage they can do - to individual staff, to relationships within depart­ments, and to the overall missions of the university: research and teaching.
should be assured that dismissal will not result from reviews but only from individuals who fail to meet the criteria set. The reviews must be reflected in the way the review is conducted and the results reviewed.

1.2 The purpose must be specific and openly stated relationship with the process of the review, the outcomes and implementation.

1.3 The purpose should be explained to staff, perhaps in the context of professionalism, accountability, or responsibility.

(2) Who should evaluate?

Academic staff are used by peers, promotion rounds, journal referee- ing, and an institutional peer. Grant applications are based on the presence of a referee. The question is whether a person should evaluate who?

Some argued that a referee should have a hierarchical relationship, i.e., one who is not employed by the same institution. Others argued that a referee should have a peer relationship or be a member of the same discipline.

Who should evaluate an academic staff member?

The question of who should evaluate an academic staff member was debated. Some argued that the Head of Department or another person within the department should evaluate. Others argued that an external referee should evaluate.

1.4 The purpose must be credible and compelling relationship with the process of the review, the outcomes and implementation.

1.5 The purpose should be explained to staff, perhaps in the context of professionalism, accountability, or responsibility.
Regular reviews could give the University a chance to demonstrate that institutional expectations of staff and individual career expectations can harmonize, that the University in fact is interested in the development of its staff. They could also demonstrate that the University respects staff autonomy and encourages, not stifles, experimentation and innovation; that academic freedom is not being steamrolled by a bureaucratic machinery but can flourish within the context of professional accountability.

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Letter to the Editor

Dr Brown's letter to the editor (Vestes, 27(8), 1985 commenting on University Act, 37(11) demonstrates some of the pitfalls which have trapped commentators into inferring inequality of opportunity from unequal representation of men and women on university staff. The first of these is created by ignoring the population from which appointments are made. Dr Brown argues that if a prerequisite for a position is a PhD, the appropriate comparison is between the proportion of PhDs and the proportion of positions going to women. One cannot easily expect, however, that women and men would be equally represented in those tenured positions which did not require a PhD. Presumably, other qualitative requirements would be involved, and it is no doubt true that a larger proportion of say, master's degrees, goes to men than to women. Another factor which must be taken into account is the disciplines in which degrees are awarded, since there is a paucity of women in the physical sciences.

The second pitfall relates to the period of comparison between degrees awarded and new appointments. Twenty years ago one-quarter of tenured appointments to the faculties at the ANU and not yet earned their highest degree, but did so after appointment. This situation has virtually disappeared. Moreover, having earned one's degree it now takes longer to gain a tenured appointment. The