Performance appraisal of university academics: issues and implications

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The current concern with declining financial resources in Australian universities has, in turn, given rise to a preoccupation with increased efficiency and effectiveness. Increasingly, the efficiency and effectiveness of university departments as a whole is being examined: individual departments in various universities have been the subject of departmental reviews. A second level at which efficiency and effectiveness may be examined is, of course, at the level of the individual academic. Most Australian universities in Australia have considered instituting procedures for staff development to enhance the efficiency of individual academic staff members. Some universities have found it necessary to institute staff development procedures as an aid to improving their performance.

Performance appraisal

A staff appraisal is defined as a process by which an organisation obtains feedback about the effectiveness of its employees. Important objectives of performance appraisal include:

- provision of adequate feedback to employees in the form of performance reviews;
- providing management with data which may be used to judge future job performance.

While the question of staff development seems to have passed generally in positive terms (by, for example, involving the individual academic in initiating and implementing decisions relevant to teaching and other duties), the question of individual performance review (to the extent it is performance appraisal) has caused some unrest amongst academic staff. At the time of writing, it is uncertain whether the policy has moved from its earlier position of implementable opposition to implementation for individual academic staff members to something of a policy hiatus. It is largely arguable that the policy will not at the moment oppose performance appraisal procedures provided that acceptable guidelines under which performance appraisal will proceed can be established. These guidelines have yet to be formulated.

This paper explores issues and implications relating to the introduction of formal performance appraisal of individual academic staff in universities from the viewpoint of general management theory and practice. It will be suggested that, conducted under the proper conditions, performance appraisal can be beneficial to the academic department as well as the university. But there is also potential for the adverse use of performance appraisal procedures and the information gained from them.

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Consideration of the performance appraisal process must be undertaken by considering the following matters:

- Appraisal of what?
- Appraisal by whom?
- Frequency of appraisal
- Communication of appraisal
- Major problems
- Designing an appraisal system

These matters will be considered in turn.

Appraisal of what?

Appraisal of an academic's performance is concerned with exploring what he or she does and whether he or she does it properly. Appraisal must be a continuous process, and the level of performance must be measured against measurable standards. The appraisal of academic performance should be designed to identify an individual's performance and help to identify what aspects of performance to measure. The terms which can be measured differ from discipline to discipline. These areas are:

- individual task outcomes (e.g., number of work items completed, tests done, papers written, etc.);
- individual teaching and research actions taken in discharged one's duties (e.g., research plans, teaching load, etc.);
- individual tasks (e.g., intelligence, attitudes, initiative, expectations, skills, etc.).

It must be recognised that some task outcomes will be beyond the control of an individual academic. For example, a research project might depend on team collaboration or the success of a research proposal, or a teaching outcome might depend on the cooperation of other staff in the university.

references

2. ibid., p. 207.
11. ibid., p. 254.
13. ibid., p. 17.
The communication of the outcome of an appraisal usually occurs between an interview between the appraiser and the appraisee. The appraisal interview should also be an opportunity for the appraisee to reflect honestly upon, and discuss, the opportunity thus arise for providing feedback on performance. Without this feedback employees might not be expected to improve their performance. Where the appraisal process is feeding into staff development purposes, in particular, the provision of appropriate feedback is critical.

Annual appraisals should be structured to encourage the appraisee to reflect upon their actual performance as an opportunity to plan for future performance. An annual appraisal process in which the appraisee as a regular colleague of the appraiser is fed from the process is likely to be viewed with suspicion by the appraisee because the appraiser is expected to have expertise of performance.

The process of planning and implementing an appraisal system is particularly important to a university environment. Staff are usually given considerable freedom in discharging their duties. In addition, their training develops in them a disposition to independence, which can make appraisal systems thus trustful. It is not unusual to distribute negative feedback to the employee and do not provide sufficient feedback to the employee to adapt the feedback received.

Appraisals after long time intervals are also more likely to be prone to appraisal errors such as the "recency" effect discussed above.

It has been observed that where the major objective of the appraisal interview is to motivate the employee to improve his/her performance, reliance on the feedback of the employee would be effective. Rather, it is suggested that appraisals should be used to give specific and frequent feedback to the employee throughout the year, not just once in a formal appraisal interview.

The frequency of the appraisal interview is important to appraising academic and non-academic work. Academic work is task related; process related appraisal is not uncommon, e.g., the opportunity for assessment). Is the margin only occasional. In terms of the independent individual would be infrequent — a factor which should be taken into account when designing the performance appraisal system.

Fairness and accuracy of the review process are often of greatest importance to the employee. This is an important concept in performance appraisal. Results of a review of both the review process and the performance appraisal results can be of great importance in determining the quality of a review.

Failure to keep in mind that appraisal schemes which involve numerical rating systems are subjective and should be given with caution. Further, across an organization, the subjective judgment of the appraiser may differ. Some appraisers who are keen on pleasing their superiors may primarily rely on performance and not on individual performance. Other appraisers may also rely on personal relationships and not on objective data. In the appraisal process the needs of the employee for self-esteem and self-confidence are important. The appraisal process can thus be viewed as a self-esteem and self-confidence process.

Too many appraisal forms can sap the enthusiasm of the appraiser for maintaining an attitude that the employee is perceived to be as a person, not just as a performance machine. This need will be effectively dealt with if the employee is appraised by someone he/she feels comfortable with and who can provide feedback on the employee.

Major problems

Performance appraisal programmes can encounter problems for various reasons. Some potential problems are:

- Emphasis on strengths which the employee can build upon rather than weaknesses to be corrected.
- Avoiding suggesting ways of changing the employee's work habits.
- The feedback given is too general or too vague to be of any useful to the employee.
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In order to improve the appraisal process, it is important to have clear and concise expectations of the employee. These expectations should be based on measurable criteria, which can be objectively evaluated. The appraisal process should be designed to be fair and objective, and to provide feedback to the employee. However, there may be some limitations on the feedback that can be provided to the employee. The feedback provided should be specific and clear, and should be based on observable and measurable criteria.
Education in the computer industry

The rapid growth of the information industry in the past thirty years has been reflected in an ever-rising demand for the teaching of computer-related skills at all levels of the educational system. Despite the impact of new technologies on the world economy since 1970, information technology has continued to expand. As a result, the computer skills gap in the Japanese market, particularly in the area of higher-level skills and education, has become a serious concern. In the past, the market for computer skills was dominated by large companies, but now it is becoming more diverse. The demand for computer skills is expected to grow in the future.

Supply and demand in the computer specialist workforce

Peter Senker, a long-time student of the training industry in Britain, notes the conflict between the short-term demands of industry and the need for governments to pursue long-term strategic goals. In Japan, however, the government has created important incentives to improve the supply of education and training. An educated workforce is essential for companies to remain competitive in the global market. The rapid growth of the information industry has created a demand for skilled workers. To meet this demand, employers are increasingly investing in education and training programs.

References

2. The change in FAUSA policy arose in part out of recognition that despite its principle of opposition to government performance appraisal, such policies might be incidental to or outweighed by other factors in the university system, and perhaps out of frustration that in times of financial stress and resource constraints, some efforts to improve staff effectiveness are reasonable.
3. As at June 1986. This question will be addressed at the FAUSA Annual General Meeting in August 1986.
5. Ibid., p. 228.
8. Some possible approaches to assessing the impact of academic restructuring is left for future research.