The professionalisation of Australian academic administration

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This paper considers the pressures for and early development of professionalisation of Australian academic administration. It argues that there has been no steady or unambiguously professionalisation of Australian academic administration, and that a period of professionalisation in the 1960s was not sustained. There have been a number of issues unresolved for academic administration, which lacks a solid body of knowledge, a well-defined level of expertise and an interdisciplinary theory which supports its current role. The relative weakness of academic administration is considered desirable by many faculty, and is not a serious disadvantage in a stable, benign environment. However, in an unstable and threatening environment, professionalisation management may be more effective in preserving academic values than reverting to a fictional ideal of 'collégiality'.

Pressures for professional academic administration

The professionalisation of the academic administration of Australian universities originated in the first few decades of this century. It may be marked from 1920 by a resolution of the first meeting of the Australian Universities Association (AUAA) in 1923, and its revival in the 1950s which led to the formation of the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee in 1957. The pressure for administrative reform has been felt in a number of ways, and has led to the establishment of a number of committees and the implementation of a number of reforms.

Conclusion

As a result of the foregoing, the following can be identified as vital periods and issues in the last few years:

- to provide an accessible and appropriate range of planned programs and activities to meet the needs of new and continuing members of academic staff, and to provide an 'academic staff as well';
- to maintain flexibility in order to meet unexpected demands and to provide the necessary orientation which supports academic staff in the discharge of their responsibilities and fulfillment of their professional potential;
- to act as a catalyst in raising awareness about significant trends and issues in universities in the context of methods of teaching, changed administrative structures and responsibilities, the needs and demands of the university community, and significant changes and opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region, and the need for continuing lifelong learning;
- to model excellence in teaching and research within the institution;
- to advocate and embody the best elements of a traditional university culture and ideals (such as the celebration of diversity, and informed critical debate) but without opposing reactionary or becoming marginal to the central concerns of the institution's mission;
- to develop a sufficiently high profile to that teachers, administration, students, and the broader community take account of the staff development implications of their actions, and seek the advice and help of staff developers as appropriate.

References


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grounds that if universities cannot be demonstrated, at least their rating oligarchies should be greatly weakened (Serie 1963, p. 12). Two, three and sometimes four chairs were slowly established in the larger departments from the 1960s (Partridge 1962, p. 92) but the signal reform was achieved a decade later in 1972 with the passing of the degree of seniority at the University of Melbourne. Despite their prominence and importance in university organisation, departments are not generally formally constituted in university statutes or by-laws, and remain an extension of the professor. Melbourne's departmental structure established departments with standing and power from their professor and provided for their head to be elected by the tenured teaching staff from among themselves and of the academic staff of senior lecturer and above.

In the 1960s the Committee proposed (p. 89) that:

"Each large department should have an efficient secretariat to keep a watchful eye on routine matters including equipment and finance. In the larger departments the secretaries should be recruited in head technicans, or perhaps, business managers, who would order supplies, etc.

This has now been achieved and the organisation of departments has improved accordingly. However, the contribution of general staff to the management of academic departments has been hardly recognised (Burtin 1967). Peter Burtin (1965) p. 14 observed recently that:

"As a former academic, now working in the private sector for eight years, it seems painfully clear to me how underestimated and undervalued the contribution of the general staff...".

At present, academic secretaries are better resourced, better trained and more meaningfully involved in departmental staff meetings, but their contribution is not only to the teaching of students but also to the efficiency of academic staff. Unfortunately, however, many of these secretaries seem to function simply as a sort of 1950s style receptionist (sum personal assistant/guest). The fact that these people take on most of the burden of day-to-day student administration is taken for granted, and not appreciated by many academic staff.

Departments' full-time administrative staff remain predominantly junior appointments (Castellan et al. 1961, p. 67) and are not primarily concerned with managing a professional corps with an acknowledged specialisation or expertise and having a defined career structure.

In the mid-1960s all staff, with the occasional exceptions of deans of medicine, were part-time, appointed in rotation from the hands of the faculty. (Burtin 1967, p. 212). During this period that lectures were serving for rotating chairs of departments. Vice-Chancellors argued for the replacement of rotating chairs with permanent full-time appointments (Rose 1960, Mathews 1970, p. 20) during this period.

This argument remains to be won in many universities.

Professorial boards were described by the Murray Committee as lacking in vigour and having lost hope (1957, p. 55). Partridge (1960, p. 58) refers to "the overgrown, disorderly, imbecilic professorial boards. Academic boards and senate have hardly become professionalised since, and their professorial role of academic decision-making has been reduced to a bare minimum in University of Melbourne. But this is not a particularly new development. Deputy Vice-Chancellors were appointed in most universities in the early 1960s (Martin Committee 1961).

The Martin Committee recommended the appointment, in addition to a Registrar, of a "senior permanent officer designated perhaps as the Bursar or Business Manager" (1964, p. 88). This has been well and truly implemented, it would seem, but such evidence as there is suggests that this is certainly comprehensible to general staff. The proportion of general staff has fallen since the 1960s at the University of New South Wales at least, from the figures given by Burtin and Myers (1965, p. 14).

There has been a slight fall in the proportion of general staff employed in higher education since 1988 (Martin Committee 1995, p. 4). Most are employed at level (N7) in 1995 less than 30% of general staff were appointed above Higher Education Officer (HEO) level 6, which is about lecturer level A and the level for which a degree is normally required, and less than 10% of general staff were employed at HEO level B. However, that is below the level of 1995 (Martin Committee 1995, p. 33). The higher status level is achieved by the lack of a career structure, and the general lack of formality, even work-based training, means that general staff are long distant from forming a corps of professional administrators.

Issues

Since the Murray Committee reported in 1957 the appointed "god- professor" has been replaced by an elected chair of department. The rotating dean has been replaced by a full-time appointed dean in some but not by any means all universities. There has been a consonant trend of professionalisation in the faculties, but the careers of academic staff are less subject to the individual judgements of heads of academic organisational units than they were 30 years ago. The explosion of committees and committee processes in the 1970s has been wound back in most universities, but committees remain for more extensive and influential than they were in the mid-1960s when the Martin Committee recommended the establishment of standing and ad hoc committees of professorial boards (1964, p. 89). The net effect has been a reduction of the personal power of the heads of academic organisational units and a transfer of autonomy in academic administration from individual heads as paticular office bearers to groups in the form of committees.

The authority of the Vice-Chancellor has generally increased within universities, certainly, but this is as much at the expense of the power of the Chancellor, an honorary office, as of the autonomy of faculty staff. This was evident from the power struggle at the University of Melbourne in the 1970s when R.D. ("Fairy") Wright, a distinguished Emeritus Professor of Veterinary Physiology, eventually achieved his ambition of becoming Chancellor of the University of Melbourne at the age of 75, whilst being elected President of the University of Sydney is consistent with this interpretation (Illing 1995, p. 3), and are surprisingly consistent to the extent that The University of Melbourne of two decades earlier.

Academics have won considerable autonomy since the 1960s, and have preserved much of these gains even since the White Paper. This is valued by most faculty, and despite the frustration of reformers, it is not a serious disadvantage to a liberal, benign environment. However, this higher education environment is becoming increasingly unpredictable, largely through its increasing reliance on commercial sources of funding.

The reports of the review of the current Prime Minister on higher education, suggestions of large cuts in Commonwealth funding and the management of the proposed review of higher education, have been an ever threatening environment. In such an environment strong professional management may be more effective in preserving academic values than reverting to an idea of 'colligibility' which is largely fiction.

Commonwealth within universities 'the administration' refers variously to the central service units such as student administration and finance branch which are formally appointed executive officers of the university such as business manager, business manager, /vice-chancellor. But this general staff and the officers of the Vice-Chancellor and the variously prefixed (deputy, pro, associate, etc) offices which are the most senior in the university are not mainly administrative or business staff. These staff and their colleagues in the faculty deans are identified as academic administrators - faculty registrars, faculty and departmental administrative officers, deans and heads of departments - have different backgrounds, different industrial conditions and different ethos from the professional management. This relationship of administrative involvement is almost as much now as they did a quarter of a century ago (James Bailey 1959, p. 29; Wheat 1970, p. 250).

Neither the 'academic' committees in universities refer to a body of practitioners who identifies and is identified as a group with common interests and special knowledge and expertise. Academic administration therefore has a difficulty in the traditional sense (Linstead 1977), nor, indeed, in their modern, bureaucratised form.