

# What is good policy writing?

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# Factors leading to this research

- Previous workshop on how to write policy in 2008
- Section on drafting policy in *Policy without (much) pain* guide - we advocated:
  - clarity
  - concision
  - plain English
  - student-friendly language in student-facing policies
- Professional writing has arguably become a key topic in university professional staff development
- The challenge of implementation/communication.

# What we did

We asked policy managers at 30 Australasian institutions (institutional policy network members) to:

- provide an example of a well written policy
- explain why they considered it well written, and
- reflect on the attributes of well written policy.

# Overview of responses

- 26 responded
- 23 offered policy texts as examples of well written policy
- respondents offered between 1-6 policy texts each
- a total of 40 texts: 33 policies, 6 procedures, 1 other
- most offered texts they or their units had developed
- a few offered other institutions' texts or in one case an AQF policy.

# Overview of responses

The respondents comprised staff of:

- 23 Australian universities
- 1 New Zealand university
- 1 Australian Institute of TAFE
- 1 New Zealand polytechnic.



# The texts

Examples of well written policy texts covered much of the range of institutional policies:

- 17 academic/student administration texts
- 10 equity/fairness texts
- 8 governance texts
- 5 facilities/resources texts
- ranging from high-level, major policies (including a Policies policy)
- to specific procedures (eg: electrical safety).

# Respondents' reflections

Well written policy should communicate clearly. It should:

- be clear, concise, in plain English (or at least, as clear as the topic permits)
- be user-friendly for those who have to implement it
- 'be written with the policy audience in mind'
- be 'easily understood by the layperson without too much jargon'
- not be unnecessarily long or verbose
- contain only one idea per sentence



# Respondents' reflections *contd*

Well written policy should ensure clarity by:

- being precise, unambiguous, unequivocal
- defining its terms carefully
- using unambiguous verbs (will, is, must)
- identifying who is responsible for the various required actions
- having intuitive layout and structure to facilitate reader navigation – subheadings and formatting

# Respondents' reflections *contd*

Other aspects of good policy writing mentioned by respondents:

- Appropriate levels of detail:
  - Policy should be 'concise, high-level and aspirational'
  - Procedures should provide templates, flowcharts to support implementation
- Texts should make clear their relationship with higher, lower and same-level texts.

# Respondents' reflections *contd*

Policy should not be:

- 'proscriptive and bureaucratic'
- 'overdetermined' (trying to say too many things at once?)
- densely written, legalese, 'lofty'

and should not contain 'waffle and superfluous information'.

# Respondent reflections *contd*

*'I dislike policies that are verbose and those that use complicated language in an effort to convey a sense of importance (perhaps).'*

# How did the samples measure up?

- Most texts were not notably concise
- Some included phrasing that seemed ponderous
- Some had typographical, grammatical and formatting errors.
- Use of verbs to require action varied: 1. *will*, 2. *may*, 3. *must*, 4. *should*
- Texts were not noticeably targeted at a specific audience



# Examples

From an academic integrity policy:

*‘To this end, the University supports the development of student academic integrity skills through a range of approaches, which include both discipline specific education, as well as making available University-wide resources through the Library and providing access to tools that support good academic practice.’*

# Examples

From a credit policy:

*‘Professional and para-professional experience, subsequent professional development activities or training and other experience, through work or life, may be taken into account in the granting of prior informal and non-formal credit, provided that the learning can be documented and the applicant can demonstrate the standard they achieved from participating in these activities is comparable to the standards in the course in which they are seeking credit.’*

# Examples

From another credit policy:

*‘Admission schedules represent equivalences and relativities between different qualifications and learning experiences (non-formal and informal) in terms of fitness for and likelihood of success in university study.’*



# Examples

From a child protection policy:

*‘[the institution] is committed to the regular undertaking of institutional and program/project risk assessments to ameliorate the potential for risks to children.’*

# How did the samples measure up?

- Some examples offered were very succinct, clear and readable, eg. a security policy, policy principles section of a student complaints policy.
- One academic integrity and plagiarism policy was short and readable, but failed to make the key distinction between naive and deliberate plagiarism.
- Most texts fell between the extremes of brevity/clarity and ponderousness, tending towards completeness and a plodding, methodical style.

# More respondent reflections

Many respondents offered reflections more broadly on what good policy should provide:

- demonstration of the University's values, intent and commitment
- clarity of the shared obligations and responsibilities for implementation
- management of risk
- purposeful, setting the agenda for good practices, to get a job done . . .

# More respondent reflections

Good policy should provide:

- a good product of a collegial approach and consultation
- education of users and communication of expectations
- a positive and user-friendly style for student-related policy

# More respondent reflections

Good policy should provide:

- a vehicle for cultural change or to set new frameworks for governance and decision-making
- clarification of complexity
- unambiguous instructions
- discretion/latitude in application

# More respondent reflections

Good policy should provide:

- consequences for breaches or non-compliance
- consistency with legislation where required
- attention to implementation and communication issues
- balancing the ability to *adapt to a changing environment* and address new and emerging needs with being able to write policy that does not require frequent change.

# More respondent reflections

Some respondents were proud of their examples as policies that met an urgent need, 'did the job', overcame challenges, eg. a new policy:

- defining academic structures of the university
- introducing central charging for space
- defining the institution's approach to web page management
- defining all requirements for delegation/authorisation.

# More respondent reflections

One respondent provided this definition of an effective policy:

- **‘accessible** by its intended audience – terms are well defined, language is precise, concise and comprehensible, easy to read
- **clear context and approach** – the purpose of the policy is stated and its relationship to legislation or other policy instruments is identified
- **roles and responsibilities** of all stakeholders are clearly stated in the policy . . .



# More respondent *reflections*

An effective policy *contd*:

- **details** administrative decisions/processes and timelines for those decisions/processes
- **transparent** in terms of the factors/values that guide the decision/process
- **supported** by systems/forms/resources/professional development that facilitate implementation.'

# So what was going on?!

- Why did so many policy managers provide examples of ‘well written’ policies in which the writing was, at best, uninspired and comments which did not address our question about the attributes of good writing?
- In our question we didn’t labour the point that we wanted them to focus on the quality of writing: was our question well enough written?

# So what was going on?!

- Blurring of what is effective policy vs policy writing vs policy development in responses: suggestive that many respondents interpreted the request in terms of well-developed policy.
- A good policy development process does not always lead to a good policy result.

# So what was going on?!

Respondents commented that the following issues impact on policy writing:

- Institutional rules about style/presentation inhibiting substance/intent
- Writing for academic approval bodies rather than for students or for the web
- High workload of writing/reviewing policies
- Borrowing 'good' passages from other institutions' policies without integrating them into our style

# Conclusions (tentative)

- For many policy managers, good policy writing is not a familiar topic – is not easily separated from the larger topic of effective policy and the policy development process.
- Policy writers are perhaps unfamiliar with analysing writing – are more confident at policy thinking.
- Is this is why policies are generally dull to read?



# Conclusions (tentative)

It appears we know what well-written policy should be, so why don't/can't we do it?

- Restrictions of institutional style and templates
- Solicitors' Offices
- Requirements of external legislation
- Policy by consensus and compromise – involvement of approving bodies and stakeholders consulted
- Others . . . ?

# Conclusions (tentative)

*'In my opinion institutional policies in higher education are rarely well written as they are modified through collegial decision-making – they reflect a compromise agreed to by the committee system, they are also often constrained by the views of Executive Management about what constitutes policy and how it should be given expression . . .*



# Conclusions (tentative)

*. . . Often there are multiple stakeholders involved in the policy drafting and development with different understanding of the intended purpose and impact of the policy provisions. Last year I was involved in the review, revision and development, as a drafter, of 54 student and learning and teaching related policies, the sheer volume and the order in which such processes are conducted undermine good policy writing.'*



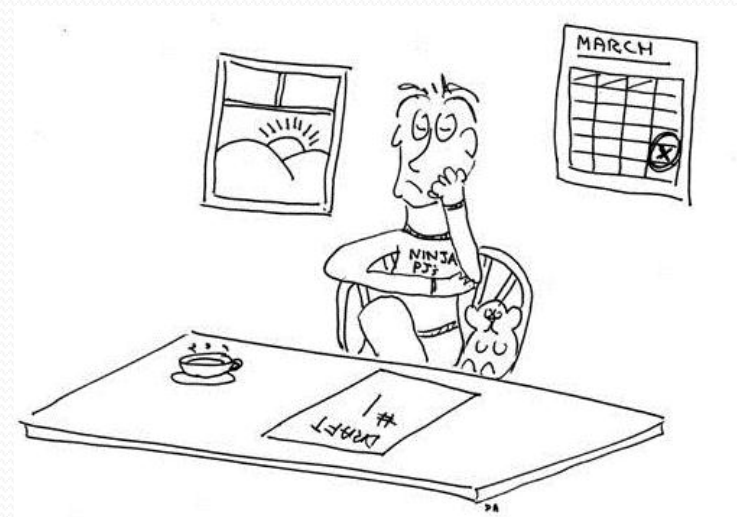
# Conclusions (tentative)

These factors are undoubtedly real, and yet they do not relieve policy developers of our responsibility to write well if we are to:

- communicate effectively with students and staff – particularly those for whom English is an additional language
- engage students and staff with policy in an age of web reading habits and information overload
- engage staff with policy that defines key requirements but leaves scope for professional discretion/ interpretation.

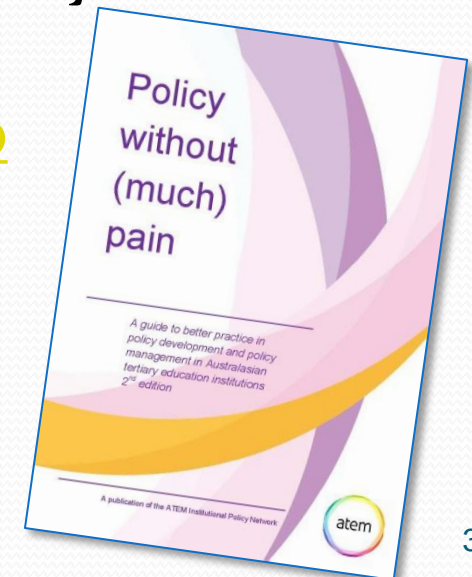
# Conclusions (tentative)

We challenge institutional policy managers to give a higher priority to writing concisely, clearly and with some flair.



# Some good references

- *Policy Without (Much) Pain* guide  
(ATEM Institutional Policy Network)  
[www.atem.org.au/publications/policy-guide](http://www.atem.org.au/publications/policy-guide)
- University of Southern Queensland Policy and Procedure resources:  
<http://policy.usq.edu.au/resources.php>





Thank you for attending.

**Any questions?**

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