Years in the Making: The Introduction of a New Staff Appraisal System

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Twenty-five years ago John Dawkins proposed tertiary education reforms in the "Higher education: a policy discussion paper" green paper. This heralded a movement towards formal systems of staff appraisal in Australian universities. This paper reports the findings of the most recent performance management project undertaken at an Australian research-intensive university. As part of the pilot program, staff completed surveys which provided an understanding of staff's reactions to the new system. The findings suggest that although the majority of the pilot participants were in favour of its introduction, it remains problematic at a practical and organisational culture level.
The formal performance management process had its origins in 1993 and has been in its present form since 2005.   The rationale for the introduction of the current "professional development review" (PDR) was threefold; to design a performance management regime which aligned the goals of the university to the individual career goals of its employees, to provide a vehicle to deliver the human resources policy framework, and to respond to demand from staff for career development and support.   An important principle of the PDR was that it was focused on an employee's development needs and career goals only, rather than an assessment of their performance.   The introduction of the Performance Appraisal Review (PAR) in 2012 completed the cycle of performance management with a formal assessment process.

The pilot of the PAR lasted for five months and five areas (two administrative centres and three faculties) participated. Participants were asked to complete a pre-PAR survey anonymously to gain a deeper understanding of staff's initial reaction to the introduction of a performance appraisal system at UWA. A total of 217 reviewees and 69 reviewers completed the pre-PAR survey, with 62% of reviewees and 83% of reviewers indicating an initial positive response towards the introduction of a performance appraisal system at the University. A total of 83 staff completed a PAR online during the pilot period, of which 11 were academics and 72 were professional staff. The post-PAR survey was completed by 66 reviewees and 19 reviewers. The qualitative data from both surveys indicate that there are significant challenges associated with the introduction of the PAR, ranging from the practical to the organisational culture.

The practical issues relate to aspects of performance management which are commonly understood to be the essential precursors of an appraisal system. These are clear standards and expectations, consistent and fair workload allocation and a complimentary system of reward and recognition. The extent to which these facets of performance management exist is as varied as the many schools and business units of the university. The variation covers nearly the entire spectrum from schools which enact all these principles to those which may espouse some but enact none. In this context, the introduction of the PAR was accompanied by the formation of an academic workload advisory committee and a new university wide reward and recognition policy. While there are existing 'standards for academic levels', they are not adequate for the finer distinction of identifying superior performance. The PAR has provided the impetus for schools to actively identify and articulate their expectations of staff.

In addition to the practical issues, there are a number of indicators of cultural resistance which may inhibit the effective implementation of the PAR. In general, universities are governed by collegial processes and some staff do not feel equipped to give feedback to colleagues, especially to those who later may become the supervisor themselves. Academics especially do not embrace PDR and PAR because they are already involved in peer review processes for research and teaching. Performance management systems are seen as a tool for corporate managerialism, too prescriptive and not useful. Some academics may view them as a direct threat against academic freedom and not a top priority in a competitive climate where only publishing research and winning grants are rewarded. In an environment where critiquing others' work provides the model for academic leadership, the cultural shift to coaching and developing employees seems to prove rather difficult.

The introduction of a new staff appraisal system has been welcomed by many professional and academic staff at the University. Nevertheless, the pilot has highlighted the need for clear standards and expectations, consistent and fair workload allocation, and a complimentary system of reward and recognition. Leadership in higher education institutions must entail motivating and enabling staff to perform at a high standard and achieve results. Essentially this includes providing authentic feedback on the individual's progress towards their own goals and those of the university.