

University Career Management Practices for Academic Staff: A Reality Check?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from the initial stage of a larger study on the career development of older academics. The paper reports the extent to which universities represent organizational career management practices for academic staff on-line and in web-based public documents. The findings highlight that to a certain extent universities express a role in the career management of academics. The selected sample of 16 Australian Universities revealed that on average half of the selected organizational career management practices for academic staff were represented. There was a reasonable degree of variation across universities and different states on the range of organizational career management practices for academic staff. An area of concern may be the limited evidence of retirement preparation and succession planning documents.

Keywords: Human resource development, Human Resource Management Policies and Practices, Human Resource Management and Organisation Performance, Strategic Human Resource Management, Career Management.

Introduction

Universities operate in a global, dynamic and competitive environment. Within this landscape there is dramatic change, compounded by an ageing academic workforce. There are crucial implications for the future sustainability of Australian universities. Key issues relate to human resource management (HRM), knowledge management and the role of the university within advanced, modern societies. For example: How are universities managing their academic workforce? Do universities realize the potential knowledge loss with an ageing academic workforce, and if so, what strategies for the future are in place? What are universities doing to retain the knowledge and skills of their academic workforce? These questions invite our attention for further research. It would seem plausible from a strategic perspective, that universities would harness and maximize the knowledge, skills and experience of their ageing academic workforce by providing a supportive context that continues to foster and value their research, teaching and service contributions. Career management of academic staff is of strategic importance to universities competing on the basis of talent and innovation. But to what extent is this reality?

This paper reports the extent to which universities represent organizational career management practices for academic staff on-line and in web-based public documents and forms part

of a larger study on the career development of older academics. The first section provides the organizational and academic career development contexts. The next sections present the methodology and research findings. The final section discusses issues arising from the findings and outlines the proposed next stage for research.

Universities and the Career Management of Academic Staff

Vignettes: diversity of academic careers

The five short career vignettes below, although speculative, serve to set the scene and present an introduction to the potential issues of managing academic careers. Consider the following situations:

(* denotes an explanation of the type of university follows in the methods section)

Vignette 1: A Professor (Level E), aged 48, within the engineering faculty of an Innovative Research University * (IRU), is highly career motivated. She is considering her next career move options as she is being tempted by lucrative offers from industry.

Vignette 2: An Associate Lecturer (Level A), with over 20 years of industry experience, has entered academia at the age of 46, within the management faculty of an Australian Technology Network * (ATN) university. As part of her conditions of employment, she must undertake a PhD. She is concerned about the juggling act of combining work, study and family commitments.

Vignette 3: A Lecturer (Level B), within the science faculty of a Group of Eight * (Go8) university, has just completed a PhD at age 26. Having been a full-time student since leaving high school, he dreads the idea of spending the next 35 years in academia and desires continual challenges and opportunities for growth and development.

Vignette 4: An academic, aged 53, with over 15 years in academia, gained in several academic postings in Australian and overseas universities, has returned to a position of Senior Lecturer (Level C) within the humanities faculty of a Regional * university. He is beginning to question his drive to succeed and contemplates an early retirement.

Vignette 5: A Senior Lecturer (Level C), aged 50, with nearly 10 years in academia, within the law faculty of a Go8 * university, has had several unsuccessful applications to be promoted to the position of Associate Professor (Level D). She is frustrated by a stalled career with no promotions in sight, but is keen to remain productive.

All the above situations require the individual to actively manage his or her academic career.

However, the role of the university in the task of career management and support should not be underestimated.

Universities: Knowledge and Career Management

Knowledge management is fundamental to modern organizations. Its emphasis is on identifying, extracting and capturing the knowledge assets of the organization, so that they can be fully utilized and fully protected as a source of competitive edge (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough & Swan, 2002). This is also pertinent for universities as organizations, but it takes on an added prominence, since knowledge is the core business of universities (Neumann, in press). Through their teaching, research and professional service roles, universities generate, acquire and transfer knowledge (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). Indeed, knowledge defines academic work and academics' primary communities are knowledge communities described as disciplines or subject communities (Henkel, 2000). Thus, for universities, it would be fair to say that academics are their prime knowledge assets and that to effectively manage and support the careers of their academic workforce would translate to effectively managing knowledge. It has been said that:

Knowledge has replaced sheep and wool as a source of wealth but, according to the corporatized university, academics, like sheep, require careful management to get the best out of them' (Thornton, 2008:5).

Knowledge within universities has several distinguishing characteristics (Clark, 1983). Knowledge is structured into disciplines creating autonomous and disparate specialties. Through research, knowledge is rapidly increasing and becoming increasingly specialized, reflected in the expansion in the number of disciplines and the increase in interdisciplinary study and research. The

production of knowledge through research is an open-ended task with no one systematic path of discovery and refinement for each specialty. Essentially the organization of knowledge within universities into disciplines can be described as decentralized and loosely coupled (Parsons, 1971) with the existence of many specialized units side by side and loosely connected at the operating level with a small number of higher levels of co-ordination (Clark, 1983). Organizationally, 'the university is simply a container which encapsulates a large number of independent units, on the one hand the departments and, on the other, each individual academic' (Lane, 1985:264). These individuals are independent professionals holding the highest formal educational qualifications within a diverse array of disciplines (departments) who in turn are employed to produce and disseminate knowledge through research, advanced teaching programs and contribution to their professional communities.

Career management can be seen as the responsibility of the individual or as the responsibility of the organization. The key difference is who takes on the responsibility for career management. According to Hall (1986) career management is defined as 'an ongoing process of preparing, implementing and monitoring career plans undertaken by the individual alone or in concert with the organization's career systems' (p3). Individual career management generally refers to the career management activities chosen and practiced by the individual. While the concept of organizational career management refers to the activities carried out by the organization that are relevant to the career development of its employees (Baruch & Peiperl 2000). In terms of an academic career, according to Gouldner (1957) there are two distinguishing organizational identities: 'locals' are academics who develop their primary identification and build relationships within the university and 'cosmopolitans' are academics who develop their primary identification with their academic discipline and build relationships mainly outside their university.

The academic career is complex and diverse – as highlighted by the introductory career vignettes. Academic careers have three interrelated strands: disciplinary, institutional and external (Light, 1972 cited by Clark, 1986). The disciplinary career is associated with activities within the discipline and in pursuit of its goals; the institutional career refers to the activities associated with the

employment at a particular university, while the external career encompasses the professional and community activities that are undertaken outside the employing university. It is reasonable to infer that in all three strands of the academic career, the university has a role in the management of the careers of academic staff. Within the Australian context, academic position and experience is recognized in a linear career structure that is based on five levels and position titles: Level A: Associate Lecturer, Level B: lecturer, Level C: Senior Lecturer, Level D: Associate Professor and Level E: Professor. Career progression is either through competitive selection to an advertised position or through promotion which is generally based upon merit, demonstrated ability and achievement.

From the organizational perspective, career management is typically a responsibility of the Human Resource Management (HRM) function. In essence, the primary focus of HRM is to contribute to the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives, as well as to the individual's goals and needs, through the formulation of appropriate HRM strategies, policies and programs. Thus, in the case of career management, the organization would be responsible for providing the appropriate HRM policies and programs that would support the career development across the three interrelated strands of its academic staff. It has however been argued that university policy makers should take a stronger market approach to recognizing the changing landscape that they operate in and to respond accordingly with the establishment of appropriate and innovative HR policies and practices. An example to combat the ageing academic workforce would be policies and practices aimed at ensuring high quality staff are not lost through retirement prematurely (Hugo, 2005; Kogan, Moses & El-Khawas, 1994).

Turning to practice, there have been noteworthy developments on academic staff profiles with particular reference to ageing, workforce planning and succession planning. Recent reports conducted by the Australia Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) who audit and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education policy, have highlighted the need for university-wide workforce plans and succession planning to be developed and implemented. Some examples include: Murdoch University (Murdoch), 'AUQA recommends that they extend the succession planning strategy for researchers to

a whole-of-university staff succession planning process as a means of addressing the looming retirement of the cohort of long-term academic staff' (AUQA, 2006:50) and Southern Cross University (SCU), 'AUQA recommends SCU develop and implement a University-wide workforce plan as soon as practicable' (AUQA 2008:2).

Method

This study examines the extent to which Australian universities represent organizational career management practices for academic staff. The particular focus in this paper is the analysis of on-line and web-based public institutional policy documents. At this first stage of investigation, the focus of analysis is at the institution level. This is the level at which strategy and policy is developed enabling alignment with the institution's mission statement and goals. Additional but complementary policies and practices may be developed at the faculty and/or departmental levels, though these may not be as readily accessible publicly through the web. Later case study stages will examine documentation and practices at these levels. The focus at this stage is the institution.

Web-searching is a form of structured content analysis that is relatively easy to access, low cost and the interpretation can be confirmed or made more or less plausible using a range of criteria (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). University websites and on-line documents of sixteen selected public Australian universities were examined based on a list of selected organizational career management practices. Initially, a review was undertaken of the wide range of organizational career management practices (see e.g. London & Stumpf, 1982; Gutteridge & Otte 1983; Baruch et al, 2000; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Baruch, 2003). This review formed the basis for the selection of our list, however careful consideration was given to include career management practices relevant to the higher education context and in particular, to academic staff. Ten organizational career management practices were identified for analysis: performance appraisal; retirement preparation programs; succession planning; mentoring; special programs for populations of unique circumstances such as gender and age; secondments; professional development; academic promotion; career development;

and study programs. Appendix 1 provides the definitions for each practice. Recruitment and selection policies and practices were excluded from this study, since the focus was on career management practices and how the careers of academic staff are managed once they are employed by the university.

The process commenced with accessing the homepage of each selected university. Analysis of the homepage was made to identify access to 'staff'. From this point, particular attention was given to locate the HR policies and procedures of each university web site. On-line documents within five clicks either from the homepage or from the HR policies and procedures site were downloaded utilizing the list of selected organizational career management practices. Only institutional policies and on-line documents were selected, including the Academic Staff Enterprise Agreement and not information, seminars and opportunities offered through external parties, such as superannuation schemes. There was no attempt to assess the effectiveness or degree of implementation of the list of organizational career management practices.

Sample

A total of sixteen universities (see Table 1) were selected based on geographic location and university grouping. Four states - New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC), Queensland (QLD) and Western Australia (WA) - and four university groupings were identified (see Neumann, Kiley & Mullins 2007). There are three main university groupings that are formal and self-selected: Group of Eight (Go8), Australian Technology Network (ATN) and Innovative Research Universities (IRU). The Go8 is a coalition of eight Australia's oldest and leading universities that are internationally recognized for scholarship and research excellence (<http://www.go8.com.au>). The ATN is a coalition of five Australian universities that share a common focus on the practical application of tertiary studies and research (<http://www.atn.com.au>). The IRU comprises six Australian universities recognized for their distinctive and innovative approaches to research, teaching and learning (<http://www.iru.com.au>). The fourth university grouping is Regional Universities. These universities

reside either as outer-metropolitan or in large regional locations outside capital cities and are economically and socially important to their local region (Neumann et al, 2007).

INSERT TABLE 1

Findings

The findings highlight that the 16 universities sampled have in place, to some degree, HRM policies and practices for career management and support of academic staff. There is however, a reasonable degree of variation across the universities and the different states in the on-line and web-based publicly available policies and documents. Of the four university groupings, the Go8 had the highest representation of the selected career management areas (63 percent), followed by ATN (58 percent), Regional (50 percent) and IRU (45 percent). Of the four locations, QLD had the highest representation of the selected career management areas (65 percent), followed by VIC (60 percent) and the least representation were in NSW and WA, both at 45 percent. Monash and UQ had the highest representation of the selected career management areas at 80 percent, while Curtin, MQ, Murdoch, UNE and UWA had the least representation, at 40 percent. Overall, the results in Table 2 suggest a moderate level of representation (54 percent) of the list of organizational career management practices within the 16 universities.

INSERT TABLE 2

Performance appraisal, academic promotion and study programs were the only three out of the list of ten organizational career management practices that were represented by all 16 universities. In contrast, the least represented were mentoring and career development, both at 19 percent and no identified succession planning programs. Terminology variations were evident for Performance appraisal with examples such as Performance Management and Development (USyd); Performance Enhancement and Development Scheme (LaTrobe); Workforce Planning and Performance (Curtin)

and Academic Staff Review (Griffith). It is worth noting that three-quarters of the universities included career development planning within their performance appraisal policies. However, only a quarter represented Career Development as a separate organizational career management practice. The terminology for Study Programs was relatively consistent, either Outside Studies Program (OSP), Special Studies Program (SSP) or Study leave. These programs generally are a period of release from normal university duties to allow academic staff to undertake a planned program of research and professional practice.

Secondments represented the second highest organizational career management practice (75 percent), followed by professional development (56 percent). Secondment policies and programs were internal to the university and/or external to another university or organization. The aim is to provide academic staff with opportunities for knowledge and skill development and to encourage collaboration and exchange. Professional development covered policies and programs such as Professional Experience Program (UTS & RMIT) and Leadership and Management Development (Monash).

Retirement preparation programs were found to be represented in just over one third (38 percent) of the selected universities. This did not include retirement policies that provided a statement of the minimum age to retire nor reference to the voluntary early retirement schemes which can be initiated by the university but are in accordance to the voluntary early retirement schemes that are approved by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). Over a third (38%) of universities had a clause about the voluntary retirement scheme within their Academic Staff Enterprise Agreements. The retirement preparation programs identified extended beyond these exclusions and include strategies and programs that address how to manage the 'older' academic workforce. For example: Staffing Flexibility: Strategies for Managing Flexible Transition to Retirement (USyd); Career Planning for Retirement (UQ), Toolkit for Managing RMIT's ageing Workforce (RMIT) and End of Career Arrangements (ECU).

Nearly one third (31 percent) of universities have Special Programs for academics which provide support to populations of unique circumstances such as gender and age. Those identified ranged from programs that provide support and opportunities at the different career stages of academics such as Early-career Academic Recruitment and Development (QUT); Mid-career Academic Development (QUT) and Fast Track Promotion (UWA). There were also examples of networking and collaboration on staff development activities, such as Staff Developers' Network group (Griffith, QUT). Other examples included professional development support and opportunities for staff with particularly carer responsibilities for young and old, Professional Development for Staff with Carer responsibilities (UQ), and programs to increase the representation of women at senior levels, such as Women and Leadership Advancement Scheme (Monash).

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has examined the extent to which universities represent organizational career management practices for academic staff on-line and in web-based publicly accessible documents based on 10 selected organizational career management practices developed from the research literature. It is the starting point for a larger study examining university career management practices and support, in particular for 'older' academics. This first stage of structured content analysis was valuable in identifying at the institutional level what publicly accessible documentation universities have in place in relation to the career management of academics. The findings present some evidence that universities provide a supportive and encouraging environment that fosters and values their academic staff and their research, teaching and service contributions. Perhaps not surprisingly only performance appraisal, academic promotion and study programs were represented by all 16 universities surveyed, indicating that career planning and development and appropriate reward and recognition do exist for academics. The document analysis does not enable conclusions to be made on either policy implementation or effectiveness. There were institutional differences on seven of the selected organizational career management practices. This may suggest that some universities have

not quite adopted a strategic approach to managing the careers of their academic workforce. It may however be that such documentation is restricted to public access. Also the decision to exclude recruitment and selection policies and practices in this study could have offered another perspective.

Potential issues that present challenges for universities in managing their academic workforce are highlighted in the introductory career vignettes. These include: the retention of high quality staff; variable reward and recognition policies and programs; flexible work policies and practices that demonstrate work/life balance; strategies that manage risk and innovation and appropriate career and development plans and opportunities. Those universities that can respond to such issues will sustain a competitive edge and at the same time provide an environment that encourages academics to continue to be productive, satisfied and motivated. This study has revealed that there is some evidence that such policies and practices do exist. In effect, the argument that universities should take a stronger market approach to the establishment of policies and practices has to some extent been negated by this study, in light of the range of HR policies and practices identified. Examples that indicate that universities are being innovative and responsive to the needs of their academic staff include the Mid-career Academic Development Program (QUT) which provides support to academics at a particular stage in their academic careers and Professional Development for Staff with Carer responsibilities policy that was initiated by UQ, as the university recognized that academics with carer responsibilities may be impeded from engaging in key professional development opportunities

<http://www.uq.edu.au>).

However, the limited extent of retirement preparation programs represented should be a concern for universities. Just over one third of the universities sampled had retirement preparation programs and no succession planning policies were identified. In light of an ageing academic workforce, and given the high level of formal qualifications and experience required for entry into the academic profession, it might be expected that universities would be actively managing the knowledge, experience and careers of their 'older' academic workforce, for the benefit of the

individual and for the university. Instead nearly one third of universities have voluntary early retirement schemes in place which would discourage their 'older' academics to continue working.

In conclusion, the study has highlighted that to a certain extent universities express a role and are making a contribution to the career management of academics which is supported by a range of innovative and responsive HR policies and practices. However, a fundamental issue is that universities cannot afford to prolong their response to the phenomenon of an ageing academic workforce. With the pressures that this presents, more active university career management and knowledge management would seem to be a priority.

The next stages of this project will examine in greater depth university, faculty and departmental strategies, policies and practices that harness and maximize the knowledge, skills and experience of their academic workforce. These stages will go beyond web-based publicly accessible documents and will involve interviews with university management to investigate institutional, faculty and departmental strategies, policies and practices more closely, as well an examination of the perceptions academics hold in terms of their career development expectations. The intention is to understand how employee productivity and longevity is fostered within universities, for the benefit of the individual and for the university. More specifically, the intention is to make a contribution to the study of career management in knowledge intensive institutions. Sustaining motivation, vitality and productivity is crucial to maintaining a competitive edge within the global knowledge economy. So, what is the reality check? The academic workforce is ageing, presenting institutions with challenges and opportunities. The reality is that universities have expressed a role in the task of career management of academics. However, the indications are that universities have not yet begun to work proactively and collaboratively with their ageing academic workforce. There are significant benefits for both the university as well as for the individual. 'The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy' (Martin Luther King, 1963).

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Table 1: Selected Australian Universities by Location by University Grouping

	Go8	ATN	IRU	Regional
NSW	University of Sydney (USYD)	University of Technology (UTS)	Macquarie University (MQ)	University of New England (UNE)
VIC	Monash University (Monash)	RMIT University (RMIT)	La Trobe University (LaTrobe)	Deakin University (Deakin)
QLD	University of Queensland (UQ)	Queensland University of Technology (QUT)	Griffith University (GU)	James Cook University (JCU)
WA	University of Western Australia (UWA)	Curtin University of Technology (CUT)	Murdoch University (Murdoch)	Edith Cowan University (ECU)

Table 2: Findings of web-search on organizational career management practices for academic staff within selected Australian universities per university groupings – Summary

	Go8				ATN				IRU				Regional				TOTAL
	USyd	Monash	UQ	UWA	UTS	RMIT	QUT	Curtin	MQ	Latrobe	Griffith	Murdoch	UNE	Deakin	JCU	ECU	
Organisational Career Management Practice																	
1. Performance Appraisal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%
2. Retirement Preparation Programs	X	X	X				X			X						X	38%
3. Succession Planning																	0%
4. Mentoring		X	X											X			19%
5. Special Programs. Eg. gender, age		X	X	X		X	X										31%
6. Secondments	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	X	75%
7. Professional Development		X			X	X	X		X		X		X		X	X	56%
8. Academic Promotion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%
9. Career Development			X				X							X			19%
10. Study Programs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%
Total	50%	80%	80%	40%	50%	60%	80%	40%	40%	50%	50%	40%	40%	50%	50%	60%	

Notes: X denotes policy and program represented

Appendix 1: List of selected organizational career management practices

1. Performance Appraisal:

It is a review to identify and evaluate an academic's performance in teaching, research, scholarship, university and community service contributions. It is also an opportunity to discuss and mutually agree on an academic's professional and career development needs ensuring they are aligned with the goals and objectives of the university and that of the academic.

2. Retirement preparation programs:

This is a practice directed at the target population of employees approaching retirement age (although there is no legislated compulsory retirement age) and/or contemplating retirement. Its aim is to enable the employee to make an informed decision and to ease the transition of the older employee from full working life to retirement. It may consist of several components such as flexible working arrangements, financial considerations and pre-retirement planning seminars.

3. Succession planning:

This is an organizational workforce planning framework to determine the possible replacement of senior and experienced employees within an organization and to evaluate the potential promotional and developmental opportunities. Succession planning (also referred to as management inventory in management literature) is a valuable strategic HRM practice.

4. Mentoring:

The practice of mentoring brings together an experienced and/or skilled person, not necessarily a direct manager, who will offer advice, guidance, support and facilitate the learning and development of a less skilled and/or experienced person.

5. Special Programs:

Specific programs that aim to support populations of unique circumstances such as gender and age.

The primary focus is on providing professional and development opportunities.

6. Secondments:

Secondment is a temporary assignment to another area within the organization and sometimes even to another associated organization. It is an opportunity in which an employee can acquire a different perspective and gain new knowledge and skills within the organization and/ or outside the organization.

7. Professional Development:

Focus is on the professional development and enhancement of knowledge and skills of employees in order to benefit their academic work and that of the University in meeting its objectives.

8. Academic Promotion:

Process that recognizes and rewards high-performing academics and advances them to the next academic classification level based on merit, demonstrated ability and achievement.

9. Career Development:

Programs that prepare, implement and monitor the on-going career development and progress of academics with the intention to enhance performance for the benefit of the individual and the university.

10. Study Programs:

A period of release from normal university duties that is granted in order to carry out a planned research program and further develop one's academic and professional skills.