

Merit Principle in University Decision-making: Experience the University of Tasmania Forum Challenges for the Future

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Abstract

Following the first [staff] women's equity forum held at the University of Tasmania in 2000, the 2001 forum focused on the merit principle in university decision-making. From keynote speaker, Wendy McCarthy, Chancellor of University of Canberra, presenting a national perspective, to three case studies presented by University of Tasmania staff women, the defining of the merit principle was explored by the Vice-Chancellor, Deans and other senior staff in a forum open to all university staff members.

Background

At the first Vice-Chancellor's Women Equity Forum 2000, Professor Eleanor Ramsey launched the AVCC's Promoting Women in Universities Action Plan in Tasmania. Issues raised by the Forum included questioning the merit principle, its definition and application. This first ever Women's Equity Forum had approximately 100 participants, primarily of senior staff and therefore primarily male. The recommendations of the Forum were first cleared by the Vice-Chancellor and then accepted by the Equal Opportunity Committee, Budget & Planning, and endorsed by Academic Senate and the University Council. The recommendations also were included in the University's strategic plan. One of the recommendations was to hold a second forum on the theme: Merit Principle? Its application in University decision-making for 2001.

This second Forum was held in June 2001 and today's presentation explores the issues raised and recommendations made. The Forum commenced with the Vice-Chancellor both welcoming participants and presenting a summary update of EEO statistics. Following the Vice-Chancellor, the keynote speaker was Wendy McCarthy, OA and Chancellor of the University of Canberra. McCarthy was followed by Greg Vines, State Service Commissioner of Tasmania, and then three case studies by University women: Kellie Peart, recently appointed Manager of Employment Services, speaking on merit in appointments; Associate Professor Joan Abbott-Chapman, Education, speaking on merit in promotions; and Dr Maria Flutsch, Asian Languages and Literatures, speaking on merit in committees. The Deputy Chancellor highlighted a number of issues raised by these speakers and grouped these issues into discussion sessions held in the afternoon and chaired by Deans or their nominees. Following the discussion sessions, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor chaired a session summarising the discussion sessions to draw out strategies for increasing women's participation in senior decision-making levels.

Vice-Chancellor's Summary

A number of EEO for women statistics were summarised in the Vice-Chancellor's welcoming address:

1. Staff balance – the University has moved from 48% women in 1991 to 51% staff women on the Launceston campus and from 39% to 44% at Hobart in 2000
2. Higher proportion of general staff women
 - since 1991, the proportion of general staff women at HEO5-7 has increased from 18% to 34%
 - and at above HEO10, the proportion has moved from 14% to 29%
 - however, HEO1-4 remain in the 70+%
3. Higher proportion of senior academic women
 - since 1991, moved from 1% to 10% at levels D & E
 - and 9% to 20% at level C
 - at Level A proportion has increased from 40% to 50%
 - however, Level B has remained the same at 30+%
4. Repetitious appointment data, eg meaning there has been little change over the past few years in external recruitment patterns
5. Promotion data shows women are significantly more successful than men at being promoted, but few apply
6. Casualisation is increasing and the proportion of women are increasingly in these positions

The Vice-Chancellor called for a re-think of strategies in recruitment and promotions. That these are key areas for achieving gender balance and were under utilised as EEO strategies.

Wendy McCarthy, OA and Chancellor of University of Canberra

McCarthy quoted one of the Dr Clare Burton definitions of merit to challenge participants: 'Merit – the relationship between a person's qualities and those required for performance for particular positions' (Burton, 1988, p 1).

McCarthy highlighted to participants that there had been a substantial increase in the proportion of female staff in universities in recent years, alongside the commitment of considerable resources into affirmative action. However, it is still 'bleak' at the senior management level.

McCarthy Challenge

McCarthy emphasised three main challenges for the University:

1. EEO officers achieve policy changes but not the systemic changes necessary to make a significant impact on the senior management culture in many universities
2. Persuading men of the need for change is a major cross-cultural communication issue citing research by Professor Amanda Sinclair. McCarthy stated that men need to be led to see the value of women in contributing to the management of universities. Men are not convinced, and are unsure of the leadership required of

them. However, McCarthy stated that many men have difficulty in discussing feelings and issues about women. She also challenged women for if women are silent on these issues, men do not see the need to speak out. Training programs, reviews of personnel policies, etcetera, must put a renewed focus on the definition of merit and the difference between affirmative action and positive discrimination.

3. Senior managers must be agents of change. They must tell their senior staff they want women on the management team. Universities need the full breadth of abilities, skills and perspectives to run a university successfully in the midst of budget restraints and increased competition between universities. Senior men must actively support work and family policies, including implementing them for themselves. Senior men need to get to know women and be seen with them as professional colleagues. And senior men must act professionally.

Greg Vines, State Service Commissioner, Tasmania

Vines introduced an overview of the new Tasmanian State Service Act that focuses on a new approach to merit. Vines stated that the new Act moved away from the individual's qualifications and experience to a broader aspect of their ability to contribute to the effective and efficient operation of the organisation. Merit must now be read and applied in conjunction with the principles of equity and diversity. As the new Act had just been enacted it was too soon to tell the outcome of this change but the objective was to increase the diversity of the state service to reflect the community population.

Kellie Peart, manager of employment services

Peart presented a different and older definition of merit - "The method of obtaining and maintaining an efficient and competent organisation through recruitment and training procedures which are based not on ...but on careful assessment of personal qualifications in terms of both excellence and social equity." (Stanton, 1978)

Peart then reviewed the recruitment and promotion policies and that human resource and EEO statistics provided annual monitoring of processes. Human Resources also reviews all minutes of these processes and responds to occasional complaints by individuals.

Associate Professor Joan Abbott-Chapman, education, and for many years a member of the university promotions committee

Abbott-Chapman called for a redefinition of merit – one responsive to and inclusive of human diversity. She highlighted the need for organisational structures to change to reflect the value and importance of different experience and different job histories – equivalent performance rather than same performance particularly of male experiences.

Dr Maria Flutsch, senior lecturer in Asian languages and literatures, having served on and chaired a number of school and faculty committees over many years

Flutsch related that corporate management theory is expressly anti-democratic. It supposes that staff are incapable of guarding the greater good of the institution and are only concerned in sectional interests. The resultant culture destroys freedom of expression producing apathy, docility and disillusionment

Flutsch called for a more stringent application of legislation regarding equity practices including the appointment of EEO officers in each Faculty. She also called for management training in committee techniques, gender balance on committees, 360° feedback in performance reviews, ethical practices and increased valuing of pastoral care.

Discussion Groups

The primary outcomes of the discussion groups included that there were no reasonable workloads for staff, significant tokenism of women staff, and several communication and language issues.

Recommendations

The Forum produced several recommendations including:

1. Review anti-discrimination materials to affirm diversity
2. Increase flexible leave arrangements, introduce cultural leave
3. Training for equity development and diversity management
4. Gender-balance on key committees
5. Faculty Equity Plan Representatives

These were accepted by the Equal Opportunity Committee and have since been endorsed by Academic Senate and Planning and Resources. In addition, the University called for a review of Recruitment, Promotion and Reclassification Policies to be led by Human Resources.

The new University Plans – Operational, Equity and EOWA – all stress the university’s commitment to equal opportunity.

Challenge for Merit

The Forum continued the focus of merit on policy and programs. The Forum asserted the challenge to senior managers to be change agents:

- Acknowledge the experience of women
- Demand women be on the senior teams
- Take ownership for and lead the equity issues

The Forum papers, Report and Recommendations, Equal Opportunity Committee response will be on the University of Tasmania’s website and available in hard copy at a small printing and handling fee. See <http://www.admin.utas.edu.au/hr/eoo/eoo.html>.