



Background

An earlier version of this paper is currently under consideration by TALQAC, which has invited a response from the Arts Faculty. The issues will be considered at the next meeting of TALQAC on the 12th of June. A report will then be prepared for the Academic Board. The paper has also been submitted for discussion to the Research Higher Degrees Committee (RHDC) at its next meeting on the 28th of May 2008.

For those interested in reading more about UMPA's activities regarding the Arts Faculty, I invite you to read the President's blog via our website at <http://www.umpa.unimelb.edu.au/blogs/presblog.html>.

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UMPA Response to the Implementation of the Arts Renewal Strategy

Introduction

The University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association Inc (UMPA) is concerned about the wellbeing of graduate students in response to a reported increase in workplace issues arising from the Arts Renewal Strategy.

The apparent change in conditions is arising from the restructure of the Arts Faculty, the Arts Renewal Strategy, and is exacerbated by increased workloads and reduced subject choice due to the implementation of the Melbourne Model. This appears to have adversely affected graduate students and tutors in the Faculty in the following areas:

- Disruption to supervision arrangements resulting from the restructure, relocation or removal of departments, as well as areas with high uptake of the voluntary redundancy packages, such as Creative Writing and Creative Arts;
- Decreased quality of coursework delivery due to the implementation of the Tutorial Payment Policy, departmental directives affecting staff, higher student to staff ratios and a reduced staffing profile;

- A decline in the quality and availability of subjects and courses, and hence the Melbourne Experience, in the Arts Faculty due to subject reduction;
- Failure to remunerate essential work functions arising from the implementation of the new Tutorial Payment Policy; and
- Increased risk in relation to occupational health and safety (OHS) issues arising from staff shortages and skill attrition from the voluntary redundancies and the associated reemployment policy.

Whilst UMPA acknowledges the importance of addressing a projected budget deficit, the immediate repercussions are of great concern. We request remediation strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of the changes and a review of the funding model associated with the Arts Renewal Strategy.

Recommendations

UMPA recommends:

1. that the Arts Faculty cease the process of voluntary redundancies immediately until a valid undertaking is able to elucidate areas where positions are truly redundant (in the spirit of the word: ‘no longer necessary’);
2. that the Arts Faculty conduct an immediate audit of subjects currently available to graduate coursework students and align that information with an audit of what is currently *advertised* to potential students, especially international students, to ensure that courses are being marketed in a fair and transparent manner, fully compliant with the ESOS Act;
3. that there be an immediate investigation into the workload concerns of tutors in the Arts Faculty, and consequently, an immediate improvement in working conditions by provision of appropriate clauses for payment and duties in the new Enterprise Agreement this year, as well as appropriately robust and descriptive policies in the University Personnel and Procedures Policy Manual (PPP);
4. that a review of workplace conditions also involve the further development of improved training programs for new and existing staff that are mandatory and paid, and provision of appropriate facilities (ie office space) for tutoring staff to conduct their work;
5. that the Arts Faculty develop a communication strategy as a matter of urgent priority, addressing the perceived significant gaps in what is communicated to students, and particularly graduate students;
6. that the University commit additional funding to the Arts Faculty to ensure appropriate and sustainable remuneration of all Faculty staff members, including academic, professional, permanent and casual staff; and
7. that the University continue to lobby the Federal Government for sustainable funding levels for the humanities and social sciences.

Background

UMPA, through the provision of advocacy and representation, provides both a feedback and a quality assurance mechanism to its cohort. Anecdotal reports of a reduction in tutorial payments in some schools of the Arts Faculty after the 2006 restructure initiated a consultation process that uncovered a wide array of issues affecting graduate students.

As a significant proportion of tutors employed in the Arts Faculty are graduate students, ensuring that risks to the occupational health and safety of tutors have been adequately identified and addressed has been a primary concern of the Association. The effects of these conditions upon the quality of teaching, combined with teaching out problems arising from the restructure, implementation of the Melbourne Model, and loss of expertise through the voluntary redundancies, have also been of major concern.

Since becoming aware of these issues UMPA has initiated support for casual employees' entitlements in conjunction with the NTEU. UMPA and UMSU also co-hosted a student forum on 10 April 2008, to facilitate student consultation with the Dean of Arts, Professor Mark Considine. Although the Dean was very cooperative in agreeing to attend the forum at short notice, UMPA and UMSU were refused the right to invite students via the student email lists, and thus had to use only such lists as we have created ourselves (such as a weekly ebulletin, UMPAnews, and snowballing emails through peers in the Faculty).

The student forum highlighted a number of questions about the disparity of conditions for tutors and students across the schools. It was apparent that there were different practices across the Faculty that could be inconsistent with the policies introduced at a faculty level. Lack of compliance with Faculty policies at this time is a significant issue arising through the consultation processes to date.

The information gathered at this time indicates that there is an urgent need for an audit of staff and student conditions across the Faculty.

Issues

Tutors' training, workloads, remuneration, and career paths

UMPA is particularly concerned by the account of working conditions for tutors relayed by graduate students that are also University employees. Reports from consultation meetings with graduate students working as tutors indicate a large array of problems underpinned by the attempt to cut costs through reducing remuneration. Tutors are not paid for requisite work associated with teaching, exacerbating the alleged problems of inadequate training and workplace inductions. The problem here is twofold: the Faculty Tutorial Payment Policy itself is adversely affecting the working conditions of tutors and arguably the quality of teaching; secondly, there appears to be a lack of compliance with the Faculty policy across the departments and schools. The Policy enables schools and departments to exercise discretion about the activities that will be paid or not paid. This arrangement is fraught as it places the onus of negotiation upon individual staff to

organise working conditions in-house – a system that has the potential for significant inequity and disparity. Tutors’ accounts of current practices indicate that it is extremely difficult for tutors – particularly new tutors - to request and/or demand appropriate payment for their work. This is an institutional issue rather than a faculty problem, and yet it seems that there is currently no strategy to alleviate or even assess the extent of the problem.

Due to the decision to cut costs by not paying for meetings, lecture attendance and student consultation time, tutors have reported that there is the potential for them to be poorly informed about lecture material, including information about assessment tasks, and to not be available for regular student consultation hours. Given that the lowest Quality of Teaching scores across the University include those for satisfaction with feedback, this appears to be a retrograde move that will reduce student satisfaction even further. Consultation is problematic, as most tutors feel obliged to provide some individual time with their students, particularly in relation to assessment. In some schools in the Faculty, the problems around student consultation also extend to an absence of tutor office space in which to conduct consultation hours, let alone any of the preparatory work undertaken before tutorials.

It is not only casual tutoring staff who are disadvantaged by the current policies of underpayment in the Arts Faculty. Sessional lecturers, particularly RHD students undertaking these roles, are not in a position to demand commensurate payment for appropriate levels of student consultation, meeting time with tutors, subject coordination duties, or considered marking practices. In the current conditions, these early career lecturers are unjustly likely to receive lower Quality of Teaching scores and qualitative feedback (eg “my lecturer was not available”, “I did not receive appropriate feedback”), and their only current recourse is to take on more unpaid work to mitigate these repercussions, which is also very likely to further impact on their capacity to complete their degrees in a timely fashion.

In this case, as in the case with tutors, the Faculty ends up in the unfortunate ‘vicious cycle’ whereby they receive less funding for RHD students (significantly less now that the funding model has changed to only account for completions, not load), and subsequently put more pressure on these students to complete who they are employing in unsustainable positions.

There are inherent questions not only about ethics of underpaying employees and the risks to teaching quality, but also professional indemnity and occupational health and safety issues relating to the conduct of unpaid work. Whilst the budgetary strategies are faculty based, there are institutional risks; if a critical incident occurred that involved a casual staff member who was inadequately inducted during an unpaid student consultation, it would highlight the problem for the University as a whole. Cost cutting measures do not really ‘save’ the University deficit dollars if the risks to employee productivity and safety increase as a result of the implementation of these strategies.

Disruption to supervision

Another of the most significant issues that has arisen is the impact on quality and availability of supervision arising from the implementation of the voluntary redundancy strategy. Reports from particular departments, such as Creative Writing & Gender Studies, have indicated a huge loss of expertise as a result of the restructure as well as redundancies. Anecdotal accounts indicate that the loss of staff was sudden due to an unexpected attrition based on job insecurity and the cessation of the Creative Arts department, increasing reliance on under-resourced sessional staff. Whilst UMPA acknowledges that the Arts Faculty is concerned about these issues, and that they will be addressed case by case, the lack of an overall strategy to monitor and assess the impact on these students and staff may result in further disparity of resources and support.

Loss of subjects

The implementation of the curriculum review, based on the D'Agostino report, may place strain on already overburdened staff resources. Whilst based on pedagogically sound principles, the intention to offer subjects at each year level appears to be at odds with the Faculty decision to save money through reducing the number of academic staff. Similarly, the transition to the Melbourne Model curriculum also involves an increased demand for teaching subjects as the 'continuing' subjects and disciplinary research areas must be finished alongside the new qualifications. UMPA is concerned that there cannot be a genuine reassurance about the provisions of adequate 'teaching-out' if the Arts Faculty is reducing rather than increasing the number of staff at this time. The transition to a new model should involve an institutional commitment to ensure implementation issues are carefully managed and monitored with rigour. Rather than allowing the Arts Faculty to manage its own projected deficit through redundancies and reducing casual staff payments, the University could be allocating funds to employ additional staff to resource the transition appropriately.

Communication

Finally, UMPA has been advised that students affected by the Arts Renewal Strategy feel that they have not been consulted or adequately apprised of the changes. RHD students, particularly those that are also employees, are users of the University as a workplace alongside staff rather than just consumers. Graduates have informed UMPA that there has not been a clear communication strategy, resulting in a lot of confusion, stress, conflict, a sense of disenfranchisement and adverse effects to academic progress. An example of this was the relocation of the academics and infrastructure of the Criminology Department to the John Medley Building, whilst leaving RHD students at Queensberry Street; graduates allege that they were not consulted about the change to their work environments and that there was significant disruption to both student work and morale.

Funding for humanities and social sciences

It is clear that the current funding models are not sustaining a thriving Arts Faculty. UMPA is concerned that the chronic shortfalls in government funding of humanities are addressed through a more equitable system of distribution. The School of Political Science, Criminology & Sociology, for example, receives significantly more funding than Literary Studies, but this should not reflect a difference in importance or course

delivery. Funding disparity is problematic if schools and departments must exist with financial autonomy, as this may result in a correlation between subject choice and healthy budgets rather than the breadth of quality education the Melbourne Model purports to provide. UMPA requests that the University further subsidise the Arts Faculty at this time in order to maintain an institutional level of quality education that can genuinely provide diversity and foster interdisciplinary study. The provision of additional fee-paying graduate programs cannot be the sole strategy for financial sustainability, as the Faculty currently has a reduced capacity to develop and deliver the subjects. Longer-term strategies should also be developed with the Faculty in order to ensure its future viability. At this time, however, staff and students are stating that the conditions are not acceptable.

Position

UMPA does not support a faculty strategy that:

- reduces staff numbers, particularly through the loss of senior academic staff;
- requires remaining permanent academic staff to take more tutorials in the subjects they are lecturing, thereby decreasing graduate students' opportunities to gain valuable teaching experience whilst simultaneously dramatically increasing the workload of the permanent staff in question; and
- decreases the remuneration of tutorial work at a time that warrants investment in knowledge infrastructure.

It recommends that the University provides substantial additional funds to the Arts Faculty to employ appropriate staff to resource the development and introduction of new curricula and to ensure that existing students are guaranteed the satisfactory completion of their currently enrolled courses.

UMPA supports the provision of consultation processes and accurate and timely information to students about changes affecting the University. It calls upon the University to ensure that the Arts Faculty is revived and that the objectives of the Melbourne Model are implemented throughout the University's departments. It hopes that the transition to the Melbourne Model provides the opportunity to not only address the current issues but improve the provision of resources for graduate students in the Arts Faculty.

As the representative body for graduate students, UMPA advocates for the interests of its cohort. It supports the equitable delivery of education and strives to protect the quality of graduate student experience. UMPA seeks to work with the University to monitor graduate issues and represent these to the appropriate decision makers.

CAPA, the national organisation representing graduates, endorses the position of UMPA in relation to the Arts Renewal strategy. UMSU shares the concerns and have collaborated to conduct a student consultation forum and some campaign strategies. Additionally, the NTEU endorses UMPA's position relating to the workplace conditions for tutors and RHD students. A joint initiative on the conditions of casual employees is currently underway.