ABSTRACT

Ageing of Academic Staff in Australian Universities: Mind the Gap

Traditionally, Australian universities have been employers of large cohorts of ageing academic staff. Although in the past academic employees usually remained in the workforce until a compulsory retirement age of 65 years, changes in legislation and federal government policy have meant that the retirement age is no longer predictable.

As a result, University management across Australia has had to rethink their staffing policies. A number of practices have been put forward which would enable universities to release their older academics within the bounds of the legislation. For example, pre-retirement contracts and phased retirement options have been used to encourage staff to commit to a retirement date.

Despite these approaches, a lack of workforce planning to address the often-cited ‘unprecedented exodus’ from the Australian academic workforce exists.
This thesis will aim to construct an age-planning model for universities to try and address this gap in the field. In order to investigate the factors which influence planning for the loss of older academic staff, two major research phases were undertaken:

- Twelve interviews with Directors and Senior Human Resource Managers, and Senior Executive Staff in nine Australian universities, and
- A formal survey to a broad group of academic staff from the universities (the sample size was 184 from only five of the participating universities).

The interviews were conducted during 2004 and at that time, the analysis revealed that of the nine universities, only two had workforce planning strategies in place. Despite the Government’s focus on quality teaching and research, it proved difficult for the universities to provide information about their outstanding academics, in particular researchers, even though most had reward and recognition procedures in place such as promotions, Vice Chancellor excellence awards, market loadings, and other measures. This was not a surprising outcome because it was found that performance appraisals were conducted as far apart as four years in some cases (if at all).

With regard to retention of staff, the interview comments indicated that career development, replacement or succession planning were not priorities
in the universities. All universities retained many retired staff as honorary staff, but there were mixed views about these appointments. Some interviewees acknowledged their very useful role and others believed that honorary staff were difficult to manage. In general, there was very little appreciation of the extent to which older academic staff contribute to the work of the institutions.

Survey responses from 184 academic staff implied much cynicism towards university managements because little was being done to plan for their imminent departure from the workforce. Only two per cent of respondents were aware of one or more strategies and fifty-four per cent either did not know of any strategies, or did not answer the question. The remaining respondents felt quite strongly about the lack of obvious strategies. In fact, there were numerous negative comments made by the respondents about older staff being seen as a cost rather than investment.

A reasonably high per cent of respondents (35%) had worked in excess of 20 years in an academic career and, not surprisingly, the majority of these were over 55 years of age. The more experienced academics usually willingly coached or mentored newer academic staff, however this was on an informal basis and not acknowledged by their universities.
The lack of attention to regular performance appraisals became obvious. At least eight per cent of responses indicated that these were held more than five years ago and another twenty-six per cent indicated that they had never had a performance appraisal.

The findings support the notion that Australian universities do not have adequate strategies in place to address the potential loss of experience, institutional knowledge, and research opportunities when ageing academic staff exit the workforce. In addition, rather than remaining in the workforce until age 65, the lure of early retirement and work-life balance for ageing academics may be more appealing.

The implication for universities is that instead of focusing on ways to release their older academic staff, of necessity, they will need to consider enticements to retain them. This includes, for example, implementing planning strategies such as recruitment (e.g. reviewing current recruitment policies and procedures to remove disincentives for ageing staff, attracting experienced as well as early career researchers, searching for high calibre staff, offering attractive remuneration and benefits), and retention (e.g. age-profiling, succession planning, rewards and recognition, honorary appointments for retirees), for an ageing workforce.