

What Makes Shared Governance Work?: An Australian Perspective

Despite tremendous social and economic challenges, collegiality can persist if a leader believes in shared governance and gains the trust of the university community. Correspondingly, academics have to be active participants in governance.

By Jan Currie

Murdoch University was named after Walter Murdoch, a distinguished English professor at the University of Western Australia who was known for the dictum "challenge the accepted." From its initial conception, the experimental institution tested traditions. "We were trying to devise something much more representative of all the interests across the university with strong input from students and general staff," said professor Geoff Bolton in describing the concept behind Murdoch.¹ If UWA (the old, traditional university in the state) was seen as hierarchical, Murdoch would be democratic and open. It is not surprising, then, that Murdoch has had a system of shared institutional governance since its founding in 1973.

This article describes the development of Murdoch's academic council (which resembles a faculty senate) from its creation to 2003, charting how it gained and later lost its legitimacy, and then rediscovered it. It draws on documentation, such as council minutes and legislation, as well as on interviews with twelve present and former council members (academics and administrators) who served at a time when the university was adopting the new organizational tenets and styles of management often called "managerialism." This history shows how collegiality can persist if a leader believes in shared governance and gains the trust of the university community. Correspondingly, it highlights the need for academics to be active participants in governance.

During its initial ten years of operation, Murdoch had a small council, and faculty and administrators worked together as academic colleagues without any split between them. In ensuing years, the council became larger and more representative. Toward the end of the 1990s, however, a shift in focus occurred. As top-down forms of management came to dominate most Anglo-American universities, successive Australian federal governments called for greater managerial prerogatives at the nation's universities. Still, Murdoch remained committed to its collegial traditions. Arguing to maintain a meaningful role for the council in governance, Bolton said, "I believe that in a climate where the federal government is trying to push top-down management, a strong and experienced council is necessary to maintain the traditions that universities have been running on for eight or nine hundred years." Has Murdoch's council managed to hold on to collegiality?

For most of the academic council's history, a relationship of trust existed between senior administrators and elected council members—although distrust sometimes developed. Among those I interviewed for this article, this relationship of trust was cited as critical in establishing the legitimacy of the council. Other perceived strengths of the council were its size, representativeness, and respected membership, as well as its informal and consensual decision-making processes and its ability to solve problems facing the university. The council's lack of budgetary oversight and the noninvolvement of some elected members were seen as its weaknesses.

The council grew from seventeen members (twelve administrators and five academics) in 1973 to thirty-six members (eleven administrators and twenty-five general and academic staff and students) in 1996. In 2003, the council was reduced to twenty-nine members (eight administrators and twenty-one general and academic staff and students).

Those I interviewed saw the council's size as an asset in that it allowed for a free flow of debate. One professor said that the strength of the council lay in the fact that "it is . . . relatively small, that it has elected members, that there is an expectation that it should be able to make decisions, and that these decisions should not be sidelined to people who are considered to be the experts."

In the early years, the informal structure of the council also permitted people to try out new ideas and to hear different perspectives, which brought them closer together. "Everybody had a feeling of belonging, being on the same team; the place was going somewhere and trying to do something different," commented Andrew Bain, a senior administrator. Bolton captured the sense of optimism on campus when he said, "There was a sense of euphoria; everything was possible. This was intended to be a much more consensual university, but one in which everybody had a voice."

In 1996, professor Trish Harris compared her experience with the Murdoch council to situations she had encountered at other universities: "At Murdoch, we sat around a large table, with a much better gender mix and a much larger proportion of elected academics, and there was a feeling that the academic council was contributing to the university's business."

The legitimacy of a decision-making body depends on its power and on the election of respected members. Those I interviewed agreed that council members were respected. In the beginning, the council included all full professors as well as nonprofessional staff. The ideal council member was seen as someone who was articulate, rational, and assertive, and who had the interests of

the whole university in mind rather than just his or her own narrow disciplinary interests.

Holding elections and having people contest them increased the legitimacy of the council. "There have been great people on it in the past, and there are great people on it now. I think a really positive thing is the filling of places on academic council. They are real elections," said Michael Borowitzka, the current president of the council.

From the beginning, the council's decisions were meant to be final. Neither the senate (similar to a board of trustees with a majority of lay members) nor the administration could overturn them. Commenting on this governance structure, Stephen Griew, Murdoch's first vice chancellor (president), noted, "Another important principle was to encourage real discussion of fundamental academic issues and avoid a rubber-stamping function by council."

In his interview with me, the current council president talked about the importance of having people ask the hard questions and enunciate their points well. A past president mentioned the value to the university of bringing expertise to bear on problems that don't have obvious answers. Expressing this perspective in a nutshell, Bev Thiele, an associate professor, concluded, "When the council works best, it is great at problem solving."

Weaknesses

A recurring theme throughout my interviews was the council's lack of involvement in budgetary matters. Early on, a permanent, representative committee was charged with monitoring the budget and advising the vice chancellor. This committee was effective, but it was disbanded in 1996, when the vice chancellor dismantled most university committees as part of a drive to expand managerial control. Afterward, the budget monitoring role lapsed. In 1998, part of it was returned to the council. Since then, the council's monitoring of the budget has been fairly ineffective. Today, the administration prepares the budget, after which the deputy vice chancellor reports to the council, explaining strategic allocations and changes from the previous year. The council is limited to commenting on the draft budget.

Those I interviewed saw the council's inability to exercise effective oversight of the budget as a critical problem. Commenting on past practice, Carol Warren, an associate professor, said, "All the budget stuff, as difficult as it was, I thought we really had to have that responsibility to challenge, question, and make them justify every penny they spent." Ultimately, the council was bypassed because the administration perceived it as meddling in an area in which it had no statutory responsibility.

The past president of the council and council members expressed frustration at their attempts to alter the budget. Thiele explained, "It is very difficult to get a handle on the budget since all the information is not presented, and we are only allowed to comment on the principles that form the budget and not interrogate the budget per se. So it is an exercise for show that leads to little feedback."

Another area of weakness in the council structure has to do with a lack of engagement among some members. The council's workload is considerable. Elected members must be highly committed to be effective as representatives of their constituencies. Academics seek election to the council, and those elected are viewed by the university community as respected academics. Unfortunately, being a respected academic does not guarantee that an individual will put forth the time and the energy necessary to be a successful council member. A few seem to value their election mostly as a useful addition to their c.v.'s. "There are people who put their hands up because they think it will be good for their careers, and then they don't speak because they think it will be very bad for their careers if they do," Harris complained. Lecturer James Bell noted, "There's been a sense of futility among some of us about members who don't seem to read their agendas, don't engage, and then rubber stamp items by putting their hands up for just anything."

Note

1. In Australia, to become a professor is rare; about 10 percent of academics are professors. The first faculty rank is associate lecturer, followed by lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, and professor. [Back to text](#)

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