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**Shared Academic Governance in an Australian Experimental University**  
**Jan Currie**  
**Murdoch University**

**Introduction**

Shared academic governance in a university depends upon at least two preliminary factors: setting up democratic structures and having a President or Vice-Chancellor who believes in shared governance. However, to gain legitimacy other factors are necessary. An important ingredient is for the leader to gain the trust of the university community and for academics to commit themselves to shared governance. Nearly half a century ago, Eric Ashby identified how a Vice Chancellor (VC) who wants shared governance will differ from other leaders.

He is the very antithesis of a headmaster or a general manager or a Roman Catholic bishop. Far from being a man charged with the responsibility of creating policy, he finds himself obliged to feed in ideas (if he has any) at the level of departments or faculties, and then patiently to watch them from the chair at numerous committees, percolating upwards toward the Council. (Ashby, 1958, p. 72)

Eric Ashby used the term 'first among equals' to describe the more democratic leader in English universities. Professor Stephen Griew, the Foundation Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University, claims that it was this kind of vision that guided him in his attempts to establish democratic governance at Murdoch. This concept of the 'first-amongst equals' is still present at Murdoch according to Thurgate, a former Council president: *The Vice Chancellor is not seen as being separate from the Academic Council or from the academic community. I think when the university works effectively there is not a division between what's happening in Academic Council and what's happening in the Chancellery.*

This paper describes the development of Murdoch University's Academic Council from its creation in 1973 to its current working in 2003, charting its strengths and

weaknesses. It draws upon my personal experience serving two terms on Murdoch University's Council and interviews with 12 individuals who were or are currently on Council, and supporting documentation (council minutes, reviews and legislation).

Based on research findings, democratic forms of university governance have benefits that are often lost in extreme forms of managerialism. Tapper and Palfreyman (2000) assert that it is a generally accepted idea that universities are better governed if their academic affairs are controlled by the faculty. Dopson and McNay (cited in Tapper & Palfreyman, 2000) concur: "Collegiality may not be efficient by the norms of other organizations, but it may be more effective in achieving the outcome of a 'good university' than rampant managerialism" (p. 20). Further, Newson (1998) argues the importance of developing democratic sensibilities, suggesting that the university is one place where democratic practices should be insistently put forward.

In contrast to these positive views of democratic decision making, de Boer and Huisman (1999) state that advocates of 'new public management' believe one tenet of good management is that "managers should be given the 'right to manage', i. e. the freedom to make decisions about the use of organizational resources to achieve desired outcomes" (p. 111). In today's climate many universities are attempting a synthesis of collegiality and managerialism.

### **University Governance: From Collegial to Managerial**

Each university is shaped by its history, by the particular time and place in which it is created, and then reconstructed by external forces and its internal dynamics. Many universities today are influenced by neoliberal economic forces bringing into greater play the role of managers in the governance of institutions. Collegiate traditions may persist at the departmental level in some institutions; however, managerial trends are increasingly introduced for strategic purposes.

In Australia during the last decade, there was a push for smaller boards, for more external involvement in universities and the need for what was seen as greater efficiency and managerial prerogative. In fact, top-down forms of management became the dominant governance model in most Anglo-American universities. Dill and Helm (1988)

in their research in the United States observed an evolution towards a reduced role for faculty. They delineated three periods that faculty participation goes through: “faculty control, democratic participation and strategic policy making”. There were traces of all three of these stages in the 30-year period at Murdoch. With a small Council in the initial ten years, faculty and administrators were seen as working together, more as academic colleagues without any split between administrators and faculty so it could be said that governance was in the control of faculty. In the middle years Council became larger, more representative and democratic participation could characterize it. Towards the end of the 1990s there was a greater emphasis on managerialism and a shift in focus to strategic policy.

Three Murdoch professors interviewed for this study referred to the corporatisation of Australian universities and the pressures exerted on collegiality in the current climate. *Very difficult to recapture the collegiality of the 1960s and 1970s that I knew while workloads remain as high as they are at the moment* (De Garis). Harris expressed a similar feeling: *Academic Council is not as effective as I would like it to be in counteracting the corporatization of the university*. Bolton argued for the need for a collegial body to exist as a bulwark against the managerial model being thrust on Australian universities by Canberra. *I believe that in a climate where the federal government is trying to push top-down management, a strong and experienced Academic Council is necessary to maintain the traditions that universities have been running on for 800 or 900 years*.

### **History of Murdoch University’s Academic Council**

The university started with 672 students in 1975 and has grown to more than 12,000 students and 1200 staff members in 2003. It also hosts some 2000 overseas students from 40 countries. During its history, it has faced various external pressures from threats to close it to the decrease from 90% to 60% in government funding. Correspondingly, its Academic Council has gone through a series of reviews and changes to its size, its composition, and its ways of operating.

This history focuses on three periods demarcating the restructuring of Academic Council: the origins of Academic Council under the Foundation Vice-Chancellor,

Professor Stephen Griew (1973-1978); the period when Professor Steven Schwartz became Vice-Chancellor (1996-2001) and enlarged Academic Council; and the installation of a new Vice-Chancellor, Professor John Yovich (2002 to 2003) and another review of Council. It is clear that the personalities of these three Vice-Chancellors influenced the culture of Council. These differences are captured in a quote from Andrew Bain, the current University Secretary, who has been at Murdoch for the 30-year period under examination.

*The first VC was Stephen Griew and because of the way the university grew up, there was a strong bond among the foundation staff. Most of us used to have lunch together. . . . Later Steven Schwartz became VC and was more of a top down person. By then the place was larger; and there was also enterprise bargaining and I think that put academic staff in more conflict with management unfortunately. What this has meant is that instead of the university as a group competing with the government to get money, the conflict has been all internal so there are people fighting each other. Now with John Yovich as VC, I think we are swinging back to the staff because I think John has a much greater empathy for the academic staff and them with him and also his management style is much more inclusive. He's the sort of person who likes to walk around, meet people and talk things through. There's a feeling that he is actually going to take the place somewhere.*

During the initial years, Murdoch was clearly seen as an alternative university, yet a quality university with the highest percentage of academics with PhDs in Australia (75%). It recruited academics from other states in Australia and internationally, mainly from Great Britain and the North America. However, soon after its creation, the Federal economy worsened and enrolments did not grow as fast as predicted. Consequently there were calls from many quarters to close the university. These threats resulted in moves by the university to retreat from some of its more radical ideas. In the 1990s there were attempts to merge Murdoch with other universities in the state. A planned merger with the University of Western Australia (UWA) almost succeeded. Thus, throughout its brief history, Murdoch has struggled to exert its independent identity within a fairly conservative and threatening environment. Its Council has had to be strong and it appears to have survived as a forum where good debate takes place, dissenting voices can be heard and problem-solving is seen as one of its fortés.

The university was named after Walter Murdoch, a distinguished English Professor at

UWA, who was well known for his famous dictum, “Challenge the accepted.” From its initial conception, Murdoch University challenged accepted traditions and its Council exemplified this. The reasoning behind its structure is best described by Andrew Bain, University Secretary.

*I think in terms of setting up the initial Academic Council there were really two influences. One was UWA and it was felt the UWA model was something to avoid because they basically had a Professorial Board. At Murdoch it was firstly felt that the Professorial Board was too large and secondly why should it just be the Professors that run the show. So there was a conscious move away from that. Second, looking at what happened at the new universities like La Trobe, Macquarie, and Deakin, universities that were created in a similar time, the move was away from God Professors. It was just natural that there would be an academic body that included academic staff, not just God Professors, and that was relatively small.*

Bolton noted, *We were trying to devise something which would be much more representative of all the interests across the university with a strong input from students and non-professorial staff.* What later became known as the “Murdoch ethos” was an essential ingredient in many aspects of the organisational culture the university developed. As Griew described it: *The Murdoch ethos was a spirit and an attitude that Murdoch would do things differently.* If UWA was seen as formal and arrogant towards students, Murdoch would be seen as friendly and informal in its relationship with students. If UWA was seen as not taking teaching seriously, Murdoch would be seen as focusing equally on research and teaching. If UWA was seen as hierarchical in its governance structures, Murdoch would be democratic and open. *The first five years of Murdoch were seen as the start of a new venture and there was much enthusiasm about working together for the good of the University. It was a time of high ideals and hope* (Gawthorne). Collegiality, in the sense of creating a scholarly community, was envisioned for Murdoch.

The “Murdoch ethos” has not disappeared. Professor Yovich, the current Vice-Chancellor, referred to it as an “often talked about but elusive to describe quality” in an article entitled “Embracing the Murdoch Ethos”.

Murdoch is differentiated from other institutions by the emphasis placed on diversity, human values, and sustainable solutions in the pursuit of our mission. Indeed, these characteristics set us apart. But the Murdoch ethos is

much more than this – it encompasses a commitment and loyalty to the broad Murdoch community. (Yovich, 2002, p. 2)

It was clear from the beginning that a democratic council that was representative of the broad community would be in keeping with the Murdoch ethos. Over the 30 year period, those interviewed felt that Council had embraced the Murdoch ethos though there were times when this was threatened. For most of the time it operated on a collegial basis with a great deal of trust displayed between the senior managers and the elected members of Council (academic and general staff and students). However, there were times when a lack of trust developed. The strengths of Council identified by those interviewed were its size and its representativeness, its respected membership, its informal and consensual decision-making process and its ability to solve problems facing the university. The weaknesses noted were its lack of budgetary oversight and the lack of involvement of some members. Here I begin with the strengths, then discuss the weaknesses and finally describe two significant changes over this time period (in the relationship of trust and the introduction of Question Time).

## **Strengths of Council**

### *Size and Representativeness*

In the beginning Council was very small because of the size of the university in 1974, having 17 members of Council (12 administrators and 5 academics). By 1985 there were 25 members (11 administrators and 14 academics and students). In the expansion of Council in 1996 three general staff, three more students, and five more academics were added. At its largest it was 36 members (11 administrators and 25 general and academic staff and students). The 1996 review described its purpose: “It would provide a forum for staff and student debate, acting as the collegial voice. Council would be the main locus of opinion of the University community on all policy matters affecting the University.” In 2002 it was reduced to 29 (8 administrators and 21 staff and students) following another review but its purposes remained the same.

Its smallness has allowed for a freer flow of debate, as noted by Warren: *It was small enough for debate to take place. It was possible to shift policy, if not always stop it or develop it from scratch.* Harris also mentions its small size as well as its

representativeness. *I think the strengths lie in that it is still 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.*

After the 1996 changes, the Vice Chancellor Steven Schwartz called Council “the Parliament of the university”. Bain comments on this change and how the Vice Chancellor felt at the time.

*Later he [VC] regretted this[calling it a Parliament] because it had connotations that went further than what he actually wanted or maybe he changed his mind. I mean a Parliament implies that it is the body to which the executive is responsible and it has legislative powers and has oversight of the entire operations of the whole organization. I think it also encouraged some academic staff to believe that Academic Council rather than Senate was the primary decision-making body in the university, so that created expectations that could not be fulfilled.*

In commenting on whether these changes improved the workings of council, Gawthorne noted that it did not: *It confused the role of Council as the supreme academic body of the university with a forum for airing grievances.* Another professor agreed.

*I don't think the Parliament model is really an appropriate one for a university, no. Our state and federal parliaments are fairly powerless bodies themselves. They are commonly referred to as talking shops and the real decisions are made by the executives of the public service. The oppositional model is not really a helpful one. I would much rather see a group, in a collegial way, working together towards an outcome that satisfies everybody. In practice that's a little idealistic. Nevertheless, I've found that when VCs approach the board in that kind of spirit, they get a very good response. (de Garis)*

There were others who felt the move was justified to expand council and make it a more representative body.

*When you've got elected members, there's a sense that at least Academic Council is the parliament of the university, then accountability flows back to the constituents. And certainly as an elected member, I felt that I needed to canvas opinion among colleagues and I couldn't always just speak in my own voice and figure out, particularly in the Social Sciences, what people were saying, thinking, and feeling. And then I would go back to the people and let them know what happened. (Harris)*



The idea of a parliament as the principal body where academic decisions would take place may still be achievable at Murdoch. At the time it was introduced, however, there were tensions between the VC and academic staff that threatened the legitimacy of council. Governance began to drift away from Council as more decisions were taken in secret by the Senior Executive Group.

### ***Informal, Consensual Procedures***

In the early years due to its very small size, Council was informal enough that people tried out new ideas and it brought people closer together by hearing ideas from a range of perspectives. The consensual manner in which it operated is depicted in these two quotes from founding members. *Everybody had a feeling of belonging, being on the same team; the place was going somewhere and trying to do something different.* (Bain) *As I recollect for the first year or so 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.* (Bolton)

Comparing experiences at other universities (UWA and Wellington), Harris noted the effectiveness of the enlarged Council in 1997 and the fact that it still managed to sit around one large table.

*Taking UWA first, I was very conscious of my gender because it was a parliament of older males and it was held in an imposing room and all of the procedures were highly formal. You weren't sitting around a table; you were sitting in a tiered lecture hall and it felt like a jury or something. I think I very rarely spoke or was expected to. It didn't seem to me like a place for debate but was more of an information-sharing session and when debates did take place the order of speech was fairly tightly controlled. Indeed, people made speeches as opposed to having a debate. I felt like I was a spectator to a performance. In New Zealand it was composed mainly of senior staff, generally male and people in their 50s or 60s plus. The debate was livelier and was more politicized. At UWA it was more polite and people said things in turn. In New Zealand I could pick up very quickly the nature of the ideological debate in the community and I joined in on it fairly early on and didn't feel self-conscious doing so. 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 Academic Council was contributing to the university's business.* (Harris)

### ***Respected, Elected Members***

The legitimacy of a decision-making body depends on the power it is given and also on the respect people give to its members. It was the consensus of those interviewed that there was respect for Council. It was seen as a legitimate governing institution and good academic leaders were elected to it. In the beginning Council included foundation professors as well as *articulate, rational and assertive members from a variety of non-professorial staff from a complete range of schools. They had already shown themselves as people who had the whole university on the centre of their radar scopes, rather than just their own narrow disciplinary interests, and their determination to take a university-wide view of most problems brought to Council* (Griew). There was agreement amongst the interviewees that good academic leaders were drawn to serve on Council. *Generally I think people respected Council, it didn't mean that they agreed with everything that came out of it, but it had legitimacy* (Bain). *You get a variety. In general I think they are good academics that get elected to Council* (Harris).

Having elections and people contesting the elections generally increases 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* (Borowitzka).

### ***Problem-Solving, Effective Body***

From its origins in 1973, Griew noted the effectiveness of Council in that decisions were to be the final ones (not overturned by the Senate or the Executive). The fact that Council was to be the principal body making policies and setting academic priorities enabled it to be seen as a legitimate and powerful body. *Another important principle was to encourage real discussion of fundamental academic issues and priorities and avoid a rubber-stamping function by Council by limiting its size drastically* (Griew).

Harris commented on her experience in different universities and felt that Murdoch's Council was the most effective of the three she experienced. *In terms of a decision-making body, UWA was a performance body, Wellington was a debating body and Murdoch was most effective as a decision-making body. But there are a lot of things that get in the way of the potential.*

Several members including the current and past presidents mentioned its ability to solve problems. . . . *you bring together a range of expertise. . . to bear on problems that don't have obvious answers. That's how it adds value and I've seen that work time and time again where you say I've never thought of that as an answer but it works* (Thurgate). *So, yes it does achieve things and the reason it works in the end is the people. It's quite a reasonably sized group that is very effective. They ask hard questions and enunciate their points very well, whether you agree with them or not. Council is engaged with the issues and that's what makes it effective.* (Borowitzka) *I think it is very important to have a forum to debate academic issues. When it works well as a collegial body and both executive members and elected academics act together to solve problems, then it is very effective. When Academic Council works best, it is great at problem solving.* (Thiele)

Besides commenting on its effectiveness, Warren and de Garis added another characteristic, freedom of speech, which was apparent in Council. *I thought it was quite effective in that period when I was on it. It was hard and painful but it was quite a critical period in the history of the university. People felt it was possible to speak their minds* (Warren). *It did bring together people from most parts of the campus and it created an environment in which they were prepared to speak up. It did develop some quite effective policies on academic issues* (de Garis).

## **Weaknesses**

### ***Lack of Budgetary Oversight***

A recurring theme over the thirty-year period and particularly during the last decade was the role of monitoring the budget. In the earlier period, a permanent, representative committee was given that role and this seemed to work well. When this committee was disbanded in 1996, the role of monitoring the budget lapsed and then was only partially returned to Council. Since that time, monitoring the budget has been fairly ineffective. Essentially the Senior Executive Group prepares the budget and then the deputy vice chancellor (DVC) explains changes from the previous year in the strategic allocations of the budget. Council is asked to comment on this draft budget. In the past, when questions were asked about line items (e.g. the amount in the VC's budget), this was considered to

be too detailed. Even when querying the proportional divide between the Chancellery and the Divisions, the answer was often camouflaged behind different accounting procedures from one year to the next. As teaching budgets steadily declined during the 1990s, the tension over the budget became more acute. Currently there is no forum in the university monitor the budget in a transparent manner.

Even though the 1996 review introduced a statement of purpose regarding budgetary oversight: “To exercise oversight of the management of the University, including scrutiny of the budget,” Council did not effectively achieve this. The brief attempt to achieve this, however, was seen as a critical moment. *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* (Warren). Yet, in the end, Council was bypassed and was seen by the Senior Executive Group as meddling in an area it had no statutory responsibility. Andrew Bain explains:

*Academic Council was never involved in the budget. The 1996 review said that it should be involved in setting the draft budget and we tried to work that through in the budget committee, but that really did not get very far. Then there was a feeling that Council was getting into the minutia and debating whether there should be 40 or 50 thousand for that one item. Some were trying to manage the budget, which was not the role of Council. The up-shot of that was a more sensible move to look at the budget strategically. Council has two cuts at it, one is in setting up the parameters for the budget and the other is to see the final budget, get a report on what the major changes were and the issues compared to last year. (Bain)*

Despite the ability to be partially involved in setting budgetary parameters, even the past president of Council saw the loss of oversight of the budget as nonsensical.

*Academic Council is empowered to look at academic issues but I can't think of one academic issue that doesn't have a budgetary consequence. So to say you can look at one side of the coin and not the other, I always thought was nonsense. How much are we going to spend on current operations and how much are we going to spend strategically. That should be the discussion and it has to be informed by the academic community. (Thurgate)*

De Garis also saw the lack of budgetary oversight as a weakness of Council. *Its weaknesses were firstly that it had no input on financial matters and the whole idea that*

*you can have academic decision making divorced from resource decision making is ridiculous.*

Bain states the obvious when he says, *I don't think Council engages terribly much with the budget, not as much as it might.* However, he may not be aware of the frustrations that Council members experience when trying to alter the way the budget is currently discussed. These are spelt out by Thiele.

*The question of the budget has been fraught with difficulty. The DVC presents the principles of the budget but that gives us little leeway to discuss the actual distribution of the budget. 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.*

#### ***Lack of Involvement by Some Elected Members***

The workload of Council is considerable and elected members have to be highly committed to be effective as representatives of their constituencies. Elections to Council are sought after and members have been deemed to be much respected academics. However, there are always a few who seem to use their election on to Council as primarily an item to add to their CVs. *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).

Some expressed a sense of disappointment that members do not seem to be as active as they should be on Council. *A weakness of Academic Council has 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* (Bell). Thiele noted the same phenomenon.

*The effectiveness depends upon the academic members being active participants. Often there are only a few of us who speak and are willing to serve on working parties and carry the majority of the load. There are many individuals who do not say much and seem to be there only to vote. They do not serve on working parties or contribute to the debate. They may be there to further their careers or to complain about something and after they have done their complaining about an issue, they contribute very little.*

When asked to suggest changes to Academic Council, a few respondents felt that an allocation of workload to elected members might be a good solution. It was obvious that the time commitment was substantial. *I really think the critical thing all along was were members able and prepared to put in the kind of time to make it work. It wasn't enough to turn up; you had to read all the agenda papers and then be willing to speak up* (Warren).

### ***Trust and Lack of Trust***

The *modus operandi* of the university in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s was to openly discuss academic policies, which may have slowed down some decisions. As a result, it was recognised that there was a danger of not being able to act quickly on matters that needed a rapid response. In the 1990s as managerialism began to dominate the university, there was a move towards less transparency and more decisions were taken by the Senior Executive Group where no minutes were kept. As a result of the sudden change in how the university was governed, a breakdown in communication and trust between the executive and academics soon emerged. This was prompted in 1996 by the VC's decision to dismantle most of the committees and to bypass Council on crucial decisions. The idea of Council as the Parliament of the university soon deteriorated. Harris demonstrated how easily an effective Council can be changed to a powerless one.

*When I was on Council, it became apparent how easy it was, sadly, to modify a body to ensure that senior executives made decisions before hand and voted as a block and really there was nothing or very little to stop the real dilution of decision-making power we thought Academic Council should have. I think it was crucial how the position of the deans changed everything; they went in and voted as a block and we've got the general staff and the administrators tending to work together so then it's left to elected members and students to do the work. Amazingly we tried to do it but it was very hard work.*

Members of Council were partially successful in blocking proposed changes deemed harmful to the integrity of the university. Many members became active outside of Council as well, through strikes, protests, letters to the Senate and meetings with the Chancellor. We were joined by noisy protests by students who organized a sit-in and then a sleep-in at the Senate chambers. In separate, mass meetings, academics, students and general staff voted no-confidence in the VC. It was a time of great agitation. As Bolton, a

member of Senate at that time remarked: *My sense was that when I got back on the Senate in 1999, after all those years away, Academic Council was certainly not highly regarded by the Chancellery.* The tensions between academics and the Chancellery were growing and little trust remained. Council became a forum to block administrative initiatives and little consensus remained between the VC and the academic members of Council during the period 1996-2001.

The current president reflected on how Council led the university through a bad patch. *Yes, I think we've seen that over the last seven years it can be effective. We went through a bad patch and the Council actually took the lead then and went ahead quite well* (Borowitzka).

Another member saw how important Council can be as a counter balance to a strong executive.

*It is also a necessary check against a management that can become too remote from the organization and too narrowly focused on management priorities. What has altered the current working of Academic Council is the attitude of the VC and his willingness to listen to members of Academic Council. There is a greater sense of a collegial approach to issues. (Thiele)*

Bolton saw the atmosphere of trust as essential and notes how it is being restored with the appointment of a new VC.

*The essential thing that our present VC is doing well is to build up a sense of trust between the various sections. So even when there is a disagreement, it's important that Academic Council feels that nothing relevant is being concealed from it and that wasn't always the case in an earlier regime.*

#### ***Question Time: Effective or Not***

Keeping with the parliamentary procedures, another change alluded to above was the introduction of "Question Time", where senior administrators could be asked a question about their "portfolios". Question Time is a procedure used in Australia's Parliament when any member can raise an issue with a Minister. Some questions are on notice, given to the Minister before the session, and others are without notice, asked spontaneously in Parliament. Before all the protests occurred at Murdoch University in 1998, Academic

Council was beginning to operate as the voice of the people and members used the forum to question actions taken by the executive. The VC often became visibly angry with the questions asked during Question Time, which defeated the purpose of the very procedure he introduced.

Possibly as a result of the tension that Question Time raised in Council, Gawthorne felt that it did not improve Council. *It would have been better if the VC had periodic university-wide forums in which staff could raise questions with or without notice.* Others were more positive about Question Time.

*Yes, I think it can be good because I remember giving a question on notice about the budget, which meant that the VC couldn't say I don't have the data, I'll have to go back and get it; when it's on notice, you have to answer it.* (Harris)

*Oddly he [the VC] introduced Question Time, which I thought was really important because it did give not only Council members as a whole but also ordinary academics who had a question had the chance to have it answered. A couple of times it became quite a critical point.* (Warren)

*Well there certainly were occasions where people asked astute questions that drew out information we may not otherwise have had. I don't think there is anything wrong in principle with Question Time but in practice, it didn't usually work that well because people were apprehensive and therefore defensive. Having the mechanism there can't do any harm.* (de Garis)

With the change in the atmosphere at Council to one of much greater trust in the VC, the need to ask questions without notice has lessened. At least for the present, few academics are raising questions about the portfolios of senior administrators.

*Yes, I think it was a good introduction but it's changed. It's only for questions with notice, not without notice, because some of the executives were worried about being put on the spot probably for political advantage. Someone might like to stump the VC with a question or issue he knows nothing about. And really we're not a government and opposition, so that's not fair in a way.* (Bain)

Although the current President of Council recognized that Question Time was a good institution to keep, he could see that since the change had occurred, it was rarely used. Now most questions relate to the VC's report.



*At the moment we are getting almost no questions on notice, haven't had one for several meetings. On the other hand, there is always the opportunity to ask questions that are not on notice — the Vice-Chancellor's report opens up that possibility.* (Borowitzka)

## **Discussion**

It is clear in the responses of this fairly diverse group of academics and administrators that Murdoch University's Council is a robust body engaging in lively debate that has to continue to earn its legitimacy as an effective decision-making body. In identifying its strengths, most respondents noted its smallness, its representativeness and its ability to solve problems. The fact that it has regained a sense of trust between the senior executive and academic and general staff has increased its effectiveness. Question Time is still a part of Council but it is not used to embarrass management due to the restoration of a collegial atmosphere. In the final analysis, Council has bent towards the role of a strategic planner as identified by Dill and Helm (1988). Governance has shifted away from the early days of faculty control and towards greater top-down management. Although Murdoch may have developed a blend between managerial and democratic procedures in a more trusting atmosphere, the role of Council in monitoring the budget remains an unresolved issue.

In examining some of the literature on university governance, it is worth exploring how Murdoch's Academic Council fits with the prevailing models. Minor (20002) identified four models of faculty senates: *functional*, *influential*, *dormant* and *subverted*. In a later study Tierney and Minor (2003) classified the meaning of "shared governance" into three categories: *fully collaborative*, *consultative*, and *distributed* decision-making. Murdoch's Council appears to fall into the categories of *influential* and *fully collaborative*. It has a collegial model of governance where faculty and managers make decisions jointly and consensus is the goal. It can initiate change on campus and is viewed as a partner in campus governance. It differs in some of its characteristics from these two models. For example, it is not exclusively composed of faculty. Perhaps because of this, it is involved in an agenda concerned with the entire university and not just faculty issues. Its composition, representative of the university, is identified as one of its strengths because its decisions are then more binding on the university community.

Lee (1991) concluded that campuses where presidents and provosts engaged with faculty senates were the ones where governance was perceived to be more effective. At Murdoch, managers cast their votes just as do the general staff, students, and academics. Only with great difficulty can managers nullify a decision made by Council.

Williams et al. (1987 cited in Minor 2002) provide five categories of how faculty view their involvement in governance: *collegial*, *activist*, *acceptors*, *hierarchicals* and *copers*. Members of Council who were interviewed could be described as *collegial* in most circumstances, preferring to share governance with the executive. However, there were times when they were more *activists*, rejecting a strong managerial role in governance. Harris strongly expressed this feeling about Murdoch's Council, *If you think that the prime function of the university is promotion of academic ideals, then I actually think that we should define a far heavier weighting to academic interests on Academic Council.*

There was no hint of being 'hierarchicals', wanting a strong administrative role in governance or 'copers' just managing to get by with the status quo. The university was founded on a democratic platform and the academics attracted to it have maintained the "Murdoch ethos" of collegiality. However, there may have been changes over time in how democratic or collegial the university has been. There were periods in the history of Academic Council when there was disagreement about its role and some individuals may have viewed it as too activist and going beyond its statutory authority.

A more telling difference with the US scene is in the greater satisfaction expressed about Academic Council. Most members interviewed felt that Academic Council was influential and saw it as a legitimate decision-making body, which is captured in this quote. *I would say that we have a robust Academic Council. I have a strong sense that our Academic Council works well and it's been quite effective* (Bell). This is in contrast to the widespread dissatisfaction with faculty senates in the US. According to Tierney & Minor (2003), "Dissatisfaction was particularly strong at doctoral universities, where only 19 percent of respondents agreed that faculty has high levels of interest in Senate activities" (p. 6) .

## **Concluding Comments**

The effectiveness of governance boards is affected by internal structures, their composition and local personalities. In addition, external pressures can change university governance. In Australia, there was external pressure towards greater managerialism, attempting to streamline decision-making. This pressure became stronger with each review of higher education from 1988 to 2002.

As a historical background to these changes, Bessant (2002) charts the demise of collegiality in Australian universities and relates it to the general decline of professorial authority in university governance and the emergence of corporate management structures. He notes that Academic Boards or Councils “were mostly reduced to briefing sessions and in some universities by-passed altogether” (2002, p. 7). The corporate management initiatives derived legitimacy from federal reviews demanding stronger governance in universities. The Dawkins’ (1988) White Paper (named after the former Minister of Education during the Labor Government’s period in power from the 1980s to the early 1990s) favored stronger managerial modes of operation and specifically referred to streamlining decision-making. The Hoare Report (1995) reiterated the need for management reform. Then the West Review (1998) made more specific statements, arguing for governing bodies of between 10 and 15 members. Most often these reports referred to the combined lay and academic Senates; however, there was a spill-over into all types of decision-making bodies.

Nelson (2002) declared in the most recent review: “There remains considerable scope for improvement of governance arrangements, despite the reforms of recent years. Boards, Councils or Senates often remain unwieldy structures, unable to provide the support and advice necessary to Vice-Chancellors managing a large-scale organization” (p. x). It seemed most perturbed about how members acted in these governing bodies. “Some of these members believe they are representing particular constituency interests rather than acting as the collective leadership of the university” (2002, p. x). Quoting a University of Western Sydney submission, it argued for legally codifying the duties of members and relating them to corporations law where the “the overriding responsibility of Board members is made clear” (p. 22). By this, it was evident that the government did

not want elected students and staff members to see themselves as representatives of their constituencies.

At Murdoch there was some support for a smaller Council because of the unwieldiness of the debate but not because of how elected students and staff members represent their constituencies. *To run a debate with 36 people is onerous, is subject to all sorts of vagaries of the way people interact. Also a committee that large really suffers from the social loafing, that is that people turn up and believe that someone else has done all the work* (Thurgate).

The checks and balances built into a representative constituency are essential for a university community. This move to see elected representatives as neutral members without political constituencies is contrary to the spirit of democratic participation. It is true that members should act in the best interest of the university but it is also quite evident that the 'best' interest does not mean that conflicting interests can easily disappear. It is better as Hoare (1995) noted to have a vigorous council and one where there is lively debate. Otherwise, issues are thought to be rubber-stamped and apathy and cynicism soon seep into the forum.

During most of its 30-year history Murdoch's Council was collaborative. The non-collaborative times occurred when there was an insufficient level of trust between academics and the executive. As Tierney and Minor concluded in their study of university governance in the United States, "Apathy and lack of trust are the most significant barriers to meaningful faculty participation" (2003, p. 11).

There was even a period when Council was not respected by some members of the Chancellery and the Senate. However, faculty did not recoil into apathy. Instead a more activist stance was taken and Council eventually regained its legitimacy in the eyes of Senate members and senior managers. This occurred with the change of vice-chancellor and validates one of the Tierney and Minor's strategies for improving governance.

***Create the conditions for trust:*** Trust exists as a reciprocal relationship where both parties accept the importance of one another and have bonds of mutual obligation. Trust is not a "pie in the sky" value that is impossible to articulate. Trust is accomplished over time as a group or individual sees that what was said is done. (2003, p. 12)

The notion of trust as a two-way process points to the importance of the multiple actors who create the conditions for good governance. Not only are there multiple actors that impinge upon this trusting relationship, there are also multi-levels of decision-making that culminate in a governing body making the final academic policy decisions. This means that there are various levels for faculty to become involved in governance. Communication of decisions is crucial so that the flow of decision making from one level to the next occurs smoothly and in a timely fashion.

An area where further delineation of authority is needed in Murdoch's Council is that of setting budget priorities. In Tierney and Minor's (2003) survey, only 11 percent of faculty reported having a substantial level of influence over setting budget priorities. Even though Council has a role in this area, the ability to influence the budget seems negligible.

Members of the Murdoch University community have been fortunate in avoiding the apathy and cynicism commonly expressed about faculty senates in the US. Currently Academic Council is seen as a legitimate forum that blends managerial processes, such as strategic planning, into its procedures. As can be seen by this brief overview of its history, there were times when cynicism began to weaken its legitimacy. It appears that one way to ensure its future legitimacy is to continue to elect activist members who believe in its collegial mode of operating. Moreover, if a trusting relationship continues to exist between the executive and the academics, then Murdoch's Council should retain its reputation as one of the more robust councils in Australia.

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