

Guidelines on Merit Relative to Opportunity

Introduction

In contemporary universities, the traditional norm of fulltime work and an uninterrupted, linear career trajectory no longer matches the profile of many staff.

Universities face considerable challenges relating to the sustainability and development of the workforce, particularly the academic workforce. Considering *Merit Relative to Opportunity* in employment and performance-related decision making provides the university sector with the opportunity to create workplace cultures that attract and retain the very best staff with a diverse range of personal characteristics, employment arrangements and career histories. (Rafferty et al)

'Certain groups, including women, people with disabilities and Indigenous staff may be less able to comply with these formal and informal norms and therefore less likely to accrue achievements at the expected rate. Equity interventions must engage with basic work practices and processes and the norms that underlie them, in order to re-vision them in ways that are more inclusive and effective for organisations' (Kolb et al, 1998).

The University of Auckland *Merit Relative to Opportunity Policy* was developed following collaboration with the Australian Go8 HR Directors' Staff Equity Sub-committee which developed a paper on *Merit Relative to Opportunity* in 2010 for the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

What is Merit Relative to Opportunity?

- Merit Relative to Opportunity is about positive acknowledgement of what has been achieved given the opportunities available - in contrast to a 'special consideration' approach that highlights the negative impact of personal circumstances on performance or expects lesser standards of performance.
- It re-examines the concept of merit (traditionally derived from a fulltime, uninterrupted, linear career history), and the associated expectations of quantity, rate, consistency and breadth of outputs, and how these productivity factors may be affected by personal circumstances and working arrangements.
- Overall **quality** and **impact** of contributions and achievements are given more weight than the quantity, rate or breadth of particular achievements.
- It applies to recruitment, performance management and development, promotion and the awarding of grants and fellowships.
- The principle applies equally to academic and professional/general staff.

Staff with delays or breaks in service due to caring responsibilities may benefit from a more calibrated assessment of their performance; however, this initiative is as much about recognising the impact of generational change and shifting attitudes to work and the implications for the higher education sector, already recruiting in a highly competitive labour market.

Application of Merit Relative to Opportunity

When the principle of *consideration of merit relative to opportunity* is included within employment policies and practices, individuals are invited to disclose relevant professional/personal circumstances and working arrangements (e.g. ill-health, parental leave, part-time work) and their timing and duration. Personal details such as precise

diagnosis of medical conditions need not be given. Applicants may wish to compare their own career achievements with benchmarked data e.g. a part time academic returned from parental leave may describe the impact on the opportunity to conduct research and publish at a rate similar to a fulltime academic with no periods of leave.

Appropriate consideration can be given to these circumstances and the effect they can have and have had on:

- overall time available.
- the quantum or rate of productivity.
- the opportunity to participate in certain types of activities and
- the consistency of activities or output over the period of consideration.

Decision makers (managers or committees) can make merit-based assessments that focus upon

- the assessment of quality.
- ensuring that all relevant standards have been met, and
- take into account how individual circumstances can affect opportunity and productivity during a given period.

Staff can be assessed on an individual basis in terms of how well they meet the relevant expectations and not on a comparative basis with other individuals in the pool. When decision makers are required to make comparisons between individuals (for example, in recruitment) the tendency to privilege the individual with the “most merit” should be avoided when the opportunities to accrue merit are not evenly distributed amongst the individuals.

Relevant circumstances may include:

- Carer responsibilities for children, elderly parents, or ill family members.
- Ill-health, impairment or medical conditions, whether temporary, episodic or permanent.
- Part-time or flexible working arrangements.
- Career interruptions and delays such as parental leave.

All information submitted in relation to personal circumstances will be kept confidential and will be used only for the purposes of assessing the application in which it is contained.

Examples

- A staff member returns to work after a “career interruption” of parental leave, which affects research productivity during this period and immediately afterwards as she re-establishes research projects and networks.
- A part-time staff member describes how her attendance on campus for three days a week allows her to make significant and ongoing contributions to a limited number of roles and Committees within her Faculty and in her discipline. In assessing her application, her “sustained” and high quality of service is acknowledged, and she is not penalised for a lack of breadth of service.
- A staff member with sole caring responsibilities for his elderly parents has limited capacity to present at international conferences but lists a high citation rate for a small but appropriate number of publications in prestigious journals. Based on a holistic assessment, the FSC determines that he has demonstrated the appropriate quality and impact of performance in the overall criterion of “research” without penalising him for relatively lower output in any single research-related activity or for his overall research output.

- A part-time staff member calculates her overall service time in “effective fulltime years of service” in her promotion application and demonstrates how her achievements are consistent with expectations of performance at the appropriate academic level for the number of fulltime years.
- An academic applying for promotion took a period of leave four years ago to care for his terminally ill child. This has created a gap in his research record and reduced productivity after his return to work. The FSC considered his prior and current rate of productivity and made an assessment based on the quality of his work which did not require continuous and uninterrupted performance for success.
- A staff member describes how a significant illness in the years immediately prior to a promotion application has affected his overall productivity. In assessing his application consistent with a “whole of career” approach that does not require a consistent level of type of contribution every single year, the FSC acknowledges that a “sustained high achievement” of the requisite quality has been demonstrated, although recent output has been affected by his personal circumstances.
- A staff member who cares for a child with an impairment must always leave by 4.30pm to collect him from the therapy centre. This has restricted her ability to participate in team building events which occur outside of working hours and in some significant receptions for external communities. In her EVOLVE performance assessment, her reviewer affirms her skills in ‘Planning and Organisation’ on the basis of evidence that she has used time and resources effectively to build relationships within the time she has available.
- An applicant for a vacancy has undergone successful cancer treatment. As a result of time out having treatment and recuperation his CV is less full than some other applicants. The interview committee decide that taking his career gaps into account, the overall quality of his previous performance is superior to other applicants.
- An applicant for a General Staff Professional Development Award has chosen to work a nine day fortnight so he can contribute as a volunteer every second Friday. The selection panel did not consider this indicated a lack of commitment to his profession and although, due to his hours, his achievements were slightly less than some other candidates, he was the most suitable applicant and was awarded a grant.
- A general part-time staff member applying for a more senior position calculates her overall service time in “effective fulltime years of service” and demonstrates how her achievements are consistent with expectations of performance at the appropriate level for the number of fulltime years.

The Merit Relative to Opportunity Policy is available on the staff intranet policy register

[Merit Relative to Opportunity](#)

For further assistance and advice on implementation please contact Prue Toft Staff Equity Manager ext 88316 email p.toft@auckland.ac.nz

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Consideration of Merit Relative to Opportunity in Employment-Related Decisions
Discussion Paper (Lara Rafferty, Barbara Dalton, Beverley Hill, Inge Saris,
Lee Atkinson-Barrett and Lucy Maynard)

Kolb, D., Fletcher, J., Meyerson, D., Merill-Sand, D., and Ely, R. (1998) *Making Change: A Framework for Promoting Gender Equity in Organisations*. Centre for Gender in Organisations, Simmons Graduate School of Management, Boston, Briefing Note No. 1.

The University of Melbourne. Academic Promotions: Guidelines for assessment of “performance against opportunity”.

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