

An Ecological Perspective on Equal Employment

Robert J. Gregory

*School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz*

KEY WORDS Equal Employment Committee. University. Worker Rights.

ABSTRACT The advent of an equal employment committee in a university department led to small, but significant changes in the overall balance of rights and participation in decision making. Within an ecological perspective, such small changes affect all other parts of a "system," resulting in a more positive working environment for staff, given a tendency of a university, like society, to allow the "rich to get richer."

University departments have traditionally been almost as autonomous as individual faculty members. The right to speak out about social and other issues of the day, to conduct wide ranging research, and the privilege of teaching students is inherent in the work of the modern academic professional. Usually, the life of the university academic is harmonious, for most are almost sacrosanct in their "ivory towers" and most are sociable, for they interact a great deal through classroom work, debates and discussions, community involvement and research activities.

The civil rights and feminist movements raised, then pushed moral and social equity questions forth, and the universities, like other parts of Western society, responded, sometimes willingly, otherwise by persuasion. Although progress may have been slow, nevertheless, changes favourable to minorities, women, and people with disabilities have resulted in most situations. Examining a case in point, this article describes what happened in one particular department in one university, and draws some ideas and implications from the experiences encountered. An ecological perspective is then used to place the specific situation in a larger context.

DEPARTMENTAL HISTORY

A university department gradually added new staff when the numbers of students grew. Over some fifteen years, the staff in the particular department of concern in this article increased from two or three to nearly fifty members. The comfort level for the staff appeared to decline, as the numbers grew. The original head of the department managed in a benevolent fashion that worked well over many years, including the growth period. However, the processes established began to deteriorate with increases in staff numbers, the greater complexity, competition and sophistication of the external political environment, and the slow erosion of funding and support by the government for tertiary education generally. Size, although not the only determining factor, was influential in the emergence of an internal "Review Committee" which analyzed issues of decision making and process within the Department.

The internally based Review Committee advocated that a standing committee system be established to carry out much of the administrative workload internal to the department. Several committees were subsequently set up, and although the head of department resisted initially, his nominal hesitance was soon overcome. His administrative workload was reduced, which he appreciated, as he had already cast his eyes upon moving to a higher level position within the university.

The standing committees formed included those for undergraduate and for graduate teaching, along with selection committees for adding staff, an equipment and technology committee and a financial matters committee. As and when the head of department moved on, a new head of department, brought in from outside, readily

accepted the structure of the committees. In fact, he promoted them as the most feasible way in which to govern the department. He felt that the department would be better off running its own affairs and that would reduce his personal workload.

However, after a settling in period, this new department head sought to implement a "management committee" to assist in decision making on key issues. Such a group could assure that a pro-active stance was available on quick notice in a rapidly changing financial environment. His choice of members with which to staff the "management committee" was entirely devoid of females, and of representatives of lower level staff. In fact, the management committee proposed and instituted was an obvious "old boys network" arrangement.

Several lower ranking members of the staff protested, pushed for, and eventually succeeded in setting up an "EEO committee" to look at a rather wide range of issues relating to gender, academic level, appointments to committees, and other concerns about the rights of minorities and lower level staff. Their initial goal was, of course, restructuring the management committee. But other staff and the committee members soon raised many other issues, including possible inequities in workloads, leave time, promotions, sabbatical leave opportunities, allocation of intradepartmental research funds, conference leave, and so on. The inequities were perceived to be numerous and serious, and the members of the committee idealistically prepared to right the perceived wrongs.

THE STAGE WAS SET

Academics are notoriously difficult to "manage," given strong disciplinary affiliations, research orientations in narrow areas of professional expertise, and a tradition of self management. Promotions, sabbatical leave, relatively ample pay, and attractive occupational roles are among the few variables that can be manipulated by administration to control, influence, or otherwise "manage" the behavior of academics. Performance ratings, publication records and other measures of output, and student and or peer evaluations may of course, be used in addition. These latter methods of monitoring came into

greater use during this time period not necessarily because of change in the department, but rather because of broader changes in the university and indeed, the nation.

The department became one of the largest groups of academics in the faculty, and numbered well over 50 staff members. The interests and activities of members varied over a wide range. Given the numbers, these people were physically scattered in several buildings around campus. This prevented a social network and the associated feelings of belonging to a coherent grouping or organization. The dispersal meant that many department members rarely saw each other, except for monthly staff meetings or committee work. Thus common values, physical proximity, and other linking mechanisms were largely absent, making the department unwieldy at best. Although virtually all staff members were connected through an internal listserve or e-mail listing, exchanges tended to be initiated by only two or three members, plus the head of the department. Thus the communication patterns quickly revealed a somewhat fragmented department.

In the years since the department began, the financial pressures on the university and consequently the department have increased. The teaching loads are now heavier than in the past. Further, the pressure to conduct research and publish has increased dramatically, and though some of the staff are eager, others have relatively little interest or enthusiasm for a research regime and an ongoing search for grants which many believe will be required to make up for an otherwise shrinking salary. Additionally, the financial resources are rarely available, and time spent on grant writing takes away from students, teaching, and administrative loads, all of which are time-consuming.

In this context, it was clearly evident that the management committee was "selected" by the head of the department to perpetuate the status quo, and yet because of the fragmentation, challenging his arrangement was not a simple matter. The university adopted a formal structure allocating virtually all governance powers to the head of departments, supported by Deans and an academic Chancellor, and this formal structure was reaffirmed. Promotions, tenure,

teaching assignments, and other perks could be affected by any challenges to the head, particularly by strong opposition to his leadership. As an outsider, and a relatively young leader, he was unsure of his hold on power, and unsure of the means appropriate in this environment to lead. Staff members were unhappy with this state of affairs, and most felt left out from the decision-making processes.

THE EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMITTEE

In this context, the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee (EEO) formed, and began to look at a range of sticky issues, especially representation of all people in the department, including by gender, race, ranking in seniority and academic level, and auxiliary staff. The EEO Committee initially reported to the staff meeting in its annual report in 1994. At that time the Committee had been working for about six months and had been involved in a number of activities including committee liaison and research needs analysis.

The Committee drafted the following mission statement:

The Equal Opportunities Committee of the department was established in 1994. The University policy statement on equal opportunity includes the aim of enabling "all staff to pursue their careers regardless of factors such as gender, sexual orientation, marital status, ethnicity, country of origin, religious belief, and disabilities which are irrelevant to their ability in the work place". Within the context of the University policy and the policies of the Faculties, this departmental committee operates as an advisory committee which focuses on particular aspects of departmental practice as they arise from time to time (for example, the constitution of the management committee) and/or on long standing issues of concern (for example, facilitating research opportunities). At present we have a standing agenda which covers the following topics:

- * Recording and publicizing positive achievements for EO initiatives
- * Networking with other EO groups
- * Workload and workload transparency issues
- * Access to sabbaticals and overseas conference leave

- * Research facilitation - summer scholarships and departmental funding
- * Audits
- * Appraisal process
- * Selection criteria
- * Producing and circulating discussion documents on EO issues
- * Documenting our experiences of EO related issues

Not all of these items are addressed at each meeting. The agenda operates more as a guideline to areas of EEO concern and activity from which particular issues may arise. Given the advisory status of the committee, meetings frequently involve lengthy discussions. In keeping with this practice, 'minutes' usually take the form of meeting summaries.

MORE RECENT ACTIVITIES

In 1995 the committee developed a clear focus as an advisory and monitoring committee, and less of a role as an action committee. Early in 1995 the director of the University wide Equal Employment Opportunity committee was invited to speak with the department EEO committee about the university's policy and its implementation. As a result the members of the committee realized that there were very few departments with EEO committees in the university, thus the importance of this committee was emphasized. The university director spoke about representation at the department's management committee and advised that the departmental EEO committee seek representation on this decision and policy influencing group.

The constitution of the management committee continued to be a concern early in 1995 and the EEO committee provided feed back to staff on related EEO issues and made recommendations, some of which but not all of which were accepted. During the year the committee collected a number of resources on EEO issues. The materials were made available to any staff members through the committee. Finding a place for them so that access was easier was a next step.

Other issues on which feedback and recommendations were offered through the year included workload transparency, the proposed categories for auditing research output in the university and allocation of funds for departmental

research support. Specific recommendations on all these were reported.

In the following two years, the committee focused on workloads and sought to make available to all staff a full accounting for each member of the staff as to workload, including research, teaching, and administrative and community activities. This was accomplished and is now being maintained through the internal list-serve. Thus, academic committees can and do operate with some effectiveness to moderate what could have been a continuing worry.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Incentives are available to seek and gain research grants outside the department. To promote research and the long term interests of the University, department, and profession, at times there may be internal funds available for research. For competitive applications for such funds within the department, the requirements of EEO may create questions and concerns. Guidelines were suggested to deal with what may turn out to be complex decisions.

Taking EEO issues into account: A Policy Document and Preamble was written by the committee to make a statement to all members of the department about the importance of EEO issues in regard to research efforts. Basically, the committee advocated strongly that junior members of the department be given greater preference for research monies to advance their own research efforts. The document follows:

The EEO committee is particularly concerned that inexperienced researchers may misjudge the time-frame required for research and fail to meet output criteria where these are not flexible. The committee is also concerned that external grant applications and paper publications and submissions as exclusive output criteria could privilege "quick and easy" methodologies/projects and perhaps implicitly disadvantage some staff/research projects.

Specific limited categories, like gender or status, may not reflect problems of equal opportunity to research or other measures of productivity. Therefore, general principles ought to guide decisions.

Two general principles are suggested:

1. Where there is competition for funding,

priority should go to those without an established "track record" (as described below) on the understanding that they will be less likely to have access to outside funding. In establishing priorities the researchers' gender, status, ethnicity, and involvement with others also ought to be taken into account.

2. Where output expectations are specified they should be clearly stated to all applicants before applications close and they should be as flexible as possible to allow for projects at different stages of development to receive funding. EEO issues can be addressed at the output stage by allowing less experienced researchers to meet specific output criteria.

Track record is not a simple concept, but generally, track record refers to research and publications. A number of additional factors may be involved including research area, lead-time, scope of projects, simplicity or complexity of projects, significance of the contribution to the field and so on. These factors need to be taken into account.

Recommendations: Finance committee and the head of the department should use the first of these general guidelines to take account of EEO issues in funding allocations. The second general guideline should be used in subsequent rounds.

THE FUTURE

The departmental leadership changed again in 1995-1996, so that a new departmental head was appointed. The EEO committee continued during that change over, and now plays an important role in departmental matters. In the immediate future the committee will continue to act as an advisory and monitoring committee, gather resources on EEO issues and liaise with other committees on specific issues. The department has made use of the committee to solve various internal differences or difficulties, and the committee has proved to be a strong advocate for those who might well have been left out from decision making. The committee has had at the least, a moral influence on a number of the initial concerns, including inequities in workload, leave time, policies on promotions, and policies on sabbatical leave opportunities. For example, the issue of inequity in workload was

addressed by publishing information about workloads of each staff member and making the data available internally to all members of the department. Some areas, such as actual promotions as opposed to policy level changes about promotions, have been more difficult to initiate or force, but a more secure path has been set for future changes.

AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

New Zealand, like many other countries affected by the "New Right" ideology, has undergone massive social and economic changes in the past 10 to 12 years. The country was often known as the "welfare state" prior to the advent of the David Lange led Labour government, and unemployment in the past was relatively rare. Poverty was almost unknown, and New Zealand rated highly on most international scales of good places to live and work. The financial crunches, undoubtedly set off by the "oil shocks" earlier, and political changes, resulted in a new right economic plan, popularly attributed to Roger Douglas who served as Treasurer during the Lange government.

One of the features of this change was privatization of ownership of companies and activities that had been held by the state. Another was massive restructuring of the workforce, so that large numbers of people were made redundant or fired from their workplaces. The union movement was largely broken, and workers' rights were guaranteed through contracts, albeit most observers would claim that the contracts were highly favorable to business leaders, and not to the workers. The old traditions, including professional bodies, unionization, tenure, and so on were lost.

In the years since, the pace of privatization and restructuring increased, although most universities were only relatively lightly touched by these changes. As a result, attrition without replacement, minimum or no pay raises, extensive monitoring of work performance, and increasingly difficult working conditions led to unease by academic staff. In this context, academic staff felt they had less control over their activities, and their professional activities were increasingly displaced by "corporate" activities.

In that context, the felt unease led to a disharmony in social and hierarchical relationships

within this and other universities. The Equal Employment Opportunities Committee can be seen, then, as one effort by academic staff to regain more positive control over their workplace situations, and over their valued professional activities, in line with business affirmative action plans generally (Ross et al., 1992). Thus the move to a committee structure and specifically the move to adopt the EEO committee, are reactions to government and university led top-down initiated political, financial, and social changes. Although a case could be made that the primary issue in the development of the EEO committee was perceived male - female power disparities in the workplace (Acker, 1998; Alvesson, 1998) another view would add minority and disability and other rights as well. The success of the EEO committee was limited, which parallels a lack of success of other workers and the unemployed to redress the massive social change and resulting social imbalances around the world, and the continuing reactions against equal employment (Cahn, 1995; Zelnick, 1996). In brief, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and as well, the leaders gain more political power and those led lose more control over their lives and workplace environments.

Nevertheless, even in the face of adversity, and in the context of centralization of power globally, actions in one part of a system lead to reactions in other parts of a system (Emlen, 1973; McIntosh, 1985; Odum, 1983). While small in scale, the present efforts to maintain a social system that works equitably for all members are viable and important.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the EEO committee has been effective, albeit perhaps not in the ways initially expected. There was an influence on the selection of the second management committee - and the EEO committee formulated the only alternative offered and made it available to all staff for consideration.

The committee was also effective in gaining scholarships and research funds - by pushing for "surplus" funding which became available to active researchers at the lower levels of the department. This was proposed and accepted

and carried out. Further there was an influence on the research working party and the selection committees for they began to think and act in terms of an EEO perspective.

The committee also collected some data, especially about research productivity and teaching loads. The members of the committee began to network with other EEO groups at the university, and made plans to record and publicize positive achievements for EEO initiatives. The committee has tried to get transparency for workload issues and information, not only on data gathered, but also influencing what was collected, that is, what counted as workload. The committee has plans to assist in audits, and has promoted information about and access to sabbatical and overseas conference leave, especially allocations in relation to applications by all staff. The committee resolved to gather discussion documents or prepare documents on various issues of interest for the department.

The committee, on the other hand, has not been as successful in redressing the move from professional and academic towards corporate models, to maintain the previously more reasonable working and social conditions, or even to fully understand the larger picture as those macro-system changes have been taking place. An ecological perspective places the events within this larger context and illustrates that worker discontent and efforts to set up committees to handle grievances emerges within local

and national, and perhaps even international, situations.

Finally, this member of the committee resolved to prepare a paper on the experience for the record, and to inform others in university settings about the value of what can be accomplished. This paper, part of that story, seeks to present a view by one person familiar with the committee and university.

REFERENCES

- Acker, Joan : The future of 'gender and organizations': Connections and boundaries, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 5, 4 : 195-206 (1998).
- Alvesson, Mats : Gender Relations and Identity at Work, *Human Relations*, 51, 8: 969-1005 (1998).
- Cahn, Steven M. (Ed.) : *The Affirmative Action Debate*, Routledge, New York (1995).
- Emlen, J. Merritt : *Ecology: An Evolutionary Approach*, Addison-Wesley Publishing, Reading, Massachusetts (1973).
- McIntosh, Robert P.: *The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory*, Cambridge: University Press, Cambridge (1985).
- Odum, Eugene P. : *Basic Ecology*, Saunders College Publishing, Philadelphia (1983).
- Ross, Rachael and Schneider, Robin : *From Equality to Diversity: A Business Case for Equal Opportunities*, Pitman Publishing, London (1992).
- Zelnick, Zeb : *Backfire: A Reporter's Look at Affirmative Action*, Regnery Publishing Co., Washington, D. C. (1996).

Special thanks to Dr. Mandy Morgan, Chair of The EEO Committee, and to Drs. Judy Brook, Nigel Long, and John Podd for reading and commenting on early versions of this paper