

The impact of restructuring and reviews on university staff: a survey of members

Analysis of responses - May 2009

Summary of findings

In November 2008, the Association of University Staff (now the TEU) ran an on-line survey examining the impact of restructuring and reviews on university staff. The survey asked AUS members a series of questions designed to better understand both the number of restructurings/reviews and the effect that these have on staff.

Our intention was to use the data obtained from the survey to inform future strategy and policy for the union, as well as being able to get some sense of how effectively reviews are managed by university senior management.



When reading the results of the survey, it is useful to bear in mind that responses can of course only be obtained from those members who remained at the university after the review (i.e. were not made redundant as a result of the review). Despite this the survey responses provide a strong sense of the often far-reaching impact of reviews both for those made redundant and for staff remaining at the institution.

Whilst some respondents commented positively on their experience, responses were overwhelmingly negative. Common themes included:

The sector is 'over-reviewed':

Continuous reviewing means staff do not have the opportunity to consolidate new systems or adjust to changes. This impacts negatively on morale and productivity, with many respondents citing examples such as work overload and a reduction in services to students and other staff.

A sense that there is often only

token consultation: Many respondents felt that decisions had already been made and that seeking input from staff was simply so that the university could demonstrate it was meeting collective agreement obligations or policy requirements.

Poor communication and unclear processes:

Respondents frequently commented that information-sharing or updates were ineffective, sporadic or unclear. Many also commented on poor management processes throughout the review, which led to confusion, unnecessary stress, and feelings of being isolated from the process.

Narrow criteria for undertaking

the review: Many respondents noted that the reasons for the review were often not compelling or lacked an evidence-base. Generally the parameters focused on financial imperatives which did not take full cognizance of academic or organisational impacts.

Ill-considered final recommendations and a lack of

follow-up: A common response was that final recommendations were either the same as in the consultation document or appeared not to have considered proposals made by staff. Some noted that there was often little follow-up of recommendations, leaving remaining staff feeling that the exercise had been a waste of time and resources, with little discernable positive impact.

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Overview

At the time of the survey, the union had an overall actual membership of approximately 6800 (September 2008 membership count). The survey link was sent to branch chairs at seven universities to distribute to members via their internal email lists. A filtering question was included early in the survey to ensure that respondents were limited to those involved in a restructuring/review over the past five years.

Of the 749 respondents who started the survey, 501 (66.9%) completed the questions, with respondents covering close to the full range of schools, departments and disciplines within our university system. Slightly more academic staff (55.3%) compared to general staff (44.7%)

participated in the survey, and again a range of positions in both staff groupings were represented.

Women represented 58.5% of respondents, and men 41.5%. The majority of respondents identified as NZ European, with respondents using the 'other' category the next largest. NZ Māori respondents formed the third largest percentage, with respondents identifying as Samoan, Cook Island Māori, Chinese, and Indian being the smallest.

Most respondents occupied the 46-55 years age range (31.5%), with the next two largest groups being 36-45 years and 56-65 years (both of which

made up 28.2% of responses). Respondents in the 26-35 years age range represented 7.5% of responses; at either end of the age range, much smaller numbers were represented (1.1% for 25 years or under and 3.5% for over 65 years).

The largest proportion of respondents (29.3%) had been employed at the university for over fifteen years, although 26.6% had worked at the university for between five to ten years, and 16.4% between ten and fifteen years. Interestingly however, a significant proportion of responses were received from newer staff (employed up to five years) with a response rate of 27.7%.

The impact of restructuring

We presented a series of questions to respondents to gain insight into how universities managed the mechanics of the review or restructuring (such as timeframes for notification and consultation and staff input), and also how staff involved found this process.

We asked participants to indicate in what years they had been involved in a restructuring or review; the majority indicated the current year (2008), with a reduced number being involved in the five years prior. This could be attributable to a couple of factors:

- a. A significant number of staff involved in previous years had left the university (either through redundancy or other options associated with restructuring and reviews, or for other reasons); or
- b. 2008 was notable for the number of reviews and restructurings occurring.

Unfortunately the number of responses to this question dropped from around 500 to 385, however the table below gives an indication of

the numbers of staff involved in reviews in the university sector.

Table 1: When were you involved in a restructuring or review (tick all that apply)

Year	Response count
2003	52
2004	56
2005	74
2006	102
2007	159
2008	215

Most AUS collective agreements at the time of the survey contained clauses specifying a reasonable notification and consultation period for restructurings and reviews, which has commonly been accepted as at least one month. The results indicated that

generally the notification and consultation period met or exceeded this. Whilst most respondents felt that this was an adequate amount of time to undertake consultation (an average of 53.5% overall), a significant number (an average of 31.4% overall) indicated that this timeframe was inadequate, suggesting that further investigation about consultation timeframes may be a useful piece of work for the TEU to undertake as part of its industrial strategy programme.

We asked respondents whether they felt that the parameters of the restructuring or review were adequately explained, and whether these parameters were then adhered to.

Most respondents in each year felt that the restructuring parameters had been adequately explained (an average of 48% overall), although when considered next to the averages of the response options "inadequately" (an average of 27.8% overall) and "little or no explanation" (an average of 14.1% overall), we see a somewhat less satisfactory picture.



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Figure 1: Averaged responses to the question "Were the parameters of the restructuring/review adequately explained to you?"

Response	Percentage
More than adequately	10.0%
Adequately	48.0%
Inadequately	27.8%
Little or no explanation	14.2%

This result suggests that some institutions or departments may need to scrutinize the information they provide to those affected by reviews to ensure that it clearly explains both the purpose and extent of the review.

The next question asked respondents to indicate whether they thought that the parameters outlined in the review consultation document had been adhered to. In each year, there is a rough split in responses between "yes" responses and "unsure" or "no" responses, with nearly a quarter of respondents (an average of 22.8% overall) indicating that they did not believe the university or department had adhered to parameters.

"Management claimed they would answer any questions about the restructuring. When staff requested written answers to specific questions, this request was refused. Management instead gave inadequate and evasive verbal responses..."

Additional comments provided by respondents are telling:

"Management claimed they would answer any questions about the restructuring. When staff requested written answers to specific questions, this request was refused. Management instead gave inadequate and evasive verbal responses..."

"Mixed messages were received from the faculty. No clear guidance on what evidence was necessary for submissions. All appeared to be pre-determined."

"Not consulted until after the fact."

Policy changed along the way. Seems little notice was taken of submissions."

"Timeframe was extended, dragged on, poor communication about decisions behind whole process..."

"It seems there are rules for reviews but they get changed when needed and it is all very nebulous."

"Consultation a farce with changes rushed through at the last minute on the basis that decisions had to be made quickly to be approved."

The comments here indicate again that practices around disseminating information, communication to staff, and management processes need to be further examined for some institutions or departments.

Individual or group written submissions were the most common method for gathering feedback from staff (an average of 81.4%), with 65.5% of respondents indicating that staff consultation meetings were also used. A smaller percentage (an average of 20%) noted that presentations to management were used during the consultation process.

After submissions had been heard, an average of 51.8% of respondents indicated that they were given the opportunity to respond to or correct any statements made about their position, programme or department/division. This means that nearly half of respondents either were not given this opportunity (an average of 27.9%), or were unsure whether they were able to do so (an average of 20.3%). Even considering any margin of error for responses, this is concerning, again indicating that processes for staff involvement in some institutions or departments are insufficient.

A central tenet of the concept of consultation is that the 'feed-back loop' should firstly be clear to those involved and secondly, should be completed, if the process is to be valued by participants. The responses to the question "Was there evidence of staff viewpoints being considered in the final decision?" gave mixed results. Slightly more than half of the averaged responses believed either few, little, or no staff viewpoints were considered, or they were unsure whether this had happened. Those that believed either all or some staff viewpoints had been considered amounted to fewer than half, at 45%.

Again this indicates an area of concern which may be quite widespread across institutions and/or departments. Much energy goes into the preparation of submissions, which are written with the reasonable expectation that the issues and concerns raised will be duly considered, and submitters advised how or whether their feedback has been considered. These results indicate that there is substantial room for improvement in this area.

Unsurprisingly most respondents in answer to the question "Was your position disestablished (made redundant) in any of these reviews?" responded in the negative – the likely reason for this is that those who were made redundant were not offered new positions within the institution, and therefore ceased their employment.

What is notable however is the impact of a review on those remaining, as is indicated by the responses to the question "If your position was not made redundant, how did the restructuring/review impact on your role or working environment?" Whilst some respondents commented favorably on the review outcomes, most found it to be a negative, often stressful, and sometimes wasteful exercise:

"The environment became untenable because management accepted voluntary redundancy from the head of our programme, and other staff had neither the knowledge nor the networks to be able to cover her role."



"2008 - Change in position description, change in focus of position 2006 - change in position description and job title, staff reporting lines."

"Some of the tasks conducted by the redundant position were not re-allocated (i.e., other staff have to do on an ad-hoc basis)."

"2007 - Recommendations of the review have been slow to emerge and there has been disappointing lack of opportunity for senior staff input into processes for this uptake. Consequently, the outcomes of the review have had little notable impact thus far."

"2008 - Not pleasant at all. Total uncertainty as what is going to happen. Very hard to keep happy being a front line person. Feel unwanted and not needed!"

"... the reviews never established the workloads/content of staff made surplus and so no plans were in place for how this work was to be picked up, we have all just taken on more and more jobs..."

"Mostly positive. I can see that some changes are necessary, given that the nature of academic jobs have changed considerably and there are also external pressures."

"Change of focus and an opportunity to reassess the way the department worked (2003). I was part of the review panel in 2007 and attempted to make constructive suggestions as to how the department under review could perform better."

"Each of the three reviews created uncertainty in the workforce - lowered morale."

"The 2006 effort had a major impact as the proposals implied the virtual destruction of my department or much of it. Preparing responses took an enormous amount of time and it did seem that the original proposals were badly conceived. Much better would have been an approach along the lines of 'we have these issues, here is where we need to get to, can we come up with suggestions together'."

"Nothing seems to happen or change, and the impact is a sense of disillusion."

"... the reviews never established the workloads/content of staff made surplus and so no plans were in place for how this work was to be picked up, we have all just taken on more and more jobs..."

"Huge amount of time spent preparing for the review at relatively short notice (6 weeks). Huge amount of time "wasted" replying to the draft report which was poorly written and showed considerable bias and prejudice. If the draft report had been properly written huge amounts of time spent on responding to it would have been saved."

Survey respondents were asked two

questions which sought their views on whether there had been any changes to either the provision of services, academic programmes or academic outcomes as a result of restructuring/review. These questions garnered a range of responses, from those who noted no discernable changes or were unsure, to a few who reported positive changes.

"No changes to academic programme. Potential improvements in provision of services from general and especially technical staff."

"... a focus on better integrating the services provided by the department (accounting, ordering, financial, building management)."

"Better delivery of services to other university staff. Better lines of communication."

"... was a good outcome as it strengthened the current path of our particular school."

A large number of respondents noted negative outcomes, ranging from minor irritations to very significant changes that negatively impacted on staff and/or students. Common themes amongst these respondents included feeling overworked, low staff morale, lack of clear communication, working in an environment of mistrust, and compromising the quality of service to other staff and to students.

"Increasing separation of technical and academic teaching to the detriment of continuity and depth of teaching/learning. Fragmentation of contact class times leaving students little time and opportunities to put new learning to practical purposes."

"Students no longer get the assistance they had. Remaining three general staff often unable to keep on top of workload because of priorities."

"Our biggest problem is we work under a full-cost-recovery model which is entirely inappropriate in our environment. By adding another layer of management we have made costs even worse."

"... people stopped offering services, waited until they were asked, so level of service dropped, causing frustration for many people."

"Academic rigour and reward for academic achievement decreased. Rewards for mediocrity, sycophancy and sitting on committees increased."

"The office is often empty, so students are unable to find someone with whom to discuss their problems... the 1.7 secretaries remaining are overworked."

"... academic programmes have been reduced and there are barely enough staff left to teach the reduced offering. This is not a direct outcome of the restructuring in terms of redundancies or loss of academic positions. However, the restructuring has caused such disillusionment that all the good people have left or are leaving and the others are looking to join them. In 12 months a well-respected department has been destroyed."

"The office is often empty, so students are unable to find someone with whom to discuss their problems... the 1.7 secretaries remaining are overworked."

"... periods of review and restructure are too close together to allow us to regroup and start to feel we're consolidating."



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The final in-depth question “*What else could AUS do to protect members’ interests during restructuring/reviews?*” resulted in detailed suggestions about what role the union might take during reviews and how it could improve service to members affected. The key themes that emerged were:

Communication

- Ensuring that university management upholds collective agreement provisions regarding advice of reviews, or where this provision does not exist, advocating for it.
- Regular updates to members affected by the review.
- Publicise reviews more widely – both within the university itself and to other union members across the country. Where appropriate, use local and national media.
- Provide information/training to members about the correct process for reviews, including guidelines for an ideal review process.

Member support

- Increased physical presence on campus – not just during the time of review – so that members know who their organiser/branch president etc is.
- Need to be particularly aware of the difficulties faced by part-time staff – in terms of attending meetings and being involved.
- Have a national ‘review hit-team’ to provide additional support to organisers and members, especially in those institutions that have large or widespread reviews taking place.

Evaluating the review process

- Analysis of the real cost of reviews i.e. including longer term impact on staff and the department/institution, cost of continually reviewing etc.
- Challenge review assumptions e.g. insist that institutions provide a researched evidence-base for the review.

- Require institutions to implement post-review monitoring to ensure review decisions are implemented, and to assess issues such as staff morale, student satisfaction etc.

Other suggestions

- Periodic “health check” of the workplace (workplace survey for union members) to gauge whether there are issues developing that need to be addressed.
- Weekly reporting system for staff that are being made redundant (email) from the union organiser or branch president.
- Establish criteria that must be met before an institution can undertake a review – as a means to reduce the number occurring.

Conclusion

There is cause for concern about the efficacy of using review processes as the primary remedy for budget discrepancies, where enrolment targets have not been achieved. Education is not a process that can be matched easily to business models that expect full cost-recovery at all times, for every part of the organisation. A much more sophisticated approach is required, that allows a holistic approach to funding and therefore to each institution’s annual budget cycle.

The survey indicates a need for much clearer systems and for training of senior managers where a review of a department or faculty is required. Respondents frequently commented about the impact of poor communication

and systems and inadequate follow-up on review recommendations, which made a difficult process that much harder. This could be easily rectified and would go a long way to addressing the concerns of departing staff and those who remain.

As the tertiary sector responds to the pressures brought about by the global economic crisis, it will become even more important that it takes a measured approach to its future direction.

A good starting point would be a careful analysis of the real cost of reviews to the sector.



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Appendix 1: The survey questions

The national union would like to better understand both the number of restructurings/reviews and the effect that these have on members. To do so we need your help by:

- Telling us about the restructurings and reviews you have been involved with over the past 5 years; and
- Telling us how this has affected you and/or your job.

Confidentiality

We appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey. As a token of our appreciation, AUS members who complete the survey by Friday 7th November may choose to go in the draw to win an i-pod nano!*

*One i-pod nano available per branch.

General information

1. Which university do you work for?
2. Which department/group/division do you work in?
3. What is your position/job title?
4. Are you an academic staff member or a general staff member?
5. How long have you worked at the university for?

Your experience of reviews and restructuring

1. Have you been involved in a restructuring/review in the past five years?
2. When were you involved in a restructuring/review?
3. What was the notified consultation period for the restructuring/review?
4. Do you feel that this was adequate?
5. Were the parameters of the restructuring/review adequately explained to you?
6. Were the parameters of the restructuring/review adhered to?
7. If not, what went wrong?
8. How were staff asked to participate in the restructuring/review?
9. Were you given the opportunity to reply to or correct any statements made about yourself or your programme/department/division?
10. Was there evidence of staff viewpoints being considered in the final decision?
11. Do you feel you were treated fairly during the restructuring/review process?
12. Do you know how many jobs were

significantly changed as a result of the restructuring/review?

13. Was your job significantly changed?
14. In each review, do you know how many jobs were disestablished (i.e. positions made redundant)?
15. Was your position disestablished (made redundant) in any of these reviews?
16. If your position was not made redundant, how did the restructuring/review impact on your position or working environment?
17. What changes (if any) were made to the provision of services or academic programmes as a result of the restructuring/review?
18. What changes (if any) occurred in service provision or academic outcomes as a result of the restructuring/review?
19. What else could the union do to protect members' interests during restructuring/reviews?

Demographic information

1. My gender is:
2. My age is:
3. Which ethnic group/s do you belong to?



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