

Comments on Draft OSP Policy
OSP and Promotions Working Group, SCG
April 4, 2007

Policy/Principles

1. Re clauses: 'A prime purpose of OSP is to encourage sustained research connections with other institutions' & 'Approval may be given for all or part of a program to be undertaken either in Australia or overseas.' The SCG raised a concern about the implementation and interpretation of these clauses. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some divisions these clauses are being interpreted as requiring staff to undertake a substantial proportion of their OSP in an overseas institution. The view of the SCG is that this interpretation of the clause violates principles of equity; both in relation to staff with family responsibilities and in relation to financial considerations, especially since the University only provides travel allowance every second OSP. In addition, the view of the SCG is that staff wishing to spend a considerable portion of their OSP in Sydney working on a project (eg. book manuscript) should be recognised as having a legitimate claim on OSP leave, since in order to complete major projects, staff often require chunks of time free of teaching and administrative commitments but with access to their books, offices and computers.
2. Re clause: 'Although research will be of prime importance, the program may also be directed to the development of scholarship relating to teaching, professional and clinical studies or other aspects of scholarly development aligned to the University's mission'. The SCG understands that the intention of this clause is to broaden the purposes for which OSP leave may be sought. However a concern was raised in relation to the interpretation of this clause in view of the new requirements imposed by the Federal Government that university academics involved in teacher training will be required to spend a period of 3 months every 5 years teaching in a school. The concern was that staff to whom this new ruling applies might be required to use their OSP leave for this purpose. In view of this concern, the SCG wishes the University to give consideration to the need for a new category of professional development leave.
3. Re clause: 'OSP is only available to research active staff, or to staff starting a research career'. The SCG recommends that this clause be amended as follows: 'OSP is only available to staff actively engaged in research, or to staff starting a research career'. If this amendment is not acceptable to the University, then the SCG recommends that the OSP policy should include a definition of research activity that is broader than the current definition of research activity employed by the Research Office. There are two main reasons for these recommendations. First, the Research Office definition of research activity has changed several times over the last year. As a result, staff who have counted as research active under one definition may not count as research active under another definition. This lack of clarity is distressing to staff and may lead to discrepancies of interpretation and implementation of the OSP policy across the University. Second, the current definition of research

activity is too restrictive and its use in the OSP policy may end up trapping certain staff into patterns of work that make it difficult for them to improve their research performance. Although this problem is recognised to some extent in the clause immediately following, the view of the SCG is that it would be fairer and more equitable to adopt a less restrictive definition of research activity. This would not preclude the requirement that staff applying for OSP who have recently been less actively engaged in research need to submit a well formulated research plan with timelines and outcome indicators.

4. Re the clause beginning, 'A program of OSP will be considered to re-start the research career...', the SCG recommends that the phrase 'on a teaching weighted workload' be replaced with 'on a teaching or administrative weighted workload'.
5. Re the clause stating that approval of OSP applications is based on 'The staff member's performance and development activities within the University's performance development and review program', the SCG wishes to point out that this is conditional upon the development of an acceptable Performance Development and Review system.

OSP Program

6. The SCG notes the new requirement to submit OSP reports within 1 month of the return to work from OSP. We agree that the old requirement to submit a report within 6 months of return to work was too long. However, our view is that the requirement should be amended to 3 months, rather than 1 month, since staff are often very busy at the end of the OSP period trying to complete projects and are often very busy upon returning to work in catching up on teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Financial Support

7. The SCG wishes to point out that the financial assistance provided in the travel grant is considerably less generous than that provided at other rival institutions in Sydney. Staff at such institutions are also eligible to apply for a travel grant with each OSP rather than every second OSP. If the University wishes to retain and attract high quality staff, consideration should be given to improving the assistance package.

Eligibility of General Staff Engaged in Research

A general issue raised by the SCG is whether the University ought to be asked to consider extending OSP leave to eligible general staff engaged in research. This might include, for example, research assistants or research managers.

Comments on Guidelines

1. Documentation of Teaching Activities

The SCG recommends that clearer criteria are needed to distinguish the categories Good, Very Good and Outstanding. The current version of the policy includes criteria for Good and Outstanding, but not Very Good. In addition, the view of the SCG is that the criteria for Outstanding are too onerous in requiring recognition from outside the University. In effect this means that University Teaching Award winners could not claim that their teaching is outstanding unless they have also received external recognition for their teaching (eg. in the form of Carrick Awards or National Teaching Excellence Awards). This puts the bar too high. On the other hand, being invited to teach or give guest lectures at another institution is not a reliable criterion of teaching excellence, since such invitations can simply be the result of networking with colleagues from other institutions, rather than recognition of teaching excellence.

2. Documentation of Research Activities

The SCG recommends success in internal and external grant applications as an additional criterion for research activity.

3. Documentation of Service to the University and the Community

Since many academics are involved in activities that provide service to their disciplines or professions, the SCG recommends that these activities be recognised under the category of Service. Typical activities include: Examination of honours, masters and PhD theses; reviewing articles for refereed journals; reviewing book manuscripts for publishers; service to professional bodies (eg. as office holders, members of working parties etc.)

4. Referees and Assessors

The SCG recommends amending the paragraph stating that 'Deans need to consult the Professor of the Relevant discipline, the adviser and other colleagues' as follows: 'Deans need to consult the Head of Department, relevant senior academic staff in the discipline, the adviser and other colleagues'.

5. Responsibilities of Deans and Heads of Departments

The current version of the policy states that Deans need to 'Be aware of and advise staff on their research programs, the availability of research funds, where they might seek to have their research work published and the most appropriate form of publication'. However, in many cases Deans do not have the expertise to provide this kind of specific advise to staff. These responsibilities would more appropriately be designated as the responsibilities of Heads of Department and senior staff in the discipline.

Comments on Appeals Process

The SCG notes that the last MQ Enterprise agreement included provision for appeal on grounds of merit and/or on the basis that the University failed to follow the procedures set down (9.02.02). The SCG understands that when the EA was streamlined it was agreed that this provision would be included in the promotions policy. We therefore request an amendment of the relevant paragraph of the policy to include this provision.

Comments on Discipline Profiles

Since the assessment of applications for promotion is closely tied to performance against the relevant Discipline Profiles, the SCG recommends to the University that disciplines be required to ensure Discipline Profiles provide clear statements of expectations for each level within the discipline and are consistent with the MSALs. There is considerable variation in the level of specificity provided in Discipline Profiles. Some provide very specific requirements while others may be insufficiently specific and therefore do not provide the applicant, Supervisor, Dean, and Promotions Committee with sufficiently clear information.