Administrative Services – keeping up the momentum

6 May 2014
1 Summary

Commendation 2 of the 2013 School Review was for “The School Manager and the administration who provide a highly regarded level of service to the School”.

The School Manager met with current Teaching and Research staff, Teaching Focussed staff and two long standing, senior research staff (Gates, Nogita) (with the exception of Professor Paul Lever who is currently seconded to CRC Mining) in late 2013 – early 2014. Research Only staff were invited to meet with the School Manager or respond to the questions by email. Two Research Only Staff took advantage of the offer.

The objective of these meetings was to ensure that the administrative staff (student/academic administration, finance, HR) continued to provide high quality services that minimised the need for academic staff to do administrative work so they could concentrate on their core business of learning, discovery (and engagement). The meetings were not about individual staff performance; however, as there were a number of compliments provided, these were passed on to the staff and their supervisors. There were no specific negative comments made about any staff member.

All staff were asked six standard questions:
- What do we do well and what should we keep doing?
- What should we do better or stop doing?
- What UQ policy or process do you hate the most?
- How do you like to be reminded about deadlines, etc? Do we remind enough, not enough, or too much?
- Do you read the School newsletter?
- Do you receive sufficient information on your project finances?
- Have you any other comments to make?

2 Outcomes

2.1 What do we do well and what should we keep doing?
Most staff were highly complementary of the services provided by the administrative staff.

Staff indicated they felt welcome in the School Office and are able to get proactive, quick and efficient service from all areas. The following are noteworthy:
- RHD and academic administration received numerous compliments
- Staff were pleased that the School had a dedicated HR person
- The finance staff were very helpful with travel, purchases and reporting
- The “Long” and “Short” version of emails is well regarded

2.2 What should we do better or stop doing?
There were a few suggestions on what could be done better; most of these identified further improvements that would enhance the already good services provided.
A few staff suggested that new academic appointees be asked to identify thesis and RHD projects, and laboratory/computer requirements as part of the appointment process. This will be trialled in the May 2014 staff recruitment exercise.

Other suggestions included –
- Advice on how to access UQ systems off campus (done).
- Assistance with organising industry meetings including parking (will involve consultation with central units).
- Assistance with student advice (e.g. draft emails) – this service exists and periodic reminders should be done.

While the following are not administrative services per se, the following would also assist:
- Training for staff on the mechanisms of teaching (ECP, assessment, uploading results, giving feedback, academic advisor training) which should be done by an academic mentor.
- Help with writing grant applications including identifying the right grants to apply for at the right time which should be done by an academic mentor.
- Help in recruiting RHD students.
- Help in organising senior tutors/demonstrators.
- Peer review of teaching.
- Maintain a list of available RHD scholarships.

2.3 What UQ policy or process do you hate the most?

Staff were asked this question to see if there was anything the School could do to influence UQ to make change. Staff understood there are legitimate reasons for UQ policies and processes and volunteered this as part of answering the question.

Travel (applications and reconciliations) is the “most hated” process at UQ. Most staff acknowledged the current version is better than the first version; however, it is important that this be explored further with a view to streamlining the process, educating staff and working with UQ for future upgrades to the system as priorities.

Other areas of concern include –
- Early examination deadlines and definition of “errors”.
- OH&S: risk assessment database, need more educational workshops, assistance with problem solving.
- Legal agreements – in particular, the time it takes to execute an agreement.
- Car parks for visitors (particularly those that fund research or engagement).
- Class timetabling: moving large classes without regard to probability that all will attend.
- Blackboard functionality.
- Policies and procedures that legislate against the few who will do the wrong thing.
- Bibliographic record: providing evidence.
- Signing new vendor forms.
- Only being allowed one budget holder in UniFi.
2.4 How do you like to be reminded about deadlines, etc? Do we remind enough, not enough, or too much?

Email is the preferred way to remind staff of upcoming deadlines. The short/long version used in these communications is very much appreciated. Staff are happy with the level and frequency of reminders.

Some suggestions include –
- Put the business process calendar on the intranet.
- Include the ‘real deadline’ along with the ‘suggested deadline’ so staff can judge when they really have to finish a task.
- Be careful of the tone in an email.
- Consider putting some deadlines via an Outlook invite (e.g. RHD specific milestones to the supervisor). Note this functionality is now available via the School Newsletter.

2.5 Do you read the School newsletter?

Nearly all staff skim read the newsletter and read more if interested.

It is therefore very important to continue to have meaningful headings and key information in the first 1-2 sentences. The inclusion of due dates is also very helpful.

The revised Newsletter format addresses most of these issues.

2.6 Do you receive sufficient information on your project finances?

Staff require regular reports on their project finances. While a few check their own projects on the Reportal, the majority wish to receive regular reports by email. There was a reasonably equal split between those who need/want monthly reports and those who think quarterly is sufficient.

These need to include project balances as well as transactions reports and projected income.

Staff who hold larger projects and regular external reporting requirements were satisfied with the level of service.

The Finance staff now run reports on a monthly basis.

2.7 Have you any other comments to make?

Most other comments were about space. Staff appear to have settled well into Mansergh Shaw Level 5 and the proximity readers on the other levels (installed in 2013) were seen as a good idea. A second AEB survey was done (closed 3 March 2014) and issues remaining with the AEB will be addressed following analysis of responses.