School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning: Report on Governance Review

Lois Bryson

Background to the Project

As members of the School are aware, concern about governance was given impetus by the 2007 RMIT Voice Project and the Vice Chancellor’s intention that issues that emerged be addressed. The climate survey makes clear there are positive aspects of working in the School, with many people enjoying the work they do and expressing satisfaction with their relationship with at least some of their colleagues. However, it also indicates some significant areas of concern and dissatisfaction as this short review confirms. However many in the School indicate that they have had experiences that were upsetting and difficult and many feel their concerns are not being adequately addressed.

It is encouraging that attention is being directed to modifying School management structures and processes so that they are better suited to dealing with issues arising in a larger and more complex School. None the less the climate survey results indicate that greater insight into issues affecting work satisfaction is requited. The initial action chosen to achieve such insight has been to consult staff through enlisting the aid of a ‘critical friend’ ‘to explore governance issues at the coalface through talking to staff and other relevant personnel about their take on how the situation might be improved’ (email from Head, GSSSP, 20/03/2008). As someone with long experience in academia, and connection with the School (as an Adjunct Professor, see Appendix 1 for a brief CV), I was invited to be this ‘critical friend’ and this report is the outcome.

This ‘critical friend’ review of just one month, was never intended to be a formal, exhaustive ‘governance/management review’, but rather a project to help move things along. Its aim has been to allow a wide cross section of staff to feed in their concerns and ideas and to thus contribute to and become more involved in achieving change. This report aims be a short, sharp and hopefully insightful input into the work environment improvement process, though achieving the necessary change will take considerable time and commitment.

Preparing the Report

Over the last month, in preparing this report I have talked with, and/or received written comments from, a sizable number of staff (more than 60) with academic, management and administrative roles. I have also considered: a range of University and School policy documents, some relevant emails and minutes of meetings, as well as the results of the Voice Survey. There are no doubt differences in the organisational climate of the various Program areas of this large School, but I have not attempted to pinpoint such differences. This is both for reasons of confidentiality for those to whom I spoke and because addressing these issues must be done on a collective basis involving all staff, but particularly those at senior levels.
Despite (or maybe because of) the short time span of the review, a picture of the more pressing issues confronting the School can be drawn. This is not surprising because discussions, both formal and informal, of problems associated with governance do occur regularly among School members. The volume of discussion seems to have increased since the most recent amalgamation. So while this review has been brief, it is possible to identify some issues that need immediate and collective attention. I have deliberately concentrated only on what seem to be the most urgent and significant issues. As these are progressively addressed within the School, the relative urgency of subsequent action will become clearer. Unfortunately I cannot cover in this brief report all the very valuable ideas and improvements that participants put to me. However, if these issues remain alive for members of the School, they will be able to be tapped into later, so none of the ideas offered to this review, but not explicitly dealt with here, need be lost permanently.

I again emphasise that this report in no way claims to cover comprehensively the governance and management issues facing the School. There are, no doubt, many issues that would benefit from quite specific discussion and action. For example, I have not devoted attention to issues specific to the TAFE sector, or finances. However, hopefully, as the School achieves a climate of greater trust and openness, discussion of all manner of issues will flourish as part of a commitment to continuous improvement.

A background issue: Size of School:

The size of the School and the role this may play in explaining the School’s problems is an important contextual matter that is worth commenting on at the outset. This is because otherwise it may cause some not very productive static in discussions about dealing with problems the School is facing. Among staff these matters tend to be linked to increased size and complexity, but I found no evidence that size itself can be blamed. Many smooth running organisations are more complex and larger than the School and many poorly functioning organizations are smaller and less complex. Size is important to keep in mind however, because formal structures, strategies and the distribution of responsibilities must suit the size and complexity of the management unit. There is wide agreement that at present they are not suitable. As one participant in the Review put it ‘it is not size but level of decision making’ that is important.

It must be recognised that many issues connected with the enlarged School are gradually being addressed eg through the Portfolio transparent workload planning for teaching and for research, which is intended to be put into trial action soon. Change is thus occurring and must continue because in the absence of suitably altered management structures for the expanded School, the position of Head will remain seriously over-burdened with day-by-day administrative matters. The necessity to deal with excessive management detail inevitably diverts the Head’s attention and energy at the top away from the most important (as against the merely urgent) leadership roles of steering, policy development and constant alertness to addressing issues, problems and tensions well before they become problematic.
Concern about the School’s size may be compounded for some by a misunderstanding about the University rules for delegation and what decisions are required to be made at Head of School level. It therefore is worth quoting from the University website: “Local business practice may dictate that a delegate may authorise another to perform duties associated with the delegation on his/her behalf, such as approving leave applications. However, the accountability remains with the delegate” (RMIT website Governance: Delegations). This brief illustration not only clarifies the basis of management processes but also highlights that a great deal of trust is required for authority to be shared. It also highlights why systems are needed to ensure that all staff are well informed about the nature and detail of their roles and duties and the care required in carrying out their responsibilities.

Three major concerns raised during the Review:

Three major workplace issues were repeatedly raised by participants in this review and these are the focus of the following discussion. They can be broadly described as, lack of transparency, high levels of incivility and third, discriminatory practices, attitudes and processes. Though it is clear that not all work sites are equally affected by each issue, I focus on these because it is recognised by many in the School that they require urgent attention. Nonetheless it is likely to take some time before they are adequately dealt with and negative effects are turned around. The seriousness of the problems is illustrated by comments by some staff that they did not feel comfortable at work, and the fact that some have had to take recuperation leave. Improving the situation is therefore not only urgent but will need all School members to play their part. The comments made on these three issues paint a graphic picture as many review participants see it.

**Issue 1:** A lack of transparency and predictability in respect of responsibilities and processes was the most commented on issue. This lack of clarity is of central importance because it creates a lack of trust, which creates other flow-on concerns. These are vividly conveyed by the following selection from the large number of comments made on this topic.

**Participant comments:** ‘lack of transparency feeds suspicion’; ‘leads to paranoia’; ‘the budget process is opaque and this creates heart ache and grief’; ‘you get given the overspend figures but not the budget’; ‘finance people need to keep staff informed about finances and get feedback from them’. ‘people get suspicious of personal deals that get made, then middle managers get unhappy and they cry/shout/slam doors’; ‘too many decisions and processes are not transparent (especially about income), and too much is done by the head of School’; ‘lack of transparency leads to mistrust, which leads to a lot of anguish’; ‘information is not shared and power not delegated’; ‘the veto is used without explanation’. ‘the buck does not stop anywhere’; ‘80% of decisions seem to be exceptions’; ‘if rules are too restrictive, change them’; ‘need proper employment practices with all positions advertised’; ‘work load issues are huge’.

**Observations regarding actions**
Achieving transparency and predictability within the School, via well-documented and well-understood processes, must be given priority as this is crucial to strengthening trust. A plan which attacking the issues, with time-lines that are based on their urgency needs to be developed. While renovation will not be achieved easily, the implementation of work-load planning to ensure fairness and transparency is being currently worked on at the Port Folio level and should have many benefits. This will standardise and make transparent teaching and research workloads and performance. A number of staff also pointed out that the budgeting process should be made more open and transparent across the School. While funding will always be a contentious matter, tensions are only magnified by a lack of clear rules that are generally followed, and if they are not, this is acknowledged and the reasons for the exception are publicly justified. While the exception may not win the approval of all, openness can minimise negative affects.

The momentum from the Port Folio workload project could be used to deal with other issues that are non-transparent. Transparency would be extended, it was suggested, if brief reports were circulated which, while respecting confidentiality, inform the School about the nature and outcome of specific appointment processes. Also the assignment of study leave should not only be made more open but reports on study leave should be distributed across the School.

**Issue 2: A lack of respectful, civil and professional interaction between work colleagues** was an issue which was commented on almost as frequently as transparency. High levels of frustration and mistrust flow from a lack of transparency and consistency. This seems to be at the base of a great deal of unacceptable behaviour between staff (and staff and students). Many examples were given of such behaviour, including, ‘bullying, shouting, door slamming’ and ‘no speaks’.

**Participant Comments:** ‘there is a lack of politeness and a lack of recognition of the most basic courtesy’; ‘meetings are toxic and decisions cannot be made’; ‘the administration team gets bullied by academic staff as well as by others in their team’; ‘people are often rude and a significant few do not even talk to others’; ‘people are not even made to apologise’; ‘the only way to get things done is to shout, and then I feel bad’; ‘a good working environment is needed where people recognise that if they want to change decisions made at the centre, they need to get change there, don’t shoot the messenger’; ‘there is a lack of accountability for bad behaviour’; ‘people who act up get something done’; ‘administrative team members often get away with impoliteness to students and other staff’.

**Observations regarding action:**

Current levels of incivility seem to be far higher than is expectable even when taking into account that, for a range of reasons, people’s behaviour may occasionally lapse. However this behaviour is not evenly spread across the School. The level of incivility is of great concern, particularly because of the serious occupational health consequences, that can result. Dealing with this behaviour will require the whole School’s commitment not only
to dealing with the behaviour itself, but importantly, the sources of tensions and mistrust that cause it. General tensions between academic and administrative staff in particular must be dealt with at the appropriate level of university management.

Issue of respect and civility are currently being addressed with administrative staff and this provides a valuable entrée into dealing more broadly with the problem. However, it does not seem that the issue is being as systematically addressed among academics. Discussions with participants in the review suggested that the relationship between academic and administrative staff is made tense by a lack of alignment between policies affecting these two groups of workers. This is something that creates friction. A plan is needed to address these divisive issues coordinated by the Head of School.

Where tensions are being caused by a clash of work-place policies, these need to be dealt with at the appropriate levels within the University, though always bearing in mind that the central mission of the university is academic in nature. Problems relating to administrative support for academics certainly seem to need attention, and solutions may require considerable initial time and effort. An example, web-based teaching/learning illustrates the problems. If in the digital age, individual teachers are expected to take responsibility for aspects of web-based teaching/learning that they formerly would have seen as tasks of administration, the procedures and division of responsibility must be clear and agreed on. Also the acquisition of the necessary skills (if academics lack these) and the time to acquire them must be factored in, even though timetables are crammed.

Crucially however, all members of the School must be expected to take responsibility for their own behaviour and accept responsibility for being civil and respectful as a non-negotiable commitment. However the Head also needs to ensure that all staff are aware of the nature of their obligations and the nature of University mechanisms for dealing with explicit conflict, and unacceptable behaviour. Advice from relevant experts from People and Culture should be called on where necessary and all School members made aware of what behaviour is unacceptable and the consequences of a breech of the University’s code.

A practical approach may be to invest in chairs of all meetings a requirement to maintain civility, and even cancel meetings if unacceptable behaviour continues, and take disciplinary action where this is indicated. While the Head of School is charged with overseeing the matter of inappropriate behaviour, a suggestion was made to consider an establishing an ‘Ombud’ role to assist in monitoring and dealing with any persistent breeching of the rules of civil and constructive workplace behaviour.

**Issue 3: Discriminatory practices, attitudes and processes,** is a third issue raised by a number of participants in the Review. Such discrimination presents difficult and stubborn workplace issues, ones that must constantly be kept on the agenda of virtually all workplaces. Discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality and age were all raised, though discrimination in general was less often mentioned as an explicit issue than transparency and civility. However, it must be borne in mind that discrimination as a heading could provide an umbrella term to encompass many issues discussed as relevant
to transparency and incivility. Such a classification was not chosen, however, because omnibus issues are far harder to come to grips with.

**Participant comments:** ‘there is poor treatment of and prejudice against women, gays, and indigenous staff’; ‘gender needs to be raised, both structural issues and discrimination’; ‘some tough talking is needed’ (about equity issues); ‘gender inequity is notable at all levels and positions’; ‘some younger and more junior staff feel less valued on the basis of young age’; some staff feel ‘patronised’; ‘better gender balance is needed in leadership positions’; ‘the School is very blokey even though the rest of university not so blokey’; ‘gender inequity is notable at all levels and positions’; ‘there are intergenerational tensions, the olds get the goods’.

As these comments indicate, the discrimination that was explicitly discussed was mostly of an entrenched variety, involving fairly general feelings of lack of fairness. They were not discussed in terms of being blatantly chargeable discrimination. Certainly it is reassuring that, in a School of Social Science the most blatant forms of discrimination were not raised. But in general, a less than satisfactory ethos is evoked by terms participants used such as prejudice, inequity, ‘blokey’, patronised.

**Observations regarding action:** While gender, race, sexual preference and age were the main bases of discrimination mentioned, other issues also need consideration by the School. For example one participant asked: ‘Are the conditions of different types of staff fairly dealt with’. The issue of part-time staff was raised, including a need for fairer more transparent recruitment, and there was concern about lack of support for career development (eg, nurturing research). Concern was also expressed about how to attract, appoint and nurture people with diversity of characteristics. Strategies to achieve greater diversity of background in management positions was discussed including whether this might be addressed in more creative ways, eg by rotation of management positions or having alternates (understudy/assistant). A suggestion was made that maybe there could be two year terms for Executive members and a process of rotation with a view to the development of the skills of a greater number of staff.

The possibility of an Ombud role for tackling these issues and dealing with complaints was also raised, though if this were the only strategy it may act to funnel problems to an already informed person. These issues must be treated as whole of School issues. Another suggestion was for ‘group counsellsing for staff regarding equity in the workplace’. It seems clear that some on-going training is necessary if there is to be greater recognition of the less florid forms of discrimination.

**Additional general observations about the School**

Apart from in formal meetings, it was noted that the Head is rarely seen in many of the widely dispersed buildings that house the School’s staff. While busyness was well recognised as the cause of this absence, it does need attention, as it conveys remoteness and such symbolism is important in the workplace. More deliberate welcoming of new staff was also suggested as of importance, as one staff member from overseas suggested:
‘people are often alienated and the most simple gestures not made… new staff are not welcomed when they arrive’.

Many commented on the lack of social events for the School, though some believed that because of tensions, staff might not attend. However most thought any reluctance would gradually be overcome (‘you need informal interaction and to feel part of the organisation’). The retreat for senior staff was seen as successful, but too costly an option for the future, if the budget remains tight.

Social events provided by the organisation are recognised in the management literature as a mark of appreciation to staff, and the relative lack of such occasions was commented on. One suggestion was for a social function every two months (at 4.00pm), with drinks and nibbles which would give the opportunity for people across the School to mix and thus break down barriers. A half hour information exchange period or staff development topic at the beginning was also raised as a possibility. The issue of the demise of the tearoom was also raised by one participant. The lack of a common time on the calendar to facilitate meetings and events was also seen to impede interaction within the wider School. Meetings, it was also suggested, need to be better organised with short clear briefs provided in advance.

While the strong points of the School were acknowledged, particularly in respect of staff/student interaction, the School was also described as ‘not an enabling place’ for staff. It was suggested that ‘incentives, including recognition’ are needed to demonstrate that staff are valued. It was also stated that ‘nobody passes on the good news’. While this may not be accurate it still suggests the need for better flagging of ‘the good news’. The possibility of designing a special email format that alerts people to the ‘good news’ and ensuring that the contents are brief, may be worth considering. This comment also indirectly raises a need to reflect on whether the School’s achievements are being as well represented across the University as they might be, a point raised by one participant. This activity is impeded if the Head is over burdened with administrative matters.

**Immediate action to pursue issues raised here**

The review suggests that a concerted effort to increase transparency and create greater trust is an urgent goal. This in turn should lead to a lessening of incivility, though this must also be dealt with explicitly. The issue of discrimination is widespread in the society, which makes it an issue to which the School must always be alert. It must not fall off the agenda.

While the Head of School’s role is to co-ordinate a response and action plan for dealing with the issues raised, the attention and cooperation of all staff is imperative too, if an improved organisational climate is to be achieved, and a comfortable working environment is to be available to all. Universal responsibility is especially pertinent in relation to respect and civility.
A Report on dealing with the issues raised by this Review needs to be prepared and widely circulated and discussed. This is especially so because only a third of the School participated and many views were presented. The School Executive is a key discussion site, but all Programs and other sections of School should be encouraged to respond. Suggestions of ways to achieve improvement will no doubt be varied, but the Head and School Executive need to draw on this Review and the feedback from the School (and associated staff) to organise how to tackle the issues. This needs a timetable for achieving the goals, and a priority rating for each. This plan should be circulated to all School members and others directly concerned with School matters. However, dealing with the School’s climate must remain squarely on the agenda and a flexible and imaginative approach taken to this as a continuing management issue.

Finally, I want to reemphasise that I think it is critical that the response on these issues, be widely discussed and the situation monitored in the future. Communication needs to particularly focus not only on current issues but also what action must be pursued maintain a civil, trusting, nurturing and productive work environment. Procedures for bringing matters to the attention of the School must also be clearly understood by all.

Finally, almost as an addendum, I include a summary of a section of a research paper on achieving organisational change in two factories that I was referred to by one of the School’s researchers. While lots of other literature is relevant and makes pertinent points, this focus on trust and mistrust highlights the importance of this matter. I have included only the parts that seem directly pertinent and while this makes things sound rather over dramatic, this in itself is quite a useful device for highlighting the importance of trust, something which can readily be overlooked and underestimated.

i. **Trust... was created by:**
   a. **Values:** The management implement[ed] firm values (namely trustworthiness, respect, engagement, collaboration and development).
   b. **Communication and consultation:**
   c. **Leadership:** ...displayed trustworthy behaviours.
   d. **Consistent actions:** Management took positive and responsive actions based on employee feedback.

ii. **Mistrust ... was created by:**
   a. **Perceived betrayal:** ...felt betrayed (ie as if they had been blamed ...).
   b. **Exclusion:** ...minimal reward was contrasted with a long tradition of profit sharing ...created a sense of exclusion and unfairness.
   c. **A spiral of distrust:** The researchers observed that the spiral of distrust affected employees’ interpretation of ambiguous behaviours.... The culture of mistrust by both managers and employees led them to question the others’ motives and to subscribe ill-motives to ambiguity.

Short informal CV: Lois Bryson

Because many in the School will know little or nothing about me, I have included these selected notes on my career. I have not included a bibliography (which if you stick around a long time, gets impossibly long). However I have written books, many book chapters and articles mostly on urban issues, social policy, gender, the welfare state and latterly women’s health.

Currently I am Emeritus Professor, Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing, University of Newcastle and Adjunct Professor, School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University.


Between 1959 and 1997 I worked full-time at a number of Universities, including Melbourne, Monash, New South Wales, Newcastle and the Australian National University.

Selected examples of employment and related activities include:

Head, Departments of Sociology and Anthropology at UNSW and U of Newcastle
Dean, Faculty of Social Science, University of Newcastle.

Victorian Public Service Employment
1983-85 Assistant Director General, Program Development and
1985 Principal Policy Consultant, Dept Community Services
1985-86 Director Social Justice Strategy Unit, Dept Premier & Cabinet

1994 Consultancy: Sexual Harassment in the Australian Defence Force (including appearing before: Senate Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in the Defence Force, with the Heads of Army, Navy and Airforce).

Member of Aust. Defence Force Advisory Committee on Discrimination.

Foundation (and current) member of the team that set up the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (1995. The study initially involved 40,000 women, now, in its 12.5 year (of 20+) it has under 30,000, but still a sizeable number of participants. Annual funding currently approx $1.5 pa.

Other past activities, include member: ARC Research Training and Careers Committee
Hepatitis C Research Committee, NHMRC.
Reviewer of many Research proposals, Research Centres, Academic Departments and Commonwealth programs. I have also twice been part of the international panel involved with New Zealand’s national researcher assessment program.