

Response to the Academic Board on the proposal to apply the title “Professor” to all those holding Level D and Level E academic appointments

May, 2003

University of Sydney Association of Professors

Introduction

The University of Sydney Association of Professors has been invited by the Chair of the Academic Board, Professor Judyth Sachs, to comment on a proposal, currently before the Board, for the title “professor” to apply to Level D and Level E academic appointments. This document is the USAP response to that invitation. The Council of USAP has compiled it after widespread consultation with Professors throughout the University and it summarizes the views they expressed on this matter.

This proposal is not new to USAP. To our knowledge, the proposal arose in discussions with the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gavin Brown, in the discussion period following his address to the Professors organised by USAP in 2001. Later in 2001, with encouragement from the Vice-Chancellor, the Council of USAP considered the consequences for the University of removing the title “Associate Professor” from the range of academic appointment grades and applying the single title of “Professor” to all those holding Level D and Level E appointments. This idea was viewed as only a change in title. As with the current proposal, there was no suggestion that the criteria for appointment or promotion to Levels D and E would be altered nor that the salary differential between these grades would be modified. It was also accepted that appointments to Level E positions would continue to be approved by the Senate Chair Appointments Committee while Level D appointments would continue to be made under the auspices of the academic colleges and promotions through the Central Promotions Committee.

The Council identified a number of features and roles associated with the existing use of the professorial title. These included:

(1) The by-laws give Professors (and not academic staff in general) the special responsibilities of *initiating proposals for courses of study, for supervising and participating in teaching and examining, and for promoting advanced study and research.*

(2) Professors as a group are a small proportion of the academic community. The University is therefore able to attract distinguished scholars and discipline leaders from outside the University to professorial appointments because of the prominent recognition that the title of Professor currently has. Such appointments give an immediate enhancement to the University’s reputation. Because of limited funds,

most other academic appointments are made at a junior level where the contribution to the University's reputation is in the future. The ability to recruit eminent scholars from elsewhere is related to the perceived distinction of the professorial title.

(3) The relatively small number of professors allows individuals to be identified as discipline leaders within the University and in promoting those disciplines in the wider community.

(4) The attractiveness of the professorial title gives the University the opportunity to honour particularly distinguished members of the academic staff by promoting them to a personal chair. Such an honour could still be bestowed, if the professorial title were to be more widely used, but the recognition might then only be in the form of a salary increase.

The Council also identified a number of disadvantages to the University if the professorial title were to apply equally to Associate Professors and the current rank of Professor. These disadvantages include:

(1) The University would lose the special inducement of a limited-use title in recruiting distinguished scholars to the academic staff.

(2) The identification of discipline leaders would be more difficult if many staff had the title of Professor.

(3) The large number of people who would have the title of Professor might not take on the extra obligations of academic leadership that are an accepted responsibility of those currently called Professors.

On the other hand, if this suggestion is worthy of consideration, there must be some advantage to the University of abandoning the title "Associate Professor" and recognising all Level D and E positions as Professors. In 2001, the Council had tentatively identified the following as possible arguments in favour of such a change:

(1) The academic standard required to achieve appointment or promotion to Associate Professor in this University is both very high and rigorously maintained. Associate Professors in the University of Sydney are recruited to professorial positions in other universities and in recent years there have been increasing numbers of Associate Professors promoted to Chairs in this university. Hence the level of academic distinction of Associate Professors could be considered to be similar to that of Professors.

(2) It is possible that many distinguished Associate Professors will never be recognised as full Professors, either because of perceived funding limitations or reluctance to apply for promotion. If the University were to invest in its own staff by identifying a larger number as "Professors", this non-financial investment

would compensate to some extent for the relatively low ceiling of academic salaries and would improve the morale of a large body of the academic staff.

(3) It could be argued that the era when “Professors” had a special role in the University has now passed. The current restructuring of departments, schools and faculties is in some minds obscuring the academic purposes of these previous organisational units. However, with these restructurings especially into larger schools, it may be that the removal of Professors from any formal organisational role could now be interpreted as any need to identify Professors as discipline leaders having also gone.

(4) The egalitarian culture of Australian universities has gradually removed any unique functional role for Professors as decision makers. The special by-law responsibilities of Professors for academic initiatives could be seen as irrelevant when collegial consultation amongst all academic ranks is now the main mechanism for bringing about academic changes. Professors do not have any greater influence than other academics in the consultation and decision-making processes.

(5) The award of the title “Professor” with no obvious linkage to salary would give recognition to academic achievement that would be seen both within the University and in the wider community.

(6) Special identification of discipline leaders may no longer be needed when this University has such a large number of experienced and creative Associate Professors who are widely recognised for their contribution to their discipline. It could be argued that Level E staff are no better discipline leaders than Level D staff. Maintaining a distinction between these academic ranks may be harmful to the University because the contributions of Associate Professors (and Readers) may be under-recognised.

(7) The need to attract senior academics from elsewhere to join the staff of this University may have diminished because of the wealth of talent amongst Associate Professors. A better age profile of the academic staff would develop if all new appointments were made at a junior level with the prospect of senior ranks being achieved by promotion over the whole range of academic grades.

Consultation with the Professoriate

In response to the request from the Chair of the Academic Board for comments from USAP on the proposal to apply the professorial title to Level D and E positions, the Council arranged a discussion forum to allow all Professors to express their views on this topic. This forum was held on Monday 5 May 2003 and was attended by 20 Professors, all of whom contributed to a lively discussion. In addition, written comments were provided by 15 other Professors who were unable to attend. The USAP Council

discussion paper of 2001 was circulated to all Professors in the University and all written responses to the proposal for change were provided to those attending the forum.

The opinions expressed at the forum, as well as in the written comments were all presented from the viewpoint of the effect this proposal would have on the University as a whole and not from any partisan position of professorial self-interest. Both the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal were outlined in an even-handed fashion.

The following is a summary, by the Council of USAP, of the opinions and ideas of the Professors of the University of Sydney.

Views not in Support of the Proposal

1. It was agreed that the title of Professor is still greatly valued by those holding it and those who aspire to this academic rank. There appears now to be little benefit to apply for the position of Reader in comparison to that of Associate Professor. The prospect of acquiring the professorial title is a very significant inducement to apply for promotion from senior lecturer. In addition, there is the custom of dropping the qualifying word “associate” in correspondence, in minutes of meetings, on social occasions and in introducing Associate Professors as speakers at meetings of learned societies (all after the first use of the formal title “Associate Professor”). This informal use of the professorial title indicates that the distinction between Professors and Associate Professors is often blurred. There are now a number of qualified professorial titles apart from Associate Professor. These include titles of Adjunct, Visiting and Clinical Professor. The general public and the student body often do not perceive any distinction between these titles and regard the holders as all being “Professors”. There is no doubt that in the University and in the wider Australian community, the professorial title still gives some academic and social status to those who have been awarded it, regardless of any qualifying descriptor. Retaining a small and limited proportion of academic positions with the title Professor would probably only maintain its perceived value within academic spheres.
2. Despite the informal use of the unqualified professorial title there is still a very clear distinction between the criteria for promotion or appointment to Level D and those for Level E. An Associate Professor (Level D) has long been regarded as someone who would be considered a serious candidate for a Chair in this University. Such a person would be judged to have the potential for scholarly achievement at the highest level. If their potential is realised, Associate Professors have the option of gaining further recognition by applying for promotion to Professor. In contrast, Professors (Level E) have already demonstrated achievement at the highest level. They are recognised leaders in their field. They have had extensive experience in all academic activities. They are expected, without further prospects of promotion, to use their experience, academic prowess and scholarly expertise to enhance the reputation of the University. Where companies and other business organisations provide funds to

support a sponsored chair, not only is an academic leader of great distinction and experience sought for such an appointment, the sponsors are also eager that the chair-holder can be identified by a distinctive title, recognised as the highest rank in academia. From the academic perspective, the current clear distinctions between Level D and Level E positions will remain. The current titular difference reinforces the different performance expectations between these two grades.

3. Not all Associate Professors have the capabilities of achieving promotion to Professor. The question was asked: would the academic community be happy for the title of Professor to be awarded to those who are unable to achieve at the highest level and who no longer have their original potential for such achievement?
4. The abolition of the title Associate Professor (and also that of Reader) would bring into sharp contrast the adjacent ranks of Senior Lecturer and Professor. Although Senior Lecturers would presumably be seeking promotion as at present to Level D, to the wider community they would appear to have been promoted from a middle academic rank to the very top. Levels B and C, therefore, might also need to have new nomenclature.
5. There may be diminished inducement to strive for promotion for those Professors at Level D when there is no recognition by title in achieving Level E. Although the present proposal is for the distinctive salary grades of D and E to remain, it is conceivable that with a single title, pressure may develop to have a single salary level for that title. Such a change might also have industrial relation implications if perhaps as much as one third of the academic staff were identified by the title "Professor". With two salary levels for Professors there may be the financial temptation for the University administration to make professorial appointments, from outside the university, at the D salary level rather than at Level E.
6. There may be disadvantages for Associate Professors if this proposal were implemented. Not only might the perceived value of the professorial title be diminished but also the mark of achievement by promotion from Level D to Level E would not be as visible as with the present system of academic titles.

Views in Support of the Proposal

There were some who saw great benefit to the University if the professorial title had wider use. If Level D appointments were known formally, as well as informally, as "Professor" their influence in their field of expertise would increase, and their career prospects and their professional standing when visiting universities overseas would be enhanced. In professional faculties, the University would be better able to retain talented Associate Professors by the award of the unqualified professorial title. Such Associate Professors may be tempted to return to professional practice with its greater financial rewards. It is possible that an improvement in status by the use of the professorial title would induce those with

alternative career paths to continue to use their skills for the benefit of the University.

Summary

The benefits and disadvantages of the current system and the effects of implementing this proposal for change were all explored by USAP in a wide-ranging discussion. Although it might have been predicted that a partisan view would emerge, the nature of the discussion was always in the context of the benefits to the University. Nevertheless, the weight of opinion was very firmly in favour of retaining the existing use of the professorial title.

Recommendations to the Academic Board

- 1. In the light of the identified benefits to the University of the current use of the title “Professor” and with the strong support of Professors for maintaining the present use of the title, USAP recommends that the Academic Board reject the proposal.**
- 2. USAP further recommends that the Academic Board seek the views of Associate Professors on this proposal, and explore ways of enhancing the conditions and career paths of this group of academics. USAP would welcome the opportunity of participating in these discussions as part of the responsibility for mentoring and support of staff that is an accepted role of Professors.**

* * * * *

This report has been prepared by the Council of USAP, Professors Marcela Bilek, Rif Ebied, David Fraser, Hans Freeman, Ian Hume, Ali Jaafari, Nalini Joshi, Gordon MacAulay, Gary Moore, Rolf Prince and Vicki Reed.

12 May 2003