



QUFA Comment on Biennial Merit

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In the 2015 bargaining round, QUFA and the University agreed merit assessment would occur biennially rather than annually for Members who hold tenured or continuing appointments. The purpose of this change was to reduce the labour that was poured into merit evaluation each year by Unit Heads and Deans. It was intended to be neutral with respect to salary costs for the University and for the distribution of merit to QUFA Members over time. In fact, this merit season has been especially fraught with difficulty, and the QUFA office has received many calls from Members and Department Heads, decrying what they describe as a “points scarcity.”

Before discussing a possible remedy, I want to comment on how the Queen's-QUFA Collective Agreement (CA) provides for merit, and how it intersects with the forms of “merit practice” that determine our expectations.

The salary model we use, devised in 1983, is designed to move Members' salaries along a curve over the course of their career. To that end, we receive each year a “progress through the ranks” (PTR) increment. The increment is determined by a formula set out in the Collective Agreement at Article 42.2.2. However, this “progress through the ranks” mechanism which is designed to move all salaries up the curve, also serves to differentiate them, using an allocation of “merit points” to determine the size of the increment. The modal adjustment, intended to shape the normal salary curve, is based on a merit score of 10 for faculty and may be increased by junior increments and reduced by senior abatements which are designed to shape the curve so that it is steeper in early career and flatter later. However, in recognition of especially meritorious performance, a faculty Member may receive extra merit points that produce a larger increment. Although we speak of “merit scores” of 10, 12, 15 and 20, it would be more accurate to call 10 “PTR” and then refer to merit awards of 2, 5, and 10 on top of that.

The University informed QUFA during bargaining that when the University calculates annual salary increases it adds the PTR (10) amount and then adds the junior increments or subtracts the senior abatements from that amount before adding any award based on extra merit points.

In that sense, no one's "merit" is ever "clawed back" by senior abatements, though *PTR* is diminished by them as the salary model intends.

"Merit" as it is provided for in the Collective Agreement is a tricky business, at once relative and absolute. Because the CA dictates that 10 is modal, were the entire Queen's faculty to win Nobel prizes one year it would have to take something more than a Nobel prize to get a 12. Moreover, because there is a ceiling on the number of points available, merit is inevitably determined through comparison. At the same time, however, the CA's provision for a band of available points to be allotted rather than a fixed number (see Article 42.2.2.8), acknowledges that some years faculty are more meritorious than others, that the value of "very good or excellent performance" (42.2.2.10) should not be diminished just because there is more of it than usual among the faculty. (It's worth knowing that QUFA negotiated this band in 1999 in order to end an earlier system that required Heads to give a score below 10 for every one above 10 – in other words, to find "donors" in order generate the points to award the meritorious.) This absolute dimension of merit is also reflected in norms that have developed in Units about the value of certain achievements such as the 15 that typically awards the publication of a book. These norms are what I call "merit practice" and are valuable to the culture of the University, saving energy, preventing purely invidious distinction, and keeping everyone on the same page. Nevertheless, it is this tension between the relativizing and absolutist demands of the system that make merit a misery, especially for Heads.

This misery may be compounded by the necessary heterogeneity of the modal category 10, the perception that it harbours performances that might justly deserve a 9 and those who rightly deserve 11. (It should be underscored, that the purpose of that modal 10 is to protect against the temptation to find points by punishing some Members.) The tension is also compounded, however, by the fact that the University typically brings the merit exercise to rest in the middle of the band of available points, no doubt to protect against "merit inflation," but with the effect of diminishing the intended elasticity of the system.

This year, as Unit Heads confronted the first biennial assessment, this tension between the relativizing effects of this restriction on available points and the absolute imperative of recognizing certain achievements, such as the publication of books and the winning of teaching awards, is more extreme because there are at least in theory, double the number of these absolute achievements to consider, along with ongoing forms of excellence that typically have garnered 12s.

When QUFA proposed biennial reporting, we had several ideas about how it might be implemented. The University countered that the simplest thing would be to keep everything constant and simply shift to a two-year reporting period. They asserted that people tend to receive a consistent merit score from year to year. Specifically, the University asserted that because individuals receiving 12s tend to do so consistently, switching to a two year cycle would have little consequence for merit distribution. As Chief Negotiator for QUFA, I regret letting this description of current merit distribution pass. While it may be true of some disciplines it is clearly not true of others in including my own where major publications often

follow long incubation periods leading to more “spiky” merit patterns. Double the number of those spike-producing absolute achievements in any merit cycle (and double the value of them to the Members who receive the awards) and points must migrate from the steady 12s and anyone on the cusp of 12 must be rounded down. In other words, the effect of the new system is a concentration of merit that neither side intended.

The proper response in the short term is for the University to use fully the discretionary points available to it, and in the next round of bargaining, the Parties should redesign the scheme of possible scores, perhaps so that there are 11, 13 and 14, and 20 as the possible awards.

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