

The problem of 'new blood'

Recently the faculties at the Australian National University have been allotted an extra \$130,000 for establishing four new tenurable lectureships.

The rationale for this initiative is a demographic survey of the faculties, which revealed a 'shortage' or younger tenured staff. Originally the positions were not to be open to anyone over the age of 32 or 35.

The vice-chancellor - Professor Karmel (*The Australian*, 9/11) has recently said that there would be no definite age bar but that the intention is to appoint younger academics.

There are several reasons to be concerned about this plan. Any form of discrimination on the basis of age is just that: discrimination. It has not been demonstrated that academic criteria should be overruled by a desire for young age. After all, the problem is not chronological age but staleness: lack of "new blood."

More than once, quite mature people have introduced bold new ideas into scholarly institutions. Furthermore, one reason for

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staleness is too many young appointments in the past. A greater amount of new blood would be introduced by making appointments only of people over age 55.

Age discrimination is also against women, who are much more likely to have interrupted career patterns. Such de facto discrimination does not sit well with a policy of equal opportunity.

The preference for young age will be especially galling to those women who already have been discriminated against because they are allegedly "too old."

There are ways to correct age imbalances that still allow appointments to be made on scholarly grounds. Some possibilities are encouragement for early retirement, fractional appointments, and making more junior and fewer senior appointments. It is unfortunate that such options were not canvassed in the university community before this program was launched from above.

It is curious that such a program has been introduced when age imbalance is much less of a problem than imbalances in other areas. The imbalance in age results mainly from the routine operation of the academic marketplace.

Of greater concern should be the active and sometimes virulent discrimination against women, racial minorities and political activists. I am familiar with quite a few cases of discrimination and suppression in these areas.

Perhaps Professor Karmel will see fit to reassess the role of discrimination on non-academic grounds in making academic appointments. If not, perhaps he will take note of a demographic survey of Australian vice-chancellors which reveals that they are all men, and rectify this by supporting the establishment of a special fund to hire a woman vice-chancellor.

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