

# Rejoinder

## Mthembu & Naidoo's (2002) Position Paper on Post Secondary Education Research Evaluation in South Africa: A Rejoinder

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The paper published by Thandwa Mthembu and Prem Naidoo (2002:176-203) in *Alternation* should be lauded for providing a comprehensive review and analysis of criteria and directives used to appraise research activity in institutions of higher education. From their analysis of institutional research output it transpires that a benchmark of one SAPSE (South African Post Secondary Education Funding System) accredited publication per permanent academic staff member per year at universities is unrealistic and should perhaps be regarded as a rarely reached goal rather than a benchmark. This is especially true in the case of social science research where even with comprehensive funding and resource support a properly composed study can take up to three years from conceptualisation to publication.

Some of the issues raised by Mthembu and Naidoo (2002) contain interesting anomalies and ironies and certainly deserve further consideration. In this rejoinder, only three issues integral to their proposed research assessment system will be briefly commented on.

### **Funding of Higher Degrees**

An issue that deserves revisiting is the recommendation that dissertation/thesis only master's and doctoral degrees should be funded by the Department of Education (DoE) at a much higher rate than master's and doctoral degrees consisting of course work as well as a dissertation/thesis of limited scope. The logic of this assertion does not make sense when applied to South African degrees offered within the field of Psychology (and probably to most fields in the Social Sciences as well).

All presently offered degrees on master's level share the same minimum standard of having to submit a dissertation. This occurs with or without the presentation of a course work programme. As yet, master's degrees consisting of a course work programme only have not been introduced. Course work programmes always include the writing of a dissertation of limited scope. The difference between 'a dissertation of limited scope' and degrees where only a 'full dissertation' is required, is only captured in volume and depth of scope with which the research topic is presented. In concrete terms this means that a dissertation of limited scope primarily describes it's research topic and procedure (as is done in a scientific research article) whereas a full dissertation provides a critical appreciation of its research topic and procedure thereby demonstrating the student's broad knowledge base of content and procedure. Nevertheless, both place the same minimum demand on exit research skills. In practical terms, each study should lead to a publishable extract.

However, in the case of 'course work master's degrees with a dissertation of limited scope' additional components of applied knowledge as well as broad based training programmes in both applied and research skills are added to the exit requirements of these degrees. Clearly these degrees command a much more differentiated and extensive set of exit skills than master's degrees consisting of a dissertation only. Given the differences in exit requirements for different master's degrees in Psychology it appears that the following differentiation makes most sense:

- 'Course work master's degrees with a dissertation of limited scope' should be pegged at the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 8a and should provide access to doctoral programmes.
- 'Master's degrees by dissertation only' require skills expressed in terms of one research design and specialist focussed knowledge defined by the research topic. It does not provide a broad based preparation for entrance into doctoral programmes. As such, these degrees should be pegged at NQF level 7 where access to doctoral programmes should be dependent on additional entry requirements such as applied internship programmes and/or a selection of course work for non degree purposes.
- 'Masters degrees by course work only' lack a specialist scientific research exit requirement and as such should also be pegged at NQF level 7 where access to doctoral programmes is denied. Such degrees

should be viewed as 'end of the line' applied degrees. Students in this category wishing to enter doctoral studies should first complete either a 'master's by dissertation only' (thereby fulfilling the specialist research requirement) or complete a 'course work master's with dissertation of limited scope'.

In light of the above, it seems that 'course work master's degrees with a dissertation of limited scope' deliver a more multi skilled and research literate graduate than any of the other options. Students who obtain these degrees generally end up as professionals working within the discipline of Psychology and lead productive lives as practitioners/scientists. It should be funded much more comprehensively than any other option.

### **Development of Post -graduate Programmes**

Given the foregoing analysis, it is important that the DoE subsidy policy of especially master's and doctoral studies be experienced as a supportive incentive for the sustained development of quality research outputs. In order to reach general consensus about this, the appropriateness of the present subsidy policy will have to be reviewed. However on the other side of the equation, it appears that most master's and doctoral programmes at South African universities will also have to be transformed in order to benefit maximally from the subsidy options available.

The teaching and research tasks of academics are indivisible and essential to their job description. Research output from universities and technikons should in the first instance flow from the work lecturers do with their advanced post graduate students. Master's and doctoral programmes should form the most fundamental context in which research endeavours in academic departments take place. As such these programmes form a valuable research output resource that has in most cases not been optimized yet. In practical terms it means that:

Registration, re-registration and examination procedures should be reviewed and benchmarked for academic departments across universities and technikons.

Getting articles published from master's and doctoral studies should be a central focus of any post graduate programme.

The structural development of these programmes should aim at resulting in publication rewards for promoters and supervisors. This is likely to sustain a proper transformation. However, the initial success of such an approach will in the first place be dependent on the production of publishable post graduate research. Academic departments and graduate schools will therefore have to take steps to help lecturers develop and refine the skills required for producing publishable research studies. This is where capacity building starts. One immediate example of 'in training' skills development would be to combine inexperienced joint supervisors/promoters with experienced supervisors/promoters on all master's and doctoral studies. In this way the student, supervisor/promoter and joint supervisor/promoter could be redefined as forming a small three person research committee working on a study where the emphasis is on collaboration with rewards for all concerned, rather than a top-down relationship.

Along with the skills development of supervisors, the provision of research and publication resource support should be a central concern of research directors, graduate schools and academic departments at universities and technikons. Basic departmental needs (such as the upgrading of computers and access to printers, supplying readily available research and publications consultation services, manuscript editing and facilitating greater access to research assistants) should be routinely gauged and attended to.

### **Proposed Evaluation System**

The importance of developing a context sensitive set of directives for the appraisal of scientific research performance instead of merely importing a system from somewhere else, has been well argued by Mthembu & Naidoo (2002). Similarly, their proposed research appraisal taxonomy consisting of sets of input, process and output measures is impressive and exhaustive. However, the actual measurement and collation of this information into a coherent report appears likely to become an administrative and interpretive nightmare. What weights will be allocated to the respective contributing measures, and how will 'missing information' affect the conclusions drawn? Also, it should be emphasised that the intention with the gathering of a wide ranging index of information should not be to penalise institutions but rather to identify and help remedy weaknesses.

Given that the DoE still hasn't finalised its proposed policy for measurements of research output for universities and technikons (De la Rey 2001), it seems likely that the Mthembu & Naidoo (2002) model will strongly influence the final policy position of the DoE. It is hoped that enough informed discussion will take place before the implementation thereof.

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\* Acknowledgement: This rejoinder is based on a round table discussion of Mthembu & Naidoo's (2002) article by members of the Psychology Department at Unisa.

## References

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