

# Performance Management in Higher Education

Charlotte Mbali

## Introduction

There are various ways of advancing quality in Higher Education. The range of proposed procedures exhibit a continuum from, on the one hand, the autonomous reflective judgement of the individual academic to, on the other hand, the tick-list measures that are drawn up to inculcate the desired standard. This article is concerned more with the latter side of the continuum, the search for measures of performance, and the use of these as incentives. However, to acknowledge the historical trajectory (Allan 1988), it is proper to give due weight to the nature of professorial authority first.

Universities are places where brainy individuals choose to work because the activities they engage there can better be done in a collaborative way, with the strength and resources of a large institution, rather than in smaller consultancies. Although some such institutions have lasted more than 700 years, the University should not be seen as the only way of advancing a knowledge career. In ancient Athens, the philosophers, as individuals, attracted their own paying students. In modern neo-liberal societies, some individuals opt out of an academic career finding that selling their knowledge services as consultants is more tax-efficient and lucrative. In these activities, it is only the reputation of the individual and market that give value, and thus quality assures the activities. In contrast, an employed professor has a reciprocal value-bestowing relationship with the University, both as an illustrious individual gaining more honours, and research grants, for the University, and as an employee of that University able to utilize its resources, its qualifications, and its illustrious name. The guarantee of quality was not just in the name but also in the procedures utilized by the professors to validate the qualifications they bestow, and the recruitment and

promotion safeguards employed to ensure continuance of the same standards by the upcoming generation. Such systems basically rely on the peer judgements of those pre-eminent in a field – on selection committees, on examination boards, on grant-making bodies, and publication reviews.

What the quality movement of the last fifteen years has done is to call into question these time-tested ways of ensuring quality. Accountability for public funds requires more transparency about quality procedures. As there is competition, between institutions, disciplines, and individuals, it seems essential to have fair and equal measures to inform planning and decision-making.

### **Rule by the Professors**

Universities have been governed by their professors for many centuries in some countries (Altbach 2002; Allen 1988). In others, especially those in the Latin/Napoleonic traditions, the professors are public servants, but even in the latter, the public servant status did not seem to entail much overt supervision by government bureaucrats. Where society has respect for the professors, the professors are trusted to manage the affairs of the Universities. So why is managerialism now intruding? Apart from the worldwide trend towards managerialism, there are special factors in South Africa that cause the rule by professors to be challenged. The post-apartheid government decided that the governance of Higher Education institutions required more say-so from outside the sector. Thus the Higher Education Act 1997 decrees that University Councils must have a majority of members from outside the sector. The same Act also legislated for the 'Institutional Forum' for each HEI, a new body that is seen as an attempt to bridge the divides between staff and students, and between different constituencies of staff. The underlying policy is transformative: HEIs were seen as being dominated by white professors, and the new governance structures have been a means by which more Black participation has been gained. Although this transformative agenda has had important results, with regard to quality, the old structures of guaranteeing quality remain intact.

Under the rule of the professors, quality was assured collegially. In South African Universities, the Senate, comprising the senior professors and heads of disciplines, is the supreme decision-making body for academic affairs. Faculty Boards, Qualifications boards, examination boards, all these

consist of academics making decisions collegially. Examinations rely on the peer-judgement of the invited external moderators.

The new quality procedures, as enunciated by HEQC, for the M.Ed. review for example, do not propose to sweep away these traditional safeguards of quality, but to monitor them and ensure they are documented properly. Quality in the heads of professors is not sufficient for accountability: there must be documents. Admittedly, there is some shrewd sense in this. External examiners might have been doing their reports conscientiously for years, but if the Faculty office has lacked a system for storing them and the departments have fallen out of the habit of utilizing these reports to improve their courses, then this is a threadbare quality procedure.

From the above it can be seen that the 'conservative' view of quality is basically to trust the rule of the professors, although admitting that the systems might need to be tightened up here and there.

Alongside this argument about trusted systems, there is also the argument about trusted individuals, those who are qualified and put in authority. Individuals who succeed in the rigours of academic training (the postgraduate system) can be trusted to impose the same quality checks when they are in positions of authority. Individuals who choose an academic career are highly motivated. When their peers are already getting into salaried jobs or business, these people prolong their student status while working for higher degrees. Although they may get some postgraduate grants, and even some small pay for teaching or demonstrating, they are unable to command the money or credit of their peers who have left University with jobs. Even after qualifying with a higher degree, some may have to hang around academia taking short-term contracts for several years before a suitable post comes up. So by the time they get fully on the academic career track, they have already shown strong commitment. Their postgraduate studies, especially the Ph.D., form a selection process. Less than 1% of registered students achieve a doctorate<sup>1</sup>. The levels of qualifications are distinguished

---

<sup>1</sup> 32% in year 2000 (Altbach) based on USA figures in *College and University Journal* 80:2. 42% in year 2004 at University of Natal in RSA (my own unpublished research on SPS database). This is the percentage of students who graduated with doctorates in the year 2004 out of a total of those who completed any qualifications across a fifteen year period.

by the autonomy factor which increases with the advance in levels. Surely such high-achieving individuals, who have proved they can work autonomously, have the motivation to sustain the quality of the academy.

## **Government Steering of Higher Education**

The post-apartheid government has enacted various laws to enable it to steer the higher education sector. The Higher Education Act proclaims the functions of higher education in South Africa. It also gives the Minister more powers than hitherto. The South African Qualifications Act set up the South African Qualification Authority which has been the vehicle for over-seeing the change to outcomes-based education, including in Higher Education. Where before individual Universities, from their own academic authority, could inaugurate new programmes, from year 2000 the template for all qualifications had to be lodged with SAQA. There was much argument about fixing the levels of qualifications, as the University and the technikon sector were not in agreement, especially around the level of the B.Tech. After five years of discussions and different proposals, at last the scheme of 10 levels has been decreed.

The 'Size and Shape' discussions which began in 1995 culminated in the mergers which started in 2003. These mergers assume four kinds of Higher Education institutions: research Universities, universities of technology, comprehensive institutions and distance institutions. There is contestation around this. By renaming the technikons 'universities' does this then give them more status? And ... more money to do research? Is there a greater need for staff to get Ph.D.s? Will they lose their distinctive technological mission and converge with the traditional goals of Universities? 'Comprehensive' Universities still lack full definition, and in the hiatus of mergers are still trying to work out their distinctive mission. With regard to distance education, one merged institution (from UNISA and Technikon SA) has been designated for distance students, but many HEIs also run courses at distant locations, and are reluctant to drop these. Institutional demarcation can be steered by funding and the control over the 'programme mix' of each HEI. The requirement that each institution submits 3 year rolling plans to the Dept of Education, with a programme mix that has to be approved, shows how the central government is seizing control over decision-making that used to be within institutional autonomy.

The Higher Education Funding Framework is a powerful tool for steering the sector. As some 85% of the funds for public higher education institutions comes from the government, the different ways of allocating these funds is already having a noticeable effect on the decision-making of HE managers. Whereas before the funding was apportioned per 'full-time equivalent' student registered (with a multiple factor to award more for science students), now there are five levels of subsidy for the various disciplines, and as well as the subsidy per student registered ('the input') there is also some subsidy deferred until graduation ('the output'). There is more money to be gained by registering post-graduates, especially doctoral students. Some departments are already showing signs of wanting to abdicate from over-much undergraduate work, and increase their postgraduate work and thus catch more subsidy money. The through-put criteria may soon have the effect of HEIs selecting only the students with the best prospect of getting through to graduation and minimizing the places awarded to the more disadvantaged students, especially because there is no extra subsidy for the value-added achievement of getting more of the disadvantaged through to graduation.

The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), which is part of the Council of Higher Education (set up by the 1997 Act), has the onerous task of assuring the quality of the whole sector. The HEQC has embarked on a programme of institutional audits, starting with institutions that were unscathed by recent mergers. A number of senior staff from across the HE sector have been trained as institutional auditors, but have been sworn to secrecy about the exact criteria and procedures of the audits that are about to commence.

This secrecy seems contrary to the principle of transparency in assessment aims and criteria that is being promoted in, for example, student assessment (see the Assessor Standards at [www.saqz.org.za](http://www.saqz.org.za)).

In addition the HEQC has started on audits of qualifications, starting with the MBA in 2004, and the M.Ed. in 2005. The MBA audit resulted in some programmes, such as the one at the ex-Natal University, being de-accredited, while others, such as the one at Westville, were to be retained, but given a conditional warning. Some of the criteria for the audit, such as the allocation of permanent staff, appear to have been effective in showing up those programmes where there was slippage of quality. But one argument

from a staffer of the rejected ex-Natal University programme is that the audit was not only about the details of implementation: when the initial framework for the audit was set up, it assumed a 'standard' type of curriculum and did not allow for specialisation. Without going further into the details of this, what can be noted here is the allegation that the quality mechanism suppressed diversity in favour of 'standards'. Was there enough research into the type of students the MBA attracts and their goals? Are there niche needs within the MBA? Or is the generic standard what business requires?

The M.Ed. audit is underway in 2005 at time of writing. Some prior decisions already revealed how steering is going to be effected. The NAP documents which finalized the levels of qualifications abolished the advanced postgraduate diploma in education which used to be awarded to those who have done the course-work of M.Ed. but have not proceeded to the thesis. There seems to be a determination by those at the helm in HEQC that postgraduate education degrees must be mainly to train researchers (Naidoo 2005), a viewpoint that seems at variance with the aspirations of many of the candidates (mostly school teachers) who are more interested in a variety of advanced courses that assist them to advance as professionals, rather than as researchers. If throughput to thesis and completion of M.Ed. are to be criteria for the quality audit, then this may sideline valuable work that is being done via elective courses which individuals opt for as they see their own career needs. This is especially true of electives in the higher education track, with such courses as mentoring or experiential learning, which feed directly into improved practice.

Thus to sum up this somewhat critical section on national steering of HE, the reported words of Prof Ramashala (2004) are applicable: 'the sector has no clarity about appropriate goals for Higher Education'. The same HEQC colloquium also emphasized points for action:

- Insufficient attention had been given to curricula, a point also made in the recent report on Distance Education which sees the need for a teaching development grant for those who create learning materials
- Teacher education needs more attention
- Creative ways should be sought to produce the next generation of academics, especially Black and female

It is not surprising that there is concern about the above three – none of the steering mechanisms described above produce these desired results. To some extent the NQF enterprise and SAQA have resulted in more attention to curriculum, but the HE funding mechanisms give no particular rewards to those who spend more time in re-curriculating.

The same funding mechanism resulted in some education departments shifting away from school-teacher training and towards more lucrative postgraduate work. As for producing the next generation of Higher education teachers, there is still an unbalanced focus on the production of researchers, and a declared intention not to make it compulsory for those taking up teaching posts in HE to take an appropriate teaching qualification, such as the PGDHE. The insistence that former technikons get more of their staff to complete their Ph.Ds has the effect of forcing candidates to aim for a Ph.D. in their discipline rather than the more practical PGDHE courses that would improve their practice as teachers.

The imposition of the same funding framework and the same quality processes on all four proposed types of HEIs may have the effect of abolishing some valuable diversity of mission. For example, the value of the Ph.D. in some disciplines could be questioned.

Why should an effective lecturer whose main job is, as part of a team, to produce about a hundred competent book-keepers per year be forced to do research for a thesis in book-keeping rather than spend a valuable year back in the commercial field to feed back the experience into renovating the curriculum? Some might argue that the experiential year can be reformulated into a Ph.D., but that pre-supposes a lot more creative supervisory resources than are actually available. The Universities and the technikons had different missions, and they employed staff differently. Whereas for most University subjects the Ph.D. is requisite, for the technikons appropriate industry experience is more valuable.

Greater clarity about the goals of Universities and the goals of universities of technology' respectively should result in conceptualizing different types of funding incentives and quality controls for each in some respects.

A similar argument could be made about the different goals of different disciplines within Universities. Rough categorization, according to potential employment sectors, could be drawn up thus:

- Professional disciplines (law, nursing, social work, architecture and building sciences, engineering, psychology, medicine and health professions, accountancy) – in short all those categorized as professions in SA law
- Generic or foundational disciplines (sciences, humanities, economics, social sciences)
- Education (which requires a good grounding in the generic discipline that are taught in schools, not the professional ones)
- Commercial generic
- Sector-specific and commercial (e.g. Hotel schools)
- Sector-specific
- Artistic (Music, Fine Arts, Drama)

Each of these has a different mix of theory and practice and different career trajectory. But what is happening is that measures that arose in the generic and foundational disciplines (such as the Ph.D., and the production of peer-reviewed research articles) have gradually come to be applied to all the others, whether appropriately or not. No wonder the Fine Arts lecturer protests when her Exhibition is disregarded as a suitable 'product' of her discipline because only 'articles' get counted.

It is easier and it seems 'fairer' to use the same quality measures on all types of institutions and for all disciplines, but the resulting output might be disappointingly inappropriate. Greater clarity is needed about the goals of higher education, and the goals of a specific discipline.

## **Performance Management of Staff in Higher Education**

While the last decade in South Africa has seen an increase of State steering of higher education through the mechanisms described above, recently another trend has also become visible, namely to adopt procedures from the corporate world. Performance management can be applied to the institution as a whole or to the individual staff within it. Corporations in the capitalist world are used to being constantly evaluated on their profitability criteria, and annually in their reports to share-holders. When the financial commentators use the word 'performance' of corporates it is applied to precise measurable economic and financial output. There are risks in

uncritical transference of this word to public higher education institutions, where the 'output' is in terms of what – research? number of graduates? – and how measured?

In the corporate world, managers devise ways of optimizing human resources by cunning management of 'performance'. The simplest incentive can be through bonus pay for extra output. There are conceptual problems with imposing this type of performance management in Higher Education. Firstly, as stated above, the 'output' of higher education is less easy to quantify than items of factory production. Secondly, the nature of 'performance' in academic work is far more complex than that of an assembly line supervisor or a sales agent. Thirdly, at a more profound philosophical level, counting performance assumes a behaviourist view of human nature, as if quality is achieved merely by reinforcing desired behaviour rather than by influencing decision-making and commitment.

In South Africa, the HE managers are responding rationally to the signals of the national steering system for HE. If research money is now to be allocated mainly for the production of research articles, then each academic must produce one article per year.

If postgraduate M-level studies are subsidized only with a 50% research thesis component, then any other type of M-curriculum must be abolished. Once the measures of performance have been laid down, whether or not they fit the purposes of higher education, the needs of the different disciplines, the employability of the graduates, or the improvability of the staff, is no longer debated.

The proposals for improved performance management are emanating from consultants who have been appointed, paid for by DOE money, to assist the merging Universities. The language used in their documents shows the corporatist context:

... performance management has evolved in a competition orientated environment and become imperative as organizations have learnt that focusing on individual performance eventually can pay dividends on the bottom line.

... the Balanced Scorecard categorises performance measurers into four strategic perspectives namely financial, customer, operations, and people.

Outcomes must adhere to the SMART rule (SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time bound)

Whereas some of the above might apply quite well to support staff trying to produce the annual faculty prospectus, it is less easy to apply to teaching or research. The recommended system for UKZN is the latter – the Outcomes one – to be implemented in a phased approach, with ‘extensive education of all staff’ and ‘continuing consultation with all the relevant stakeholders’.

The performance management system as recommended by the consultants will be:

- Aligned to the strategy (appropriate to the vision, mission, goals) of the university
- Uniform across all departments within the University
- Linked to the pay of individuals

Each of these is problematic. It is far easier to align performance in a manufacturing firm to increased output of profitable goods than it is in a University, such as UKZN, where the goal is a buzz-word ‘premier African University’. Too many unquantifiables there – **premier** (in salary scales for staff? In numbers of library books or research articles? In research grants? – and if all of these are important what about the relative weight and mix of each?) **African** (Numbers of Africans on permanent staff? Numbers of disadvantaged students admitted? curricula relevant to Africa? Postgraduates flowing in from other African countries? – probably all of these, and the appropriate mix?). So we have huge problems of quantification with the criteria of aligning to strategy.

The desirability of ‘uniformity’ has already been called into question in the earlier discussion about how national steering mechanisms are ironing out appropriate diversity of mission.

The proposal to link performance to pay of individuals is likely to stir up much contention. The problem is that it is based on competitive,

materialistic, and largely a male, view of human nature. The competitive individuals will grab the most lucrative work leaving the chores to the more altruistic, often the females, or the newest members of the department. How will a department balance fairly the workloads between the ongoing year-by-year teaching of large first year classes and the glamorous new research project that will gain bonus pay? Will it depend on the management skill of the Head of School, or will there be constant fighting between colleagues, vitiated even more than now because real money is involved?

In an attempt to bring 'rational decision-making' into management of human resources, UKZN has developed a School Planning tool for academic workloads. A default ratio is assumed ('an average across the School') of 40% research, 45% teaching, 10% administration and 5% for community engagement. A questionnaire sent out via the staff Union, NTESU, revealed that most respondents (n=70) do not work to that ratio. There was huge perplexity as to what counted under each category. Is preparing a new curriculum part of 'teaching'? Is training tutors part of 'administration' or 'teaching'? Under 'community engagement' a huge variety of activities were listed. (More detailed analysis of responses is to be found in Mbali (2005) for SAARDHE2005.) Here it is enough that such workload planning is another manifestation of performance management. Interestingly most of the respondents acknowledged that management has the right to try to measure workload, but many also found the actual measures used did not fit their work. Appendix 1 summarizes responses to the NTESU survey. It substantiates two of the problems pointed to above in the comment on applying corporatist measurement systems to higher education, firstly that academic work is complex with many different tasks within it, and secondly it is difficult to quantify in that how can measures be devised that are fair across such different tasks? It is simply not just a matter of counting student contact hours, or counting research articles. Even the concept 'student' is slippery: do only registered students count? What about prospective students and past students? The notion that all research articles in any discipline could be regarded as equal is questionable: the nature of research and even the nature of publishing outlets in each discipline each is so different. It is not so surprising that so many of the sample disagreed that SAPSE measures their research fairly.

## **Compliance, Consultation and Autonomy**

The third problem with performance measures is the behaviourist assumptions that underpin it. In the quest for measurable improvements, the quality advisors and managers seem determined to define outputs and behaviours that should be rewarded. This seems like a retro-step into Fordism or Taylorism that minutely specifies the tasks to be performed in the productive work-place. In the corporate world this type of behaviourist management fell out of favour when Argyris and others in the West, and Japanese with their Kaizen circles of improvement in the East, realized that workers work better when they feel some 'ownership' over their sector of work – that they themselves can contribute ideas for improvement.

Admittedly, there are some aspects of the quality discourse in South Africa that appears to recognize 'stake-holder' input. The Mission of each University is self-defined, presumably by appropriate consultation within the institution. The precise terms of this mission become important when it is these terms that are used as criteria in the forthcoming HEQC peer-audits. In the proposed performance development procedures, each employee will decide, in consultation with a supervisor, the priorities for work, within the mission of that sector.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century report emphasizes that the performance management must be accepted by 'stakeholders' and employees first, and be implemented BEFORE it begins to be used for differential pay based on performance. The problem is that within a managerialist system, consultation may become perfunctory or patchy, with blind spots. An example of a blind-spot was revealed in the CHE AGM 2004 in the report by de Lange on a survey of Vice-Chancellor's views on mergers. Not one of them had even thought to mention that staff unions could be significant in a time of mergers.

Performance management arises from a neo-liberal view of human nature. It assumes that human beings are best motivated by individual incentives, preferably monetary. It assumes that competition is inevitable and that it drives progress. It assumes that differential awards will achieve improvement rather than disabling dissension. It assumes that performance can be quantified and priced. It assumes that it is fair to use the same indicators for everyone in the 'same' type of work. What may happen is that some individuals will romp ahead in such a system, as the incentives suit

them and their type of work. But many others will be left doing the chores that these alpha males (with a few alpha females) disdain. Some will gain the requisite performance pips by complying on paper, while in fact having different goals and activities.

There is another view of human nature which respects the capacity of individuals to freely choose their own courses of action, and to collaborate with others. The type of individuals attracted to academic careers is achievement orientated, but not necessarily for large monetary rewards (although many would say it is nice to get the money as well.) It is far more important for them to have the freedom to pursue their knowledge quests. And for some teaching is also hugely satisfying. Judging by the responses to the NTESU questionnaire about incentives ('if I wanted to work in the corporate world, I would have done so'), the consultants and the UKZN workshop over-estimate the effectiveness of pay differentials. Much cheaper incentives would also work, for instance, a Vice-Chancellor's Day where people could present or exhibit their work.

Academics are proud of their work, and stay in the academic environment precisely because of the value of association – the reciprocal value-giving noted earlier. They know the value of peer-recognition. A large part of academic authority is derived from the exercise of judgement (13 such peer-review activities are listed in Finch 1996). Surely such individuals can be trusted with judgements about quality.

What is apparent in the quality discourse in South Africa is an uneasy wobbling between the managerialist tendencies towards reductionist performance management and the more traditional respect for academic autonomy – that the institutions must devise and implement their OWN quality systems, and the employees must define their own work priorities. Reductionism tends to gloss over diversity, but too much respect for autonomy can lead to inequality.

## **Conclusions**

The above analyses show that underlying the debates about quality in South African Higher Education are some polarities that can be put in two columns, as below:

National steering Regulation Performativity Standardization Performance management Bonus pay	academic self-governance stakeholder consultation reflexivity diversity self-motivated individuals achievement motivation
---	--

South Africa seems to have swung towards the left side of the list. But before we go too far, irrevocably, to that side, it might be prudent to look at what is being lost on the other side of the list.

## **References**

- Allen, Michael 1988. *The Goals of Universities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Altbach, Philip G 2002. *The Decline of the Guru: The Academic Profession in Developing and Middle-Income Countries*. London: Palgrave.
- Altbach, Philip G 2004. *Doctoral Education: Present Realities and Future Trends*. <http://www.bc.edu/cihe> accessed July 25<sup>th</sup> 2005.
- Brennan, John, Peter de Vries, & Ruth Williams 1997. *Standards and Quality in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Finch, J 1997. Power, Legitimacy and Academic Standards. In Brennan, J et al. (eds): *Standards and Quality in Higher Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mbali, VC 2005. How should Academic Work be Measured? A Conundrum Discussed with Reference to a Planning Tool Proposed for use at University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). <http://www.interaction.nu.ac.za/saardhe2005>
- Naidoo, Prem 2005. In Address to Faculty of Education, UKZN in March 2005.
- Ramashala, N 2004. Report of HEQC Nov. meeting <http://www.che.org.za> accessed June 2005.
- Thackwray, Bob 1997. *Effective Evaluation of Training and Development in Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Summary of Responses to the NTESU-UKZN Survey on the Planning Tool**

(Q2) 32 (nearly 50%) say the suggested 40:40:10:10 ratio does NOT fit their work

13 of these do more administration.

8 do more teaching

9 said it fits their work

(Q4) Work they do includes

9 – Student Counselling

8 – Personnel Administration (tutors etc)

and 14 other types of work with fewer responses (see the 16 nodes in this category)

(Q5) On formula counting only student numbers and contact hours:

11 agreed

57 object to it

(Q6) They responded with 10 other factors to measure with regard to teaching:

Preparation (not coded as researcher has always assumed that is part of teaching)

New curriculum, courses, or materials

Level of students (1<sup>st</sup> Level, post-graduate etc.)

Mode of Delivery

Praxis (if there is experiential placement e.g. School practice)

Personnel administration

Type of Assessment

Student Counselling

Disadvantaged students including disabled

Course Administration

(Q7) Research measured by SAPSE:

23 agreed

57 disagreed

(Q8) They came up with at least 14 other factors to measure research by

Graduation rates of post-graduates

Research funds raised

NRF

Editing and Reviewing

Books

Discipline status

Networking with other Universities

Creative work

Conference organization

Civic or Development

Research for the University (intra-University – like this report)

Commercial applications and patents

Time – 8 mentioned various problems with the one paper per year e.g. Ph.D,

Typical research cycles in the discipline e.g. with plants

Appraisal problems were acknowledged by 8

(Q9) There were 16 factors listed by those whose administrative tasks exceeded 10%, the largest being:

Administration connected with being in charge of courses or programmes – 19

Office mal-functioning, or systems failures – 15

Merger – 10

(Q10 and Q11) A large and varied list of appropriate community engagement was noted. Only 13 could not list any appropriate activity. Some of these mentioned large teaching loads as preventing any extra engagement.

Centre for Higher Education Studies

University of KwaZulu-Natal

mbali@ukzn.ac.za