

An Assessment of the Implications of Research Policies on Research Performance in African tertiary institutions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the assessment of the implications of research policies on the performance of research at the institutions of higher learning in Africa. There are numerous challenges the institutions face and these among others include limited supply of high quality evaluation evidence, which is seen as the market failure for both education outcomes and the institutional research. The public seems to have limited information about performance in universities and educators face limited incentives to improve performance. In the market for institutional research, consumers face information problems, which in turn make it difficult to determine the quality of research product due to work overloads on the part of the lecturers and students. The success of institutional research policies are therefore based on requiring better data in the institutions under study to ascertain the workloads and to limit management interferences in research.

Key words: Institutions, Education, Research, Performance, Policy and Workload, Apartheid, Bantu education

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As of late, it has been observed that most institutions in Africa focus on producing human resources who would work in the private and public sectors who are not necessarily involved in research in their respective institutions. The paper explores the challenges of workloads,

management actions, institutional research bottlenecks, lack of incentives and then offers the necessary recommendations required to turn around the situation.

1.2 BACKGROUND

The majority of institutions in Africa are privately owned either by church organisations, private foundations or individuals. A few are operating as public institutions.

Since their inception, there is a lack of research policies, but this area is receiving attention. The postgraduate schools are being established to cater for research and higher institutional needs in terms of education. The universities normally start with undergraduate degree programs, then MBA and doctoral programs. The universities' management are in a learning process to broaden their research areas, but rigidity in some instances, caused by the culture and environment of the institutions, seems to take centre stage and thus make them to move at a snail's pace on the progress of research development. Due to the fact that they have started to progress gradually from their inception to date as recognised institutions of higher learning, they still have to overcome some shortcomings such as lack of financial resources and inadequate trained staff in research areas.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Universities have a limited number of staff that foresees the supervision of students that are involved in research works. The criteria are such that undergraduate and postgraduate students cannot graduate unless they produce a written and well-researched mini (in the case of undergraduate students) or full thesis (in the case of postgraduate students) as a partial requirement for the award of an undergraduate or postgraduate academic work.

The fact that the lecturers teaching undergraduates and postgraduates are the same ones also engaging in supervising research; makes it difficult due to workloads where a specific lecturer can teach for thirty hours or more per week. Students also find it difficult to be well-supervised due to the high student supervisor ratios, because each supervisor may be given, in some instances, more than a hundred students doing research for supervision. There is also a lack of library materials in terms of the provision of mini and full theses in the libraries and its difficult for students to go and do research with such limited materials. The fact that the time frame or duration of the research is running concurrently with the mid-year semester examinations of the first and second semesters has an impact on the completion of research works and therefore some students find it difficult to progress and complete their studies on time. The universities' management has, in some instances, some significant interference in the research

works; as they want to give directives on a top-down approach manner and have difficulties in accepting problems being experienced at the lower levels. The other problem they face is accepting the fact of paying the supervisors money for each thesis or research project completed in order to motivate them. Parallel to this, is that government owned institutions compensate their staff once the students and the staff have completed a project.

The workloads for lecturers and the students become so massive that in some universities, each student is entitled to write eight continuous assessments in each of the ten subjects plus a research project. As a consequence of this, it is observed that the students have more time for complying with continuous assessments and examinations and thus have limited time on research. The lecturers have massive workloads to such an extent that they become more inclined to continuous assessments which have cut off dates as compared to research works. These lecturers do not publish any articles at all for the most time of their career. Management is too rigid on the institutions and enforcement of the eight continuous assessments that is seen as a culture of the institution and hence the retardation of research appetite to lecturers concerned. The research teams are also facing difficulties in concentrating on research works due to limitations of time caused mainly by the culture of heavy overloads on lecturing and continuous assessments. When the research teams request for reliefs in the number of continuous assessments to be reduced so that they could also concentrate on research works; management does not want to act on this.

Students are assessed when they start writing their research proposals, completion of the research project and finally when they qualify for the programmes they are registered in. The assessments of these research works are supervised by the lecturers concerned and as well there is need for external examiners before the student qualifies or is legible for graduation. Those students who cannot pass the research normally repeat the writing of the research until they have satisfied all the requirements of the research programmes before they could be allowed to graduate.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To assess how research is conducted at the higher institutions of learning in Africa;
- To investigate the role of management in the research aspects;
- To examine whether most institutions have established research policies in place;
- To recommend remedies and improvements on how higher institutions would in the future operate in terms of research satisfaction in its operations as a research institutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this section, this paper assesses and evaluates the readings from various scholars in order to get more relevant information intended to meet the goals of the study of this nature. The material search relates to the subject on the impact of institutional research policies on the performance of research at the institutions of higher learning in Africa and how these reading materials could be applied to ensure that there is change in addressing research works at the above mentioned institutions.

2.2 The functions of institutional research at a higher Institute of Learning

Saupe (1990, p.4) posits that activities of institutional research should be able to identify situations which exist in the institution, which may be viewed as matters of concern. He further explains that some of the projects the institutional research may be interested in could be action research in which the researcher and the client could work closely throughout the problem definition, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and implementation phases of the activities to be engaged. With most institutions in Africa, the focus is teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students to be more industrial-oriented than research work, which would reveal the needs for the institutions and the industries and as well to advise private and public sectors on certain critical issues that need address.

Saupe (1990, p.5) further emphasises that the function of institutional research is an essential ingredient of sound college or university governance at all levels of the institutional setup. In his assertions, he suggests that an institutional research be carried out in the individual academic and administrative units of the college or university in order to support the information needs, planning and decision-making responsibilities which are mainly found at the unit level of the institution. This calls for attention of the management at these institutions.

If any institution needs to be effective in its research works and programs, it needs to be characterised by ensuring that it applies descriptive statistics, sampling and statistical inferences, questionnaire construction and survey research, experimental and quasi-experimental design, principles of operations research, procedures for program evaluation and methods of qualitative research. The essential dimension to be employed is to call upon selected pool of researchers in various areas as listed above to ensure that each area is richly supplied by a fully resourced person in order to bring about successes in research at the institution (Saupe, p.9).

Meek & Van der Lee (2005, p.3), interestingly assess the benchmarking and performance indicators as crucial to the functioning of a research institution by critically reviewing the works of Jackson & Lun (2000) as well as the works of Garlic and Pryor (2004) in which they emphasise benchmarking being defined as *“a learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in*

the process to compare their services/activities/products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement and/or self-regulation."

Furthermore, Meek & Van der Lee (2000) cite Garlic and Pryor (2004) extracting their ideas and assimilating them to the definition of benchmarking on a different area in order to assess and critically argue the meanings of the two definitions to research institutions as they define benchmarking as *"...in the university situation [as using] terms like collaboration, organization learning, inclusiveness, reflection, review, leadership and improvement. This way is about connecting up relevant stakeholders both within and outside the institution in such a way that leads to knowledge exchange about why, what, where and how improvement might occur."*

Meek and van der Lee in their illustration of benchmarking above clearly advocate that the institution will not work in isolation, but should ensure the involvement of stakeholders both within and outside the institution in order to have a clear understanding on how to adjust the research programs to meet the needs of both the institution and the outside partners by importing and exporting of ideas from each side of the coin.

Terenzini (1999, pp.21-29) argues technically on the nature of institutional research as he views institutional research as institutional intelligence in three, mutually dependent but very distinctive forms when he states that the first form (Tier 1), has a technical/analytical competence which is both substantive (for example, familiarity with terms, definitions, counting rules) and methodological (for example, knowledge of research designs, sampling, statistics, measurement, computing and qualitative methods as well as enrolment forecasting, workload analysis, instructional and program evaluation, etc. Essentially and interestingly, Terenzini touches on the very nature of the influence of workloads and elaborates it in a way that it suits the current trends of higher institutions in Africa, which have a high shortfall and bottlenecks on the proper functional models of the institutional research implications at the institutions under study.

Looking further into Terenzini's (p.28, 29) second form of organizational intelligence, he views the institution as requiring an understanding of the substantive problems confronting administrators on which the technical/analytical intelligence is brought to be borne in mind and made meaningful to the research institution. Accordingly, Terenzini states that intelligence such as this one is both substantive and procedural and that substantive intelligence in this tier involves familiarity with major categories of institutional decision-making roles (for example, enrolment goal-setting, resource allocation, physical facilities planning and management, program and institutional planning and assessment. According to Terenzini as he posits and elaborates further on this second tier of institutional intelligence, he says that procedural competence includes knowledge of activities such as the budget development process and its linkages with academic and facilities planning, varying models for faculty workload analysis, faculty resource allocation, and faculty evaluation. The procedural knowledge in this tier is viewed by Terenzini as not merely technical but also being conditioned by an appreciation of the essentially political character of those activities and an understanding of how these

activities could be completed successfully with the smaller amounts of internal institutional friction.

The third tier of the models of Terenzini, (p.29) focuses on contextual intelligence, which is characterised by the requirement and understanding not only of the culture and customs of higher education in general, but also the particular institution in which the institutional researcher is serving. This is referred to as the “sense of the place” by Terenzini. It tells of what the institution has been, what it is, and what it is becoming or can become. This is suggested by Terenzini as the form of institutional wisdom, the crowning form of institutional intelligence, transcending both technical competence and general administrative understanding. Summarily, those three forms of organizational intelligence are mutually dependent and supportive.

Importantly, Coates & Goedegebuure (2010, p.2) explore the challenges of reconceptualising the Australia’s future academic workforce and suggest that one of the first means to overcome these challenges is for the system to find and implement a positive narrative for the future and that a significant foundation task for any workforce development initiative should revolve around understanding the major changes that are taking place with the workforce, learners and education itself and to be able to translate these changes into new conceptualisations of the roles and expectations of the workforce and the institution by implementing them and putting them into action. Coates & Goedegebuure identified eight auspicious strategies by which these challenges could be operationalized to achieve best results in reconceptualising the future academic workforce and these are outlined as:- reconfiguring academic work; constructing academic career profiles; distinguishing attractive customised experiences; designed measured experiences; engaging sessional academics; refreshing the research degree; expanding staff numbers with system growth; and lastly, but not the least, engaging leaders in capacity development.

Wooldridge (2010), on agility states that there are at least three component parts and the first one is the capacity and willingness to adopt new business models for universities in which collaboration between clusters of universities work together and the benefit is shared value into services both nationally and internationally. This is essential because it brings about a new kind of market positioning in relation to the student as purchaser and consumer of services in the institutional research programs. The second component Wooldridge states, is relating to the culture of the institution, which he feels should embrace new ways of operating and determining how things are done. The third component he observes is the strategic leadership of technology, which he regards as the key determinant of instructional competitiveness internationally.

Davis (2014) using the views of (Bass 1985, p.5) argues that *“leadership perspectives serve to critique rationalist knowledge claims underpinning managerialism which offers a limiting lens that only ‘sees’ the work we do in higher education as ‘based on economic cost-benefit assumptions’*. This statement offers a meaningful point with regards to the institution under study, which actually was formed on the basis of producing human resources that would join the industries using their expertise as employees. For economic reasons, this institution under

study capitalises on such and views research as secondary in the meantime while in the future, the institution will move towards embracing the economic factor and the research domains.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this paper was an exploratory design. According to Burns and Bush (2006) exploratory research design is referred to as gathering information in an informal and unstructured manner and has to rely as well on qualitative techniques in which the review of related readings from various scholars were engaged in order to get relevant data to support the study of this nature. Different scholars searched were all of whom were more meaningful in their writing materials in terms of policies supporting research at institutions of higher learning. The literature was then compared with the current situation at the institutions of higher learning in Africa and whether there would be changes to be considered based on the learning and adaptation to what scholars addressed in order to pave a way considerable for these institutions to assimilate, conceptualise and change where need be, for the better.

4. REPORTING OF RESEARCH OUTCOMES / FINDINGS

At the end of the physical assessment of the situation at hand, the study revealed that the following dominant areas influence the institutional research policies and smooth operation thereof:

- The manner in which the research is conducted at the institutions of higher learning is cumbersome and needs adjustments;
- The role of management in the research at the institutions is very limited due to the fact that they rely on rigidity of the vision and mission statements of the institutions, which is producing expertise that would work in industries and public sector and are inclined not to embrace research as a stepping stone for the better;
- Most institutions do not have laid down policies which should all in all control, maintain, guide and ensure that research becomes more critical and crucial and that all research teams and streams are coordinated to bring about change in the research domains or areas;
- Most of these institutions were established solely for need at hand during their inceptions, for example produce expertise for the private and the public sectors, but due to changes in the environment and as a result of this, minimum focus is geared towards the development of sound policies that would see them as a milestone for research contributions;

- There is need to assess and recommend feasible and viable ways on how to improve research by building on what currently is there in those institutions.

The reporting of research outcomes by students and concerned lecturers is normally ascertained by a number of completions of research projects at a given time period of three months for research proposals and another three months allocated for completed research projects that are submitted within this period. Students who do not meet the deadlines up to the beginning of another year are required to reregister for their further works on their project proposals and final completion of the research project due for examinations and marks allocation purposes as the case may be.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assessment and identification of the number of lecturers who are doing research with the aim of minimising their teaching workloads and attempt to set aside more time for them to conduct research is necessary;
- Improve on the culture of the university by not only concentrating on producing cadres for private and public sectors, but to also instil research works among the management cadres;
- Strengthen and encourage management to participate and advocate research works at the institution;
- To create research policies that are implementable and user-friendly by the students and lecturers;
- To align institutional policies with the current changes of the manner in which markets across the globe impact on performance of universities;

CONCLUSION

This paper investigated and examined the challenges that affect institutional policy research performance and further revealed the interference of management into research works. The paper explores more on the workloads and institutional culture of rigidity and how strategies could be advanced to help research grow at these institutions.

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