A critical overview of trends and practices in performance management in the South African higher educational environment

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ABSTRACT
The transformation from an industrial society to a postmodern knowledge society has given rise to a new set of values that are manifesting to varying degrees in modern organisations. Besides quality orientation, these include focus on teamwork and cooperation, democratisation of the workplace, fairness and equity in labour relations, and a respect for diversity. In South Africa, many of these values have been amplified by the political transformation that the country has been undergoing since the early 1990s. Organisations are obliged to promote these values and build new cultures through strong leadership, changed strategies, and ensure buy in and compliance by means of performance management and reward systems.

Higher Education, particularly in South Africa, has been reluctant to adopt performance management systems and practices, especially insofar as it pertains to the management and appraisal of academic staff at institutions of Higher Learning. The reasons for the reluctance seem to revolve mostly around an exaggerated deference to the idea of "academic freedom" and more operationally, the difficulties associated with "measuring" excellence in academic pursuits.

This article will give an overview of prevalent trends and practices in managing academic performance and will attempt to explore the possible reasons for the apparent reluctance of academic staff and academic administrators to develop or adopt systems and procedures for managing academic performance.

MANAGING EDUCATOR PERFORMANCE – A MANAGEMENT FAD OR A VALUE ENHANCING HUMAN RESOURCE REQUIREMENT?
Around the late 1970’s the postwar burgeoning consumer demand for manufactured goods typical of the industrial era gradually started making way for a changed business environment where knowledge generation and service delivery became of primary importance. This shift from a manufacturing industry to a service industry required fundamental conceptualisation of how organisations are designed, structured and managed, including a fundamental change in the concept of "workload" and what constitutes it. One of the main trends that accompanied the move from manufacturing to service organisations was an increased emphasis on quality management and continuous quality improvement. Two salient features of a quality focussed approach are a customer orientation and the prevention of errors. Both these features have important implications for organisational design and management practices.

With a quality approach, the needs of customers overshadow the importance of line managers in determining service and thus necessitate a move away from rigid hierarchical structures that emphasise vertical reporting relationships and a preoccupation with command and control. Organisations adopting a customer orientation have found that serving the customer is best achieved through streamlined horizontal processes designed to satisfy customer needs with the maximum flexibility and speed. Many of these organisations are also replacing traditional top down management practices with self directed teams that have discretionary power to decide how best to serve customers within the scope of existing policies.

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and procedures, without wasting valuable time by having to consult higher levels of management.

Devolved responsibility associated with flattened organisational structures has however placed an increased focus on group and individual accountability, how it is demonstrated, and above all how it is evaluated and maintained. A decrease of rigid top-down control has thus not diminished the need for accountability and justification for work decisions and actions, but required a rethinking of techniques and processes in order to reflect an unconventional accountability chain.

The quality movement’s emphasis on the prevention of errors has in its turn lead to a focus on improving organisational systems and processes, rather than only focusing on the performance of individual employees in isolation. This arises from the quality movement’s assumption that errors are largely due to system factors, rather than worker characteristics. Some of the proponents of the quality approach, such as Deming (1993), have even gone so far as to recommend scrapping the practice of performance appraisals altogether. This sentiment is echoed by Nickols who perceives the value of performance management as greatly exaggerated. His view is that “…it devours staggering amounts of time and energy, it depresses and de-motivates people, it destroys trust and teamwork and, adding insult to injury, it delivers little demonstrable value at great cost” (Nickols 1997).

It becomes clear from the preceding discussion that the transformation from an industrial society to a knowledge society has given rise to a new set of values that are manifesting to varying degrees in modern organisations. Besides quality orientation, these include the focus on teamwork and cooperation, democratisation of the workplace, fairness and equity in labour relations, and a respect for diversity. In South Africa, many of these values have been amplified by the political transformation that the country has been undergoing since the early 1990s. Organisations are obliged to promote these values and build new cultures through strong leadership, changed strategies, and to ensure buy in and compliance by means of performance management and reward systems.

Higher Education, particularly in South Africa, although embroiled in a process of extensive transformation on various levels, has been reluctant to adopt performance management systems and practices, especially insofar as it pertains to the management and appraisal of academic staff at institutions of higher learning. The reasons for the reluctance seem to revolve mostly around an exaggerated deference to the idea of “academic freedom” and more operationally, the difficulties associated with “measuring” excellence in academic pursuits.

This article will give an overview of prevalent trends and practices in managing academic performance and attempt to explore the possible reasons for the apparent reluctance of academic staff and academic administrators to develop or adopt systems and procedures for managing academic performance.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Research for this article included an extended literature study into performance management issues and existing practices in managing academic performance, as well as interviews and correspondence with international experts in the field. On a national level, research included the analysis of existing and emerging practices in managing the performance of academic staff at eight prominent Higher Education institutions in South Africa. The particular institutions were included in the research on the basis of their established or recently introduced systems of performance management. Models implemented were analysed and processes researched and where possible, clarified and augmented by means of interviews with human resource managers, academic managers and academic staff members at all job levels at the various institutions.

EXISTING INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

The history of performance management is not an extensive one. As a formal management procedure used to evaluate work performance, it has existed for barely sixty years, roughly since the Second World War (Archer North & Associates 1998). However, in a broader sense, the practice of appraising performance is as dated as humanity. According to Dulewicz (1989 as quoted by Archer North & Associates), there exists “…a basic human tendency to make judgements about those one is working with, as well as about oneself”. The appraisal of performance is, it seems, both universal and inevitable. Ruth (Ruth 2001) points out that the inevitability of appraisal needs to be acknowledged by formalising and democratising it, rather than allowing subjective and often misinformed judgements to hold sway. In the absence of thoughtfully designed systems and processes, they tend to evolve arbitrarily and informally, often creating serious motivational, ethical and legal problems in the workplace (Archer & North 1998).

Performance appraisals were the precursors for the later, more comprehensive performance management systems introduced in the workplace. Performance appraisals started as a simple method to justify income and expenditure, that is, determining whether the salaries paid to employees were justified and in line with the value they add to the business or organisation. As such, the process was firmly linked to material outcomes in terms of increases and cuts in
salary, that was often considered less than ideal. Initially little consideration, if any, was given to the developmental possibilities offered by appraisal of both the individual worker and the business as a whole. As a result, the initial emphasis on reward outcomes was progressively rejected in favour of appraisal as a useful tool for staff development and motivation as part of a business enhancing strategy. A broader and more multidimensional model, referred to as performance management emerged as a result.

Formalising a performance appraisal as part of an integrated performance management system has however always been controversial and in many instances an uncertain and contentious matter for those involved. Performance management is seen by some as a tool for management to control and manipulate employees and to enforce a particular transformation agenda. In the South African context, this perception is common, especially where performance management has been introduced as a newly formalised management practice. Exacerbating the natural suspicion of practices that involve evaluation and judgement, many respected sources, including researchers, management analysts and psychometrists have expressed doubts about the reliability and validity of performance appraisal per se, and suggested that such a process is, of necessity, so inherently flawed that it may even be impossible to perfect it (Derven 1990, as quoted by Archer North & Associates).

At the other extreme of viewpoints, strong proponents of performance management see it as the most crucial aspect of organisational success (Lawrie 1990, as quoted by Archer North & Associates). From this viewpoint it is perceived to be the basis of accountable human resource practices as it intends to optimise contributions of staff in line with the goals of the organisation. Between these two extremes many schools of thought and belief prevail. While most support the use of appraisals for managing performance, many and varied opinions on how and when to best to apply it can be found.

Common reservations about performance appraisal as a practice centre around the linkage of appraisals with reward outcomes. The developmental advantage of integrated performance management is seen to be reduced and even eliminated by linking it to reward. Rather than a process of constructive review, reward linked processes appear to be judgmental, punitive and harrowing, resulting in low staff morale and inviting manipulation of the system.

Legal requirements however support rival arguments that, to establish remunerative justice, organisations need an equitable process by which reward is openly and fairly distributed to those who are most deserving on the basis of effort, merit and results. To ascertain this, performance needs to be fairly, uniformly and regularly appraised and documented. Human Resources managers, particularly those in Higher Education institutions, face a major challenge to deal with this ambivalence and incongruence in establishing a performance management framework that addresses both the need for accountability as well as the opportunity for skills analysis and staff development.

An overview of international practices reveals a variety of models applied in managing performance in Higher Education. Existing models generally reflect the purpose of the performance appraisal; that is whether it is established for development purposes, for determining tenure or promotion, as a basis for decisions on remuneration, or as a diagnostic tool for quality control. Although practices are internationally well established, the relative success has not been confirmed definitively.

**DILEMMAS IN MANAGING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

Many of the trends referred to above are to a greater or lesser extent manifesting within the institutional environment of South African Higher Education. A brief overview of the basic principles and key processes will illustrate how institutions have responded to current trends and imperatives in designing and implementing performance management with academic and support staff.

**Balancing academic freedom with performance management**

Universities are primary examples of organisations without clear cut boundaries and distinctions in terms of who is the actual provider of a service and who the client. Higher Education Institutions are characterised by the co-production of learning by its lecturers and students. The special relationship existing between students, lecturers and support staff in a university context is touchingly embodied in concepts such as “university community” and “community of scholars”.

Furthermore institutions of higher learning are subsidised by state funding derived from taxpayers’ money. It could therefore be argued that the institutions and the academics in its employ serve the state and broader society, making them also “clients and stakeholders” of the service provided by Higher Education. The co-responsibility for delivery of service, as well as the diversity of direct and indirect clients, render it rather difficult to identify and equally satisfy customer needs, as standards for excellence would clearly be determined by often conflicting priorities.
Further blurring of boundaries occur when the concept of “academic freedom” is evoked in arguments opposing the introduction of performance management. Academic endeavour is held up to be a particularly individualised and unique kind of job where uniform performance standards cannot be applied in the appraisal of performance.

The concept of academic freedom stems from the development of liberalism and the idea of freedom of thought, even when that thought comes up against traditional restrictions from political and religious authorities. With the development of liberalism during the period of Enlightenment, philosophers found that their challenging of tradition brought censure from different authorities. They, in turn, reserved for themselves the right to go wherever their minds and ideas lead them. When the call for intellectual freedom occurred in an academic environment, it became a call for academic freedom for teaching and learning. Academic freedom has two primary connotations. The first involves the freedom of individual scholars to write, speak and teach on whatever topics they consider important or factual. The second important connotation is the idea that an entire academic institution, be it a university or a research group, should have the freedom to decide upon policies, practices, and goals without being restrained or controlled by outside agencies; be they political in the sense of the government or private in the sense of corporations or special interest groups.

At times the term academic freedom is used to refer to a near absolute freedom of a teachers to perform their job without unreasonable restrictions and without fear of censure due to the unpopular nature of the subject or their conclusions. This view of academic freedom is largely derivative, because the freedom of the institution is based upon the freedom of the individual researchers and scholars. In light of the increased call for wider accountability, it becomes clear that a conflict of interest could result, particularly where this accountability involves an appraisal of performance against standardised criteria.

**The nature of academic work**

Although the work of academic and support staff in Higher Education institutions is closely linked in terms of strategic objectives and delivery of products and services, the nature of work is totally different in terms of the key performance areas. Performance standards relate to the key tasks of a particular category of employee which in the case of academic and support staff vary considerably. This distinction in key tasks and performance areas often necessitated the design of two systems similar in terms basic principles, approach and application, but different in content and structure. The research undertaken for this article focussed exclusively on systems designed and implemented for managing the performance of academic staff.

An approach adopted internationally by institutions in line with competency based thinking, has been to identify core competencies required, presuming that the behaviours associated with these competencies result in performance excellence. These are, *inter alia*, effective communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, self development and the development of others, change management, commitment to quality, student and stakeholder orientation, innovation and creativity, decision making, judgement and critical thinking skills. These competencies form the basis of the performance criteria defined in the key performance areas of academic work, and thus form the basis for managing and appraising academic performance.

**Job descriptions**

An essential prerequisite for the management of performance on a formal basis is a clear description of the nature and scope of jobs on escalating levels of work complexity. Job descriptions at most of the academic institutions studied were found to be vague and lacking clarity in terms of job level distinctions. Extensive focus group interviews with academic staff on all job levels revealed great confusion with regard to what is expected and how duties are perceived. Differences in expectations and job requirements were found between not only different institutions but also between the different faculties in a single institution. A number of factors are cited as the reasons for differences in job requirements and expectations on a particular job level, of which the most common are the following:

- The subject speciality area often requires specific duties and involvement of staff in unique responsibilities, often unrelated to what would normally be expected at a particular job level. An example of this would be a junior lecturer in a unique and often scarce subject area who has to undertake the supervision of postgraduate students; a duty which according to academic tradition, falls in the ambit of senior academics at higher job levels.
- The size of departments that determine the variety and complexity of duties performed. Academic departments are not homogeneous in size or structure, although required to provide a fairly homogeneous range of academic offerings such as undergraduate tuition, post graduate supervision, (applied) practical work as well maintain a respectable research profile. Department sizes are linked to student numbers rather than to the variety of functions that need to be performed. In smaller departments fewer staff members are obliged to service this diversity of duties, thus resulting in
The restructuring of Higher Education that is currently taking place has impacted greatly on the scope and complexity of academic jobs. The tendency to structure academic departments around programmes rather than disciplines, has numerous consequences for the content of academic jobs and job levels. It has been obvious that in most institutions, this restructuring has not brought about a simplified structure, but rather a more complex structure where uncertainty exists around management functions, reporting lines and job levels. What is referred to in the various institutions as, *inter alia*, programme directors, directors of departments, departmental chairs, heads of departments or academic executives, all seem to fall into a broad middle management group with little clarification as to how these jobs relate to one another and to the organisational structure of the institution.

The effect of this apparent confusion on the implementation of performance management has been unfortunate in many instances. The role of a head of department or academic manager is pivotal to the successful implementation of performance management. Analysis of sound practice in this regard indicates that it is essential that performance be contracted and managed on a consistent basis by a direct superior who is *au fait* with the requirements of a particular job and the incumbent’s performance in the job. The “many chiefs” in new academic structures often manage diverse functions performed by an individual academic. Contracting and managing the overall workload of an academic staff member is nigh impossible, especially where the direct superior is often an expert in a totally different subject discipline and unable to appraise the uniqueness of a discipline and its required methodologies. This problem has been addressed in some institutions by introducing a form of 360 appraisal, implying feed back from multiple sources. This practice, although perceived to be fair and welcomed by academics, has however been increasing the administrative burden on managers who need to gather, merge and interpret feedback from the various sources.

Contrary to the uncertainty concerning involvement of academic staff on different job levels, there is a fair amount of consensus with regard to the key areas of academic performance, the vexing issue being how these key areas complement one another and how they ought to be balanced to achieve excellence.

**Balancing key performance areas of academic work**

Key Performance Areas in academic work have been identified and described around the tasks and functions associated with three main areas, namely:

- **Teaching and learning** which involves all tuition related practices in which academic staff are involved, with an emphasis on meeting the needs of the student body through the provision of appropriate and relevant courses, appropriate modes of delivery and equitable assessment practices and student support.

- **Research** which involves all activities linked to the acquisition or development of knowledge and skills in a subject field, or with regard to appropriate teaching methodologies and approaches.

- **Academic citizenship** refers to the individual’s involvement (as an academic and subject specia list) in both the community of the Higher Education institution as well as the wider community, in delivering a service, performing tasks and making contributions to the functioning, well being, and upliftment of these communities. It includes those activities conventionally classed as “administrative duties” as well as those related to “community service” or “community participation” (Franzsen & Orr 2001).

Underpinning these key tasks and roles are the competencies referred to earlier that were identified as pertinent to the successful performance of academics in the three Key Performance Areas.

In the informal appraisal of academic performance that has long been common practice, the convention has been to place a very high premium on research outputs as indicators of academic excellence. Although this is a long standing academic tradition and one of the few objective and tangible measures of performance, it has increasingly become an inadequate and incomplete measure of academic performance as has been reported by Dearing: “What makes higher education institutions unique is their teaching. The quality of teaching is at least as important as research itself” (Dearing 1998). This affirms a similar view expressed by Boyer in referring to “the scholar ship of teaching” (Boyer 1990).

The tuition versus research obligation of academics has been much debated. In contemporary Higher Education, the involvement of academic staff on all...
levels of governance and management structures, has become common practice, extending and redefining the once vague “service” function of academics to a more specific and often very time consuming obligation.

Balancing involvement in these three areas is a major cause for concern. In various mission statements drawn up by Higher Education institutions, the threefold mission is underscored and pertinent to defining the strategic objectives envisioned by the institutions. In the normal order of strategic management one would expect these objectives to be prioritised or weighted in some sense to enable executive managers to formulate their own aligned strategies and objectives. More often than not, however, there is very little direction in this regard to ensure well balanced task divisions and to support, develop and reward all the aspects of academic work equally. In performance management and reward practices, research gets far more and detailed attention than the other key performance areas whereas the tuition function, which by many is considered the primary function of academics and certainly impacts most directly on students, appears to be seldom rewarded. “It seems that the very basis of the global higher education reward system is the belief that working with, contributing to and pursuing knowledge (ie research) is in fact superior to teaching” (Seldin 1996, as quoted by Jacobs et al 2002) This is also partly due to the fact that excellence in teaching and learning does not lend itself to easy definition and outputs are long term and often less tangible than, for instance, that of research. Most incentives in academic work also centre around research bursaries and awards, conference attendance allocations and the like, entrenching the perception that this is valued more than teaching excellence.

**Managing and appraising service provision**

Bowen and Waldman (1999) point out that many factors complicate the evaluation of service quality. Firstly, services are much less tangible than physical products and are therefore highly dependent on customer perceptions and experiences. Secondly, customers are often co producers of services. As mentioned in a previous section, this is especially evident in institutions of higher learning where the effectiveness of academic offerings depends in large part upon the skills, abilities and commitment of learners. Thirdly, as the above list of service dimensions illustrate, customer satisfaction is usually the result of a large number of variables of which the frontline academic, dealing directly with students, has little control.

Proponents of the Total Quality Movement believe that more than 90% of the variance in an individual employee’s performance can be attributed to systems factors over which the employee has little or no control (Bernardin et al 1998). This might be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, most employees and their line managers can attest to the deep frustrations stemming from disagreements on whether unsatisfactory performance should be attributed to the employee’s ability and motivation or to situational constraints such as inadequate training, faulty equipment, supply problems, role overload, or unsatisfactory performance of co workers. Such disagreements often lead to dissatisfaction with the performance management system and to cynicism and decreased motivation that can have a serious impact on organisational performance.

**CRITICAL COMMENTS ON NATIONAL PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES**

The South African Higher Education institutions have been slower than their international counterparts in establishing performance management as a formal management practice. What has become clear in the research and analysis of systems is that although in many instances, systems have been designed and developed according to standards of contemporary “good practice”, implementation has been mostly slow and fraught with difficulties. In addition to the more general dilemmas referred to earlier, a number of specific issues seem to be common cause for concern and hesitant implementation.

The perceived purpose of performance management and associated approaches adopted

In most instances, documentation around performance management in local Higher Education institutions indicates a preference for a system that is developmental and formative rather than judgmental and summative. Performance management systems in most institutions include personal development plans and are linked to organisational skills development initiatives. Although this is viewed as the ideal, outcomes of the performance appraisal process are often, understandably, used as a basis for career decisions such as appointment and promotion and furthermore, as a basis for performance bonus allocations and salary increases. This dual application of a single process in most instances refutes the formative purpose of the process since individuals involved (managers as well as employees) tend not to focus on and acknowledge areas where development is required when financial consequences are linked to the outcome of an appraisal process.

Consideration has to be given to designing a system that involves either separate processes for summative and formative appraisal, or an integrated process,
which has different steps or sub processes to deal distinctively with either development or formal summative evaluation for input to career decisions.

Consequences attached to performance appraisal and feedback on employee performance

In two instances where performance appraisal was used with the sole purpose of introducing performance related pay increases, the financial gain for the individual employees was so insignificant that it had hardly any incentive value and was viewed by employees as a waste of administrative time and effort.

The reverse side of the coin, in terms of reward and punishment, also appears to be cause for concern. Academic staff members repeatedly claim that they could accept a performance management system more readily if it meant that under performance was effectively addressed and resulted in equal workload distribution.

For a performance management process to add value and be worth the time and cost involved, it must essentially have open dialogue between evaluators and those evaluated as its core process. Continuous honest and constructive feedback is not only an administrative and legally required prerequisite for any evaluation process, but determines the long term benefits if not the survival of a performance management system. It is in this respect that most academic institutions seem to experience most of their implementation difficulties.

Giving performance feedback is rated by most managers as one of the most taxing and sensitive managerial tasks requiring specific training in interpersonal and communication skills. None of the academic managers (Heads of Department, Heads of Schools, Directors of Schools or Academic Units) who were interviewed considered themselves adequately trained and competent in dealing with performance interviews, especially in cases where negative feedback had to be communicated. Many academic managers see themselves firstly as specialists and academics and only secondly as managers and they complain that they have neither the inclination, nor the time, as one respondent put it, to "police" fellow academics. This attitude was echoed by most of the managers interviewed for this article and indicates a pressing need for clarification of the roles of academic managers and intensive training to fulfil the responsibilities of such a role.

Change management and communication issues

Change takes time and the best laid plans seldom influence the tempo at which huge institutions operate and move. Decision making processes and agreement on principles, basic structures and procedures take time and need to be factored into the planning and management of the process. One of the major problems in the development of performance management systems in Higher Education institutions is the protracted processes needed to get buy in and constructive participation from the various stakeholder groups. This includes the necessity to keep all stakeholders informed and up to date with decisions and developments. Despite concerted in formation campaigns some of the institutions have undertaken, they report that academic staff members and unions remain negative and sceptical about the purpose and nature of a proposed system and how it will affect their professional and work lives.

Organisations other than academic institutions where performance management has been introduced successfully, report that it took up to three cycles of implementation to establish a culture of performance awareness and before the system started yielding results in terms of staff development and improved performance (Theron & Roodt 2000). Haworth (1998) suggests that a performance feedback system should be introduced first as a development tool, after which it can be changed and used for appraisal and compensation purposes. It is therefore crucial that institutions manage stakeholder expectations in respect of time frames and appraisal outcomes, specifically where the intention is to link direct rewards to the process.

The use of external consultants

A number of institutions that have embarked upon the development and implementation of a performance management system have made use external consultants for expert input into the system design. Although the technical know how they provided was generally sound and scientifically well founded, it did not in all instances translate well into the university or technikon culture and environment. Extensive and continuous participation by internal drivers and monitors of the performance management initiative had been necessary in the system development to ensure alignment with organisational values and culture. This process often resulted in the adjustment of proposals and the extension of time frames.

These implementation issues seen together with conceptual and structural problems that are associated with managing academic performance could
explain what appears to be institutional reluctance to fully embrace formalised performance management.

CONCLUSION

A general concern with the implementation of any new human resource management practice is whether the intervention will be worth the time, effort and cost it occasions. None of the national Higher Education institutions, which have moved some way along the route of implementing a performance management system, have yet been able to quantify in any way the value added or to claim unequivocal success. However, implementation difficulties as highlighted above contribute significantly to the perceived and real success of a performance management system and, rather than abandoning the process altogether, these need to be addressed in a meaningful way. The advantages of a well established and well managed performance management system, greatly outweigh the difficulties and teething problems experienced insofar as it:

- complies with labour legislation and requirements;
- provides role definition and clarifies mutual expectations (i.e. individual and organisational);
- aligns individual performance with organisational goals;
- documents performance systematically and provides input for related human resource practices; and
- identifies development needs as basis for professional growth.

Should these ideals be realised, higher education can indeed claim competitiveness and accountability, the demand for which is likely to increase rather than decrease.

The lack of decisive and conclusive findings in this research project is an indication for the need for continued endeavour to establish a workable and justifiable system of performance management in the Higher Education environment, as well as the need for recording and sharing of emerging practices and developments.

REFERENCES


