



**Conference on**

**Trends in the management of human resources  
in higher education**

**Performance management of academic staff  
in South African higher education:  
a developmental research project**

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*South African higher education is facing an unprecedented number of demands for increased public accountability; responsiveness; capacity-building; efficiency and effectiveness. The conflation of about 30 different policy demands has not only led to a change in the scope, nature and intensity of academic work, but has also subjected academic work to performance and quality assessment and management. This paper arises from a comprehensive research project undertaken by the Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development (CHESD) at the University of the Free State (UFS). The project focused on performance management of academics in higher education and further education and training (FET) institutions as an issue embedded in Human Resources Management and Development (HRMD).*

*The motivating force for this project from a higher education perspective was the awareness that shortcomings exist in current performance management and staff development systems within South African higher education, due to - among other things - the increasingly dynamic higher education and training environment; the enduring legacy of the apartheid past that looms within institutions; as well as the failure of most institutions to address the real needs of academic staff, sustain their interest, and support their traditional academic roles while at the same time assessing their diversified roles in the knowledge economy fairly. The research followed a case study approach and the results from three universities provide insight into the nature of performance management in South African higher education. The investigation commenced with a broad literature review of issues regarding performance management. These issues covered themes such as performance management as a component of HRMD in higher education, as well as policies guiding performance management in South African higher education institutions. It explored the responses of institutions to the changing higher education environment and how these have influenced the development of performance management systems within the context of an institution's specific organisational culture, in addition to what lessons have been learnt in the process of developing performance management systems. The benefits of a phased approach to performance management systems were also explored. The study reaffirmed that institutions are facing major challenges regarding the management of the performance of academic staff.*

## **Background and context**

During the last decade the South African higher education system has been subjected to a radical transformation intended to reverse inequities born by the practices of the previous government. The system has been going through turbulent times due to, among other inevitable factors, a plethora of restorative national policies and legislative initiatives to which it must respond; the new emergent nature of academia; the challenges imposed by global markets and international competition; as well as the changing expectations of the role-players and stakeholders. Institutions must ensure that they deliver in accordance with the required standards to ensure their survival within the competitive higher education environment. African and South African institutions must discern options for dealing with, among other issues, the escalating costs of institutional operation and maintaining sustainability amidst dwindling government subsidies; increasing interinstitutional competition for the best students; and the ever-changing demands of the various higher education stakeholders.

In the wake of democracy many human resources management and development inefficiencies surfaced, both for South Africa and the African continent as a whole. The fact that Africa cannot generate sustainable socio-economic development without investing in human development became evident. In an attempt to respond to this need, governments have been exerting insurmountable pressure on public services sectors to be more productive.

Higher education institutions in the continent and specifically in South Africa are expected to play a critical role in the development of human resources and in the overall social development and transformation of the continent by, among other things, contributing to the projects and programmes of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) through the production of knowledge and high-level personpower. While such expectations bring fresh hope for Africa's renaissance, the success of higher education institutions in fulfilling them is contingent upon many factors, although - more importantly - it is dependent on a cadre of academics that can utilise research, teaching/learning, as well as community engagement to identify and solve problems, in addition to harnessing the full economic potential of the continent. The biggest challenge regarding staffing in South Africa and other African countries is "brain drain". Although several initiatives have already been taken to curb this epidemic, the loss of the "cream" (talented staff and experts) of Africa's academia still remains one of the critical problems facing universities on the continent. Universities are experiencing a steady loss of academics either to better-paying universities in Africa or abroad, or to the corporate world which offers appealing salaries. The loss of senior staff and more experienced staff sets these institutions back in terms of their research outputs and it furthermore has a marked effect on the quality of teaching. In the South African higher education context, all these imperatives undoubtedly pose major implications for attracting/recruiting and retaining expert staff, as well as the for development and performance management of academic staff.

According to Kochanski, Alderson and Sorenson (2005), globally in most organisations performance management still has a long way to go in fulfilling its roles and objectives. This is particularly the case in higher education institutions in South Africa (that is, those that are lucky to have performance management systems in place). The outcome of the research project on performance management of academics in higher education and further education and training (FET) institutions undertaken by the Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development (CHESD) at the University of the Free State (UFS) reflects that numerous shortcomings still exist in the performance management systems of certain higher education institutions in South Africa. Some of the findings point to the fact that performance management in South African higher education institutions is not only a poorly conceptualised issue, but it also remains a poorly executed process which is thus failing to achieve its intended purpose.

## **The setting**

The analysis reported here is based on an investigation of the performance management practices of 11 different institutions. The first six case studies relate to research undertaken within one province, while the other five were undertaken outside the province in order to provide a complement of external perspectives. The diversity of the local higher education and further education institutions in South Africa was taken into consideration. Hence the participating institutions included one historically advantaged university, one historically disadvantaged university, one university of technology (previously a technikon) and two FET cluster institutions. For purposes of comparison, investigations were undertaken at two established universities outside the province, as well as at two vastly different organisations (a university and a goldmine). International perspectives were brought in by means of an analysis of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) research and development project on human resources development at English universities. A student researcher was assigned to each of the case studies which she/he did as part of a master's or a doctoral study in higher education. Each researcher provided an overview of the context of the specific research setting; the methodology employed; the main features of the setting's current performance management system; the system's strengths and weaknesses; as well as the lessons learned and challenges revealed by the research.

In this paper the results of three historically advantaged universities are discussed to illustrate the complexities around the development and implementation of performance management systems within institutions. The rationale for the sample is that the typical distinction between advantaged and disadvantaged institutions is increasingly difficult to make due to the changes in the higher education landscape as a result of mergers and incorporations of different institutions since 2004. This sample also provides perspectives from institutions that have implemented these systems before and those that are only starting to develop a performance management system, which provides an accurate representation of the state of affairs at different advantaged and disadvantaged institutions.

## **Research methodology**

A qualitative case study research methodology was used to gather data and provide perspectives on performance management in higher education institutions in South Africa. Bassey (2002) defines this kind of study as an empirical enquiry conducted within a localised boundary of space and time into interesting aspects of an educational system, and mainly in its natural context and within an ethic of respect for persons. This is employed in order to inform the judgements and decisions of practitioners or policy makers, or of theoreticians who are working to these ends; and such that sufficient data are collected for the researcher to generate valid and trustworthy findings.

The strengths of a case study methodology are that it has high construct validity; it provides in-depth insights; and it establishes rapport with research subjects (Mouton 2001). The weaknesses of the methodology is that the results lack generalisability; the measures are not standardised; and the data collection and analysis is very time-consuming (Mouton 2001). However, data triangulation was used to limit the weaknesses of the methodology. In the context of the study this methodology provided the most effective way to share the experience of an institution about the complex area of performance management which is, by nature, very context specific.

## ***Sampling***

The overall project had 11 post-graduate masters and doctoral researchers studying performance management systems in higher education and in FET institutions, a government department and a Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA). This paper reports on the results of three higher education case studies in the Free State and Gauteng provinces.

Within the case studies a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify specific samples of staff (management, support and academic), as well as institutional experts who are presently working on improving the performance management system of the university. The aim of the sampling was to get as comprehensive a set of perspectives as possible from staff at different levels and within different roles in the institution.

## **General findings**

The results of the study are based on a 12-question semi-structured interview schedule that was used in interviews with various staff members (see Appendix 1). From the interviews it was evident that there were many more similarities than differences in the experiences of the three institutions with regard to performance management. Since the aim of the case study method was to understand these performance management systems in their contexts, this paper does not provide a comparative analysis of the case studies, but focusses on the common trends in these two cases.

### ***Organisational environment***

It was clear from the interview that both institutions had developed or improved on performance management systems in response to the demands of the new higher education environment. All three institutions had gone through a restructuring process which involved, among other things, the rationalisation of faculties, the amalgamation of various departments into schools and the decentralisation of decision-making and some of the core services of academic administration, financial management and human resources to the faculty level. The success of this restructuring process was described by one of the participants as follows:

“The success of that restructuring is variable. Some of the schools are highly coherent newly directed operations and others are recalcitrant determined to try to retain their old structures as best they can. And desperately cling to their financial independence within the structure of the school. I think that it is a direct function of leadership”.

### ***Development of performance management systems***

The central HR units or departments drive the performance management system with the involvement of other support services in all three cases. In one of the institutions the performance management system started as a performance appraisal system driven by the remuneration division of HR aimed at generating a score that could be linked to salaries. Therefore performance management was linked to pay from the beginning. After several iterations the performance appraisal system has evolved into a more developmental-focused performance management system. In the second institution the performance management system started out as a “market-related performance remuneration system” strongly influenced by a business approach to performance management which was also more focused on appraisal. Since its inception this system has been redesigned into a computerised performance management system focused on strategic alignment and staff development and has not been linked to pay. The third institution had not developed a formal performance management system before and was in the process of developing a system based on the results of institutional surveys of perceptions of staff around current performance management practices.

### ***Institutional priorities and performance management systems***

Institutions strategic planning documents were well aligned to the challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa. In all three cases there were multiple strategic objectives that an institution was trying to address. Interviews with staff at different levels suggested that staff supported the strategic objectives of institutions, but felt that there was a need for greater prioritisation. Staff responses suggested

that not all staff were clear on what exactly the strategic priorities were, since faculties and departments were also at different stages of alignment to the strategic priorities of the institution. Although the data from the interviews highlights the well-documented need for clear communication of strategic objectives in the organisation, it also showed that prioritisation in environment where institutions need to implement about 30 policy documents as part of the transformation of the higher education sector is a complex and difficult task.

### ***Staff consultation and institutional reviews of the performance management system***

In the case of the two institutions that had already implemented performance management systems, some participants indicated that they still felt that the performance management system did not involve them in spite of collective bargaining structures, consultative workshops, as well as “roadshows” in faculties. Some of these staff felt that they did not receive any feedback on whether their inputs had been used in the design or improvement of the system. The findings suggest that HR should continue having multiple strategies of involving staff, but that special attention should be given to feedback to staff about their inputs. Institutions evaluated their performance management systems and practices, using both qualitative and quantitative studies in varying degrees.

### ***Strengths of performance management systems***

Performance management seems to enjoy the support of top management and a high participation rate of staff in the annual performance appraisal in the two institutions that have already implemented formal systems and the development of a more formalised system was strongly supported in the third case.

The results from the current formalised systems indicate that academic staff and managers value the opportunity to have a discussion on performance, since it provides “... an absolutely important structural moment to reflect on performance”. Participants also appreciated efforts to increase the flexibility in performance management systems and the fact that these were creating a more balanced perspective on academic workloads. The computerised system focused on strategic alignment and helped to enhance management capacity and strategic thinking, since the system provided managers with easily accessible, detailed information about staff.

### ***Weaknesses of performance management systems***

#### ***a) Developmental problems***

Although the two established systems developed at different times in different institutional cultures, participants in both institutions felt that there was a top-down approach in the development of the system, especially in the initial stages. The third institutional case was planning a phased-in consultative approach to overcome this problem.

#### ***b) Format and procedures***

In the two established systems the exact format and procedures of the systems in terms of what time of the year it should take place and perennial arguments about the rating scale appears to complicate the implementation of the system. The computerisation of performance management systems provides a way of getting around the debates since formats and procedures can be manipulated more easily.

#### ***c) Lack of management capacity***

The lack of management capacity appeared to complicate the functioning of the systems as indicated by one of the participants:

“Where we have managers that are not good at their own planning, we have a fundamental problem. Because that fundamentally undermines the whole idea”.

Differing levels of knowledge and understanding of performance management by different levels of management led to unrealistic expectations, which viewed performance management as a product instead of a process. The lack of capacity was underscored by the institutional survey in institution three, which highlighted staff concerns relating to the subjectivity of the more informal collegial operating system that lacked transparency of criteria and rating practices.

#### *d) Rewards*

Staff in all three institutions supported the linking of performance to pay. The complexities surrounding the linking of pay to performance was apparent from this study, especially in the more established systems. Public universities struggle to give staff remuneration increases that are big enough to make a difference in performance. Several participants highlighted the need for a more diverse range of rewards, including development opportunities and not just pay. It was also clear that better integration was needed between the performance management system and the promotion systems in the institutions.

#### **Conclusion: lessons learnt**

The case studies provided a valuable opportunity to explore the status of performance management systems already in place in two South African higher education institutions. From this study it was clear that performance management is always going to be a complex and difficult reality.

In all cases the introduction and development of a performance management system highlighted the tensions between collegiality and managerialism, often learned to knee-jerk debates about academic freedom among academics. The need for staff development initiatives to improve management capacity and change management skills in academic was emphasised by the following quote from a participant:

“Performance management is the lightning conductor for poor people management”.

This quote underscores the development of strategic staff development initiatives to help institutions deal with the demands of a fast-changing higher education environment.

It was clear that performance management needed to be an integrated collaborative effort that draws on the experiences and expertise of both academic and support staff and transcends traditional distinctions between academic and support staff in higher education. The development of these complex systems needs to draw on the expertise of management, support and academic staff in order for it to be successful.

The results also suggested that typical business approaches to performance management would not work in higher education. Therefore existing performance management models and approaches need to be adapted to the needs and vision of higher education institutions and followed by the gradual introduction of the system that allows for a process of institutional transformation and systemic adjustment. In the words of one of the participants:

**“In higher education people tend to look for the right answer [to performance management] and they forget that there are many right answers in a process”.**

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## **Appendix 1 - Semi-structured interview schedules**

The development of semi-structured interview schedules was guided by the following assumptions:

- Not all staff would be able to provide information on all 12 questions posed by the case study.
- Specific question would be asked of staff members at different levels of the institution.
- Some generic questions would be asked of all staff to obtain perspectives of the performance management system at different levels.
- A maximum of six questions could be asked within the space of an hour interview.

### *Top management level interview*

- Was there organisational change over the last two years?
- Are there priority areas in the institution?
- How are academic staff consulted and communicated with in connection with performance management?
- What are the strong and the weak points identified in the context of performance management systems for academic staff?
- Which management information is used by the institution to verify and review the point made in question 10?
- What activities are planned to correct the weak points in the performance management system for academic staff?
- What would the ideal performance management system look like?

### *Human resource management staff*

- How is performance management organised in the institution?
- How is the performance management of academic staff regularly reviewed?
- Are learnerships of the EDTP-SETA included in the performance management of academic staff?
- If learnerships are not included, why not?
- If learnerships are included, how?
- What are the strong and the weak points identified in the context of performance management systems for academic staff?
- Which management information is used by the institution to verify and review the point made in question 10?
- What activities are planned to correct the weak points in the performance management system for academic staff?
- What would the ideal performance management system look like?

### *Support services staff*

- How is performance management organised in the institution?
- Are there priority areas in the institution?
- How are academic staff consulted and communicated with in connection with performance management?
- What are the strong and the weak points identified in the context of performance management systems for academic staff?
- Which management information is used by the institution to verify and review the point made in question 10?
- What activities are planned to correct the weak points in the performance management system for academic staff?
- What would the ideal performance management system look like?

### *Academic staff*

- How is performance management organised in the institution?
- Are there priority areas in the institution?
- How is academic staff consulted and communicated with in connection with performance management?
- What are the strong and weak points identified in the context of performance management systems for academic staff?
- Which management information is used by the institution to verify and review the point made in question 10?
- What activities are planned to correct the weak points in the performance management system for academic staff?
- What would the ideal performance management system look like?

These questions were used to provide structure to the interviews with different types of staff within the institution. The participants could raise any other issues about the performance management system if there was any time left.