

MaximizMaximising Human Resources in South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to stress why academics in developing countries such as South Africa need to place far more emphasis on the teaching than on the research aspect of their jobs or do their research through their teaching. The approach taken is that of a provocative essay focusing on the top ranked African University, rather than of a formal academic paper. It is argued that although academics should be both teachers and researchers, they should place more emphasis on teaching or increase the value of their research through teaching to maximisze the development of human resources. The paper hopes to contribute to the field by sensitising academics to be reflective and to perhaps adopt a different approach to conducting their lives, particularly in developing countries.

Introduction

The idea and material for this paper arose and has been drawn from research conducted towards an unpublished and yet to be submitted PhD (Johnston, 2010a) and a paper to be presented at a conference (Johnston, 2010b). Direct quotations from staff members have been taken from the PhD. An interpretive epistemology with a qualitative approach and grounded theory research methodology were used. A persisting issue in developing countries such as South Africa is the development of human resources. Academics in both developing and developed countries have a propensity to see research as the most critical and rewarding component of academic work. Universities and higher education bodies have accentuated this view by advocating and rewarding research more so than teaching. This paper examines what the leading university on the African continent has done and is doing. Research and teaching at the leading university are briefly examined. The human resources of South Africa are described, as well as how these resources are developed. Suggestions are then made as to what academics should do to change the situation.

Research at UCT

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is currently the highest ranked university on the African continent (146th in 2009), and the only African University in the top 150 world university rankings (Times Higher Education - QS World University Rankings, 2009). UCT takes research very seriously, and claims to be a research-led university. UCT has had a Deputy Vice-chancellor (DVC) Research for several years. The fourth goal in UCT's strategic plan is "A Vision for the Development of Research at UCT" (UCTStratPlan, 2009). UCT created, staffed, and funded an active research office which reports to the DVC Research. Staffing costs of the research office rose cumulatively by 53.8% over the period of 2004-2008.

UCT's research output has been monitored and reported on and has steadily increased over the past few years. A report to Senate and Council on research in 2008 stated that the University publication count grew by 12%, while research income grew by 26%, and patent applications increased by 28%

over the preceding year. UCT's number of National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researchers rose by 5% overall, and the number of A rated or world leaders in research rose by 10% in 2008 (UCTResearch, 2009).

Academics are reviewed and assessed annually (HR174), and each academic has to detail their research direction, research workload, research funding received and papers published. In addition, faculties are required to submit proposals every three years regarding the eligibility of each academic for a rate for job (RFJ) increase over the following three years. These submissions are scrutinized by the collective Deans with the DVC Research chairing the process. Decisions are largely based on the teaching and research activity of academics over a period of three years. The penalties for not attaining RFJ are severe, and include no increase for three years.

Various programmes such as the Emerging Researcher Programme (ERP), and the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Capacity have been created to strengthen and support researchers in UCT. The South African Government also plays a role, as it offers universities financial incentives for research produced, over R100,000 per article published in a Journal recognized by the Department of Education, and varying amounts for Master's and Doctoral degrees awarded.

Research is easy to quantify, as articles in Journals and research degrees awarded are easily verified. Research output brings prestige (such as 'A' rated researchers and global rankings) and money (Government subsidies) to an institution. UCT has the "highest number of rated researchers in the country, and one of the highest proportions of PhD and Masters students" (UCTStratPlan, 2009, p. 13). UCT has an enviable track record of climbing the charts, UCT was ranked 200th in 2007, 179th in 2008 (Times Higher Education - QS World University Rankings, 2008). UCT sets an example to other universities in developing countries aspiring to climb the rating charts. UCT has done extremely well at research and is justifiably proud of its research record.

Teaching at UCT

Starting at executive level, UCT has no DVC responsible for teaching as it does for research. An analysis of the Strategic Plan reveals that the string 'research' appeared 211 times, while the string 'teach' appeared 80 times (UCTStratPlan, 2009). Similarly in the UCT Financial Plan the string 'research' appeared more than twice (11) as many times as the 'teach' string (5 times). There is no teaching office similar to the research office. There is much emphasis that "research must inform our teaching" (UCTStratPlan, 2009, p. 18), but no thought that teaching should inform our research. "Currently UCT measures the effectiveness of our teaching primarily on the basis of quantitative indicators of internal retention and completion rates and the reduction of differentials along racial lines in relation to success rates. This happens at relatively high levels only, and has little impact on individual academics or course teams" (UCTStratPlan, 2009, p. 24).

Completion rates are poor, only 20% of UCT students admitted in 2000 graduated within the regulation time and 56% of those students left without graduating (Boughey, 2009). As mentioned, academics are reviewed and assessed annually (HR174), and each academic has to detail their teaching workload, and performance as assessed through student evaluations. Many academics control the timing and number of student evaluations as they are left to decide when and where to request such evaluations. The rate for job (RFJ) increase includes teaching, but the process is chaired

by the DVC Research and it is common knowledge that research is the key factor in determining whether an academic is awarded RFJ or not.

The university has a process which awards a few academics a distinguished teacher award annually. Teaching is not as easy to measure as research; teaching is not as prestigious and is not as recognized as research in many higher educational institutions today. In South African higher educational institutions the emphasis is clearly on research output today. This results in many academics not taking the teaching aspect as seriously as they take the research aspect of their jobs, after all they are recognized and rewarded for research.

It also results in more junior and less experienced academics being tasked with teaching first year undergraduates while more senior and experienced academics vie to teach final year undergraduate and postgraduate students. This discrepancy could probably explain UCT's low pass rates and why so many black mostly junior academics never get the opportunity to obtain MA's, PhD's or RFJ and therefore remain contained within this space.

Additionally, however, is the inconsistency whereby some very senior academics, who achieved their tenure through processes unlike those applied to others, are awarded RFJ without any research at all and only teaching senior undergraduate and postgraduate students. To this one has to add those instances where RFJ is awarded because one or other academic achieves the same because of long-standing relationships with those on the decision making panels.

The human resources of South Africa

Developing countries such as South Africa have underdeveloped human resources. South Africa had a medium Human Development Index (HDI) of 0,683 in 2007 and was ranked 129th (a drop of one place) out of 182 countries (Klugman, 2009). Alarming, South Africa's HDI has been dropping in both the medium (1990-2007) and the short term (2000-2007). The HDI is a "summary measure of a country's human development" (Klugman, 2009, p. 11). The HDI measures the average achievements of three dimensions of human development, namely life expectancy, access to knowledge, and standard of living. "These three dimensions are standardized to values between 0 and 1, and the simple average is taken to arrive at the overall HDI value in the range 0 to 1" (Klugman, 2009, p. 11).

South African statistics include a life expectancy of 51.5 (Africa's average was 53.9), an adult literacy rate of 88% (Africa 63.3), and GDP per capita of \$9.757 (Africa \$2.729). An examination of educational attainment levels shows that 73% of the population aged 25 and above have less than upper secondary education, and only 8.9% have attained any tertiary education (Klugman, 2009). The Human Poverty Index for developing countries (HPI-1) ranked South Africa as 81st among 135 developing countries in 2006 (HDI, 2008), and 85th in 2007 (Klugman, 2009). The HPI-1 measures the percentage of people who live below the threshold level in the three dimensions of the HDI. However, South Africa is a country of two distinct and separate groups of people. There is a small affluent group who live in a first world environment, and a larger poor group who live in a third world environment, so most statistics on South Africa do not reveal a true picture. There are huge gaps between the two groups, which affect all aspects of life (Waddock, 2007). South Africa had a

GINI index of 57.8 in 2007 (Klugman, 2009), the eighth most unequal country in the world. South Africa is “one of the most unequal societies in the world, more than half of all South Africans live in poverty, more than 10% of South Africans live in absolute poverty, and the situation is getting worse” (Hall, 2007, p. 21). Over 58% of the South African population live below the local poverty line, about a third live at or below the international poverty benchmark (\$2 per day), and 42% of adults are unemployed (Hall, 2007). Using Hofstede’s dimensions of culture, South Africa ranked 35/36 out of 53 countries (tied with Argentina) in power-distance, 16th in Individualism (which is surprising given the collective nature of many of its peoples), a high rate (tied 13/14 with Ecuador) of masculinity, and a lower rate of 39/40 (tied with New Zealand) of uncertainty avoidance (Marcus & Gould, 2000). South Africa had an estimated total population of 49.32 million; of which 79% were black, 9% white, 9% coloured and 3% others (Lehohla, 2009).

Human resource development in South Africa

The development of human resources should be a top priority in South Africa. UCT is one of South Africa's 23 public higher education institutions, and one of its 11 universities (Council on Higher Education Overview, 2010). Less than 9% of South African adults have any tertiary education (Klugman, 2009). The participation rate of the 20-24 year old population in higher education was 16.3% in 2003 (Lange, 2010).

“Students entering university do so from positions of extreme inequality, most obviously in schooling, but also in terms of financial and other resources. A lack of academic 'preparedness', in terms of both social class and the high school curriculum is cited as one of the reasons why students fail to or take longer to master degree requirements” (Lange, 2010, p. 6). Twenty percent of students admitted to UCT in 2000 graduated within the regulation time, but 56% left without graduating (Boughey, 2009). Thirty-three percent of the 2004 UCT student intake had completed a qualification by the end of 2008 (5 years), a further 17% were still studying in 2009 (IPD, 2010). This effectively means that if all 17% of the 2004 student intake qualified in 2009, 50% of that intake would leave UCT without a qualification after 6 years. Furthermore, the majority of the students affected were those who were historically ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘underprepared’, i.e. black South Africans (Boughey, 2009). “Less than 5% of the black age group is succeeding in any form of higher education” (UCTStratPlan, 2009, p. 22). Clearly the country and UCT in particular are failing to maximise the development of student human resources. How are they doing with respect to non student human resources?

Table 1 shows percentages of the population groups in South Africa, and various groupings in UCT (Table 1). Although blacks make up 79% of the population of the country, they made up 18% of UCT students in 2008. The relatively ‘high’ figure (compared to other figures in the same column) of 29% enrolments is tempered by the high failure rate which reduces the overall percentage of black students to below 20%. From Table 1 it is clear that black South Africans are underrepresented in every area at UCT, as they make up less than 20% of executives, academics, and administrators at UCT after 14-16 years of ‘transformation’ initiatives.

	Blacks	Whites	Others
South Africa 2009	79%	9%	12%
UCT Students 2008	18%	41%	41%
UCT Student enrollment 2009	29%	36%	35%
UCT Executives 2010	14%	73%	14%
UCT Administrative staff 2009	19%	30%	51%
UCT Academics 2009	12%	69%	19%

Table 1: Population group percentages.

These figures are blurred by the manner in which they are presented by statements such as “South African black, coloured and Indian students together made up 40% of the total enrolment” (UCTTeaching, 2008). Parts of the ‘others’ are conveniently added to blacks at times to make figures look more presentable.

In 2002, a study revealed that blacks held 35% of senior management positions in South Africa, while whites (who made up 14% of the labour force) held 50% of these positions (Makgetla, 2004). At UCT in 2010 blacks make up 14% of the executives, and does not appear to be making any serious efforts to develop managers or executives. Three direct quotations from UCT staff interviewed as part of my PhD illustrate this. “*I have had no managerial development since I joined UCT, not 1 day,*” said a senior administrator, while an academic said, “*Managers at UCT have no managerial skills, have received no managerial training,*” and an executive admitted, “*I learnt the job by working my way through things.*” The leading African university has not put significant resources into developing its own managers or executives.

The picture with regard to administrative staff at UCT is not much better. Less than 20% of administrative staff was black in 2009, and many of the positions they held were the most junior positions. According to one executive of the university, “*Lots of people at UCT who have substandard skills,*” while a second executive stated, “*Another part of our culture which impedes change is not having a significant emphasis on staff development.*” An academic admitted that there was “*under investment in our staff in terms of staff development.*” Once again, the situation appears to be that the university has not and continues not to invest in developing and maximising its own human resources.

The number of black academics at UCT has doubled from 6% in 2006 to 12% in 2009. In 1994, over 90% of academic and administrative staff of institutions such as UCT were white males. Dr. Ramphele was Vice-Chancellor of UCT from 1996 to 2000, and she developed a two pronged strategy programme to transform the staff profile (Ramphele, 2008). The first was a recruitment strategy to recruit Africans abroad to come and teach at UCT. The second longer term strategy was to recruit and develop black people and women to academia. This programme was named Growing Our Own Timber (GOOT) and has been adopted by other institutions in South Africa (Ramphele, 2008). The failure of these strategies is evident as after 10 years (1996-2006) blacks only made up 6% of academic staff. The majority of black academics are at lecturer level, very few at professorial level. One academic confessed, “*there were more South Africans of colour in my department 15 years ago*

than there are today.” UCT is thus not attracting nor retaining black academic staff. Development of academics through programmes such as GOOT appears to have disappeared.

A recent book published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) expresses concern about throughput rates in SA universities and the raised the issue of development of academics to rise to the challenge. “The preparation of university teachers for teaching in diverse and changing higher education contexts should no longer be optional; it is crucial to the success of undergraduate students. Knowing how to teach in ways that engage, challenge and transform undergraduate student learning is a complex task for which university teachers must be specifically prepared. Changing the attitudes of university teachers, especially towards students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, is an important task that will have an impact on the orientation and success of undergraduates” (Lange, 2010, p. 182). The majority of students, particularly undergraduates (and particularly in developing countries such as South Africa) need good teachers in order to enhance their understanding and learning, and to increase their chances of success.

UCT enrolls scarce human resources (only 18% of South Africans qualify to enter university (Klugman, 2009)), and allow 56% to leave with no qualification (Boughey, 2009). UCT is not fully developing the executives, administrators or academics it has. Any educational institution which is not maximizing maximising the development of the majority of the human resources available must be deemed a failure, particularly in a context where there is a crying need to maximise scarce resources.

So where to?

What should be done to maximisze human resources in a developing country? Academics should start to see themselves as both teachers and researchers. An essential aspect of being an academic is academic freedom, and this should remain sacrosanct. The idea of academic freedom dates back to when Plato established the Academy based on a duty to seek and speak the truth (Crabtree, 2002),; however this did not involve institutions. The first western universities had an almost sacred duty to search for and teach the truth (Crabtree, 2002; Russell, 1993). The meaning of words and concepts is often unclear and changes with context and time. For example, the word ‘freedom’ has many meanings which range from personal liberty from slavery, freedom from want, freedom of movement and assembly, freedom of access, freedom of choice, religious freedom, and freedom to take certain actions without control or interference. The term academic freedom, like freedom is not static, and its meaning has also changed over time (Russell, 1993).

Academic freedom roughly meant the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn without external control or interference up to the early 19th century (Altbach, 2001). Prof. Davie the Vice-Chancellor of UCT from 1948 to 1955 defined academic freedom as the freedom and right of a university to decide “who shall teach, what we teach, how we teach, and whom we teach” (Bentley, Habib, & Morrow, 2006, p. 32; du Toit, 2000). In 2000 Higgins asserted that this definition was correct (Higgins, 2000), and it is still widely used and quoted in UCT and in South Africa. Interestingly, this definition makes no mention of learning, research or administration.

No matter how defined, academic freedom provides academics with opportunities for innovation and for complacency. This paper is calling for academics and institutions to behave innovatively in order to maximize maximise human resources of the institution and the country. Academics in South Africa and at UCT have influence if not control over “who shall teach, what we teach, how we teach, and whom we teach” and it is time they exerted their influence. There are opportunities to influence who shall teach, academics need to speak out in recruitment and selection procedures and change the composition of both administrative and academic staff to be more reflective of the country.

Academics largely control ‘what we teach’, and have opportunities to promote alternative content (questions, truth, survival, passion). Similarly, academics control ‘how we teach’ the methods (self-paced, student choice of topics, relevance, inquiry, ICT), and academic freedom gives individuals opportunities to do things differently in the privacy of their own classrooms. There are also opportunities to do critical research (not safe research) on all aspects of university life, on discipline related issues as well as on broader societal areas. Academics also have influence over ‘whom we teach’, both in the student admission process and in the selection of actual classes to teach. Academics need to become involved in the student selection process and speak out to ensure universities enroll more black students.

As teaching is not rewarded as well as research, many academics steer away from teaching large undergraduate classes, preferring to focus on small post graduate classes. Undergraduates are however the group of students who need the best teachers, who need inspiration, passion and commitment, and who are struggling (56% leave with nothing (Boughey, 2009)). The bottom line is that academics in South Africa today need to start using their academic freedom to influence their institutions and broader society to become more equitable. Failure to do so will result in a failed society, from which their children and grandchildren will flee. The core of education should be to maximizmaximise human resources.

The biggest challenge and threat to an academic adopting this attitude is likely to arise from one’s colleagues. There is usually no problem if the colleagues approve and support the initiative. But if they oppose the initiative, their resistance is often so strong and intimidating that the academic often backs down. Academics should anticipate and prepare for counter arguments, and persist.

Academics also need to use technology in teaching, this could include:

- using the internet to find information
- using learning management software to manage courses
- using learning management software to write exams,
- using social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter to communicate and question,
- using laboratories as classrooms,
- usingUsing podcasting to get material to students.

Academics who promote these types of alternatives are essentially connecting with the students rather than with disciplinary or administrative powers. Academics who push for greater student participation in learning find that students learn more when they are involved in controlling their own learning. Opposition once again is likely to come primarily from one’s colleagues who prefer to maintain the status quo and prefer to maintain power (Martin, 1998).

Academic freedom also allows academics to pursue their inquiries without fear or favour (Martin, 1998). Few do any critical questioning research because of what is acceptable to journals and conferences (Martin, 1998), and what is necessary to advance in the educational system. For example Information Systems (IS) research has been dominated by a positivist epistemological stance probably due to the encouragement and endorsement of the top IS research journals (Sidorova, Evangelopoulos, & Ramakrishnan, 2007). Eighty nine percent of IS papers published in major United States IS Journals between 1991 and 2001 had a positivist epistemology while 66% of those published in European IS Journals were positivistic (Becker & Niehaves, 2007). Could the answer be that “Excess rigor supports the demands of appointment, grant and promotion committees, but is drying up the wells of academic inspiration” (Whitworth & Friedman, 2009, p. 1). How many papers are published simply to get ahead in the promotional race, the old ‘publish or perish’ dilemma and the content or impact is considered irrelevant? It has been stated that some research agendas are determined by governments or corporations who are prepared to pay for research, obviously a violation of academic freedom (Bentley, Habib, & Morrow, 2006).

Academics should use their academic freedom to challenge and question all systems, including the higher educational systems in which they operate. An academic’s research should be about what is important, relevant, and serious to that individual, preferably something they feel passionate about. Academics should be committed to research and the research should contain some element of risk to them. Academics need to be ready to take risks (danger of suppression or ostracization) and to pass on their passion and skill to students. A test to see if an academic has unconditional commitment could be to check, ‘if one has the incentive and courage to transfer what one had learned to the concrete situation in the real world’ (Dreyfus, 1999, p. 19). Would an academic be prepared to refer to the research he/she has worked on in the classroom?

Conclusion

The author believes that to be an academic in a Higher Education context in South Africa today means continually asking oneself five questions:

1. Is one doing everything possible to maximizmaximise the human resources of the country?
2. Is one doing everything possible to develop all the human resources of the institution?
3. Is one speaking out and influencing “who shall teach, what we teach, how we teach, and whom we teach?”
4. Is one doing critical and useful research?
5. Is one listening and engaging with the students?

Each academic should continuously be challenged to ask themselves the question, “Why am I an academic?” They then need to be challenged to give themselves an honest answer and to reflect on that answer. The silent context for this paper is equity. The underlying issue of equity transcends general perceptions about teaching and supports a general belief that little is being done (deliberately or otherwise) by this specific tertiary institution to even out the wrongs done towards the underprivileged and previously disadvantaged.

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