

EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC LIAISON: AN EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa the impact of all training and development initiatives are being assessed with reference to the extent to which they promote overall performance and the achievement of the policy goals and priorities of the current African National Congress led government. In this way a form of macro organising and coordination of all learning and acquired knowledge and skills manifests and becomes an ongoing and integral part of the public service transformation and development process of this developing country.

In the light of the above mentioned, UNISA as a whole and the Department of Public Administration and Management in particular had to revisit its policy on macro organisational aspects such as the nature of the ever increasing competition in the tertiary distance teaching environment, the range, variety and quality of its products and the facilitation and rendering of an improved tertiary distance teaching service by means of among others, more effective market research, communication, coordination and service rendering to the distance learning students of South Africa.

In this article the typical nature of the intra and inter academic liaison regarding the Department of Public Administration and Management at UNISA will be highlighted and an attempt will be made to come up with some realistic and easy achievable methods to influence the nature of academic liaison in a more positive sense. It is part of UNISA's and especially the Department's responsibility to fulfil a leading stakeholder's role on the terrain of public administration and management within the developing public service and public sector of South Africa. This can be brought about by pursuing, accomplishing, installing, updating and extending a wide variety of effective and significant ways of academic liaison.

INTRODUCTION

The government-of-the-day strives to achieve the goal of developing and preparing the country's human capital in a more optimal way by working in partnerships with other sectors in the society. That is, government is cooperating with local, regional and international organisations and tertiary institutions in the provision of among others, education, training and development opportunities. Strategic partnerships are being developed so as to ensure effective co-ordination and co-operation between the public, private, community and tertiary institutions and thus optimising on already limited resources. The partnerships also ensure the cross-fertilisation of ideas and solutions, the sharing of and use of best practices from the respective sectors; as well as the possibility of each sector being freed to focus on its core business and functions only. Thus, each sector is able to identify and out-source activities and functions to relevant parties and thereby focus on what it can do most effectively and efficiently in a sustainable way (Mokgoro 2000). Furthermore, the Department of Education's National Plan for Higher Education ordered a fully fledged merging of the Technikon of Southern Africa (TSA) with the University of South Africa (UNISA) and an incorporation of Vista University's Distance Education Campus (VUDEC), whereby there will be a process undertaken aimed at building synergy and integrating policies, procedures, conditions of service, practices and projects.

In South Africa the impact of all training and development initiatives are being assessed with reference to the extent to which they promote overall performance and the achievement of the policy goals and priorities of the current African National Congress led government. In this way a form of macro organising and coordination of all learning and acquired knowledge and skills manifest itself and becomes an ongoing and integral part of the public service transformation and development process of this developing country.

In view of the background above, UNISA as a whole and the Department of Public Administration and Management in particular revisited its policy on macro organisational aspects such as the nature of the ever increasing competition in the tertiary distance teaching environment, the range, variety and quality of its products, the merging with TSA and incorporation of VUDEC and the facilitation and rendering of an improved tertiary distance teaching service by means of among others, more effective market research, communication, coordination and service rendering to the distance learning students of South Africa.

In this article the typical nature of the intra and inter academic liaison regarding the Department of Public Administration and Management at UNISA will be highlighted and proposals will be made with regard to realistic and easy achievable methods in addressing and implementing the aforementioned macro-policy of the government.

NATURE OF ACADEMIC LIAISON

In order to proceed with the analysis of an effective academic liaison in the tertiary educational environment, it should be noted that the action of making contact with another person in for example the field of Public Administration and the service rendering public sector out there (either touching physically or bringing about commu-

nicative interaction), depends on among other aspects, the availability and accessibility of an updated data base on especially the contact particulars of interested stakeholders which have been identified, noted and recognised as possible primary role-players in the specific environment.

Effective communication is the vehicle to bring about effective interaction among interested stakeholders. For purposes of this article communication is defined as "... a process in which a person, through the use of signs (natural, universal)/symbols (by human convention), verbally and/or non verbally, consciously or not consciously but intentionally, conveys meaning to another in order to affect change." (Internet: regent.edu). The resulting academic liaison as a product of the aforementioned process of making contact by means of effective communication, can be described as the manifestation of mutual deliberation(s) between two or more individuals and/or institutions within the academic environment.

Based on the availability and accessibility of an updated data base on particulars such as institution, post, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail addresses, fields of interest as well as recognised fields of expertise, effective contact can be fostered, thoughts and ideas exchanged, mutual learning can take place and more effective communication channels can be established. Subsequently, collaborative actions of individuals and/or institutions to purposefully pool resources to achieve a predetermined common goal, can be realised.

Unfortunately research and experience have shown that the nature and extent of contact and any effective interaction as well as positive academic liaison resulting in the service rendering environment of a tertiary institution, differ significantly in terms of its nature and repetitiveness. Furthermore, that communicative and collaborative results brought about, are generally of an unsatisfactory nature and are influenced and determined by various personal and organisational aspects. Hutchens (1998) for instance identifies "...isolation in the culture of scholarship, faculty competitiveness, lack of interest, self-limiting behaviour of individuals in groups, and the lack of enthusiasm for professional development activities with university faculty" as some possible reasons for a lack of macro co-operation (e.g. getting together and through open and friendly conversations use each other as 'bouncing boards'.

In a structured data collection effort by the Department of Public Administration and Management in 1996 it was stated categorically that many academics are even proud to say (and to use it as an excuse not to collaborate freely) that unfortunately the academic environment nurtures individualists (Focus Group, 1996). This unfortunate state of affairs have also been identified by Bennis & Biederman (1977:4) when they stated that academics regularly argue as follows:

- It's so hard to collaborate with people and come out with something you are proud of because so many compromises have to be made.
- Collaboration is hard work and it takes so much time.
- I don't want my ideas lost in a collaborative group.

Research has shown that women and men approach collaborative teaching and research relationships differently. The developmental process for women moves toward *connected knowing*, whereby relationships are based on trust, empathy, mutual support, and a desire

to understand the ideas and experiences of others. Separateness is more likely to characterize the way in which men construct their sense of self (Austin and Baldwin 1991:75).

Furthermore, the general public are not a mass audience. Each member of the public must be defined and addressed. Publics are not static, they change as their social environments change. Often service rendering institutions assume knowledge of the publics' perceptions of them, but often their information is dated, incorrect and/or greatly limited. Improving or adjusting an external image of a specific institution is futile until the internal image is understood (Hickson and Stacks 1992:185).

Taking all the aforementioned into consideration one could understand that the Department of Public Administration and Management needs to identify the various sections of society that impact on the Department, evaluate its internal image projected in the past and formulate a plan to project a unified external image. Ignorance of the identity, primary needs and nature of the strengths and weaknesses of the Department, as well as that of the existing and potentially new cooperative partners and clients can influence the nature of effective academic liaison significantly. One should have clarity of one's place and role within the bigger picture of the rendering of an effective distance teaching in Southern Africa. There is a highly competitive market in the distance teaching environment due to the fact that all the tertiary distance training institutions are aimed at serving the same limited market.

Another reason for an unsatisfactory level of academic liaison and collaboration up to this stage is that effective academic liaison and collaborative research and services are not recognised as continuous processes which should be effectively managed by influential leaders. It usually goes hand-in-hand with a lack of capacity (e.g. resources, time and creativity) at the various academic and service rendering institutions which can bring on a closed, non-transparent and inaccessible state of affairs regarding aspects such as contact particulars and typical services rendered by contact persons and/or institutions.

The nature of and availability of modern communication media (electronic mail, video conferencing etc) surely determines the nature and range of effective contact, communication, interaction and academic liaison between the *distance removed* individual and the academic institutions. The brought on academic liaison between the committed parties within a cooperative venture must also be of an economically viable nature.

The absence of an effectively drawn up, manipulative, accessible and updated data base on the Department of Public Administration and Management's, cooperative partners and clients' identity, primary needs and nature of their strengths and weaknesses can influence the nature of effective academic liaison within UNISA significantly.

Taking into account the aforementioned comments on and reasons for the manifesting of unsatisfactory academic liaison in general, the following opportunities for contact, interaction and academic liaison for the Department of Public Administration and Management within UNISA do occur:

- Formally structured departmental meetings, intra-committee meetings, project committees as well as informal group manifestations of the members of the Department take place during which pertinent and common issues are identified, analysed and debated in a fruitful manner.

- Continuous contact with administrative personnel from support sections within UNISA occur during which aspects such as scheduling of tutorial matter, editorial services, budgetary aspects and despatch of learning material are attended to.
- Formally structured College, School and committee meetings take place on a regular basis.
- There is a formal cooperative agreement with the UNISA's Department of Political

Sciences on the facilitation and administration of an accredited Journal (*Politeia*).

- Continuous contact take place with students enrolled in the different modules and courses of the Department, manifest through different lecturing media.
- Membership of and facilitation of meetings with professional and academic associations and forums inside the University (e.g. APSA) and outside UNISA such as the South African Association for Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM).
- Attendance and participation in national and international workshops, conferences and symposia are discussed.
- Attendance and facilitation of ad hoc meetings with practitioners within the public sector and citizens are considered.

Unfortunately the order and intervals of most of the contact sessions included in the discussion above are still seen as being of *an ad hoc* nature. The Department of Public Administration and Management has been accused of keeping a too closed, isolated and ivory tower located position in the 'real academic and public service rendering ...' (Departmental Colloquium, 2002). Subsequently some proposals will be made on improving of the Department's intra and inter academic liaison.

MORE EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC LIAISON

In order to foster a positive environment for more effective academic liaison with reference to the place and role of the Department of Public Administration and Management as an innovative key role-player in the applied field of public administration in a developing South Africa, it is self-evident that the facilitation and elaboration of effective academic liaison between academics and practitioners should be a key strategy. Academics and practitioners need to challenge the exclusionary comfort zones present in both academic and their working worlds. In the spirit of challenging comfort zones, the following questions should be asked (Barth and Bartenstein 1998):

To the practitioner:

- When was the last time you or a staff member researched a question before making a decision?
- When was the last time you read a professional public administration journal?
- Have you ever written about the work you do, or attempted to have it published?
- Have you ever presented a paper at a professional conference?
- Have you ever contacted an academic to discuss a problem or question?

To the academic:

- Have you ever co-authored an article with a practitioner?
- Have you ever asked local practitioners about questions they might have regarding the execution of their line functions that puzzle them?
- Have you ever refused to consider a practitioner-generated research project because it did not fit your own research agenda?
- Have you ever used practitioners to develop a course or module you are teaching?
- Have you ever run an idea which you personally came up with by a practitioner or had a practitioner comment on for example a manuscript?

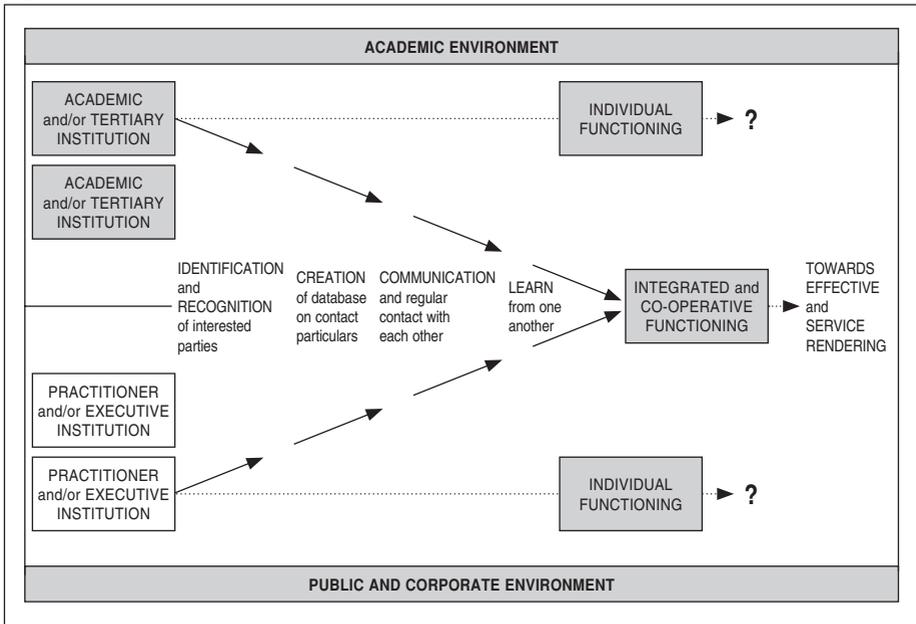
The pursuit of more effective academic liaison and highly co-ordinated collaboration between identified role-players should be recognised and treated as a continuous process and should be managed by an effective manager with the required amount of influence, capacity and administrative support. Effective communication media should be established, maintained and developed in a continuous fashion. The problem of under-utilisation of electronic mail and other modern communication media should be investigated, problem areas should be addressed and the utilisation thereof in a more effective and productive manner should be encouraged (Naude 1995).

All the members of the relevant contact seeking parties should be involved in the introductory phase, recognised and acknowledged as equals (eg exchange of CVs, photographs and information on fields of interest and expertise). The formal and informal networks of members of the Department of Public Administration and Management should be identified, made known to each other, developed and incorporated in a departmental data base on accessible and skilled contact persons.

An effectively drawn up, manipulative, accessible and updated data base on the identities, primary needs and nature of strengths and weaknesses of the Department's, cooperative partners and clients should be created and managed in an effective manner. In the case of formal collaboration agreements, the rules of the game should be identified, stated clearly and purposefully fulfilled. To work collaboratively, participants must continuously define and redefine how they work together, what roles they play, and who will play which roles, when, and how. Joint research between academics, between academics and students (especially postgraduate students) and between academics and experienced and influential practitioners should be undertaken. Academic incentives for engaging in public or professional work with the practitioner community as well as practitioner incentives for contributions to, for example, the public administration literature, should be provided.

Team building sessions are essential for the developing group cohesion by means of effective communication and synergy in the Department of Public Administration and Management's quest for achieving its optimally coordinated common goals. Team building can lead an institution to success because it involves communication, effective co-ordination and effective division of labour (Mogotlane 1998).

Figure 1



Even though the culture of a university will continue to require that academics distinguish themselves as individuals, approach the focussing on research field of study in an interdisciplinary manner and develop a collaborative approach in the advocated instead of disciplinary specialization and research isolation. The distinguished individual should coexist within a great group and helps others in the group distinguish themselves (Bennis & Biederman 1977:4). If attitudes of respect, understanding, and communication prevail, cooperation will replace threat and aggressiveness on the side of resisters and advocates of the change programme (Harvey & Brown, 1996).

Taking into account the abovementioned approach one can in a very simplistic manner portray the process of bringing about more effective academic liaison within the academic environment of tertiary institutions in a more graphical manner;- see the above Figure.

From the Figure it can be deduced that the academic and the practitioner usually operate in separate environments. However, in a developing South Africa they should work together to form part of one congruent promoters in a public service delivery environment. Through the identification and recognition of each other's place and role within the bigger context of effective public service delivery, an effective database on contact particulars should be created and maintained. Regular contact and established effective communication media with one another will improve the nature of contact, conversations and interactions positively and the participating role players will assist one another in achieving their individual objectives in a more integrated and co-operative seeking spirit.

POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF IMPROVED ACADEMIC LIAISON

If the Department of Public Administration and Management can pay attention to the aforementioned aspects and recommendations there certainly will be an improvement in the nature and level of academic liaison, collaborative research and service delivery. So, for example, bigger challenges to the individuals and the institution as a whole will be set with a subsequent broadening of their subject related and general knowledge.

More effective service rendering by the Department of Public Administration and Management will take place and an improved and enlarged list of products and services will be produced. This could subsequently bring about higher productivity and possible cost savings.

Improved transparency and accessibility with reference to the service rendering by individuals and departments as organisational units will be brought about. This could also have a positive spin-off on the expansion of the personal spheres of influence and formal and informal networks of the members of a particular service rendering institution. The increased nature of the academic liaison will ensure that the collaborative partners (students, lecturers and practitioners) will be able to utilize each other's knowledge more effectively as 'bouncing boards' regarding any 'new developments' in the subject and implementation field. As the so-called experts in the subject field of organisational structuring and behaviour the Department of Public Administration and Management could play a leading and pro-active role on the macro-organisational level of UNISA.

CONCLUSION

The eminent importance of effective academic liaison in the distance teaching environment of the developing Southern Africa is clear. It is part of UNISA's and especially the Department of Public Administration and Management's responsibility to fulfil a leading stakeholder's role on the terrain of public administration and management within the developing public service and public sector of South Africa. This can be brought about by pursuing, accomplishing, installing, updating and extending a wide variety of effective and significant ways of academic liaison. This will present the Department with ample opportunities of exposure to relevant and subject related environments as well as the installing of exceptional standards regarding research, education and tuition.

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