

# Proposed use of a Shared Services Structure for improving academic quality at public universities

Professor R. R. Ramphal  
Graduate School of Business Leadership  
University of South Africa  
[ramphrr@unisa.ac.za](mailto:ramphrr@unisa.ac.za)  
phone: +2711 652 0363

## Abstract

University academic performance is normally measured against criteria for teaching and learning, research output, academic citizenship and more recently community engagement. Academics spend a considerable portion of their time on administration matters – at the expense of teaching and learning, research and community engagement time despite having administrative support staff available to support them. This use of their time on administrative matters affects their performance and effectiveness on their core functions. This problem is also exacerbated by declining governmental funding and by pressures from university management to increase research output in terms of completed studies of masters and doctorate candidates and publications in accredited journals as a means of supplementing the university income.

This study supports the view that academics prefer a structure in which there is increased quality and increased effectiveness of administrative support services resulting in decreasing administrative loads on academics through the use of shared services. Shared services structures are now being widely used by many large organisations which has resulted in improving the performance of administrative supporting services and in increasing the productivity of the core functions similar to those that reside within academia.

**Keywords:** academic performance, administrative services, higher education structures, services, service quality, shared services



Source: <https://thecustomizewindows.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Shared-Services.jpg>

## Introduction

Shared services originated at the end of the eighties in the United States Army used for the processing of travel documents (Strikwerda, 2014). This concept gradually grew in the nineties into United States (US) companies with computer technology related services, human resources services and financial services offered as shared services. Presently other services such as purchasing, facilities management, manufacturing services, logistic services, medical services, and legal services are provided as shared services in many organisations (Strikwerda, 2014).

Shared services is an organisational structure that consolidates delivery of one or more internal support functions and is designed to achieve cost reductions, economies of scale and improved quality of service (Derven, 2011). Banermann (2005) reports from a research study that US firms can achieve a cost saving of between 40% and 70% within two years of implementation and between 25% and 50% for organisations in Europe and Strikwerda (2014) indicates that other benefits include higher levels of quality of service and strategic flexibility of the organisation. Kearney (2013) also reported that over 85% of Fortune 500 companies have captured a variety of benefits from cost reduction and capability enhancements to global delivery and business transformation by employing

shared services. Firms also claim benefits such as organisational flexibility, consolidation of expertise, and higher levels of customer satisfaction (Forst, 2001; Kearney, 2004). In addition, it allows more time for employees performing core functions to work on their goals (Schulman, Dunleavy, Harmer & Lusk, 1999).

In order to stay competitive in a global economy, major South African companies such as Gauteng Government, Sasol, Centre for Science and Innovation Research (CSIR), Standard Bank and Goldfields Mines have implemented shared services structures to drive greater productivity, improve performance, lower costs and find new avenues of investing the savings. These structures create opportunities for organisations that want to lower operating costs by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of their support services and by increasing the productivity and output of their core employees. In this regard, public higher education universities are no different because they have to decrease costs, increase productivity of support services and academic staff and increase the quality of service. Table 1 is extracted from a powerpoint presentation developed by the University of Michigan (2013) as an overview of a shared services model for higher education showing specifically the economic, strategic, quality and speed benefits that can be acquired.

**Table 1:** Benefits of shared services for higher education institutes

Economic	Strategic	Quality	Speed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher productivity</li> <li>• Lower cost allocation</li> <li>• Reduced expenses</li> <li>• Reduces infrastructure costs</li> <li>• Leverage investment in technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shift funding from a back office to a front office perspective</li> <li>• Meet increased demand with fewer specialised staff</li> <li>• Achieve process and system standardisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved information for decision making</li> <li>• Better service to academics, students and other stakeholders</li> <li>• Reduced error rates with quality concentrated at source</li> <li>• Develop centres of expertise, innovation and specialisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced cycle times in service delivery processes via benchmarking and continuous improvement methods.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Adapted from Administrative Services Transformation Overview Presentation for Shared Services (University of Michigan, 2013)

A feature of the South African higher education landscape is twenty three government-aided universities. Cloete and Bunting (2013) have defined universities as specialised institutions whose core business is knowledge, both its production and its reproduction and dissemination, including the education of the next knowledgeable (suitably qualified) generation using the number of research-based doctorates and masters graduates as a performance measurement indicator. Table 2 shows the performance of these universities in terms of the graduation of

post graduates for the years 2010-2012 extracted from Financial and Fiscal Commission (2012) The criteria used in the table show teaching and learning performance (item 9) and research performance (items 1–8). More than half of the universities are failing to meet government targets in terms of graduating doctorate candidates, masters candidates and undergraduate pass rates. This, however, can be interpreted as poor performance of academics and poor performance of academic managers.

**Table 2:** South African public universities performance: 2010 – 2012

Criteria	Target	Universities meeting requirement	Universities not meeting requirement
1. Masters + doctorates as % of total enrolments	15%	4	19
2. % of permanent academics with doctorates	50%	6	17
3. Ratio of doctoral enrolments to permanent academics	1.0	3	20
4. Ratio of bachelor's and diploma graduates to undergraduate enrolments	20%	11	12
5. Ratio of master's graduates to master's enrolments	25%	3	20
6. Ratio of doctorate graduates to doctorate enrolments	15%	2	21
7. Ratio of doctorate graduates to permanent academics	0.15	2	21
8. Ratio of research publications to permanent academics	1.0	3	20
9. Success rate	80%	8	15
* Ratio of administration to academic staff (average = 1.86) range ( 1.2–3.12)			

**Source:** Extracted from:Financial and Fiscal Commission (2012)

This raises the question as to whether the academics really are to blame or whether the problem is inherent in the systems and structures of the university.

The tasks of university academics centre on the primary activities of teaching and learning and the generation of knowledge. The latter comprises of publishing research outputs from various activities such as their own postgraduate studies supervising the research of post-graduate students, or from any other collaborative research projects. These activities – leading as they do to the graduating of students and the publishing of peer-reviewed articles – are also linked to the acquiring of government funds and grants

for the institutions concerned. The government provides subsidies for completed post graduate students and subsidies for peer reviewed articles published in accredited academic journals. In other words, academics are also indirectly responsible for the financial viability of the institutions with which they are associated and it is for this reason that the performance against the target indicated in Table 1 raises deep concerns for the management of these universities. Moreover, the funding so raised is reserved for teaching and research activities only. Many of the universities employ a huge complement of service staff (on average 1,8 per academic employee as shown in Table 1) which is

supported financially using non-governmental funds. The funding principles discussed in the “1997 White Paper on higher education transformation” indicates that government funding of higher education is not designed to meet specific kinds or levels of institutional costs such as that for service delivery. Funding is linked to academic activity and output, and in particular to the delivery of teaching and research related activities. Shortages of funds have to be met from other sources such as student fees, short learning programs, donations and other fund-generating activities. The question raised here is whether these “costs of employment” of administrative and support staff is really an expense, or an investment in terms of releasing the academics from administration matters and allowing them to concentrate on their core functions.

Government, however, as indicated in its funding policies that funds are granted on student pass rates and research graduates related to masters and doctorate candidates and for peer reviewed published articles. This means that universities will have to increase research output, improve pass rates and increase publications for additional funding. In essence the funding frameworks are used to force universities to improve their academic performance. According to the report by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) to the ministerial committee on the review of funding in 2011 it was indicated that government funding to universities decreased from 49% in 2000 to 41% in 2009 and student fees escalated by an average of 2.5% annually over the same period. Many commercial and private businesses have focused on reducing operational costs when confronted with such reduction of revenues, and have found value in the use of a shared services structure (Redman, Snap, Wass & Hamilton, 2007). The success of shared services is based primarily on the improvements in productivity and efficiency that they bring – as well as on the increased effectiveness of support services in helping to realise the core

goals of an organisation. The thought of shared services will have a profound impact on the university culture and leadership style. To work, shared services will require a new and different level of trust and interdependency. If the organization is still grappling with those concepts at both local and system-wide levels it will require a new level of dialogue, shared understanding, and commitment. (Strikwerda, 2003) has indicated that the implementation of shared services will be less prone to obstruction or other mishaps if the executives introduced it in a broader strategic perspective.

The supporting study on which this article is based showed that academics are to a large extent, involved in administrative functions and that these activities come at the expense of teaching and learning, as well as the production of valuable research outputs, and this is despite the huge contingents of support staff that employed. The author recommends a shared services structure to improve the organisational performance of universities. This article reports on data collected from 100 academics based at South African public universities by means of an online questionnaire. The data provided information on academics’ participation in their current tasks, their desired participation in these tasks and their levels of acceptance of a shared services structure.

### **Shared Services**

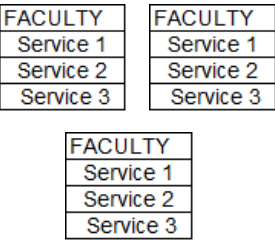
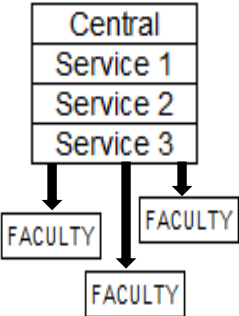
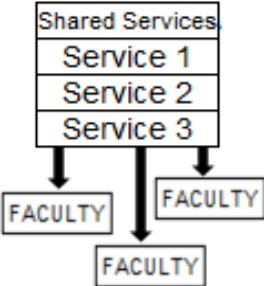
Shared services, as explained by Ulrich (2006), is still a relatively new concept. Shared services, in essence, refers to optimising corporate resources and processes into a new organisational entity. Its precise definition, however, remains unclear. The attractiveness of this concept lies in the potential it has for addressing the need for cost reduction, improving service quality, simplifying processes, sharing best practices, transferring knowledge and bringing about greater alignment to business requirements (Redman *et al.*, 2007). These needs are similar to the challenges of higher education where cost reductions and

efficiency improvements are required in the face of declining government funding.

Various authors, such as Bergeron (2003:3); Grant, McKnight, Uruthirapathy and Brown (2007); Mercer (2008); Schulman, Dunleavy, Harmer and Lusk (1999) and Webster (2007:40) have all provided definitions of shared services. In essence, these definitions portray shared services as a collection and concentration of non-value-adding activities. Such activities include human resources services, financial services, information technology, computer services, procurement and supply chain services –

all concentrated into one internal business unit whose task it is to provide services as an internal supplier to the business units responsible for the core functions. In a mature shared services organisation, there is consolidation and concentration of these transactional activities, along with standardised processes that can be optimised in order to promote efficiencies, cost reduction, quality improvement and value to the organisation. The characteristics of different administrative service structures are shown and discussed in table 2

**Table 2:** Administrative organisational structures

Decentralised structure	Centralised structure	Shared services structure
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous Units</li> <li>• Each unit has control of its services</li> <li>• Each unit has different systems and processes of service delivery</li> <li>• Each unit has its own service staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single control of services The focus is on efficiency and control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate profit centred business unit for services</li> <li>• Services offered and managed through service level agreements</li> <li>• Customer driven transactions and focus is on profitability of shared services</li> <li>• Service performance management culture through measurement and feedback Common standardised processes</li> <li>• Specialised service staff</li> </ul>

**Source:** Adapted from Administrative Services Transformation Overview Presentation for Shared Services (University of Michigan, 2013)

However, a centralised model is characterised by a high degree of control, poor economies of scale at the expense of poor customer service and a low level of responsiveness (Bergeron, 2003). Budgeting, allocation of resources, reporting, employee rewards and internal services are controlled by means of centralised processes governed by corporate management, as is the case in South African public universities. University support functions are also

centralised and bureaucratically centrally controlled. An advantage of this model is that there will be high consistency in the results of the various processes.

In contrast to the centralised model, the shared services model is positioned closer to the customer who can then have a higher degree of ownership over service delivery (Janssen & Joha., 2006). A decentralised model on the other hand, is characterised by the absence of a central

locus of control. Control and decision-making occur through localised business units. According to Bergeron (2003), an advantage of a decentralised model is that it offers freedom from control and the flexibility to change tactics without delay. A major disadvantage is that decision-making and allocation of funding for resources may sometimes be irresponsibly managed. In fact, shared services models combine elements of both

the centralised and decentralised models in which the primary management control and revenue, as well as the demand for support services are in the hands of the various business unit managers (deans and academic managers) with some degree of influence from the parent corporation (Bergeron 2003). The differences between shared services and centralisation is shown in table 3.

**Table 3:** How is Shared Services different from Centralization?

Attributes	Centralisation	Shared Services
Customers treated as .....	End users	Customers (faculties)
Leadership	Headquarters	Shared services board
Location	Central office	Anywhere to minimise costs
Service responsibility	Headquarters	Shared by means of service level agreements
Service Management	Optional	Key performance indicators and performance reports
Customer contact management	Ad hoc	Multiple channels (email, web, call centres etc.)
Typical processes	Highly functional and task based	Highly functional and integrated with customer relationship management, continuous improvement, knowledge management, performance management and service management

**Source:** Adapted from Administrative Services Transformation Overview Presentation for Shared Services (University of Michigan, 2013)

Services are supplied from the shared services centre on demand from the business units (faculties) and are positioned so that they are cheaper, offer greater satisfaction, and are more efficient than services provided by external suppliers. In essence, the shared services department is an “internal business unit operating profitability” selling services to “internal customers” (faculties) in a client–supplier relationship managed by service level agreements (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). These internal customers, like any conventional customer, will negotiate prices and quality of services, and have the right to source these services externally if they are not satisfied. Redman, Snape, Wass, and Hamilton (2007), for example, emphasise that despite the consolidation of resources into shared services, ‘power and control rests with the customer who may consider external service sources should the shared services not adequately satisfy the service requirements of the business unit.

However, employees of shared services will share the goals of the business units and, in a sense, will be “servants” to the

business unit employees. For example, in the higher education institute (HEI) environment, one of the functions in a shared service department could be recruitment. The dean (head of a faculty) will have a service level agreement for the provision of recruitment services for this particular faculty. The service level agreement will incorporate a negotiated fee and will define the quality of the required services. Should the dean be unhappy with the services provided, these services can then be sourced externally. Hence, shared services departments have to remain competitive in the eyes of their internal customers. Further, the recruitment practices would be driven so as to meet the goals of that specific faculty and not those of the recruitment department itself or of the university as a whole.

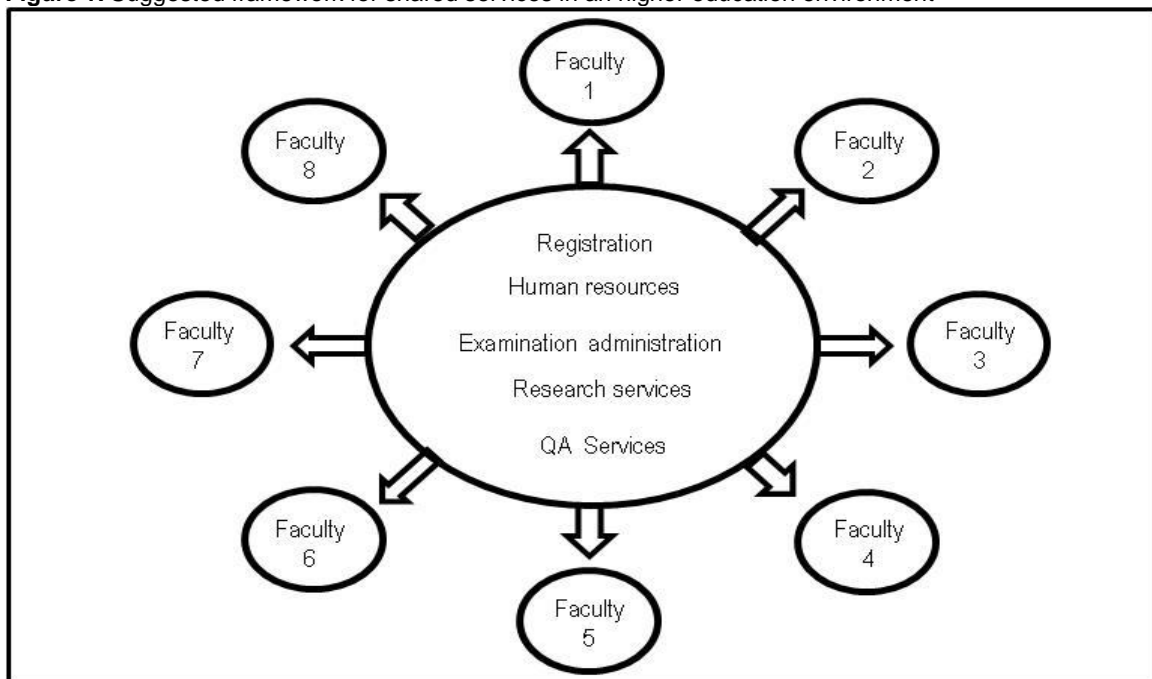
There are also benefits for the shared services departments which are elucidated on as follows: There should be increased efficiencies through the standardisation of processes, better quality of services received, increased internal customer satisfaction, decreased personnel

requirements (because fewer employees are needed to produce the same result) and improved economies of scale through the concentration of specialised services. Savings will be made by eliminating duplication, streamlining processes and re-engineering the workflow. Hence, the tangible benefits of shared services include expense reduction, increased productivity, better economies of scale, leveraged technology, improved span of control, improvement in working capital, and better leverage of purchasing from consolidated vendors (Schulman et al., 1999). In the shared services context, the firm's internal business units purchase services from the SSC, the employees may also use the SSC services, and the employees who deliver services to internal customers may also provide services to external customers (Soalheira & Timbrell, 2014). This creates the opportunity for each service department to become "good at what they do" and to become a highly specialised business in its own right. For example, the recruitment department should become a department of recruitment experts and, if they have additional capacity, can then offer services to outside companies. In other words, a shared services structure can also

promote the "entrepreneurial university" – a description which includes administration support staff rather than academics alone. The crux of the matter is that a shared services department should become self-funding by selling services (internally at the outset) and by selling excess capacity externally to external clients. Once again, it is an opportunity for universities to increase self-funding in an era of declining government funds and militancy towards student fee increases.

The Corporate Leadership Council Report (2006:2) and an article by Ulrich (2006) conclude that in a shared services structure, more time is created for staff and senior management from the core business units to focus and direct their attention to strategic core issues and to the needs of their external customers. This implies that academics can reduce their time spent on administrative matters and increase their time on teaching and research activities. Figure 1 illustrates an example of how shared services can be structured in a higher education environment with typical services such as human resources, registration, research services, quality assurance services and examinations offered as support services to nine faculties.

**Figure 1:** Suggested framework for shared services in an higher education environment



Source: Author's own

A suggested conceptual framework for shared services in a public higher education environment is shown in Table 4 and compared with a centralised

structure. Details specific to a higher education environment are shown in square brackets.

**Table 4:** Suggested framework

<b>Centralisation</b>		<b>Dimension</b>		<b>Shared services</b>
Senior functional managers set service policy and direction Accountability to corporate [Accountability to university]	◀	<b>Governance</b>	▶	Shared services board sets service policy and direction Accountability to business units [Accountability to faculties]
Corporate staff decide on service offerings and delivery [Directors of service departments decide on service offerings and delivery]	◀	<b>Accountability</b>	▶	Business units set priorities on quantity and quality of services required [Faculties will set priorities on quantity and quality of services required]
Services are standardised [All services are of a uniform nature]	◀	<b>Service orientation</b>	▶	Service is tailored to address business unit requirements [Service is tailored to address each faculties requirements]
Use of internal services is mandated [No option but to utilise internal services]	◀	<b>Flexibility</b>	▶	Flexibility to source from external sources is often permitted [The dean/academic manager will have the flexibility to source services from outside the university if the internal services are more expensive and not satisfactory]
Performance monitored against internal targets [Directors of service departments set targets]	◀	<b>Performance monitoring</b>	▶	Performance monitored against internal targets and external best practices [Performance monitored against internal targets and external best practices to ensure they are cheaper and of best quality]
Businesses are charged on allocations [Service departments work with an allocated budget]	◀	<b>Charge-backs</b>	▶	Business units are charged on actual usage of service [Service department will charge the faculty for each service rendered within a supplier–customer relationship]
Often physically located at corporate headquarters [Normally on main campus]	◀	<b>Location</b>	▶	Located wherever it makes sense from a customer interaction point of view [Can be situated at any location where it makes economic sense]

**Source:** Adapted from Couto, Dunn, Hyde, Kocourek and Lambert ( 2000)

The table shows that the shared services concept will require the establishment of a shared services board responsible for the governance of shared services, the shifting of “accountability to senior management” to “accountability to management of the different faculties”, faculties determining the type and quality of services required to meet their goals, the faculties having the power to source

services externally if not satisfied with services internally, and faculties engaging with the monitoring and evaluation of services and paying for them accordingly. The expectation is that the shared services unit will be comprised of all the support services concentrated to improve the quality, efficiency, effectiveness of service provision and to lower the cost thereof. Further, a well-structured shared



services department has the opportunity to locate itself anywhere that makes economic and business sense to do so. For example IBM has service centres in Prague, Singapore, and Philadelphia and Shell has them in Manila, Krakow, and Kuala Lumpur largely promoted by common IT platforms and appropriate service level agreements (Reilly, 2014).

A shared services structure offers opportunities for the reduction of operational costs, increased quality and efficiencies of services, and improved productivity in respect of core functions. These benefits seem attractive for a university. In order to determine the acceptability of this view, the study on which this article is based engaged with academics by means of a questionnaire, the two objectives of which were, firstly, to evaluate workloads of academics and, secondly, to evaluate their support for a shared services model. The questions in the questionnaire were based on the eighteen shared services performance factors derived by Ramphal (2010) without any mention of shared services to respondents, so as to allow the respondents to evaluate the performance factors rather than shared services itself.

### **Research Methodology**

The research was conducted in late 2011 and made use of a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections using a quantitative approach. The first section concentrated on collected biographical information, the second section on the actual and preferred time usage of the respondents, and the third section on evaluation of the level of preference towards a shared services structure.

Specific items in the first section included academic position (professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, academic manager), gender, age, qualifications, contact or distance modes of teaching, and teaching loads. Section 2 required the respondents to allocate their time usage (both present and desired) to tasks such as teaching and learning, improvement of qualifications, research and publications, curriculum development, industry liaison,

workshops, academic administration, student administration, participating in conferences, and any other activities. Section 3 was comprised of 18 criteria. These criteria were developed from an intensive related literature review and a focus group interview with shared services customers and subsequently tested and found acceptable as quality requirements by the customers of shared services as part of a doctoral study (Ramphal, 2010). Care was taken not to use the words "shared services" in the questionnaire but, nonetheless, to get the respondents to react to the customer requirements of shared services. The respondents were not informed in any way that the intention of the questions was to evaluate the use of shared services in higher education environments. In other words, the respondents were not aware or informed of the objective relating to their support for a shared services model. They were required to indicate on a Likert scale of one to seven their preference in relation to each criterion. A seven-point-scale was preferred over a five-point-scale is as to provide a greater range and greater reliability as suggested by Synmonds (1924). A score of one would indicate a very low preference, while a score of 7 would indicate a high preference. Any mean value above the midpoint of 4.50 was deemed to be a significant result for this study.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with five professors as a pilot study and then developed into an online questionnaire by the researchers' research support services. A link was provided for access to the questionnaire together with a short note describing the purpose of the questionnaire as being to gather information to evaluate service structures. The ideal respondent was described as an academic in a South African government higher education university. The questionnaire link was e-mailed to all academics of the researcher's faculty and to close academic colleagues of the researcher who were from different faculties and universities. These external academics were requested to forward the link to other academics within their

institutions. The respondents were required to complete the questionnaire online with the data, once submitted, being automatically entered into a database set up by research support services. The database was closed after a period of three weeks and the data was analysed using SPSS version 20 software.

### Results and discussion

A total of 150 completed questionnaires had been received at the end of the three-week period. Fifty were rejected due to incomplete data and a further eight were rejected due to unrealistic data, for example a case of age stated as 78, student class numbers of 50 000, teaching 25 modules and so on. It appeared that many of the respondents were very suspicious of the questionnaire as a performance monitoring tool. Some contacted the researcher to enquire if their departments or their university had facilitated the data collection in order to evaluate their performance. The data subsequently retrieved from the 92 acceptable questionnaires were analysed.

The respondents consisted of 24 professors, 33 senior lecturers (19 doctoral, 11 master's, 3 honours), 30 lecturers (2 doctoral, 14 master's, 14 honours) and 5 academic managers (deans, HOD's, 4 doctoral, 1 master's). The average age of professors was 53 years, that of senior lecturers 44 years, that of lecturers 36 years, and that of academic managers 46 years. The data

collected on the teaching and learning loads indicated that all the academics who responded were involved in the teaching of undergraduate and honours subjects across many faculties as well as in the supervision of students within the master's and doctoral programs. At least two of the five academic managers were also involved with a teaching and/or supervision load. The research profiles were examined for the period 2009 to 2011 in terms of publications in accredited journals. This showed that 83% of the professors had contributed between one and eleven articles, 58% of the senior lecturers had contributed between one and six articles, 20% of the lecturers contributed between one and four articles and 60% (three of the five) of academic managers had published one to three articles. The analysis indicates that 17% of professors and 42% of senior lectures and 80% of lectures did not publish over this period. Professors and senior lectures are capable of publishing, whilst lectures are probably busy with their studies and still building up their publishing capabilities.

Table 5 shows the views held by academics in respect of the various activities that hinder their performance of their core functions: teaching, learning and research. The results are expressed on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 is considered low and 7 is considered high. The shaded data shows levels over 4.50 which are deemed as significant.

**Table 5: Levels of hindrance**

	Professors	Senior lecturers	Lecturers	Academic managers
Upgrading of qualifications	1.95	3.15	3.66	3.3
Student administration	5.05	5.5	5.45	5.6
Academic administration	5.76	6.12	5.28	2.0
Attendance at workshops	4.85	4.03	3.48	3.8
Internal committees	4.7	4.73	4.17	5.0
External committees	3.0	3.58	2.86	2.5

The data show that all the academics who responded view student and academic administration as imposing high levels of hindrance. (Only the academic manager did not view academic administration as a hindrance as it was "part of the job"). In addition, the professors viewed

attendance at workshops as hindrances whilst senior lecturers and academic managers viewed attendance at internal committee meetings as hindrances. Hence, administration is viewed as a hindrance to the performance of academics and this creates an opportunity

for the application of a shared services structure. All administrative tasks will be absorbed by the shared services department thus reducing the hindrances to academic performance. The shared services model will increase collaboration and cooperation across the enterprise and meet the growing demand for all services in the most productive and cost-effective manner possible.

The academics were requested to indicate their actual and preferred percentage of time spent on their various activities. The difference between the preferred and actual times is shown in Tables 6 and 7 respectively. The significant differences are highlighted in the table. The academics seemed to be comfortable with

the times allocated for teaching and learning. The senior lecturers, lecturers and academic managers indicated that they would like more time to devote to improving their qualifications. They also preferred a huge increase in the time allocated to them for research and publishing. However, all academics preferred a reduction in their academic and student administrative workloads of between 9.00% and 12.00%. These data show that the academics surveyed wanted to reduce their administration time in favour of spending more time on improving their qualifications and research activities. This confirms that academics are keen to be involved in research if they have the time for it.

**Table 6:** Actual and desired time distribution of professors and senior lecturers

	Professor			Senior lecturer		
	Actual %	Desired %	Diff %	Actual %	Desired %	Diff %
Teaching and learning	31.36	30.13	1.23	27.92	27.42	-0.50
Improvement of qualifications	1.58	3.05	-1.47	4.78	10.86	-6.08
Research and publications	17.35	35.25	-17.9	9.13	20.9	-11.77
Curriculum development	10.41	9.15	1.26	14.94	11.68	3.26
Industry liaison	1.31	2.83	-1.52	3.25	5.29	-2.04
Workshops	5.52	3.93	1.59	6.77	5.61	1.16
Academic administration	17.07	4.47	12.6	15.09	5.16	9.93
Student administration	8.41	3.39	5.02	9.03	3.14	5.89
Conferences	4.38	6.02	-1.64	3.21	6.18	-2.97
Other activities	2.62	1.78	0.84	5.89	3.76	2.13

**Table 7:** Actual and desired time distribution of lecturers and academic managers

	Lecturers			Academic managers		
	Actual %	Desired %	Diff %	Actual %	Desired %	Diff %
Teaching and learning	30.01	28.29	1.72	15.20	14.00	1.20
Improvement of qualifications	10.79	16.74	-5.95	7.80	1.40	6.40
Research and publications	6.45	19.2	-12.75	13.40	27.80	-14.40
Curriculum development	9.35	8.67	0.68	26.20	27.60	-1.40
Industry liaison	3.26	3.92	-0.66	2.80	5.80	-3.00
Workshops	4.91	4.52	0.39	9.00	8.40	0.60
Academic administration	15.03	5.44	9.59	13.80	4.00	9.80
Student administration	12.47	2.3	10.17	8.20	1.60	6.60
Conferences	4.21	7.83	-3.62	2.40	7.40	-5.00
Other activities	3.54	3.09	0.45	1.20	2.00	-0.80

Table 8 serves as confirmation of the workload reported by the academics surveyed. It shows that about 80% of the

academics believed that they were overloaded with work with over 60% (excluding the academic managers)

believing that they were spending too much time involved in student administration and over 70% believing that did not have enough time for research. In addition, over 60% (excluding the professors) believed that they did not have enough time to improve their qualifications. These results confirm the belief among academics that they are

overloaded and want a reduction in their administrative loads in order to concentrate on studies and research outputs. The results shown in Tables 6, 7 and 8 support the feasibility of a shared services structure in higher education where such a structure can reduce administrative loads of academics.

**Table 8:** Academics responses to work loads

	Professor	Senior lecturer	Lecturer	Academic manager	Overall
	%	%	%	%	%
I believe I am overloaded with work	83.33	81.82	58.33	80.00	75.87
I believe I spend too much time on student administration	62.50	78.79	66.67	50.00	61.99
I believe I spend too much time on academic administration	83.33	81.82	72.22	80.00	79.34
I believe that I do not have enough time for teaching and learning activities	41.67	27.27	47.22	40.00	39.04
I believe that I do not have enough time for research activities	91.67	84.85	69.44	100.00	86.49
I believe that I do not have enough time for improving my qualifications	33.33	63.64	61.11	80.00	59.52

The purpose of table 9 was to determine the level of preference among academics for a shared services structure. The determinants in this table were the customers' quality criteria determined for a shared services environment (Ramphal, 2010). It is the researcher's view that if the academics desire these criteria in order to be satisfied, the establishment of shared services structures in higher education is preferred. The results indicate that there was a significant preference for all criteria by all academics. The top five requirements included academics wanting non-bureaucratic procedures for services for example they can change lecture

rooms without seeking permission from their managers, an improvement in the quality of the services by allowing service personnel to specialise in their respective tasks., and increased urgency as regards to service delivery. Staff and students are generally frustrated by delayed responses from the service departments for example in the provision of new library books, which can take three to twelve months to acquire. They also wanted service staff to be part of the team so as to understand and participate in achieving the academic goals of their organisations and to be proactive in meeting the service needs of academics in achieving these goals.

**Table 9:** Preference for a shared services structure

	Professors (Mean)	Senior Lecturers (Mean)	Lecturers (Mean)	Academic Managers (Mean)	Overall (Mean)	Rank
1 I require improvement of the quality internal services	5.90	6.36	5.76	6.6	6.16	4
2 I want to participate in the evaluation of the support services as a customer	5.14	5.94	5.14	5.6	5.46	14

3	I must be able to demand services to suit my academic needs	5.76	5.97	5.38	6.2	5.83	11
4	The support services staff must assist me to achieve my goals rather than they achieving their goals	6.00	5.82	5.72	6.2	5.94	9
5	I must be able to seek other external service providers to support my goals if the internal services do not meet my requirements	5.29	5.00	5.28	5.6	5.19	17
6	There must be service level agreements with the academics to ensure the provision of services as required	5.90	5.42	5.21	5.4	5.48	13
7	I value using self-service products to meet my service needs	4.81	5.12	5.41	5.4	5.19	16
8	The services department to train academics in the use of all self-help products	5.05	4.79	5.21	5.6	5.16	18
9	The processes of the service delivery to be quality assured to ensure high quality services	5.67	6.27	5.72	6.0	5.92	10
10	The service staff to be competent in their respective jobs	6.05	6.27	6.00	6.0	6.08	6
11	The service staff must be more customer focused when dealing with academics	5.24	6.24	5.90	6.4	5.95	8
12	The service staff must understand the goals and tasks of the academics	6.33	6.18	6.38	6.4	6.32	2
13	The service staff to provide services with a sense of urgency	6.38	6.21	6.21	5.6	6.10	5
14	The service departments must be non – bureaucratic with their procedures and controls	6.52	6.30	6.41	6.2	6.36	1
15	The service staff to be proactive to the needs of academics	5.81	6.12	6.34	6.6	6.22	3
16	There must be a central point for the collection of complaints and complements regarding the services	5.43	5.82	6.03	5.8	5.77	12
17	Academics must be provided with reports on the efficiency and effectiveness of the services	5.14	5.09	5.31	6.0	5.39	15
18	The service staff to pay more attention to the core functions of the university	5.90	6.36	5.41	6.2	5.97	7

## Conclusion

The results demonstrate that the academics are spending a substantial portion of their time on administrative matters. There is a desire for these academics to reduce their administrative loads and to engage more with their studies and research outputs. The results confirm that there is a possibility of restructuring higher education administrative services into the form of a shared services organisation. These results ultimately support the possibility for a shared services structure in higher education.

The purpose of this article was to provoke thought in the area of using a shared services structure as a solution to the challenges of academics in government

higher education environments. In general, higher education environments are challenged by demands for higher pass rates, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as for more research outputs from academics. In addition to these challenges, they are faced with declining governmental funding. Governments globally, in an effort to manage budgets and set priorities, are restricting funds to higher education sectors. Institutions tend to respond by seeking private funding and by raising tuition fees to maintain their educational quality and good student experience. Other challenges include escalating enrolments without matching financial resources, increasing inflation rates, devaluation of currency rates, other economic and political turmoil and the

inability of students to afford the tuition fee rates (Teferra & Altbach, 2004), hence Universities have to engage in considering new models of operations.

It is noted that only four (out of 23) universities are probably meeting the government's targets. It is critical for universities to consider drastic solutions as the government is increasing pressure on improving pass rates and research output targets unsympathetically. The research on which this article is based verifies that academics are overloaded with administrative activities and they want to reduce their involvement in these activities so as to be able to engage in their studies and research outputs. The results confirm that universities have a research culture but that they cannot functionalise this fully due to the hindrance posed to academics by administrative matters.

By means of the data collected, the academics surveyed have indirectly shown their support for a shared services structure operating modality. The shared services structure in a higher education environment can potentially reduce operational costs as well as improve quality of service delivery to academics. In addition, such a structure should conceivably allow academics to have more time to devote to pressing core academic matters. Shared services departments would also be able to sell their services to external parties and would hence be able to move towards being self-funding which would greatly support transformational initiatives in the country. This structure will promote an effective governance culture incorporating a forum for constructive dialogue, careful decision making, good priority setting, and follow-through which is essential to the successful implementation of shared services.

This study is not immune to limitations. The small sample and the limited statistics may pose some concern as far as the making of generalisations is concerned. However, the intention of the author was to 'seed' ideas and to provoke thinking regarding the use of shared services in the

higher education environment. Shared services structures have been successful in many national and international organisations. Further recommendations would include, perhaps, a larger-scaled research project as well as the setting up of a conference on the topic of shared services in higher education environments.

## References

- Bangemann, T. O. (2005). *Shared services in finance and accounting*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Bergeron, B. (2003). *Essentials of shared services*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wiley.
- Cloete, N. & Bunting, I. (2013). Challenges and Opportunities for African Universities to Increase Knowledge Production. Available at [http:// www.chet.org.za](http://www.chet.org.za) [Accessed: 31 July 2015.]
- Corporate Leadership Council Report. (2006). HR shared services: determining the scope, scale and structure. *Corporate Executive Board*, catalogue no. CLC15GXNSI:1-9.
- Counto, V., Dunn, M., Hyde, P., Kocourek, P. & Lambert, F. 2000. *Getting shared services right-capturing the promise*. Available at <http://www.boozallen.com> [Accessed: 14 October 2014.]
- Derven, M. 2011. Advancing the shared services journey through training. *American Society for Training and Development Magazine*, 65(9):58
- Financial and Fiscal commission. (2012). *Submission for the department of revenue 2013/2014*. Available at <http://www.ffc.co.za> [Accessed:14 October 2014].
- Forst, L. I. (2001). *Shared services grows up*. *The Journal of Business Strategy*, 22(4): 13-15.
- Grant, G., McKnight, S., Ururhirapathy, A. & Brown, A. (2007). Designing governance for shared services organisations in the public service. *Government Information Quarterly*, 22(3):522-539.

Janssen, M. & Joha, A. (2006). Motives for establishing shared service centres in public administrations. *International Journal of Information Management*, 26:102-116.

Kearney, A. T. (2013). *Rewriting India's shared services playbook*. Available at <http://www.atkearney.com> [Accessed: 14 July 2015.]

Mercer. 2008. *Finding your place on the HR continuum*. Available at <http://mmc.dppl.com> [Accessed: 4 August 2015].

Ramphal, R. R. 2010. *A quality framework for shared services environments*. Pretoria: Tshwane University of Technology. (Doctoral thesis.)

Redman, T., Snap, E., Wass, J. & Hamilton, P. 2007. Evaluating the human resources shared services model. *International Journal of Human Resources Management*, 18(8):1486-1506.

Schulman, D. S., Dunleavy, J. R., Harmer, M. J. & Lusk J. S. 1999. *Shared services, adding value to business units*. Toronto: Wiley.

Soalheira, J. & Timbrell, G. (2014) . "What is Shared Services?" *Shared Services as a New Organizational Form. Advanced Series in Management*, 13: 67-84

Strikwerda, J. (2003). Shared service centers: Van kostenbesparing naar

waardecreeatie Assen — Den Haag. *Van Gorcum — Stichting Management Studies*.

Strikwerda, J. (2014). Shared Service Centers: From Cost Savings to New Ways of Value Creation and Business Administration. *Shared Services as a New Organizational Form. Advanced Series in Management*, 13:1-15

Symonds, P. M. (1924) On the loss of reliability in ratings due to coarseness of the scale. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 7: 456-461

Teferra, D. & Altbach, P. G. (2004). African higher education: Challenges for the 21st century. *Higher Education*, 47: 21-50

Ulrich, D. 2006. Improving shared services implementation: adopting lessons from BPR improvement. *Business Process Management Journal*, 12(2):191-205.

University of Michigan (2013). *Administrative Services Transformation Overview: Presentation for Shared Services*. Available at <http://ast.umich.edu> [Accessed: 1 August 2015].

Webster, D. W. 2007. Financial and shared services. *The Journal of Government Financial Management*, 56(2):39-42.