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Institutional Research in Support of Decision-Making in Higher Education in Southern Africa

Keynote address

Knowing that We Don't Know:

The Quest for Smart Data through Institutional Research in Support of Knowledge-based Decision-Making in African Higher Education –
A New Role for Institutional Research

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Introduction

Dear participants of the 22nd SAAIR Conference

I want to thank you so much for inviting me to deliver this keynote address. I feel honoured. It is a challenging task for me because the topic itself is a challenging subject, particularly concerning the issue of *decision-making in African* higher education. *Decision-making* is in itself a complex socio-anthropological¹ and political phenomenon, therefore, subject to academic scrutiny.

Decision-making in the context of higher education is even more challenging due to reasons, some of which, I would like to address today. The main challenge in proposing Institutional Research as a means to support *decision-making* in African higher education *is that in most cases the top and middle level management often don't know that they don't know much about higher education and are utterly convinced that they know*. This is the reason why I have titled my keynote address "*knowing that we don't know*".

In other words, the kind of knowledge that most academic leaders and middle level managers, in the African higher education context, use to support their decision-making is what I have termed "*experiential knowledge*"². It is the kind of knowledge that anyone who has gone through some sort of university socialization or occupational experiences acquires according to the various roles that he or she performs, be it as a lecturer, manager or as a student.

I should not be misunderstood. I am not suggesting that *experiential knowledge* is sub-standard in status compared to other forms of knowledge. However, as the renowned British sociologist Michael Young and his South African colleague Johan Muller (2014.p xx) pointed out "*it has long been recognised that specialised knowledge is at the core of what distinguishes professions from other occupations*".

¹ Cf. Gonçalves, E (2013). Orientações superiores: Time and Bureaucratic Authority in Mozambique. African Affairs, 112/449, 602–622

² Langa, P (2014). Alguns Desafios do Ensino Superior em Moçambique: Do Conhecimento Experiencial à necessidade de produção de conhecimento Científico. In Brito, L; Branco-Nuno, C; Chichava, S; Forquilha, S; e Francisco, A (Org.). *Desafios para Moçambique 2014*. IESE: 365-398.

In most cases, academic leaders and managers are scholars in their respective disciplines or area of studies. Phillip Altbach (2011), one of the Gurus of Higher Education Studies, argues in his book '*Leadership for World-Class Universities*' that very few countries have professional leaders who are now managing what have become huge institutions and systems, with hundreds of thousands of students. In other words, higher education institutions and systems have become complex entities that require specialised knowledge.

Drawing on this argument, my point is that African higher education should build up a cadre of people and institutions who really know how higher education systems and institutions work. I am convinced that the role of institutional research today is to *generate intelligible knowledge* about the institutions and the external context in which they operate, but also the intelligence that informs strategic decision-making at various levels. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask *what kind of knowledge is needed through institutional research*. Traditionally, Institutional Research has been responsible for collecting and storing data, and conducting *ad hoc* self-studies pertaining to the institution's unique circumstances. This old role is no longer adequate for the new conditions under which higher education operates globally. That means institutional research has to move beyond being the *data warehouse* to provide smart institutional and contextual data and intelligence.

Moving beyond a simple data warehouse to smart data

I regard institutional research not as it has long been conceived, that is, as a data warehouse, typified by the planning department. This has typically been the case in most African higher education institution to date. What I am proposing here is a new entity *at the heart* of the institution that produces *smart data* and *institutional intelligence*. In other words, a place within the institution where specialists in higher education studies, multidisciplinary in nature, generate specialised institutional and contextual knowledge about higher education that can be used to support strategic and effective decision-making.

In order to make this a reality in African higher education the attitude of the leadership towards higher education has to change. The idea that academics by the virtue of being scholars are experts on higher education no longer works. We have to pass the age of

expert *amateurs*. One can be a top mathematician, sociologist or economist and still have no clue of how to manage a complex university with tens of thousands of students and staff.

The announced death of the traditional academic leader

Dear participants

I want to spend a few minutes announcing the death of the traditional academic leader or manager. It is well documented that, typically, academic leaders and managers come from the faculty. In Europe, for instance, they have traditionally been elected from the senior faculty, serve for a couple of years, four or five, and then go back to the faculty.

In most African universities, the principle is the same; however, it is common that once an academic has moved into an administrative and managerial leadership position, he or she hardly ever returns to the faculty, ending up as a bureaucratic “*mad cow*”, with high political capital or influence, legitimised by external political constituencies and often weak academic or scholastic capital, acknowledged by his academic peers.

In part, this is the case because the managerial incentives, particularly the ones related to leadership and managerial positions, tend to be more attractive than the academic incentives related to the pursuit of scholarship (Langa, 2015)³.

In most cases, academic leaders become entrenched in daily managerial duties, therefore developing a certain experiential knowledge in management at the same time as they lose track of the developments in their fields of study or discipline. The chance of becoming leaders in their respective disciplines diminishes, and they tend to hold on to managerial positions. Of course, there are a few outliers to this trend, but rare exceptions can also reinforce the norm.

The decision-making process, in these cases, is based on mastering the institutional bureaucratic routines, the political life of the institution, and the exercise of academic

³ Langa, P. V (2015) Academic incentives for knowledge production. *University World News*. Issue 357, March 6, 2015.

power that derives from leadership positions in the organisation or even from external constituencies to the university.

This kind of academic leadership is no longer working and is doomed to disappear sooner or later. There are clear signs that it is going to be sooner rather than later, due to the changes in higher education systems worldwide.

The global integration of higher education as the key knowledge institution in the knowledge economy and society is precipitating things. The national, regional and international positioning of higher education institutions, commonly referred to as rankings, can no longer be ignored by any “serious” higher education leader. Hate or love them, the rankings are here to stay.

Rankphilia, for those who love them, *rankphobia*, for those who fear them, are the new terminology that describe and classify our unavoidable relationship with league tables. One thing is certain, we may contest rankings, and dispute their biased methodologies, but we must refer to them.

The positioning of institutions is creating new realities, stratified and differentiated national, regional and international higher education arenas than cannot be ignored. A university leader who wants to know about his or her own institution needs more than the usual *dashboard statistics*, for his ceremonial speeches, that the registrar or the panning office collects internally. He or she now also needs specialised, analytical data about other institutions and systems.

In other words, he or she needs smart data for intelligent and strategic decision-making. In his decision-making process, he or she needs not only to consider institutional data, but also cross-institutional and cross-national data. He or she needs not only to provide data to the ministry of education, perform regular self-evaluation to comply with the Quality Assurance Framework and Regulations, but also to know about student satisfaction, international mobility trends, to increase the profile of internationalisation, to target and pursue new funding opportunities and so on.

This kind of information and knowledge requires more than the simple, traditional, descriptive institutional statistics, which are typically about the number of students, staff or publications. It requires smart information systems, intelligent databases, which

go beyond the usual dashboards, and above all it requires a cadre of higher education experts in various subjects.

This kind of specialised knowledge on higher education should be produced by a cadre of professionals and experts who know about higher education systems, student affairs, internationalisation, financing, curriculum, and all sorts of cutting-edge issues in higher education. It means that institutional research should move from the corner office to take the central stage of the intelligence of the institution.

Dear colleagues

Our ability to produce and acquire the kind of knowledge that is needed to support decision-making in African higher education today is constrained by some of the following factors:

- The growing complexity of higher education as a social institution, which requires a multidisciplinary approach. No one can be expert in all aspects and dimensions of higher education. Acknowledging our knowledge borders and limitations is therefore not just an act of humility, but a condition of the possibility of knowing;
- The incipient development and, in most cases, the absence of higher education studies as a field of study in our countries and institutions is a limitation. While the USA alone accounts for 27% of the field - about 50 higher education research centres/institutes, - Africa, as a continent, only accounts for 3% (L.E. Rumbley et al., 2014⁴). In other words, our basis for scientific knowledge on higher education is very weak.
- Africa, as continent, lacks academic programs where the cadre of higher education experts could and should be trained. An inventory, recently undertaken by some colleagues from Boston College, shows that worldwide there are 277 academic programs in higher education, most of them housed in schools of education. The programs are based in 29 different countries; however, 70 % of them are located in the USA.

⁴ L.E. Rumbley et al., (2014). From inventory to insight: making sense of the global landscape of higher education research, training, and publication. In *Studies in Higher Education*. (39) 8: 1293-1305.

The inventory places China in second place in terms of its concentration of programs, 11% of the global total. China is followed by the UK, which hosts 5%, Japan 2%, South-Africa 1.5%, and Canada 1.1%. The rest of the 23 countries each account for less than 1% of the global total of higher education programs (L.E Rumbly et al., 2014).

I could not conclude this point without alluding to the one programme in Mozambique which I established in 2012, which will graduate the first experts in the field ever in the country. Prof Cloete, in the audience, and I worked hard advocating for the need of such a program at the UEM. The Higher Education Master in Africa programme at UWC was one of the few to train cross-national African students to serve on the continent. The graduates from such programmes are some of the people that should be staffing and developing institutional research units in African universities. As we can read from the statistics, Africa still lags behind every continent in terms of training its HE managers and institutional planners. Most African higher education institutional leaders, middle range manager and institutional planners still think that experiential knowledge suffices. Some still think they can do business as usual. Higher Education is still regarded as a 'game' for amateurs. They waste time defending the *status quo* and that they've been around in the university long enough to be experts of higher education.

- The other source of expert knowledge in higher education is the academic journal. Again, as a continent, we are not doing well when it comes to disseminating higher education research. L.E Rumbly's et al., (2014), found that the vast majority of journal publications in higher education serve a domestic audience. Of the 53 journals that target a broader audience beyond their national borders, which represents 19% of the total, 40 % are published in North America, 28% in Asia, 22% in Europe, 4% in Latin America, 3% in Oceania, 2% in Africa and 1 % in the middle East and North Africa.

Nowhere is this knowledge limitation as serious as it has become in the management of our higher education institutions on the African continent. The lack of scholarship in African higher education studies is therefore critical.

Paradoxically, we still hear, frequently with horror, higher education leaders and managers urging for more investment in science and research in Africa on the grounds that knowledge is needed to “develop” Africa, whatever that means, but fail to acknowledge and understand that they themselves need to invest in knowing the corners of their own house.

They may be experts in linguistics, sociology, mathematics etc., with many years of academic experience, but they fail to understand that despite their expertise in their discipline and the years of experience in management, it is not specialised knowledge in higher education. In other words, they don’t know that they don’t know.

Ulrich Teichler (2000), captured the knowledge paradox in higher education very well, and I quote:

“Paradoxically, many politicians, institutional leaders and administrators in this field, as well as members of the academic profession themselves while trying to persuade society that systematic scholarship is superior to the practitioners’ experience are most sceptical about the value of scholarship and research when it comes to their practical turf, i.e. higher education.”(Teichler, 2000)⁵

Socrates in the boardroom

Dear colleagues

Let me refer to a recurrent debate in higher education management. Who should run universities? In 2009, Amanda Goodall, a British scholar, who wrote considerably on the issue of expert leadership and developed the *Theory of Expert Leadership* (TEL) (Goodall, 2015)⁶, published an interesting book titled: ‘*Socrates in the boardroom*’.

As many of us will recall, Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, is well known for his famous quote “*I know that I know nothing*”. The so called Socrates paradox refers to the

⁵ Teichler, Ulrich (2000) The Relationship between Higher Education Research and Higher Education Policy and Practice: The Researchers’ Perspective. (31 pages)

⁶ See: <http://amandagoodall.com/journalarticles.html>

attitude of humility which enables a person to acknowledge his ignorance and therefore creating the condition for the possibility to know.

Goodall uses Socrates' paradox to argue that in universities there is strong evidence that research-focused scholars make the best leaders of their institutions (Goodall, 2009)⁷. Accomplished researchers make the best university leaders. Goodall supports this claim by correlating the number of times that presidents and deans have been cited in scholarly publications vis-à-vis the positions of their organisations in the Shanghai Jiao Tong University Rankings and the London Financial Times MBA program rankings for business schools (Morphew and Taylor, 2010)⁸.

A critic of Goodall's argument emphasises the generalisation of the thesis beyond the USA and UK, particularly due to the over representation of US and UK institutions in the selected rankings, on the one hand. On the other hand, we also know from the growing literature on New Public Management that academics are not always well-equipped and suited to manage higher education institutions in a context of increasing competition, accountability and the marketization of higher education.

Increasingly, external stakeholders have a word to say in the ways academics manage higher education institutions, often subjected them to external assessments. Without taking any sides, there are at least two lessons that can be derived from the two positions:

- (i) On the one hand, even if academics are to be the ones managing higher education institutions, without the interference of external stakeholders, the growing complexity of the field and the multitude of issues require that they rely on specialised knowledge rather than on their disciplinary, managerial, occupational or experiential knowledge.

⁷ Highly Cited Leaders and the Performance of Research Universities'. Research Policy, 2009, 38 (7): 1079-1092

⁸ Morphew, C. C and Taylor, B J (2011). Scholars as leaders. A review of Socrates in the boardroom. *Higher Education*. 61: 617-619

- (ii) On the other hand, the NPM movement will also require that university leaders and decision-makers respond to the demands of increasing accountability by both internal and external stakeholders.

Above all, academic leaders and decision-makers need to be aware of the growing complexity of their institutions, the higher education systems, and society at larger.

The visionary leader should not be embarrassed to acknowledge that he knows that he or she doesn't know. It is in this context that I envisage a new role for institutional research in support of decision-making in African higher education. Institutional research is the new intelligence of the institutions' strategic decision-making.

A new role for institutional research

Although rarely considered as part of higher education research, institutional research constitutes a large and important sector in the field of higher education (Altbach, 2014 p. 1314). This year, Karen L. Webber, Angel J. Calderon (2015) edited a book titled: *Institutional research and planning in higher education: global context and themes*.

In the book, various authors provide thoughtful comments, documentation and evidence of the current status of institutional research and planning worldwide. We learn that the origin of IR not only varies by region of the world, but also takes different designations. The differences in the composition, governance structures, funding arrangements of HEIs, functions, etc. make a single typology of IR rather a mission impossible. Yet the growing importance of IR and the tasks associated with it are becoming increasingly important and acknowledged worldwide.

The most recent attempts to theorise about IR identify three main domains, even when they are not related to particular organizational structures, that is, the so-called Golden Triangle of Institutional research.

- (1) Institutional reporting and policy analysis;
- (2) Planning, Enrolment and Financial Management;

- (3) Quality assurance, Outcomes Assessment, Program review, Effectiveness and Accreditation (Volkwein, 2008)⁹.

Institutional Research has developed in different parts of the world and at distinct rates and paces.

Lessons from HERANA

In conclusion, I would like to draw your attention to an example from a university that participates in the HERANA project. HERANA stands for Higher Education Research Network and Advocacy in Africa and is coordinated by CHET. Amongst other things, it produces smart data or analytical information and knowledge based on various performance indicators and policy analysis in 8 African universities.

The HERANA study reports go beyond the usual institutional statistics on number of students and staff to provide comparable advanced knowledge on performance indicators and the conditions under which the institutions operate and pursue their missions and goals.

This project, which is coordinated by an NGO, possesses more *smart data* than the 8 intuitional planning departments of the universities from which it gets its raw data. This is partly because some of these institutions still do not acknowledge the importance of institutional research for their own advancement. They are still used to doing business as usual.

The data from HERANA enables inter-institutional comparisons according to a number of selected performance indicators, as well as analysis of the cultural, governance, autonomy and accountability contexts in which these institutions operate.

There is a university in the HERANA project that intends to transform itself from being a teaching-intensive university into a research-led institution. The university approached a long-term partner to seek support of its transformational agenda. After submitting a concept note to its partner, they received the following comment from the partner:

⁹ Volkwein, J. F. (2008). The foundations and evolution of institutional research. In D. G. Terkla (Ed.), *Institutional research: More than just data*. New Directions for Higher Education, 2008(141), 5–20.

“the document would benefit from some more information in relation to baseline values. How many Master’s and PhD’s does the university (sic) have per discipline/ faculty/ department? This as it is important to know the distribution of current research competence at the institution (sic) on which the future phase will bill on”.

“Some information about the research capacity at other public universities that the institution would be training would be relevant as well”

These two comments are extracts from this particular partner, which is seeking basic information, from the university they want to support, that is lacking in the institution’s concept note proposal. The donor needs that information to support his decision-making, but it is not in the culture of that particular university to organise meaningful and intelligent data. The required information is more than simple institutional statistics from that particular university; rather, it is relational and contextual information. The planning department of that particular university may actually display global information on the number of Master’s and PhD’s, but it certainly knows very little about the research capacity at other public universities as is required.

This is just a simple example to show the need to go beyond the piles of meaningless statistical information on an institution’s descriptive statistics and be able to produce flexible, comparable, user-friendly knowledge and information that can support decision-making for all stakeholders and not just the top institutional leadership and management. This is what I see as the New Role of Institutional Research, .i.e. producing smart data and intelligent knowledge for various internal and external stakeholders. I hope the 22nd SAAIR conference provides us with a unique opportunity to discuss the past, present and future of IR in South Africa, in particular, and in Africa, in general.

Dear colleagues

In this keynote, what I wanted to bring to your attention is not a call to arms against the current academic profile of institutional leaders in African higher education, which might set the wrong tone for future engagement for change. It is rather an invitation to appreciate the complex nature of a critical engagement with our claims to knowledge about our very own institution: the university.

The politics of engagement that I have in mind is a reminder of how all of us are deeply implicated in the project of building a modern African university, but we fail to acknowledge that we don't know that we don't know much about our institutions and systems.

In becoming Institutional Researchers we accept the Socratic self-effacement of knowing that we don't know and in so doing challenge the kind of decision-making that is based on strong convictions with weak evidence.

Without questioning the very knowledge-base that informs decision-making, which should be part of the job description of an institutional researcher, we may amount to nothing less or nothing more than data warehouse wardens of ignorance - ignorance about our very own institutions. So the quest is to move from data warehouse keepers to smart data and institutional intelligence producers.

I thank you for your attention!

Patrício Langa

About the keynote speaker

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