Phases of institutional research development: Two South African Research Management Cases

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Background to the research

- Increased emphasis on research
- Differences in institutional mission
- Mergers and reconfiguring of the South African HE landscape
- Research management

Purpose of study

- Postulate phases of institutional research development
Case institutions

- Technikon
  - Founded 1925
  - Mission of teaching adjusted 1993
  - Managerial
  - Low research activity – 8 publication units per year (1997-2001)
Case institutions

- University
  - Founded 1967
  - Teaching and research mission
  - Managed by academics for academics
  - Highest per capita research output in South Africa 2001 (0.89 per academic staff member)
  - Average of 300 research outputs per year (1997-2001)
Method

- 2 exploratory cases at polar type institutions
- 20 unstructured interviews (12 initial and 8 follow-up)
- Senior managers (co-constructed a new reality)
- Researcher was participant observer
- Unstructured interviews with a schedule
Method

• Analysis – manually on Atlas.ti
• Miles & Huberman transcendental analysis
• Rigour
  – Verification of data by participants
  – Field notes (observational, methodological, theoretical)
• Researcher subjectivity
  – Audit trail (electronic and manual system)
  – Peer debriefing (verification of findings and discussions with colleagues)
Findings

Management philosophy

P 7: (126: 127)
“...you can't just let individual pockets of people continue doing what they are doing, without aligning it to some kind of coherent strategy.”

P 4: (125:127)
“... this is how a university functions... you [an academic] are here... you have the space and the freedom to express yourself, according to your needs, within the broader context of scientific practice.”
Findings

Performance management and career advancement

P11: (227: 229)
“... every person has a timetable and each of my heads of department, each member of staff, will have a little roster.”

P 5: (197:198)
“... I [a researcher] am busy with science and you are not going to influence me in the practising of my science.”
Findings

Academics’ mindset towards research

P 7: (27: 29)
“Remember people came into this institution as teachers, of vocational orientation. That's what you were employed for.”

P 1: (101:101)
“And if you cannot publish then you aren’t an academic. End of story.”
Findings

- Prolonged lack of emphasis on research
- Degree-awarding powers of the technikon
- Centralized research management
- Researcher development philosophy
- Measures of research output
- Postgraduate students
Phases of institutional research development

- Instilling
- Broadening
- Honing

Transfer of knowledge (external focus)

Creation of systems and practices (internal focus)

Anita Venter and John Taylor, 2006