**INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH (IR): THE TOOL FOR TRANSFORMATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Paper presented as Keynote Speech to the Southern African Association of Institutional Research 2009 Forum, 21-23 September 2009, at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa**

**THEME:**

**THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH (IR) ON INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS: ARE WE CLOSING THE LOOP?**

1. **Introduction**

The future of institutional research and its growing strategic role has to be seen in the changing context of universities and colleges of tertiary education. In the Southern African region, as elsewhere around the world, institutions of higher learning are going through an unprecedented period of rapid change and reform. The forces of change in tertiary education institutions are many, varied and compelling. They come from both the external and internal environmental pressures. For example, among external forces are a high social demand (massification) of tertiary education and accompanying demand for programme quality, calls for stronger links between tertiary education institutions with industry, the expectations of governments, employers and society for tertiary education to play a new and complex multifaceted role in the creation and sustenance of a knowledgeable, balanced and highly skilled graduate who will be able to respond to emerging economic and social issues of their society. Tertiary education is also called on to provide for further development of economy and society through applied research that solve various societal challenges such as poverty, disease and economic development.

Internally, tertiary education institutions are facing the challenges of diminishing financial resources, competition for better students, student cultural diversity and managing new expectations of students and faculty. Added to these change pressures is a highly competitive environment driven amongst others by global university ranking mechanisms which are gaining recognition internationally.

The central questions in the foregoing context are, how can institutional research help tertiary institutions respond strategically to these fairly new challenges? What in fact, is the impact of these pressures on institutional reforms and on the role of institutional research?

This paper argues that global and regional pressures for institutional accountability and effectiveness have helped to move institutional research from the “backwaters” to a central strategic place in the organisational hierarchy of our universities and colleges. The need to elevate the focus of institutional research from the routine issues to higher level strategic issues of high quality data, strategic planning and development of performance indicators constitute a positive trend in the recognition of the profession in modern day institutions of higher learning. Thus increasingly, institutions both public and private are recognizing the urgency of generating evidence-based data to make strategic decisions and respond systematically to diverse stakeholder demands.

Are we closing the loop? Yes increasingly so. For although the recognition and use of institutional research as a central tool for decision making and institutional climate analysis differ from one institution to another based on type, size, area of focus and leadership styles among others, it is clear that institutional research is no longer seen by senior management, faculty and students as one of those side functions operating on the fringes of institutional core-business yet competing for scarce resources against the core-business operations of institutions..

The Vice Chancellors, Principals and Senior Managers are getting closer to institutional researchers than ever before. This is a positive trend which the paper presents with some case evidence from the region.

1. **Institutional Research in Global Context**

The central role of institutional research as a tool for transformation and reform of tertiary education institutions has finally been recognised. In Southern Africa however, we are in a situation of unequal development when it comes to recognition and use of the profession of institutional research. South Africa is definitely far advanced while the rest of the countries in the region lack far behind. This is one loop that needs to be closed. How can this be done? As sum of you will be aware next week from September 27th to 29th 2009 the American Association of Institutional Research jointly with the Council of Independent Colleges will hold their Annual Meeting and a training workshop on a theme related to our own in this Forum. According to their website information and I quote:

... “the ability to access, analyse and convert data into strategic information is critical to institutions operating in today’s competitive educational climate. ... Increasingly, college and university leaders seek to base strategic decisions on data-targeted information about their institutions and up-to-date comparative information about other institutions. Institutional accountability to trustees, accrediting agencies and the public, require benchmarking on key indicators of institutional performance.”

Clearly institutional research which to quote Middaugh (1990:36) had for a long time been kept at the backwaters of the institutional operations has in the recent years moved to the centre stage of college and university operations. This way institutional research is beginning to serve the purpose for which it was born in the first place. But what is institutional research? There are many definitions but the most consistent one or perhaps most comprehensive is one by Middaugh, (1990:36) who defined it as:

“... the sum total of all activities directed at empirically describing the full spectrum of functions (educational, administrative and support) at a college or university. Institutional research therefore examines those internal and external environments, embrace data collection and analytical strategies in support of decision making at the institution.”

In this region we need to close the loop of unequal development in the recognition of institutional research. Some institutions in this region do not even have an office of institutional research let alone a systematic culture of programme review and continuous improvement on student service. Given the total absence or limited institutional research culture in Botswana’s colleges and universities, the Tertiary Education Council (TEC) has taken the initiative to provide institutions with seed money to undertake research on institutional research areas. More than ten public and private colleges were last year provided with funds on competitive basis to undertake research on issues relating to their internal environments. It is TEC’s hope that this initiative will assist institutional managers and leaders to recognise the value of institutional research and use the findings to better inform their policies. We need to address the training loop in the region.

Institutional research seeks to provide answers to the different aspects of the operations of a college or university which operations revolve around a three step framework that focuses on **inputs-process- outputs** (IPO) where **inputs** are students, faculty, staff, facilities, indicators of quality, financial resources, etc while **process** refers to institutional mission, academic programmes and services, support programmes, teaching and research, etc., and **outputs** being graduates, value-added outcomes, cognitive outcomes, quality indicators advancement of knowledge, etc. These topics remain at the core of modern day institutional research activities. The areas of academic education, college faculty, cost effective activities, student diversity and enrolment, higher education strategies, institutional evaluation, institutional research invention, peer institutions’ programmes, research design, research methodology, staff salaries, total quality management and institutional performance are all still central topics of institutional research. The difference between the outputs of today’s institutional research and that of yesteryear is the seriousness and the immediate utilitarian value the findings add to decision making. Institutional research work is not only increasingly key to accountability and institutional effectiveness but it is also instrumental in generating evidence to support the ranking of a university or counteracting perceived wrong ranking by those who develop ranking and league tables internationally.

Looking at the papers that will be presented at this forum it is clear to me that we in Southern Africa are on track in terms of the current global issues in institutional research. The topics for this forum include connecting evidence and practice, from evaluation reports to implementation, academic programme review data, potential useful role of institutional research into doctoral success, a way to integrate IR and academic activities to enhance institutional effectiveness, towards a conceptual model for explaining and predicting retention and success in distance education, relating to entrepreneurial needs of higher education institutions, curriculum evaluation, student satisfaction, assessment and graduate employability and language proficiency, etc. This array of themes in the discipline show that we know what constitutes key issues in institutional research in our region today. The way we have framed the topics also show that there is still a lot of gaps in either the extent to which institutional research findings are utilised by institutional leadership or the faculty to improve on programme delivery, retention and satisfaction issues of students and faculty.

Allow me to turn now to the issues of external environment which I believe should perhaps have also been more reflected in the choice of our topics for this forum. While most of the external environment issues are largely more relevant to general academic research than institutional research, there is no doubt that if institutional research would not focus a significant part of their research activity to helping the institutions respond more effectively to external environment issues, then of course, the loop will remain far from closing. We shall be pointing the sword to the wrong target and shall be overcome by the challenges of external environment. Let me however also confess that I am not an institutional researcher neither by training nor by practice. I have worked for some time in a number of areas of institutional research including being an academic tutor for over a thousand students over a period of three years in the 1990s at the University of Botswana. I also sat in and later chaired the Admissions Committee of the same University for two years. During the mid 1990s I had the privilege of chairing a Task Force at the University of Botswana on Restructuring Student Services department. I did all these duties as a part-time worker over and above my full-time work as a lecturer. Even then, at least the University of Botswana had not taken up institutional research as a comprehensive area of inquiry that deserves professional attention and resources. I then had the honour of being one of the early junior scholars while at UB to be sent for a short course on strategic planning organized by the Association of African Universities (AAU) at the University of Natal in the early 1990s.

From this broad involvement in the different areas of the institutional research profession one can say I have some, though no doubt limited exposures to the issues involved in the discipline. I must nevertheless declare my limitations and confess that I now represent a regulator agency for tertiary education in Botswana. Here too we deal with all the issues that relate to institutional performance and development. I believe our work as a regulator complements and synchronises with and must depend on institutional research for assessing tertiary education institutions on their accountability and effectiveness scores.

The agenda of institutional research is informed by internal as much as external forces of change. Often institutional researchers appear to lose sight of the crucial role of the fact that the purpose of institutional research is first and foremost to plan strategic responses by institutions to demand of both internal and external customers of their institutions. I now turn to these external forces which are re-shaping university missions and visions around the world.

1. **Global Trends in Higher Education Implications for Institutional Research**

The past decade from 1998 when the first higher education decade was declared by UNESCO has seen nothing less than a social revolution in tertiary/higher education globally. In 1998 there were around 44 million people enrolled as student/learners in higher education institutions around the world. During 2008 this number had more than trebled to 150 million students/learners globally. Higher education has seen phenomenal growth in just a decade. This major process has had far reaching implications on the size and shape of tertiary education institutions and their management systems. Let me quote from the recent report produced for the second UNESCO Decade for Higher Education held in Paris France, early in July 2009. In its executive summary the Report titled Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution states:

**“An academic revolution has taken place in higher education in the past half century marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity. Comprehending this ongoing and dynamic process while being in the midst of it is not an easy task. Arguably, the developments of the recent past are at least as dramatic as those of the 19th century when the research university evolved, first in Germany and then elsewhere, and fundamentally redesigned the nature of the university worldwide. The academic changes of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are more extensive due to their impact on global nature and the number of people they affect”.**

The Report then identifies massification, globalisation, inequalities in access, increasing student mobility, teaching, learning and curricula, quality assurance, accountability and qualifications framework, financing higher education and the public good-private good debate, private revolution, the academic profession, the research environment and information and communication technology as key drivers of the present global academic revolution. Each of these is a very elaborate topic on its own and I would not dare try to address them here. Suffice to say that they all directly relate to the subject matter of institutional research. Let me just pick a few to illustrate the point.

1. **Inequalities in Access**

The inequalities in access affect women, the poor and underprivileged and those with some physical and other forms of disability. A number of governments have put measures in place to increase access to deal with problems of poor access to tertiary education by the poor and disadvantaged sections of the population. Countries such Mexico, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to mention but a few have even lowered admission requirements to meet the needs of women. The Indian government, for instance, obliges universities to reserve a set of spaces for “socially and backward classes”. The Brazilian government has also mandated the universities to reserve space for disabled and Afro-Brazilian students.

The questions which arise for universities are:

* Are they willing to lower their entry requirements to respond to the needs of this deserving section of the population?
* If so, are universities prepared to provide the required new services?
* If not are universities accountable to their stakeholders and trustees being governments?
* If universities respond positively as many are bound to do, what are the implications of this in the recruitment of the best talent in students and,
* What new student services do universities have to provide to make ensure that this new section of the student community compete effectively with their privileged class compatriots?

These certainly are externally generated policy issues that have direct relevance to the agenda of institutional research. For example, when recruiting new students, what issues and policies should universities to bear in mind and when providing student services, what additional measures should universities put in place. Those of you who deal with planning and overseeing construction of facilities and accommodation know clearly how they were caught napping by the new generation of disabled students in the 1980s. My point here is that the institutional research agenda is a moving target. The agenda is often imposed by government and global trends and policies to which tertiary institutions have to response in a manner that will show that they are constantly accountable and are effective players in the transformation of their society.

1. **Teaching, Learning and Curricula**

This topic is an important one for institutional research as shown in the papers prepared for this forum. However, here too the curricula and teaching and learning issues are often defined by the external environment of economic and social demands as well as the expectations of the student population. It is clear that an increasingly diverse student body also creates pressure to put in place new systems for academic support and innovative approaches to teaching. In particular, the demand for the curricula to shift from focusing on “traditional disciplines” which provide general education and knowledge to science and technical professions with skills and creativity is certainly shaping the size and shape of our colleges and universities more than ever before.

1. **Quality Assurance, accountability and qualifications frameworks**

The UNESCO Report sums up the issues under this heading as follows:

“Quality assurance in higher education has risen to the top of the policy agenda in many nations. Postsecondary education has to prepare graduates with new skills, a broad knowledge base and a range of competencies to enter a more complex and interdependent world”. It is this new context that has given rise to quality assurance and qualifications frameworks movement aimed at creating global common understanding and comparison of programmes. Customers of tertiary education and education in general are demanding some kind of certification of institutions and the qualification they award (Philip G.Altbach, et al., 2009:xi).

Universities and institutions of higher learning find themselves under enormous pressure to show not only their own internal quality assurance measures but also that these meet the demand and standard set by external quality assurance bodies. How are universities responding to this new culture of external supervision and pre-determination of what constitute standards? How are they responding to the shift from general education to a competency based demands of the qualifications framework? Across the world university professors are not taking kindly to this “perceived interference and threats to their academic freedom”. There is a lot of resistance to change by academics. The question is how can institutional research assist in bring about change management processes in universities that will make them more responsive and accountable to stakeholders in this area?

1. **Institutional Research in the SADC Perspective**

The Southern African Universities Research Association (SARUA) has this year completed and released the findings of a three year study of the state of higher education in the region. The findings point to serious shortage of data that can help determine comparison between countries in the region and report challenges and progress more successfully. Many countries do not have data on enrolments, on cost and financing of higher education, on the levels of private sector involvement, etc. As a result the work of synchronising qualifications and allowing for credit transfer from the education system of one country to another is difficult to advance. These changes make it difficult to implement the SADC Protocol on Education and Training of the 1990s.

When the situation is this bad in SADC, especially on the absence or poor quality data on universities one cannot help but question the role of institutional research offices. If that data were difficult at system level of each country, it should nevertheless be available at institutional level. It appears this is not the case. Regional initiatives, regulatory agencies, efficiency and effectiveness issues, relevance and equity will not be addressed in this region until universities come forward with evidence based data on how these policy issues should be addressed.

The dearth of evidence based information on university operations in this region is a signal of the open loop that needs to be closed. The regional bodies, quality assurance agencies and many other customers of our higher education institution are crying out for accountability. They need universities to report their operations and show that they are efficient and effective. We need to train more institutional researchers and do so more regularly. We should get university associations in SADC, Africa and elsewhere to support our training programmes. I am sure many will respond positively to this genuine need.

1. **Conclusion**

Institutional research has come a long way. In many ways institutional research has come of age and in the process closed many but not all of the loops that for many years hindered its growth and recognition in universities. The emphasis on production and utilisation of evidence based data by university leaders place institutional researcher in a critical role of change agents. The use of institutional research by university leaders is evident from those strategic plans, programme performance reviews, reforms in student services and policies as well as the closing loop between institutional researchers and other academics in our universities.

However, the challenges and forces which have shaped colleges and universities’ operations will continue to form the agenda of institutional research and be used to determine the extent to which our institutions of higher learning are or are not accountable and effective in responding to the needs of the stakeholders. The forces or issues are drivers of the continuing academic revolution that began towards the end of the last century and are summarised by Altbach et al (2009) as:

* Student participation will continue to expand, as will higher education systems. Only a few countries will see a contraction in student numbers.
* Women will form the majority in student population in most developed countries and will substantially expand their participation elsewhere.
* The mix of the student population will become more varied, with greater numbers of international students, older students, part-time and other types.
* The social base in higher education will continue to broaden, along with uncertainty about how this will affect inequalities of educational opportunities and between social groups.
* Attitudes and policies relating to access as well as the consciousness among disadvantaged groups will change and become more central to national debates.
* The academic profession will become more internationally oriented and mobile but still be structured in accordance with national circumstances.
* The activities and roles of the academic profession will be more diversified and specialised and subject to varied employment contracts, and
* For many developing countries the need for ever-expanding numbers of university teachers will mean that overall qualifications, now rather low, May not improve much and current reliance on part-time staff in many countries may continue.

These pressures from the external environment are going, as they have done in the past decades, to be critical measures of universities’ accountability and effectiveness to their customers. Are we as institutional researchers ready to be change agents of our institutions by producing more evidence on the foregoing challenges and what should be our the mode of response?