

Towards more effective academic liaison between academics, students and practitioners in the field of public administration and management in the North West Province

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Abstract

Towards more effective academic liaison between academics, students and practitioners in the field of public administration and management in the North West Province

In the light of the changing tertiary education arena in South Africa, the Department of Public Management and Governance in the School for Social and Government Studies of the Arts Faculty, North-West University (NWU) had to revisit its policy on macro organisational aspects. Issues such as more effective communication mediums, the merging and alignment of the University's three campuses, the nature of the ever-increasing competition in the tertiary residential and distance teaching environment, the range, variety and quality of its products and the facilitation and rendering of an improved tertiary teaching service were identified.

In this article the typical nature of the intra, inter and extra academic liaison regarding the Department at NWU are highlighted and some recommendations on more effective communication and work procedures as a result of academic liaison are presented. Examples being that academics and practitioners need to meet more frequently, upgrade effective com-

munication media among them and undertake joint research in a more cooperative manner.

Opsomming

'n Beweging na meer effektiewe akademiese skakeling tussen akademici, studente en praktisyns op die terrein van publieke administrasie en bestuur in die Noordwes Provinsie

As gevolg van die veranderende tersiêre arena in Suid-Afrika, het die Departement van Openbare Bestuur en Regering in die Skool vir Sosiale en Owerheidstudies van die Fakulteit Lettere en Wysbegeerte, Noordwes-Universiteit (NWU) in besonder sy beleid oor makro-organiseringsaspekte in heroorweging geneem. Aspekte soos meer effektiewe kommunikasiemediums, die samesmelting en belyning van die Universiteit se drie kampusse, die aard van die toenemende kompetisie binne die tersiêre residensiële en afstandsonderrigomgewing, die reeks, verskeidenheid en kwaliteit van sy produkte en die fasilitering en aanbied van 'n verbeterde tersiêre onderrigdiens is geïdentifiseer.

In hierdie artikel word die tipiese aard van die intra-, inter- en ekstra-akademiese skakeling met betrekking tot die Departement by NWU beklemtoon en 'n aantal aanbevelings oor meer effektiewe kommunikasie en werksprosedures as 'n produk van akademiese skakeling, word aangebied. Voorbeelde hiervan is dat akademici en praktisyns meer gereeld moet ontmoet, die effektiewe kommunikasiemedia tussen hulle moet opgradeer en dat hulle gesamentlike navorsing op 'n meer samewerkende wyse moet onderneem.

1. Introduction

On the tertiary arena in 2003, the Department of Education's National Plan for Higher Education ordered a fully fledged merging of South Africa's 36 tertiary institutions into ultimately 21 institutions. Subsequently, on the first day in January 2004, an apartheid-induced divide was overcome in the North West Province when the University of North-West, a historically black university (located in Mafikeng) merged with the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, a historically white university (located in Potchefstroom and with a satellite campus located in Vanderbijlpark) to form the North-West University (NWU). By doing this a long process could be undertaken aimed at building synergy and integrating policies, procedures, conditions of service, practices and projects in the tertiary education environment of the province. The management

cadres and councils of both the former universities accepted the inevitable need to change and decided to make a success of the merger-integration process. The universities realised the reconciling role this new merged tertiary institution could play and the obligation it had to the people of South Africa in fulfilling its role as a new, truly South African university.

In view of the aforementioned, the Department of Public Management and Governance (hereafter referred to as Department) in the School for Social and Government Studies of the Faculty of Arts in particular revisited its policy on macro organisational aspects. This policy includes aspects such as the nature of the ever-increasing competition in the tertiary teaching environment regarding the training of the public sector supervisors and managers, the range, variety and quality of its products and services, the merging of the two universities and the facilitation and rendering of an improved residential as well as distance teaching service. The change has to occur by means of, among others, more effective market research, communication, coordination and service rendering to its students and public sector clients.

In this article the nature and extent of the typical intra (inside the Department), inter (between the Department and other departments in the School of Social and Government Studies of the Faculty of Arts) and extra academic liaison (between the Department and other tertiary institutions, public sector institutions and the various communities) regarding the Department at NWU, will be highlighted and proposals will be made with regard to some more practical and easy achievable methods on how to improve it.

2. Nature of academic liaison

In order to proceed with the analysis of the nature of academic liaison in the tertiary educational environment, it should be noted that the action of making contact with another person and/or institution in, for example, the field of Public Administration and Management and the service rendering public sector out there (either getting in touch physically or bringing about communicative interaction and cooperation), depends on among other aspects, the availability and accessibility of an updated contact data base. This could for example contain the contact particulars of interested stakeholders which over time have been identified, noted and recognised as informed, skilled and knowledgeable primary roleplayers. (These roleplayers could be senior and post-graduate students, fellow academics in other departments of the Faculty and at other campuses

of the University, public administration and management departments at other tertiary institutions, professional associations, influential politicians, experienced practitioners and influential members of the society). Such a database should be continuously updated, made available and be accessible to all the stakeholders and could for example contain the following essential information:

- name of institution
- postal address
- telephone and fax numbers
- e-mail addresses
- recognised fields of expertise
- fields of interest and research

Improved contact between the above-mentioned role players can be fostered where thoughts and ideas with reference to the subject Public Administration and Management as well as the practical manifestation thereof can be exchanged, mutual learning can take place and more effective communication channels can be established and maintained. Subsequently, collaborative actions of the respective individuals and/or institutions, to purposefully pool resources to achieve predetermined common goals, should be realised in a more easily and effective manner.

Effective communication is the vehicle to bring about more effective contact, interaction and academic liaison between the aforementioned interested stakeholders. For the purposes of this article, *communication* is defined as "... a process in which a person, through the use of signs (natural and universal) and/or symbols (by human convention), verbally and/or non verbally, consciously or not consciously but intentionally, conveys meaning to another in order to affect change" (Anon., 2003) and to establish mutually beneficial relationships for an organisation (Steyn & Puth, 2000:5). The resulting academic liaison can be described as the manifestation of a mutual deliberation(s) between two or more individuals and/or institutions within the academic environment.

But, unfortunately, research and experience have shown that the nature and extent of contact, effective interaction and any positive academic liaison resulting in the service rendering environment of a typical tertiary institution, differ significantly in terms of its nature and repetitiveness. Furthermore, communicative and collaborative re-

sults brought about through academic liaison, are generally of an unsatisfactory nature and are usually influenced and determined by various personal and organisational variables. Many scholars of technical communication and organisational behaviour have identified the need for closer collaboration between academics and practitioners (Palmeri & Tuten, 2005:313). Hutchens (1998) for instance identified "... isolation in the culture of scholarship, faculty competitiveness, lack of interest, self-limiting behaviour of individuals in groups, and the lack of enthusiasm for professional development activities with university faculty" as some possible reasons for a lack of macro cooperation and the manifesting of unsuccessful academic liaison. Dicks (quoted in Mirel & Spilka, 2002:13) is of the opinion that academics and practitioners display great cultural differences in their perceptions of information value and dissemination, their language and discourse styles, their views of collaboration, their assumptions about employment, and their reward structures.

In a structured data collection effort by the Department of Public Administration and Management at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 1996 it was stated categorically that many academics are even proud to say, and to use it as an excuse not to meet and collaborate freely that "unfortunately the academic environment nurtures individualists" (Unisa, 1996). A long time before this date, this unfortunate state of affairs have also been identified by Bennis and Biederman (1997:4) when they stated that academics regularly say that "It's so hard to collaborate with people and come out with something you are proud of because so many compromises have to be made; and that collaboration is hard work and it takes so much time."

Austin and Baldwin (1991:75) are of the opinion that research has shown that women and men approach collaborative teaching and research relationships differently. The developmental process for women moves toward "connected knowing", whereby relationships are based on trust, empathy, mutual support, and a desire to understand the ideas and experiences of others. On the other hand, men are more likely to construct their sense of self by means of separateness. In the same sense the different cultural and traditional backgrounds of the meeting academia, clients and key role players, also influence the nature and extent of the brought-on academic liaison directly.

Furthermore, the general public out there are not a mass audience. Each member must be defined and addressed personally. Publics are not static; they change as their social environments change.

Often, service rendering institutions assume knowledge of the publics' perceptions of them, but often their information is dated, incorrect and/or greatly limited. Improving or adjusting an external image of a specific institution is futile until the internal image is understood (Hickson & Stacks, 1992:185).

Taking all the aforementioned into consideration one can argue that with reference to improving the nature and extent of contact, academic liaison and service rendering in general at NWU, the Department needs to evaluate its internal image projected in the past, identify the various publics and environments that impact on it, and formulate a plan to project a unified and improved external image in the future. Ignorance of the identity, primary needs and nature of for example the strengths and weaknesses of the Department, as well as that of the existing and potentially new cooperative partners and clients can influence the nature of effective academic liaison significantly. One should have clarity about one's place and role within "the bigger picture" of the rendering of an effective teaching service in Southern Africa; especially in the light of the merger-integration process of NWU's geographically distributed campuses at Potchefstroom, Mafikeng, and Vanderbijlpark and the alignment of its products and services.

Another possible reason for an unsatisfactory level of academic liaison and collaboration up to this stage is that effective academic liaison and collaborative research and services are not always recognised as continuous processes which ought to be effectively managed by influential managers and leaders. The facilitation of it usually goes hand in hand with a lack of capacity (e.g. resources, time and creativity) at the various academic and service rendering institutions which can bring on a closed, non-transparent and inaccessible state of affairs regarding aspects such as contact particulars and typical services rendered by contact persons and/or institutions. An effective manager should try to create, nurture and manage effective relations by means of clear insight into "the bigger picture" and superior managerial skills to align the subordinate and cooperative organisational units towards more regular and more effective liaison. The absence of an effectively drawn up, manipulative, accessible and updated contact database on the Department and School's cooperative partners and clients' identity, primary needs and nature of their strengths and weaknesses can influence the nature of effective academic liaison within NWU significantly.

The nature of, availability and skilful use of modern communication media (electronic mail, video conferencing, et cetera) surely deter-

mine the nature and range of effective contact, communication, interaction and academic liaison between colleagues within the same organisational unit, with students and especially the distance removed clients, individuals and/or institutions. The brought-on academic liaison between committed parties within a cooperative venture must be of an economically viable nature. They should be willing to first get to know themselves by determining their own strengths and weaknesses, then listen to themselves and others by arranging suitable and time-honoured gatherings and forums to first listen to each other attentively and respectfully before they abruptly judge, criticise or try to show their individual superior knowledge and skills.

Taking into account the aforementioned comments on and reasons for the manifesting of unsatisfactory academic liaison in general, the following contact sessions and opportunities for effective contact, interaction and academic liaison for the Department within NWU, however, do occur occasionally:

- Formally structured School and Departmental meetings, intra-committee meetings, project committees as well as informal group manifestations of the members of the Department take place during which pertinent and common ground issues are identified, analysed and debated in a fruitful manner;
- continuous contact with administrative personnel from support sections within NWU occur during which aspects such as the more effective and efficient scheduling of tutorial matter, editorial services, budgetary aspects and distribution of learning material are paid attention to;
- continuous contact with students enrolled in the different modules and courses of the Department manifest through different lecturing media;
- membership of and facilitation of meetings with professional and academic associations and forums inside, e.g. South African Parastatal Tertiary Union, and outside NWU such as the South African Association for Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM) and The Association of Southern African Schools and Departments of Public Administration and Management (ASSADPAM);
- attendance of and participation in multi-disciplinary colloquia within the School, Focus area and Faculty;

- attendance of and participation in national and international workshops, conferences and symposia; and
- facilitation and attendance of, e.g. focus groups and ad hoc-meetings with senior students, practitioners within the public sector and citizens of “the real world out there”.

Unfortunately the order and intervals of most of the aforementioned contact sessions are still seen as being of an ad hoc-nature. The Department of Public Administration and Management at e.g. UNISA, has been accused of keeping a too closed, isolated and “ivory tower” located position in the “real academic and public service rendering world out there ...” (Unisa, 2002).

Subsequently, some proposals will be made on the improving of a typical academic university department’s intra, inter and extra academic liaison.

3. What can be done to bring about more effective academic liaison?

A more positive environment for improved effective academic liaison must be fostered with reference to the place and role of the Department at NWU as an innovated key role player in the applied field of public administration and management in a developing South Africa. To do so it is self-evident that the facilitation and elaboration of effective academic liaison between academics, students and practitioners in the public sector should be regarded as a key strategy.

Established academics and practitioners need to attend more subject related research forums and meet more regularly to challenge the exclusionary comfort zones present in both of their working worlds. With the last mentioned in mind, the following questions could be addressed to them (Barth & Bartenstein, 1998:21):

To the practitioner:

- When was the last time you and a staff member researched a question together before making a decision?
- When was the last time you read a professional public administration and management journal?
- Have you ever written about the work you do, or attempted to have it published?

- Have you ever presented a paper at a professional conference?
- Have you ever contacted an academic to discuss a work related problem or question?

To the academic:

- Have you ever co-authored an article with a colleague, student or practitioner?
- Have you ever asked local practitioners about problems and possible questions they might have regarding the execution of their line functions?
- Have you ever refused to consider a practitioner-generated research project because it didn't fit your own research agenda?
- Have you ever used fellow colleagues, senior students and practitioners to improve or develop a new course or module you are teaching?
- Have you ever run an idea, which you personally came up with, by a practitioner or had a practitioner comment on for example a manuscript?

The aforementioned approach can also be followed to address the following questions to senior students in the field of public administration and management:

To the senior student:

- When was the last time you and a fellow student researched a question together before making a decision?
- When was the last time you read a professional public administration and management journal?
- Have you ever written about your studies and research, or attempted to have it published?
- Have you ever presented or co-presented a paper at a colloquium or professional conference?
- Have you ever contacted an academic or established practitioner to discuss a research related problem or question?
- Have you ever run an idea, which you personally came up with, by an academic and/or practitioner or had them comment on for example an assignment or manuscript?

The pursuit of more effective academic liaison and highly coordinated collaboration between identified role players in a specific subject related environment should be recognised and treated as a continuous process and should be managed by a skilled manager with the right amount of influence, capacity and administrative support. The aforementioned can only succeed if the Department can identify all its subject colleagues and senior students at the various campuses and thoroughly get to know each other. This might at first start in an informal manner and then proceed to a more formal attempt to be informed about each other's strengths and weaknesses. Subsequently, they can then start to plan together in a cooperative manner, to assist each other with capacity building, to win each other's respect and trust, to share ideas, to learn from each other and to improve and expand each other's knowledge and spheres of influence. All the members of the relevant contact and interaction seeking groupings should be involved in the formal introducing phase, and recognised and acknowledged as equals, e.g. exchange of CVs, photographs and information on fields of interest, research and expertise.

Effective communication media should be established, maintained and developed in a continuous manner. The problem of underutilisation of electronic mail and other modern communication mediums should be investigated, problem areas should be addressed and the utilisation thereof in a more effective and productive manner should be encouraged (Naude, 1995).

The informal and formal networks of members of the Department should be identified, made known to each other, developed and incorporated in a departmental data base on accessible and skilled contact persons. A database which is effectively drawn up, easy manipulative, accessible and updated on the identities, primary needs and nature of the strengths and weaknesses of departments, cooperative partners and clients should be created, maintained and managed in an effective manner.

In the case of formal collaboration agreements, the "rules of the game" should be identified, stated clearly and purposefully fulfilled. To work collaboratively, participants must constantly define and re-define how they work together, what roles they play, and who will play which roles, when, and how. Joint research between academics mutually, between academics and senior students (especially post graduate students) and between academics and experienced and influential practitioners should be undertaken. Academic incentives for engaging in public or professional work with the practitioner com-

munity as well as practitioner incentives for contributions to, e.g. the public administration and management literature, should be provided.

Action research by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an institution or community seeking to improve their situation should be carried out in a flexible and adaptable manner (Palmeri & Tuten, 2005:318). It entails a clear identification and definition of the problem(s) to be examined, cogenerating relevant knowledge about the participants, learning and execution of social research techniques, taking actions, and interpreting the results based upon what they learned (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

Team building sessions are essential for the bringing on of group cohesion by means of more effective communication and channelling of synergy in the Department's quest of achieving its optimally coordinated common goals. Team building can lead an organisation to success because it involves more effective communication, coordination and division of labour (Mogotlane, 1998).

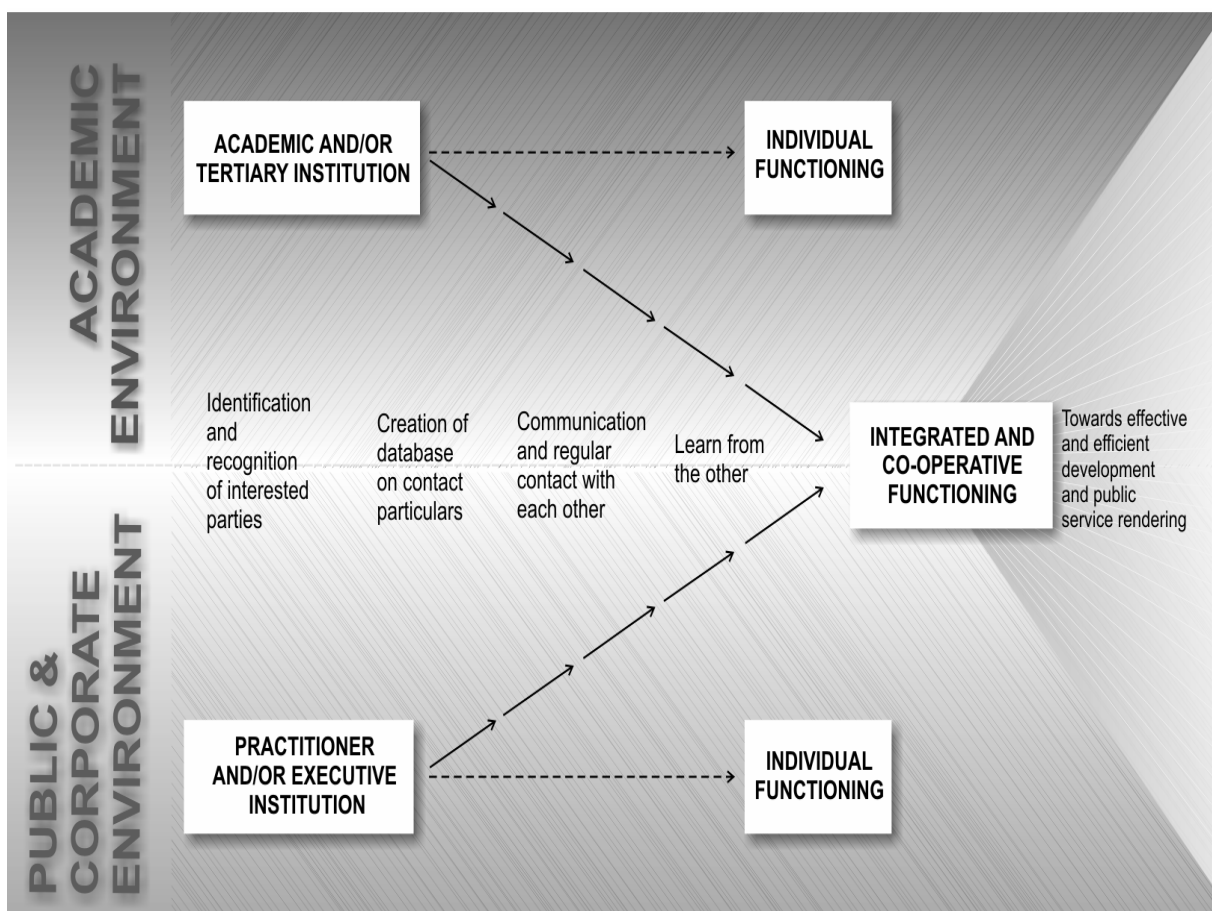
Even though the culture of the research university will continue to require that people distinguish themselves as individuals, the interdisciplinary and collaborative work by the faculty is becoming a common theme, advocated over disciplinary specialisation and research isolation. More and more the distinguished individual coexists within a "great group" and helps others in the group to distinguish themselves (Bennis & Biederman, 1997:4). "If attitudes of mutual respect, understanding, and effective communication prevail, cooperation will replace threat and aggressiveness on the side of resisters and advocates of the change programme." (Harvey & Brown, 1996.)

The increased nature of the academic liaison will ensure that the collaborative partners (students, academics, practitioners and citizens) will be able to use each other more effectively as "bouncing boards" regarding any new developments in the subject and implementation field. As the so-called experts in the subject field of organisational structuring and behaviour within the public sector of a developing South Africa, the Department could ensure that NWU's public administration and management curricula are effectively aligned between its geographically distributed campuses; that it stays relevant and in touch with the ever changing tertiary and public service delivery environment of the North West Province as well as

the country; and that it plays a leading and pro-active role on NWU's macro-organisational and merger integration process.

Taking into account the abovementioned one can, in a simplistic manner, portray the process of bringing about more effective academic liaison within the academic environment of tertiary institutions, in a more graphical manner – see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Academic and practitioner liaison towards integrated and more cooperative functioning



In Figure 1 one can see that the established academic and the practitioner usually operate in separate environments which, in a developing South Africa, should work together to form part of one congruent public service delivery environment.

4. Conclusion

The eminent importance of effective academic liaison in the tertiary teaching and public service delivery environment of the developing South Africa is clear. It is part of NWU's, and especially the Department's responsibility to fulfil a leading stakeholder's role on the terrain of public administration and management within the develop-

ing public service and public sector of South Africa. This can be brought about by pursuing, accomplishing, installing, updating and extending a wide variety of effective and significant ways of academic liaison. This will present the Department with ample opportunities of professional exposure to relevant and subject related environments as well as the installing of exceptional standards regarding education, learning, research, and community service. This will also make a positive contribution towards NWU “becoming a pre-eminent university in Africa, driven by the pursuit of knowledge and innovation” (North West University, 2006).

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Key concepts:

academic liaison
collaborative research
communication media
contact particulars
regular meetings

Kernbegrippe:

akademiese skakeling
gereelde ontmoetings
kommunikasiemediums
kontakbesonderhede
samewerkende navorsing