

A case Report on the Obstacles in Research Publications in a Rural University, South Africa

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Abstract

Background: Universities are the powerhouse; they generate knowledge through research all over the world. A university without research is a black hole that swallows the taxpayers' money without contributing much to them.

Objective: To highlight the obstacles to carry out research in a rural university of South Africa.

Case History: Ms. X was enthusiastic to carry out the research in the university She had so far produced about 100 research articles in peer reviewed journals, despite all odds. She was appreciated nationally and internationally for her work, but the university under study has humiliated and victimized her. This report on Ms. X highlights how this rural university is being disadvantaged by not allowing people to go further. The author will try to present his personal views after informal discussions with various academics and researchers. The highlights of the de-motivating and inhibitory factors are discussed in this manuscript.

Conclusion: The main obstacle is lack of transparency and abuse of power at this rural university. The university functions like a secretive society.

Keywords: *Research, motivating and inhibitory factors.*

Introduction

Thirteen universities from South Africa feature in the 2021-2022 list of top 2000 universities compiled by the Center for World University Rankings (CWUR). The University of Cape Town ranked 269 globally, followed by the University of the Witwatersrand at

292. Stellenbosch, KwaZulu-Natal, and Pretoria University are within the top five universities in South Africa. The University of Johannesburg ranked sixth. There are, however, no rural universities in the rankings in South Africa. In addition, South African universities are dropping in their rankings.¹

Table 1. Ranking of the 13 best universities in South Africa

2021 Rank	2020 Rank	University	2021 score
269	268	Cape Town	77.3
292	275	Witwatersrand	76.9
435	429	Stellenbosch	74.9
483	477	KwaZulu Natal	74.3
580	578	Pretoria	73.3
674	706	Johannesburg	72.5
924	922	North-West	70.7
1163	1200	Free state	69.3
1239	1158	Western Cape	68.9
1313	1295	Rhodes	68.5
1416	1409	Unisa	68.1
1631	1655	Nelson Mandela	67.1
1950	1936	Tshwane	65.9

Research is vital to know the facts of life and it promotes the quality of life as well as the longevity of human beings. It is carried out mainly in universities. There has always been a great emphasis on research in the rural university, and a lot of money has been pumped into it, but it contributed only 0.2% to the research output in 2014 in South Africa.² According to the Department of Higher Education (DHET) Report of 2014, the rural university under study is almost at the bottom of universities in terms of research output.² In a recent list of rankings this university is not even visible (Table 1).

Case History

Ms. X was appointed to this rural university. She was excited to do research, thinking that it would help to get promotion. She started publishing significantly and was awarded a research award but soon these

research publications and these awards become a problem to her. Subsequently, Ms. X was humiliated time after time, and year after year by managers. They wanted to demotivate her so that she stopped her research activities, although in the university forum these managers encouraged her to carry out the research. Since 1996 Ms. X had also been doing community service, and that also benefitted her in the form of international and national awards. From 2008 to 2018, Ms. X underwent three disciplinary enquiries with two suspensions, one forensic audit, and stoppage of her salary and birthday bonus. Despite all this, Ms. X has continued working but her research output has come down drastically.

Discussion

Ms. X was a victim of research publications. She was not promoted despite all her achievements, but

that is not enough. The managers tried hard to trouble Ms. X as much as possible. Discrimination is not uncommon in this rural university, but this is limited only to the managers. The people at ground level are very nice and humble people. There are always protests to increase the salaries at the university but there has been hardly any benefit to Ms. X as her salary has hardly increased. The Human Resource (HR) Department is working on the instructions of management, without following any policy and protocol. This practice is to discriminate against people like Ms. X. In fact, there is shortage of policy documents and managers do not try to develop them. This helps them to manipulate people. There are no norms so usually managers turn a blind eye to a problem if someone takes one to them. There is discrimination by powerful people, as they abuse their power. This discrimination was not uniform, as union member did not practice it, but the Human Resource Department practiced it, especially in relation to salary, leave encashment and so on.

Ms. X has undergone challenges during her service to the university which is difficult to describe because of limited space in this article. The university's management tried to get rid of Ms. X from the university as she had become a threat to fellow professionals. In university meetings, it is difficult for these managers to explain why they do not publish. It is something like a concrete house built by someone in the middle of mud houses. These mud houses are the many nationals who are appointed professors. They have lot of influence on local staff. The residents of the mud houses combine to demolish this concrete house. This was because the number of Ms. X's research publications constituted about 50% of that of her faculty, and about 25% of the whole university.³ This was the report submitted by an independent assessor in 2011.³ The recommendations of an independent assessor just remain on the books, and nothing has been implemented. If this was the position, then there was no reason to send an assessor

and spend funds on futile work. A lot of forensic audits have been carried out in this university, but nothing has been made public. Probably, some of them are buried in the secrecy of university.

Purposely Ms. X was kept all alone in her department, so she might not have time for publication and research. Ms. X took her own time on weekends and holidays to work on research articles. The good part of research publications is that they are measurable and available on the internet. One can count them, and this is a difficulty managers have, how to bring Ms. X down. Generally, universities appreciate their researchers and honour them but in this is not a culture in this rural university. Higher management is generally weak, and therefore the middle management started to abuse power. It may not be known in South Africa how this rural university is functioning as reporting is generally carried out by the same managers, highlighting all the good things going on. Thus the purpose of this article is to enlighten the honorable Ministers of Education and Health so that they may make a note of it.

There is hardly any introspection as to why some universities are publishing research articles and others are not. The simplest answer is that those university will not promote staff without them fulfilling the research requirements and publications, while this rural university hardly cares and, instead, promotes staff members without them meeting any publication requirements. Research office at this rural university introduced another method to promote their favoured ones, i.e., through inaugural professorial lectures. Of course, it was started with the approval of higher management. It takes hardly one hour to get promotion through this system. Generally, it is said that either you publish or otherwise you perish, but this is the opposite at this university. The development of an unbiased promotion system is important to the legitimacy and mission of a university⁴ but at this rural university

research is not a criterion for promotion, and, if it is there, they do not follow it up. There are many professors working in university without a single publication. Generally, there is always an inequality and bias in promotion but not at this high level which is visible in this university. Those who publish are singled out as there is no culture of publications. This is very well evident in the case of Ms. X.

In Ms. X's case, the problem started from the day she joined the department, where she was presented with a case which was a preventable death. Ms. X was new and did not understand their culture. Ms. X has received research awards. She was not allowed to apply again as she received awards for two consecutive years. Anyhow, it was a decision of the higher management of the university, and one cannot challenge them. Again, the university research award application was announced in 2005 and Ms. X applied. She received a platinum award, but this was stopped a day before handing it over her, and a disciplinary enquiry (DC) was started. This was the day when Ms. X became a target to remove her from the university. Ms. X was cleared of that allegation of publishing plagiarized work with the help of the University Union. Fortunately, the chairperson of this enquiry was a top labour law practitioner of South Africa. It was after only a few weeks that another similar enquiry started, which is called as double jeopardy in law. It was a duplication of her own article, but the punishment was more serious, DC with suspension than first enquiry although the charges were much lighter than first one. This suspension was very heavy, as it did not allow the person to come to the university and it did not allow her to leave the city, but her work was displayed as a poster in the corridors of the faculty to get appreciation from visitors. Similar duplications were found among four other professors in the same faculty, but no action was taken against them. This time the enquiry commissioner was an African expatriate who was appointed telephonically.

They certainly wanted to finish off Ms. X.

Fortunately, the university union was very supportive and protected Ms. X. The university head is just like a father of the institution, and he must protect a researcher from outside and inside threats, but this was not the case in this rural university. All her research funds were frozen, and several claims were lost by the Finance Department. The international prize money of USA \$5000 awarded to Ms. X was not handed over to her. It was swallowed in the research office. Again, the research award application was announced but could not conclude because Ms. X was an applicant. Meanwhile, Ms. X received an international and a national award which were not in their control, but this had no impact on their behaviour.

Ms. X faced all the challenges of no promotion, financial loss, and humiliation but she did not stop working, even though time was wasted in DCs so the research work could not be carried out as much. They also stopped Ms. X from going to the forensic pathology laboratory so there was no way to collect data, and therefore her research output came down. The faculty head also did not stop troubling Ms. X. They started a forensic audit and that took many years but remained unfinished until the present date. The report of the audit was requested by the research office as well as by Ms. X, but it remained secret. The Occupational Specific Dispensation (OSD) started in July 2009 and was paid to Ms. X in 2009 but then after that it was stopped, and she was not paid despite repeated requests. The OSD scale is supposed to pay all the professionals in South Africa who are serving in public hospitals, but Ms. X was omitted.⁵ Again, those favoured professionals who were in the faculty were silently shifted to the health department, but Ms. X was not among them.

The DC with suspension was continued by the head of the faculty. This time a convicted prisoner who was in jail for years was appointed as the commissioner

of enquiry. This time the management of the faculty were certain that they would finish off Ms. X. This commissioner disclosed his intention before the start of the enquiry by stating to his friend in a city that he would punish Ms. X. The charges against Ms. X were very superficial. He promptly declared that Ms. X was guilty without any supportive evidence. It is surprising that such an ex-prisoner was appointed to this position. It is not clear in university policy documents if an individual who has a criminal record can be appointed to this position. This is probably because they themselves were promoted in the same manner. Therefore, a cat with a cut tail would like to see another cat without a tail.

The research office is remotely controlled by the head of the institution, who should get out of this office as there are no policy documents in place. Sometimes they show a policy document which does not have any signature of the council chairperson. The university's research output has slowly declined from 1996 to 2018 while at the same time corruption has kept on growing with the same speed.

Ms. X was a victim of this system, but she never thought this was possible. She was thinking that the only way to get to stay in the university through research publications. There are staff in the university who admire and appreciate the work done by Ms. X. She published a sizeable number of articles but the immediate head in the faculty was not happy. This was because they expected to see their name in these publications. At that time, higher management was not so bad, and the research director was excellent, as she promoted publications. She was pushed to the head of the institution and Ms. X was promoted one step higher despite all the faculty managers being against this decision. There are two types of suspension according to the Rhodes University protocol governing suspension. Ms. X did not fit into those criteria. Rather, Ms. X was not suspended

when there was a serious charge of plagiarism, but she was suspended on a lesser created charge.⁶ Ms. X cleared all the disciplinary enquiries and retired with full respect in 2018, which was published in the news media.⁷

There is rampant corruption going on in the university and it is known to everyone. A good example is that Ms. X's personal research funds were taken away without any explanations by the research office. It was also not explained by the finance department of the university. After reporting the matter to the university head, no action was taken. It indicates some suspicion regarding his position. When Ms. X raised this question with the head of the institution, he simply said nothing had happened. Ms. X was surprised by his statement. Thousands of rands were taken away from a researcher who was retiring and for her nothing happened. An HR clerk promoted himself, and increased his salary by himself, and all relevant papers were put on the desk of head, but there was no reaction by the same head.

Ms. X wrote dozens of letters to the head of the university and HR, but very few were answered. There is no culture of replying to a letter. Then Mr. X wrote a letter to the institute auditor on her request as follows:

Dear Mrs. D, I request you to audit all the research funds if you can go back. These funds are generated by me through research publications. These are two accounts. 1. Personal research publications account. 2. Department research publications account. Mr. X is not getting any information, and nobody prepare to help me. It looks like that someone is dosing with bad intention. Attached herewith some examples or copy was issued by research office, but these are not only one. Every year (2001 to till date), I received money from DoE through research publications. Please take audit it from 2001 if possible. Thanks, Mr. X.

The head of the rural university's intention is not to bring the university in line, and he is ignoring all kinds of proof of corruption submitted to him. This is only a small example of it: Ms. X's reply from head of the rural university was as follows:

Dear Ms. X, I am concerned about the email below. Ms M reports to me, and no staff member has the power to request her to institute audits. And in any event, this request is not reasonable. Please refrain from this kind of thing in future. Rgds r

Ms. X has written several letters to all the levels but there has been no progress with her problem. It is difficult to estimate the total financial damage to Ms. X, but it is very heavy.⁸ Her pension has reduced because of the low salary paid for a long time.⁹ The publish or perish dictums is commonly used in universities but in this rural university a new dictum has developed, "Publish and perish."¹⁰

Conclusion

The main obstacle is the lack of transparency and abuse of power. The university functions like a secretive society without any accountability. The control system is just like in Afghanistan as there is multiple organ failure.³ There is a need to change this culture if you wish to develop a viable university which can serve the community.

Ethical issue

The author has ethical permission for case report publication (approved project No. 4114/1999) from the Ethical Committee of the University of Transkei, South Africa. The author tried to keep complete anonymity, but if someone anyhow find it out, then it is not an intention to defame any institution or any individual person. It is a system failure, and that tried the author to improve it.

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