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Reputational Yardsticks That Separate the Best from the Rest in Research: Driving the Accountability Agenda in the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

This study examined ways of supporting the accountability agenda, by benchmarking information and establishing reputational yardsticks in the Zimbabwe Open University through research evaluation. The Zimbabwe Open University use reputational yardsticks where research undergoes rigorous peer review to ensure high standards for research quality and objectivity. As a result of donor fatigue, funding for research is mainly from the national purse. For this reason, the University wants to support research work that makes a difference. However in Zimbabwe there is no simple formula for identifying truly important research. This makes the task more difficult. As funding gets squeezed, researchers in the University face stiffer competition for resources, and it becomes more crucial than ever to develop reliable ways of spotting and supporting the best work. This research is a case study of one University informed by a purposive sample of 16 researchers. Findings appear to justify that reputational yardsticks support the accountability agenda. Arguments put forward are that interest in and demand for the evaluation of research is increasing internationally. It is seen as driven by the demand for good governance and management practices growing in profile on national and international stages. Reputational yardsticks are also justified by the fiscal austerity that is gaining ground in Zimbabwe. Research evaluation demonstrates that policymaking is evidence based and, particularly in the current economic climate, it makes economic sense to demonstrate accountability for the investment of public funds in research. Research evaluation provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment to policymakers, research funders, institutional leaders and research managers. This research thus, conclude that given this growing need for effective and appropriate evaluation of research, it is increasingly important to understand how research can and should be evaluated in different contexts and to meet different needs. The study recommended more formative evaluations, as well as more comprehensive evaluations that cover wider outputs from research outside the standard measures, such as numbers and quality of publications.

Key words: Accountability agenda, reputational yardsticks, benchmarking, research evaluation and squeezed funding.

Introduction

Research is gaining support the world over as the driving force behind development. Policy making in today's world is evidence-based. This evidence is found through research. This shows that policymaking is evidence based particularly in the current economic climate. For policy makers to remain relevant to the electorate it makes economic sense to demonstrate accountability for the investment of public funds in research through evidence-based policy making practices. This research thus set out to examine ways of supporting the accountability agenda which is gaining ground and support in Zimbabwe, by benchmarking information and establishing reputational yardsticks in the Zimbabwe Open University through research evaluation.

Background

Research is defined by the Tertiary Education Commission (2013) as original investigation undertaken in order to contribute to knowledge and understanding and, in the case of some disciplines, cultural innovation or aesthetic refinement. To them, it typically involves enquiry of an experimental or critical nature driven by hypotheses or intellectual positions capable of rigorous assessment by experts in a given discipline. They go on to elaborate by saying it is an independent, creative, cumulative and often long-term activity conducted by people with specialist knowledge about the theories, methods and information concerning their field of enquiry. An important attribute of research is that its findings must be open to scrutiny and formal evaluation by others in the field, and this may be achieved through publication or public presentation (Tertiary Education Commission, 2013). In some disciplines, the investigation and its results may be embodied in the form of artistic works, designs or performances.

According to Harle and Corbett (2014), putting research knowledge at the heart of development is the aim of International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), and will be critical if the world is to respond to the challenges of a post-2015 world. They went on to argue that if countries are to take control of their own development, and to generate the ideas and the policies that they need to do, then it's clear to everyone that higher education and research will need to play a central role. This is where accountability comes in. Mechanisms must be put in place to sieve research in order to come out with those that address the felt needs of society.

According to O'Neill, Foresti and Hudson,(2007) voice and accountability go hand in hand. To them, voice refers to the capacity to express views and interests. To these authors, they also think to the exercise of this capacity is part of the voice. In research evaluation voice is about poor people expressing their views and interests in an effort to influence government priorities and governance processes and in such cases influencing research practices. O'Neill at el (2007) went on to say that accountability exists when those who set and implement a society's rules such as politicians and public officials are answerable to the people who live under those rules. It means in this case the focus is on the

relationship between the state and its citizens and ultimately the researchers and the extent to which the state is accountable to its citizens. Thus they conclude that voice and accountability are separate but related concepts. In some contexts, voice can lead to greater accountability. In most contexts, a lack of voice will lead to a lack of accountability.
The concept of research cycle as enunciated by Harle and Corbett (2014) can be helpful in this discussion. They point out that they find the concept of a research cycle a helpful way to illustrate what we do: research is done, it's published and disseminated, it's made available to others, accessed by researchers and students, and then used to do new research. There's also a further critical off-shoot here: how research gets taken up outside of academia, by practitioners and policymakers and other users.

According to Thomson Reuters (2008), Because research is a central function, the university must evaluate its performance. Data on research performance helps to inform strategic decisions about what areas of research to support or build. It also helps the university leaders understand the institution's position relative to global and domestic standards of research production: How much research is conducted? What is its impact? How many of the faculty members' articles are published in first-class journals? Is that number of publications increasing or decreasing?

What Is Good Research?

Good research should make an impact. American Association of Universities appear to agree and point out that research universities must show a commitment to support its local and national communities. They even went further to suggest that research universities must contribute to international wellbeing by taking actions and developing a culture which works to maximise the short and long-term benefits of the research and education it performs (American Association of Universities, 2013).

According to Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014), good research reflects a sincere desire to determine what is overall true, based on available information; as opposed to bad research that starts with a conclusion and only presents supporting *factoids* (individual facts taken out of context). They then go on to say that a good research document empowers readers to reach their own conclusions by including:

- •A well-defined question.
- •Description of the context and existing information about an issue.
- •Consideration of various perspectives.
- •Presentation of evidence, with data and analysis in a format that can be replicated by others.
- •Discussion of critical assumptions, contrary findings, and alternative interpretations.
- •Cautious conclusions and discussion of their implications.
- •Adequate references, including original sources, alternative perspectives, and criticism (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2014).

To this end, Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014), maintain that good research requires judgment (or *discernment*) and honesty. To Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014), good research:

- •carefully evaluates information sources.
- •acknowledges possible errors, limitations and contradictory evidence.
- •identifies excluded factors that may be important.
- •describes key decisions researchers faced when structuring their analysis and explains the choices made (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2014),.

Describing decisions reached is important in that it helps consumers of research output to understand recommendations put across. Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014) support this idea by arguing that if various data sets are available, or impacts can be measured in several ways, the different options are discussed. Sometime, multiple analyses are performed using alternative approaches and their results compared. We also learn from Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014) that good research is cautious about drawing conclusions. It is careful to identify uncertainties and avoids exaggerated claims. It demands multiple types of evidence to reach a conclusion. It does not assume that *association* (things occur together) proves *causation* (one thing causes another).

What Is Bad Research?

The ideas here on bad research come from Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2014 who are of the opinion that bad research often contains jumps in logic, spurious arguments, and *non-sequiturs* ("it does not follow"). They go on to argue that bad research often uses accurate data, but manipulates and misrepresents the information to support a particular conclusion. Questions can be defined, statistics selected and analysis structured to reach a desired outcome. Sometimes alternative perspectives and data can be ignored or distorted. Critics of an idea sometimes exaggerate issues of uncertainty. They imply because we don't know everything about an issue, we know nothing about it (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Research which we often refer to as scholarship investigates ideas and uncovers useful knowledge. It is personally rewarding and socially beneficial. But research can be abused. In Zimbabwe, donor fatigue has adversely affected research funding. Thus, funding for research is mainly from the national purse yet scientific research itself, and recording and communicating research results through publications, has become enormous and complex. It is so complex and specialised that personal knowledge and experience are no longer sufficient tools for understanding trends or for making decisions. With limited funding, this calls for the need to separate the best from the rest. Universities need to be selective, to highlight significant or promising areas of research, and to manage better investments in research through research evaluation. A publicly funded university must account for its performance as part of national or professional accountability protocols.

Research Question

How can the Zimbabwe Open University separate the best from the rest as part of national or professional accountability protocols in research? What then can be done to separate the best from the rest?

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

This research was driven by the view that:

"Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." -attributed to Senator Patrick Moynihan

The purpose of this research was to assess the impact of research and then use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their research funding to researchers in the university. The reputational yardsticks so generated provide accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment. It will also provide benchmarking information that could be used by researchers in pursuit of research excellence.

Reputational yardsticks

In the Zimbabwe Open University, the reputational yardsticks had more to do with the impact of research. It has also to do with making our research relevant beyond academia. This research has to be beneficial to the wellbeing of society. This exercise is undertaken in order to provide an assessment of the quality profile of research undertaken in the University so that this can cascade into influencing the reputation of the university both nationally and internationally. This means to say decisions on what research outputs to be funded from the thin budget are of great importance to the future of our researchers. These decisions will be reached solely on the basis of maximising the quality of the outputs that can be presented and therefore the university's reputation for its research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework behind this exercise is the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is the new system for assessing the quality of research in ZOU that has been borrowed from other established research countries. Its main purpose is to inform the selective allocation of research funding to ZOU researchers, provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks and provide accountability for public investment in research and demonstrate its benefits beyond academia. This is a process of expert review where researchers are invited to make submissions in their areas of expertise. Submissions will be assessed by an expert panel of experts in the area who apply a set of generic assessment criteria and level definitions, to produce an overall quality profile for each submission.

Methodology

This research was a case study of one university. It was informed by a purposive sample of 16 researchers.

Results

Reputational yardsticks that separate the best from the rest

Some of the following reputational yardsticks which were raised by researchers in the Zimbabwe Open University were seen as able to separate the best from the rest. Researchers were of the opinion that as funding grows thinner, research excellence need to be upped in order to support the accountability agenda.

Critical assessment by qualified experts

Critical assessment by qualified experts sometimes referred to as peer review was mentioned in this study as important in separating the best from the rest. They called for *peer review panels* groped in subject areas such as biological sciences, humanities, education leadership and others. These researchers preferred blind so reviewers. In such a case, authors do not know each others' identify. To them, this enhances research quality. This argument does not mean that only peer reviewed documents are useful because we all know that much information is distributed in working papers or reports. Sometimes, many published ideas are proven false. Blind peer-review was preferred because this process encourages open debate about issues. The American Association of Universities (2013) appear to agree with this stance. In their characteristics of research universities, they claim that the pursuit of excellence across all its operations, calibrated though informed, independent, disinterested assessments from peer organisations and individuals from outside the university are important components. This can only be arrived at through expert assessments. They also add that a commitment to transparent, meritocratic systems for selecting faculty, staff and students, creating an internal environment that nurtures learning, creativity and discovery, and will unleash and develop the potential of its staff and students, both undergraduate and (post)graduate (American Association of Universities, 2013).

Addressing community felt needs

Researchers in this study were of the opinion that researches addressing community felt needs should be given preferences. To them, research must address issues that affect the community, the country, the region or the world at large. According to American Association of Universities (2013), the focus of university research is on expanding knowledge, leading to new understandings, products and processes that strengthen national economies; improve the quality of life of the nation's citizens and enrich its culture.

Depth and breadth of research

The depth and breadth of research was seen in this study as separating the best from the rest. This appears to be confirmed by American Association of Universities (2013) who argue that a major research effort which has both depth and breadth is an important characteristic of a research university. They then went on to add that producing

internationally recognised research results which are broadly disseminated through publication, teaching and community engagement (American Association of Universities, 2013).

Use of reputable sources by researchers can enhance the depth and quality of their research. The argument for sources is supported by Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014) who argues that sources are needed for both the conceptual framework of the piece (e.g. levels of public space in squatter settlements, types of planning responses to disasters) and for the facts and figures you use to support your argument. Sources are also typically needed for the methods you use to show that you are building on earlier work, even if modifying it in some way. They also add that better sources are published by reputable presses (e.g. University Presses), are refereed (blind reviewed articles), or are by reputable organisations. To Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014), one source is frequently not enough, particularly for controversial or complicated issues. They think that better writers use multiple sources to allow the reader to see the balance of evidence.

According to Thomson Reuters (2008), citations are the references researchers append to their papers to explicitly show earlier work on which they have depended to conduct their own investigations. They argue that tracking citations and understanding their trends in context is a key to evaluating the impact and influence of research. As described in Eugene Garfield's (cited in Thomson Reuters, 2008) reasons for citing a paper, the citations in academic papers create a record of influence. Motivations for citing a prior work can include:

- •Paying homage to pioneers.
- •Giving credit for related work (homage to peers).
- •Identifying methodology, equipment, and the like.
- •Providing background reading.
- •Correcting one's own work.
- •Correcting the work of others.
- •Criticizing previous work.
- •Substantiating claims.
- •Alerting researchers to forthcoming work.
- •Providing leads to poorly disseminated, poorly indexed, or un-cited work.
- •Authenticating data and classes of fact (such as physical constants).
- •Identifying original publications in which an idea or concept was discussed.
- •Identifying the original publications describing an eponymic concept or terms.
- •Arguing against the work or ideas of others.
- •Disputing the claims of others to have been first with their work (Thomson Reuters, 2008, p. 5).

Thomson Reuters (2008) further add that not only can the influence of an individual research paper be traced through its citations in other papers, but the influence of a body of research in a specific domain can be determined.

Contribute to community, national, regional and international welbeing and inclusivity of the study

The respondents in this study were of the opinion that relevance of the study is important. To the respondents in this study, the study has to be placed in the context of current professional practice or knowledge. If this is not there, then the research can be questionable. Another important aspect that was cited is that of the potential contribution of the study to practice. Unite for Sight (2013) is of the opinion that the purpose of research is to inform action. They claim that the study should seek to contextualize its findings within the larger body of research. To them, research must always be high quality in order to produce knowledge that is applicable outside of the research setting with implications that go beyond the group that has participated in the research. Furthermore, the results of a good study should have implications for policy and project implementation.

Relevance can also be further judged through the inclusivity nature of the research. Researchers should be open to divergent views. They should be inclusive in their arguments. The American Association of Universities (2013) appear to agree and point out that tolerance, recognition and welcoming of competing views, perspectives, frameworks and positions are necessary attributes in the research community. They support their argument by pointing out that inclusivity is necessary to support progress, along with a commitment to civil debate and discussion to advance understanding and produce new knowledge and technologies (American Association of Universities, 2013).

Evidence of dedication to research integrity

One major finding of this study was that researchers must be dedicated to research integrity. The respondents were of the opinion that there are ethical obligations that all researchers must adhere to. This to them, will separate the best from the rest. This idea has been echoed elsewhere. For instance, American Association of Universities (2013) is of the view that a dedication to the highest standards of research integrity and its associated ethical obligations is what distinguishes the best from the rest. They claim this because they are of the belief that dedication to research integrity ensures the probity of data collection, assessment and analysis independent of any considerations of funding source or of personal or institutional benefit, and which is supported by explicit and effective processes to investigate and respond to any allegations or perceptions of unethical research or behaviour (American Association of Universities, 2013).

Distinguish between significant scientific fact and meaningless statistical babbling

Research evaluators must be able to distinguish between significant scientific fact and meaningless statistical babbling. "Most murders in South Africa are committed with 24 hours of eating bread". With this information, some articles can find their way in dubious journals. You can be duped by the title. However, when your go deeper, you will notice that despite the title, the journal is not a real academic journal. Once you read the material. You will know that it lacks peer review and other requirements for academic verification. It is unlikely that such an article would pass normal

peer review because it contains critical errors and omissions. In some instances such articles will be published outside the journal's scope to dupe readers.

Pathological science

The respondents in this study cited unverified scientific claims used by researchers to dupe research consumers. According to Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014), this is pathological science which refers to scientific activities in which "people are tricked into false results ... by subjective effects, wishful thinking or threshold interactions," or "the science of things that aren't so." They often involve inaccurate or premature publication of unverified scientific claims, and sometimes intentional fraud.

Another example (Economist cited in Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014) was the 2006 claim by Duke University researchers Anil Potti and Joseph Nevins that they could predict the course of cancer growth and the most effective chemotherapy treatment for individual cancer patients. This was considered a major breakthrough. The University soon began clinical trials based on this research, funded by the America's National Cancer Institute. But peer scientists soon found numerous errors in the research and were unable to replicate results.

A subsequent investigation by the Institute of Medicine (a board of experts that advises the American government) identified the following structural problems in the research process:

- Peer reviewers were not given unfettered access to the researchers' raw data.
- Journals were reluctant to publish letters critical of the published articles.
- The University failed to consider financial conflicts of interest that can encourage researchers to falsify or exaggerate claims of success, and publish premature results.
- University administrators accepted researchers' claims and gave little consideration to critics.
- Research oversight committees lacked expertise to review the complex, statistics-heavy methods and data produced by experiments.
- Verification relies on peer review that is generally unfunded and often given little administrative support.
- The methods sections of papers often fail to provide enough information for peers to replicate experiments (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2014, p. 13).

Inflated self assessments

Inflated self-assessments are done by people who know very little but are not aware of this terrible shortcoming. These people over rate themselves. According to Victoria Transport Policy Institute (2014), this is the challenges of unskilled researchers. Such unskilled people often rate their knowledge and ability much higher than it actually is, suffering from *illusory superiority*, while more highly skilled people underrate their own abilities, suffering from *illusory inferiority* (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2014).

Recognize the dynamic, fluid nature of information.

Researchers in this study, were of the opinion that peer evaluators must recognise the dynamic and fluid nature of information.

Currency of information

Many researchers come out with information that has already been overtaken by events. Such information is not useful to the users.

Moderation panel

The respondents in this study called for the moderation panel whose role was to ensure that the peer reviewers have applied themselves above board. They claimed that *peer-review panels should be subject to the oversight of a Moderation Panel* which is composed of the various experts who act as moderators and also include peer-review panel chairs. The major role of the Moderation Panel is to ensure that the assessment framework is applied consistently across the panels, while at the same time avoiding a situation in which the judgements of the panels are reduced to a mechanistic application of the assessment criteria (Tertiary Education Commission, 2013). They should be in a position to provide an opportunity to review the standards and processes being applied by the panels and then go on to establish mechanisms and processes by which material differences or apparent inconsistencies in standards and processes can be addressed by the panels. The panels are not cast in stone and hence need to be looked into. According to Tertiary Education Commission (2013), Moderation Panels should work to ensure that peer assessors have conducted their assessments appropriately, fairly and consistently and that they applied the Guidelines in a reasonable manner. In such a case, the results should provide an accurate picture of the relative research performance of researchers in various subject areas and nominated academic units.

Conclusions

It is important that all research evaluations should recognise that all relevant policies that are put in place recognise the broad, pervasive and long-term benefits of university research and education. Universities and research centres must move fast to continuously staff develop their staff, develop lines of investigation, and compete for funds to make policy making evidence-based processes. Research evaluations helps in making informed decisions, developing strategies, demonstrating capacity and promoting accountability to the electorate. Through research, universities can help publicise the university and attract students and researchers, as well as donors and other supporters. Basing on good research, the public relations and development units of the university can benefit from objective figures about the university's research

outputs and accomplishments. These achievements create the demand from other universities for research collaboration, staff exchange and sustainable strategic relationships.

The Zimbabwe Open University, through the establishment of reputational yardsticks that separate the best from the rest, aims to develop and sustain a dynamic and internationally competitive research sector that makes a major contribution to economic prosperity, national wellbeing and the expansion and dissemination of knowledge. It also will help justify the case for public spending in this area.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusions, this research recommended that:

- Research evaluation should protect the confidentiality of individuals
- Research evaluators must strive to maintaining the confidence and cooperation of the research community
- Research evaluation must ensure that the results are presented in a useful and meaningful manner for the benefit of relevant stakeholders, such as students and research funders
- Research evaluation should provide information that will assist researchers in benchmarking their research performance so that they are able to improve their decision-making with respect to priority setting and the allocation of resources
- Research evaluation should provide the support and environment that will ensure that research institutions continue to flourish; sustaining the foundational characteristics that make research institutions an invaluable part of any national infrastructure.
- Research institutions must recruit, across a broad range of disciplines, the talented research personnel which in turn attract the exceptional graduate students who themselves become magnets for new researchers.

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