



The following definitions of soccer and rugby tell us much about the academic malaise. Soccer consumes 80 minutes involving 22 players pretending to be in serious pain, rolling about in the field in abject misery. Except, of course, when one of them scores. Then the entire team engages in a writhing group grope worthy of a porn movie. Thirty rugby players, in contrast, spend the 80 minutes pretending *not* to be in pain, and might high five or crash into each other when scoring a try. The old adage that soccer is played by gentlemen watched by hooligans and that rugby is played by hooligans watched by gentlemen no longer applies.

Whether in pain or not, the players of both sports at top level earn obscene salaries, though rugby players are also hedging for their future health and potential disability – whether temporary or permanent. They are finished by their early 30s whereas the soccer group gropers can continue groping for a while yet.

Academics, in contrast, have no sell-by date except those determined by pension funds, institutional policies and the stresses of untenable staff:student ratios, under-prepared students and administrative meltdown. Far too many take early retirement just to get their heads back into normal shape.

The solution: we should think of ourselves as golfers, that rather boring sport where huge crowds meander across water-sapping greens after (mainly) men who hit little white balls across what one might call a delightfully manicured battlefield interspaced with obstacles like bunkers, ponds and the occasional wild life. All very genteel. Golfers live to a ripe old age still playing. Look at Gary Player. Golfers try to level the playing grounds by means of a mechanism they call handicaps.

However, golfers winnings, like tennis players, are measured in US dollars. Where the rest of us cretins are just happy to bank our meagre monthly pay cheques, top sportsmen earn millions. These millions used to be plastered all over the media along with their scores. OK, it's just a few of the professionals who achieve this status, making the soccer players look poor, even as they are bought and sold by their clubs in what otherwise might be categorised as a legal high-end slave trade where the relationship between coaches and pedophilia are now under the spotlight.

In the academic world, in South Africa, there are the research millionaires who play the right sport (sciences, engineering, medicine) – so to speak – and the rest of us also-rans who play in poor sports (Humanities, Education). We don't try to hit little white or larger balls here and there, but rather to change the nature of the game itself. We're lucky if we can score but two 'accredited' articles annually, while the big hitters make the Proteas look dismal as they reach into the 300-550 annual article accomplishment. That's one plus publication a day!

This extraordinary achievement – which can only occur through massive funding, the availability of literate and competent lab assistants, a low teaching load, good institutional support and a factory production-line – is what separates these superstars from the plodders looking for their balls in the bunker sand. Among the plodders, of course, are those who write for readerships, not balance-sheets, indexes or bureaucrats. We thus rarely get out of the bunkers, and when we do, we are reminded that the golfers and the tennis players are the monetary role models.

So, how does UKZN play this game? Once upon a time when academics made the rules and management followed them, all peer-reviewed journals – whether accredited or not - qualified for internal disbursements of research incentives, if on a differential scale. Like with medical aids, the funds earned by the accredited articles cross-subsidised those that did not qualify for this arbitrary qualifying status.

Everyone was happy.

Actually, only the academics were happy. At some point a manager changed the rules. The 'unaccredited' journals were removed from the Natal University list. As one research manager observed: 'All other research publications simply became invisible – and with this, a major part of our research in the Humanities – and were not included in the annual research publication.'

UKZN at its recent Awards Ceremony for the Top 30 researchers, into which I squeezed, adopted the golfing metaphor. It listed the top winners of grant applications in rands. The Top 30, a different list that was not publically monetised, however excluded the top researchers who did not play on the designated ‘accredited’ greens, as their courses [the journals in which they published]) had not made the DHET lists. UKZN imperils its international standing as the rankings agencies care not a jot for DHET accreditation, but rather global exposure.

Recently, I was invited to external a PhD from another university. I did not apply to undertake this minimally remunerated and often arduous and certainly thankless task. I was *invited* to do the work. But ironically, this university wanted to justify its invitation to me by asking me to vet myself, and for me to categorise my publications into ‘accredited’ and ‘non-accredited’. It was clear that the ‘accredited’ journals (i.e. only those on the SAPSE list) were to be taken seriously. Since only South African journals can be ‘accredited’, the IBSS and WoS-listed journals not subject to this classification, it was unclear to me why some busy bureaucrat wanted this division. So I told the university to take a hike. I don’t mind being underpaid to examine - a bartering exercise at best - but I refuse to waste a morning justifying my employment by mindless form filling.

In response, the department concerned filled in its university’s form from my CV. Form-filling thus becomes the real academic task. While I understand that examiners need to be vetted, this particular exercise had little bearing on my ability and experience to be an examiner.

Thus, my story on what academics are now required to do, continues, and the systems and procedures become ever more bizarre, time-wasting and ineffectual. A bad examiner will be a bad examiner no matter how many accredited publications they have, whether or not they fill in the forms required by the administrators.

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author’s own.*