



The UKZN Griot. Of NRF and Ratings

BY:

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It's the NRF rating season again. Round and round we go. Bewildered researchers are either licking their wounds having been denied rating, or crushed from a prior expectation of being bumped from an A to a C3, or no rating at all. Is this what our colleagues really think of us? So we lick our wounds for another year, blame the system, blame the NRF and blame the disciplinary panels. Others bury their heads in doing yet more teaching. Some of us kick the dog. A few consult the consultants provided by the Research Office, but like some of our students, some expect the consultant to fill in their forms for them.

Having served on two panels and refereed applicants from a variety of disciplines, done a stint on the NRF appeal committee, and advised UKZN applicants, I have worked from the inside and from the outside of the ratings process. Amongst my contributions have been workshops conducted at other universities and conferences on getting rated. I know the system - warts and all. There's no easy cure. St John's Wort won't work on the depression that accompanies rating applications, or girding one's loins to start the process. Neither will acupuncture, aromatherapy or reflexology, though these are infinitely preferable to doing rating.

Ratings applications are more stressful than doing tax returns. The latter steals our hard earned income, the former, often, ruins our self-esteem. Yet, both are supposed to build capacity, encourage us to be good citizens, and enable us to make contributions to society. So we persist with taxes and ratings, and KPAs and SAPSE, and work load calculations and other indices that bear less and less resemblance to actual reality.

These are all part of the new global instrumentalism resulting from the demands for public accountability that now characterise the public sector except for, in South Africa, the public sector itself. Those who hold us accountable are themselves exempted from being held accountable. Ratings, like IQ tests, are of course biased. They measure ephemera, and outcomes may differ between panels, and not everything that should be measured, or better still, qualitatively assessed, is included. This would be impossible.

Those of us who play the game are both stressed and positively challenged by it. My own maverick research career might have been much more narrowly and boringly focussed had the rating system been introduced to the Humanities along with the Sciences from the beginning. Personally, I don't like being boxed into narrow conceptual or methodological trajectories. But this also reflects my transdisciplinary origins and broad interdisciplinary mandate in setting up CCMS in 1985. Ratings criteria can't easily handle critical hybridity, transdisciplinarity and intellectual mavericks. Neither can they easily handle postdisciplinary researchers who have no clear disciplinary home.

So, many academics just opt out. They are neither stressed by it, and consider their passive resistance as a positive. But they thereby limit their horizons promotion-wise. This is Finagle's Law at work: 'The likelihood of a thing happening is inversely proportional to its desirability.'

The rest of us negotiate the following contradictions and, as is well known, these hit the Humanities hardest:

- SAPSE as God; one has to balance submission to top international journals not on any qualifying list with what for the Humanities are largely local back door accredited operations. Nothing wrong with this except that such journals are not taken seriously by NRF ratings panels. And, remember folks, the panels are constituted from our own peers, some of whom are the editors of such journals.
- Disciplinary-boundedness; UKZN has done away with clear boundaries in the name of transformation, ie dismantling departments, disciplines and killing off HODs. According to Rozenzweig's Rubric, departments, ironically, are simultaneously the most capable of producing change, but the least likely to do so. So they get unbundled even as their staff try to retain the bundles.
- NRF panels rate in terms of disciplines. Many in the Humanities have lost their disciplinary paths which now fall between (post-)disciplines; many are teaching topics in which they are not qualified, and nor do they necessarily learn about the epistemological histories of the subjects they are now teaching. These folks will find themselves at a ratings disadvantage. Take a hike to no-ratings land. It's not far.
- The SAPSE-led push for quantity vs. the NRF-led push for quality and impact. While the one does not cancel out the other this tension does affect choice of journals in which to publish. We all know

about instances where a bad paper is simply round-robbened by its author until a SAPSE accredited journal picks it up. Everybody does get published thus – eventually. But remember, the NRF referees will pick this up and crucify the ratings applicant for publishing a paper that everyone but the author (and the clueless reviewers) knows should never have seen the light of day.

- The consequences of parochialization; academics who want to be global scholars need to publish locally and globally, whether or not in SAPSE-accredited journals. We put a brake on our international careers and South Africa's global standing when we forget about the rest of the world.
- In reading the proposed SAPSE accreditation policy, it once again forgets the Humanities. Are we really surprised? The answer is simple. Just include one more index to the list, the Modern Languages Association. But elegant simplicity is not the way we do things in South Africa.
- More significantly, journals that do not obtain and retain ISI, Scopus and IBSS status will have to reapply for 'accreditation' every five years. Good idea, then those journals still listing long dead members of their editorial boards, or which lack impact, might wake up and smell the coffee.

Actually, engaging in the ratings process is a positive career pathing experience, though the outcome may be disappointing. I recommend it for everyone.

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