

The UKZN Griot

Of Good News and Bad News



KEYAN G TOMASELLI

UKZN is usually the butt of bad news. Sometimes, however, the good news outweighs the bad. On the same day (1 June, 2012) when the intrigues again hit the national press with new and old allegations leveled against our Vice-Chancellor, as prominent was an opposite editorial Daily News story on the key role that UKZN scientists will play with regard to the just announced Square Kilometre Array Radio Telescope to be located in the Northern Cape. That news may furthermore have put an end

to fracking in the Karoo. Now that's good news for the environment. The good news is also that UKZN continues to offer world class research even as it is dealing with institutional fracking. We know this because Nicola Jones's The Witness article (June, 20) emphasised this point. Hey man, we're also No.1 in maths research.

Daily, I think of the sustained newspaper reports on UKZN's management style and the Mad Magazine-like "Spy vs. Spy" exposés of so-called "dirty tricks". UKZN would be a great place to learn how to write thrillers, especially of the medical variety.

The teaching of creative expression in all disciplines could be a winner. A School of Creative Writing should be instantly established. The first novel could be A Chip off the Old Block: Shaiking It Up All Over.

Then I wonder about other institutions. Here are some ad hoc observations for which I have only anecdotal evidence, so I won't defend myself in court on these:

One top-rated university seemingly places its graduate students on the graduation list even before the thesis has been marked. Clearly, it knows what the outcome is even before the examination is concluded. This would constitute a disciplinary offense at UKZN.

Some institutions have been known to pass a thesis without revision even when it has been failed by one of the examiners. The UKZN proctor awaits such disciplinary offenses at UKZN.

I have marked PhDs from other institutions that are so bad that I queried their being submitted at all. At UKZN just getting the proposal approved is a real achievement.

Where some other universities appoint lecturers with Honours degrees, at UKZN clear benchmarks have been put into place. The under-educated will no longer be employed to under-educate the already ill-prepared.

Unlike universities in many other countries, retrenchments of permanent academics is not even a last resort when it comes to balancing budgets. But the A-rated world-class over 65ers are expendable.

Where some universities have dumped KPAs, at UKZN they continue to bedevil labour-management relations. However, when assessing research and supervision productivity of the majority of employed academics, one begins to understand why they

are in place. When only 20% of the academics are producing over 100% of the university's research target, one must ask what the rest are doing between teaching terms. While we might resent KPA benchmarking, to what extent have academics brought performance management on themselves?

SAPSE incentives at some universities are paid out as (taxable) salary. This a bad idea. Extra individuated income rather than building collective research capacity becomes the primary motivation for doing research.

The good news is that UKZN made it into Generation Next's 2012 Youth Brand Survey (Sunday Times). The bad news is that UKZN scored 9th, after Boston College but one above the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, otherwise known as CPUT. This score is not because of bad news about UKZN, but because youth and students compare notes on twitter, facebook, and other social messaging sites about the social life of different campuses. The popular perception is that UKZN is bottom of the pops in terms of this (recruitment) indicator. The good news is that this lack can be easily rectified with creative campus social planning even as bad news makes the national press.

The bad news is that some universities in their relentless march towards instrumentalism now require that their 'teaching' staff earn education diplomas. In this way will they be taught how to teach the taught and how to tighten the tautology that what researched universities do is teach.

The good news is that the researchers who wish to critically educate their charges rather than shovel pre-primed information down students' throats, will always succeed. But they will be punished

anyway by management bureaucrats who have boxes to tick, forms to fill in, and SAPSE forms to manage. Will the technocrats be made to obtain education diplomas so as to learn what it is we supposedly do?

The bad news is that universities are employing more and more bureaucrats trained in managerial instrumentalism and fewer and fewer academics who put education above training.

The good news is that UKZN can still purchase good news, which it does regularly. The bad news is that this good news costs a bomb.

All this reminds me of Flip Wilson's Law: "You can't expect to hit the jackpot if you don't put a few nickels in the machine". Bad news however, is rarely rectified by good news. But I do need to remind my readers that these Laws that I keep quoting are not all made up by me. Many, like the one cited here, were derived by managers, CEO's and management professors, who know how the real world works. We really should pay attention.

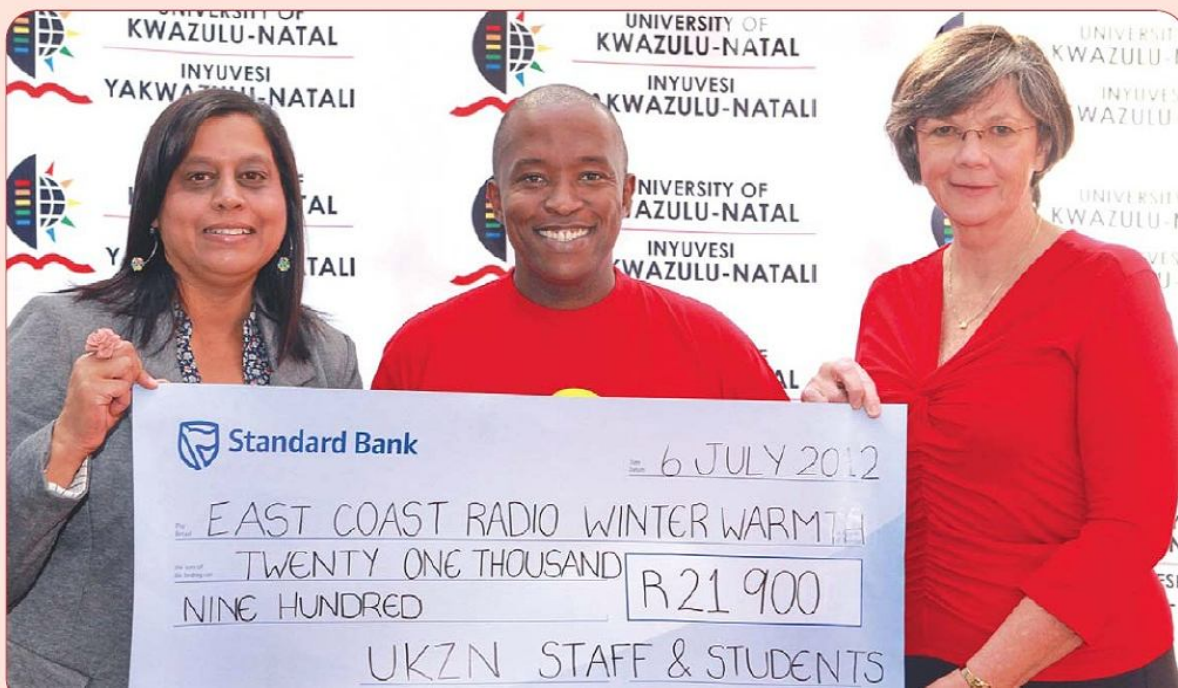
Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He once worked briefly on a TV news team, but is now a columnist. No heavy and cumbersome equipment to carry around.

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

A happy College trio



Baby Christie Opperman with proud mum and dad, Velda and Shane Opperman. Christie, who was born on 19 February 2012 and is now a big-eyed five-month old, is truly a College of AES baby. Mum and Dad met on the Agric Campus where they both worked, and romance later blossomed. As they say, the rest is history.



UKZN helping keep the East Coast warmer this winter

ASHAY NATHOO

THIS winter will be a little more bearable for the poor and needy in KwaZulu-Natal thanks to the generosity of the UKZN community, who answered East Coast Radio's calls for support in collecting blankets and cash donations for their Winter Warmth campaign. In total, R21 900 and more than 100 blankets were donated by the UKZN community!

From left: East Coast Radio's Ms Anusha Timul and Mr Gabriel Sithole, with Professor Jane