

The UKZN Griot

Of Bulls and Bears



KEYAN G TOMASELLI

MY column on "Illiterates" drew a response from Johann Mouton whose Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology, regularly contracts to undertake surveys of issues on knowledge production and post-graduate studies in the tertiary education sector. If anybody knows what threats face universities, it is surely he. Johann observes: 'We found in a recent study that the results of indiscriminate admissions policy at the postgraduate level is having disastrous effects.'

A few universities that have been accepting any doctoral student (no selection/ no screening) have a drop-out rate of 90 percent!

'Just think of the complete waste of faculty time in trying to supervise this cohort where only 10 percent eventually graduate. Not surprisingly, top universities are actually going the other route and putting in more stringent selection criteria at this level.'

I like to think that UKZN is following this 'other' route.

Johann's response reminds me of one of the Corollaries of Murphy's First Law: 'It is impossible to make anything foolproof because fools are so ingenious'. The ingenious comprise two constituencies in the academic sector: a) the fools who apply for PhD studies; and b) the fools who admit them.

The administrators who set unrealistic 'targets' (for admission) are not themselves responsible for ensuring throughput. That daunting task is allocated to the hapless, increasingly underpaid, exhausted academic sector; that is dumped with the job of doing the impossible amongst all the other impossible things they are expected to deliver on. If they fail, they are the ones who are punished for failing to achieve their KPAs, not the ingenious fools who admitted the ingenious applicants in the first place. As Murphy's Third Law states, 'Nature always takes sides with the hidden flaw'. Well, now that flaw has been exposed by Mouton. The fools who admit just anyone to doctoral programmes work in terms of Wozencraft's Law, 'If you make all of your plans on the assumption that a particular thing won't happen, it will'. So, those institutions that accept PhD applicants without screening but who expect success have a 90 percent drop out rate when they expect a 90 percent pass rate.

Why do educated policy makers and senior management make such grievous and obvious errors? These start with the way that universities are funded, their need to pay their bills, and the new instrumentalist notion that educational institutions are simply production lines that enrol "clients" who are processed via the promise of learning, and pushed out at the other end of the factory a

few years later, whether or not they are educated or literate.

On graduating the students, the university then applies for the state doosh now owed to it, but it does not calculate the per item cost of processing the final product/client/student. This occurs because universities are not required to balance their budgets. Rather, they defer debts – sometimes endlessly, and often for ideological reasons. The very costly production line where 90 percent of the products disappear into the waste bin prior to final beneficence, is funded by the taxpayer who – as we all know – is a bottomless financial resource. So, some universities accept illiterates because they pay fees (or are trotted out in the name of equity) and thus are exploited as a kind of futures bull market offering a vicarious debt security, while the real debt, hidden in the internal accounting, pounds academics in the face, and seriously disadvantages the capable 10 percent of PhD students who do pass. And, we all know that the Law of Asymmetrical Supervisory Distribution ensures that the 90 percent who will inevitably fail will consume 1000 percent+ of all academic resources, leaving little left over for the 10 percent who simply and successfully get on with their studies – irrespective of whether or not they get adequate supervision.

The contradictions, of course, are clear. Rudin's Law states that 'If

there is a wrong way to do something, most people will do it every time'. As a comprehensive theory of mistakes, Rudin's Law portends worse to come. This form of delusional accounting admits the 'proposition that it is entirely possible to pick up a piece of shit by the clean end'. (I cannot reference this delightful comment as it arrived in email inbox without attribution. I do sometimes love mischievous email.)

While the academics know what the problem is (no screening, massification, mindless corporatisation), management then blames the academics for the 90 percent failure rate. They predictably do this by demanding reports from academics, usually in a highly structured format. The design and issuing of uniform forms becomes uniformly obsessive, setting forth a flood of reports and policy statements, computer runs, new surveillance software, employing ever more technocrats who might know their software (but often they don't). Usually they don't know squat about education. When this is pointed out to them they retort that such critics 'are resisting transformation'. This is the First Law of Academic Management. Punish the academic sector for problems not of their own making. The second is Merrett's Caveat on the Principle of Management by Disorientation. Never let the institutional sector settle, and

create the impression of transformation by endless (and often fruitless) restructuring. UKZN has been involved in restructuring ever since I arrived here in 1985. It's like being on a treadmill that more often than not goes nowhere. Let's get the operational systems working properly before we change the structures!

That's why the state and some universities employ consultants like Mouton to reveal the obvious. The obvious, however, is not obvious when it is so obviously obvious. Researchers are able to quantify and reveal the obvious because those to whom a problem should be obvious are obviously pedagogically illiterate. Management's optimistic belief in bull markets is counteracted by the pessimistic academic sector's knowledge of bear markets that follow the bull. There has to be a balance.

Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He's used to talking a lot of bull.

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

JOMBA!

OPENING NIGHT A SENSATIONAL DANCE HIT

MELISSA MUNGROO

THE Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre was packed to capacity for the opening night of the 14th JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Experience presented by UKZN's Centre for Creative Arts (CCA) with principal funding from the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund.

The act for the night featured dancers from the Flatfoot Dance Company and Ensemble BATIDA who performed A Spring (two) matter, which is the music and story of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, part of collective memory for dancers and musicians over the past 100 years.

It tells of the struggle between the positive and the negative human being in thinking and acting; two opposites that battle each other; trying to blend and exist peacefully, or convincing one another to aim for a better co-existence.

Patricia van Deutekom, Julia Wilson, and Lerato Lipere of the Flatfoot Dance Company performed A Spring (two) matter on the opening night of JOMBA!

