

# The UKZN Griot Of Managers and Forms

What do academics actually do? My mother is still puzzled why I am still in my office when students are on vacation. Some think that academics teach. Research, we know, is what we do after hours when we are not 'working'.

WORDS: KEYAN TOMASELLI

**B**ut what lecturers really do is fill in forms. Forms for this, forms for that: iEnabler, HEMIS, IRMA, KPAs, SAPSE etc. The most recent SARS-linked HR software distributed to all staff wants lists of all our publications which are already on IRMA. But rather than hyperlink to IRMA, HR wants us re-enter information already in the system. This, after the system refused to accept an arbitrary date I concocted for the start of a disciplinary membership in the late 1970s for which neither I nor the association has a record. Some of the systems work, some don't. None of them talk to each other or to national software systems, which means that the same information has to be constantly regenerated manually under different categories from scratch to cross-populate all of the above.

Not only do we live virtually in acronym-obsessed software, but we have to manoeuvre through a spreadsheet economy managed by remote upper management. This strata very often forgets that our real jobs have something to do with education and that often invisible constituency – students. Administrators want reports on this, reports on that, verifications of the other, all required by yesterday. Sometimes we get admonished because the deadline passed before the forms were disseminated.

Our students, sensing our frustrations, conceal themselves behind doors and bushes, and pounce the moment a helpless lecturer is sighted. I once did a survey of a female professor in an understaffed programme trying to get to the toilet and back to her desk. Hordes of students mobbed her when she exited her office, all clamouring for immediate attention as she struggled to get across the corridor. Not to be outwitted, the female students followed her into the toilet while the rest surrounded her on her return. Just going for a pee takes a real act of will at UKZN – especially during registration periods and at the start of term.

UKZN is the only institution of the many that I've lectured at where this kind student pack behaviour occurs. A sympathetic face and an administratively savvy lecturer always attract those in need.

Does the form-filling make the institution's administra-

tion anymore efficient? Students can't make sense of them, staff are often bewildered, and academics resent being dragged away at peak marking periods to undergo 'training' on how to populate computerised software written by programmers who think that academia is a sausage factory. Expensive underage external consultants with dodgy degrees were previously employed to generate spreadsheets to guide world-renowned senior professors and highly rated researchers on how to do their jobs. Administrative benchmarks that have no relation to the real world were imposed on academics who often responded with irritation and creative number crunching. Now, we all know that numerical methods are only as good as the assumptions on which they are based. So, I guess, like iEnabler, we are in freefall ...

A professor from America once commented in exasperation, "I've never before worked in a University that has such a lien on one's time". An instructive comment this, as this was before the merger, before corporatisation, but after massification. He went back to the US for respite – the same country that has instrumentalised the world.

The corporate university now has multiple layers of management, and each one creates work for the level below, to the extent that students, who are the majority and at sub-tier seven, are often invisible – except for the noise they make. How else does one explain the surprise of some in upper management when they find rooms booked, (some) students in the classroom, lecturers unavailable for this or that workshop or endless form-filling training.

The lecturers find themselves inevitably sandwiched between students from below and managers from above. Lecturers have been made into the work horses located at the eduface struggling to balance data-generation and exponentially increasing administration with educational and research activities. Ultimately, something's got to give. What gives is sustained interest by lecturers in university government, starting at School level. Too much to do, too little time to do it, too few lecturers, so skip the meeting or the training workshop and forget the instruction for one article annually. Lecturers try to find their way to the

classroom, where students detect lecturer exhaustion, where the lecturers try to turn to advantage the fact that half the class is usually there for only half the time. The serious students are still waiting to pounce on lecturers in the corridors. This story may not apply beyond the Humanities, but it is a story the managers need to be told.

For management, work means going to meetings and generating more work that needs to be done at night and weekends after the meetings are over. For academics, work requires that meetings be paced with other academic activities. When one is in a meeting one can't be found, when one is lecturing, one is always found. So, to paraphrase the old Springbok Radio serial, Squad Cars, "they [the students] prowl the corridors by day, and party by night", while the aca-

demics actually do need a vacation. Hi, Mom, see you soon.

PS, Andrew Stengel of Electrical Engineering on my last column asked: "I'm curious about your referring to Prof Richard Dawkins as Dworkins", and wondered where this started and why". Andrew had done a fruitless search on the internet, hoping to discern "a more exotic explanation" than simply a spelling error. Nice to know that folks are actually STUDYING my articles, from Engineering no-gal, as did Roger Peplow who responded empathetically to my column about noise on campus. Seems that us Humanities types do have some things in common with the sciences after all!



Tomaselli is director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He writes this column in his personal capacity. This is a true story, only the facts, names and places have been changed, and the setting bears no resemblance to UKZN.

## Sudoku

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| 2 |   |   | 8 |   | 1 |   |   | 3 |
|   |   | 1 |   |   | 9 |   |   | 2 |
|   |   |   | 7 |   |   | 1 |   |   |
| 5 |   |   | 1 |   | 6 |   |   |   |
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Produced by Corporate Relations. Tel: 031 260 1245/8668/2957 [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)