



CARROTS AND STICKS: WORKLOAD AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN ODL

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Summary

An analysis of activity-based time capturing at UNISA (University of South Africa) indicated that over time the academic administration of academics increased disproportionately to the time spent on core academic tasks such as tuition and research. To investigate this problem, data on activities and time spent on these activities were collected from academics across all levels in the College of Human Sciences (CHS) at UNISA. Content analysis revealed that academic administration at all academic levels is indeed encroaching on core academic tasks. Academic administration is, however, not acknowledged as part of the Key Performance Areas (KPAs) of academics which are measured purely based on the outcomes, such as research papers published and student success rate, and not on their actual daily activities. Core academic activities such as research are increasingly pushed into evenings and weekends, and community engagement is put on the backburner due to more immediate demands. Academics recorded working on average 8.6 hours on a typical day with a typical distribution of 3.7 hours for tuition, including postgraduate supervision (43%), 2.2 hours for academic administration (25%), 1.4 hours for research (17%), 1.2 hours for academic citizenship (14%), and 0.1 hours for community engagement (1%). Finally, this study recommends the alignment of the actually experienced academic activities with the outcomes-based performance measurements.

Introduction and background

Higher education globally is under pressure “to do more with less”, in other words, to increase internal efficiencies by achieving increased outcomes (such as can be measured in student success and research outputs) without increasing costs. Examining workload can assist university managements in determining the degree to which academics can successfully perform their job to meet their strategic missions, as well as to meet the performance requirements of the university. Academic workload (WL) refers to the nature and extent of what academics do, i.e. what kinds of tasks they perform, how many of these tasks they perform and how much time it takes. Managing workload, according to Graham (2015), has positive impacts on how individuals perform in their roles. All academics are expected to work across three domains: teaching, research and community engagement and each one of these have specific tasks attached to it. In an ODL institution, like UNISA, time devoted to

teaching includes the development of study material, preparing tutorial materials, setting examinations, reading and marking assignments and examinations, supporting students through responding to emails and telephones and supervising postgraduate students. Time spent on all activities leading to scholarly outputs is referred to as research. Community engagement performance is not as clearly defined as the previous two. Yuker's (1984) description of the different academic tasks is similar to the ones UNISA uses. He, however, also includes time spent on activities that contribute to the professional knowledge of an academic and this involves "reading material related to the profession, attending professional meetings, taking courses, and engaging in discussions with colleagues" about issues in the field (Yuker, 1984; p.2). All these activities are linked to the performance of an individual academic. Through performance management systems, employees are measured according to the university's expectations.

Performance depends on a long list of factors including system's design, implementation, workload to which it is subjected, metric used in the evaluation and the interaction between all these factors (Parsons, 2000; Yuker, 1984). Although all these factors are important to evaluate performance, this study will be based on the premise that increased workloads affect performance. It is crucial for studies on workload to analyse the distribution of work, availability and distribution of resources, resource use, as well as the skills and competencies that are required for each job. This will be done through analyzing tasks related to teaching, research and community engagement and the time spent on each task. The focus will be on the amount of time academics spend on each of these tasks as agreed upon in their annual performance agreements.

Every year, UNISA academics are expected sign a performance contract based on a centrally determined template which specifies the activities of the Key Performance Areas (KPAs) of academics. These activities include academic leadership (for senior positions), teaching and learning, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. The weight for each academic KPA differs according to the rank of the academic (full professor, associate professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, junior lecturer). Workload allocation (WA) refers to the way in which work load is allocated by a manager to an employee or a group of employees, in the case of higher education usually a Chair/Head of an academic department allocating tasks to academics, to ensure that all the work is done, as well as to ensure that there is a fair distribution amongst academics, as well as an appropriate allocation according to levels of seniority. Kenny & Fluck (2014; p.601) refer to the under-researched nexus between the manageability of academic work, and the quality of teaching and research outcomes, and state that academics need to be consulted, and that realistic time allocations "which reflect what academics actually do" should be agreed on to ensure their wellbeing and the quality of their work. The importance of time allocation for tasks is also reflected in the management literature (Claessens, 2007; p.255, p.272) as an important aspect of managing one's own time to job satisfaction.

Activity-Based Time Capturing (ABC)

In an attempt to verify the allocation of staff funds to the actual activities performed by academics, UNISA collects information through Activity Based Costing (ABC) – a time capturing method in which academic staff members are expected to fill in a break-down of their activities and tasks per year in terms of the percentage of their time spent on pre-set activities. Activities are broken down according to the main academic activities: Core Academic (such as course development, tuition, community engagement and research), Academic Support (such as academic administration, academic personnel development, community outreach and executive management participation). The break-down is done numerically in percentage terms, and academics are invited twice a year to complete and submit an overview of their percentage time for that semester. Course and curriculum development, as well as tuition and academic administration are linked to specific course codes. This time-capturing method does, however, have its challenges and weaknesses including the fact that some academics resent it as a form of managerialism in the academic sector. A further drawback of this type of reporting is that time is captured by academics in perceived percentages of overall time spent, after the fact, and that there is therefore no indication of the actual substantive hours that academics work. The time capturing also requires the contracted working time of a semester to be reported across 200 items. This is likely to lead to considerable inaccuracies. More proper recording that is based on daily or weekly timesheets are likely to be even more cumbersome and may not lead to more accurate information. Despite some of the inaccuracies regarding this time-capturing system, it shows that there is a shift from activities related to core academic to the activities on academic support, and particularly to administration. Table 1 below indicates the shift in academic processes from 2009 to 2013 (adapted from Du Plessis & Bester, 2014).

Table 1: Shift in academic processes 2009-2013

Process	2009 %	2010 %	2011 %	2012 %	2013 %
Core Academic	67.5	64.2	66.7	66.6	60
Course and curriculum development	3.6	3.5	3.9	3.8	3.5
Community engagement	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.1	5.2
Research	21.6	20.5	19.6	21.1	18.9
Tuition	36.9	34.9	37.9	36.6	31.4
Academic support	32.5	35.8	33.2	33.5	40.8
Academic administration	26.5	29.1	25.9	26.1	33.8
Academic personnel development	3.1	3.4	3.7	3.6	3.1
Community outreach	1.3	1.8	2.1	1.8	1.9
Executive management participation	1.6	1.5	1.5	2	2
Grand total	100	100	100	100	100

From Table 1 it is clear that most of the processes (such as course and curriculum development and community engagement) had stayed relatively stable, whereas Tuition (which includes developing study material, assessment and student interaction) had dropped from 36.9% to 31.4% and academic administration had increased from 26.5% to 33.8% (which includes assignment, examination and tutor administration; as well as the recruitment,

appointment and training of markers and tutors). The report continues to conclude that a “significant shift that took place in the balance between the core academic activities (being defined as teaching, research, and community engagement and course and curriculum development) on the one hand, and academic support (specifically academic administration) on the other hand” (Du Plessis & Bester, 2014, henceforth ABC Report). These findings are similar to what was found by Watanabe, Murasawa, and Abe (2013) who reported that the work content of Japanese professors has shifted considerably from teaching- and research-oriented activities towards more administrative and service-related tasks.

Integrated Performance Management System (IPMS)

Performance is affected by and large by the systems’ design and implementation, workload to which it is subjected, metric used in the evaluation and the interaction between these factors (Parsons, 2000; Yuker, 1984). The starting point of a performance management system, according to the UNISA Integrated Management Systems (IPMS) framework is to ensure that the strategic objectives are linked to the outputs of the university. Performance management is about integrating an individual’s performance and the institutional strategy (Seyama & Smith, 2015). Molefe (2012) argues that performance measurement is designed to focus the employee’s attention on what the university considers important. Managing performance in an academic environment is, however, a complex issue. What makes it more complicated is that performance was brought into higher education from “the commercial environment, and therefore generally viewed with high degree of suspicion by academics” (Parsons, 2000; p.7). Secondly, performance management is about measuring specific quantifiable outcomes that can be easily rewarded. In higher education, performance is based on output measures such as pass rates and research outputs. These types of reward systems tend to focus only on the output of an activity rather than on the process, time and effort required to achieve such an output, e.g. innovative activities in teaching may not be considered if they do not lead to better success for students.

Methodology

In this study, the activity-based time capturing report at UNISA is used as a baseline survey, which was then followed up with a particular case study using the following methodology. The College of Human Sciences (CHS) at UNISA was identified as a case study and ethical clearance was obtained from the university to conduct this study. All academics in CHS received an email with a letter requesting them to document a typical 24-hour work day in their own words, and to send this email to the research assistants in the study. Even if the data was not entered equally regularly in all instances, it was deemed to be relatively accurate, because the time between the event and its recall was short and limited to a specific time period.

The research assistants then followed up this received email with a telephone interview to clarify the submitted time and task allocation and for the academics to comment on any aspects of their task and time submission and their perceptions of workload. It was felt that asking academics to record their tasks and time spent over a protracted period of time would be too intrusive, as well as contributing to the actual problem of increasing administration for academics. Despite a number of requests, there was a very low response rate. The major problem with this technique is academics' unwillingness to devote the time and effort required to complete a diary. This negativism is particularly acute if the academics are requested to continue the diary over a long period of time (Yuker, 1984). Nonetheless, a time and task analysis of the submitted data was done, and a thematic content analysis of the comments was concluded.

Description of data

Summarising the data was used as a starting point in order to define the classification of tasks, followed by reporting on the collected data for each set of tasks for all the three main groups of staff members (Professors = Peromnes level 5 & 6; Senior lecturers = Peromnes level 7; and Junior lecturers = Peromnes level 8 & 9). In the second step, we discuss the relation with the perceived workload to the KPAs used for staff assessment.

Perceived workloads by categories of staff

We use the following classification of tasks:

- AC = Academic Citizenship: Meetings; reviewing for journals; editing journals; external examining;
- AA = Academic Administration: exam-concession administration; reporting; emails; NRF rating; academic administration;
- CE = Community engagement;
- R = Research: Reading, writing, conferences; discussion about projects; fieldwork; data collection; academic networking for a project;
- T = Teaching: curriculum development; writing study material; reading for teaching; exams; marking; supervision.

In the first group, 20 professors responded and provided us with a detailed description of a randomly selected working day. Based on the descriptions we allocated time (hours) to each category of activities described.

Table 2: Workload distribution (Professors; level 5 & 6)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Av.
AA	5		1.5	2	2	4	2.5	3.5	2		1.5	0.5	1	3	1	2	7.5	1	1.5	2	2.12
AC		0.5	1	1.5	3.5	5	2.5		3.50	2	2		0.5	2.5	0.5	2	1	1	1.5		1.53
CE	2						0														0.1
R			4.25	4	4		1.5			3	4.5			2		2		2	7.5	12.5	2.36
T	2,5	9	1.25		1		2	6.75	6.00	7	1.5	9.5	7.5	1	9	2.5		3	3.5		3.65
H	9,5	9.5	8	7.5	10.5	9	8.5	10.3	11.5	12	9.5	10	9	8.5	10.5	8.5	8.5	7	14	14.5	9.81

The first column in Table 2 should be read as follows: Professor 1 reports having spent 5 hours on academic administration (AA); no time was allocated to academic citizenship (AC)

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that day, two hours were dedicated to community engagement (CE); no time to research, and 2.5 hours to teaching. Altogether the first professor reported having worked 9.5 hours (H) that day.

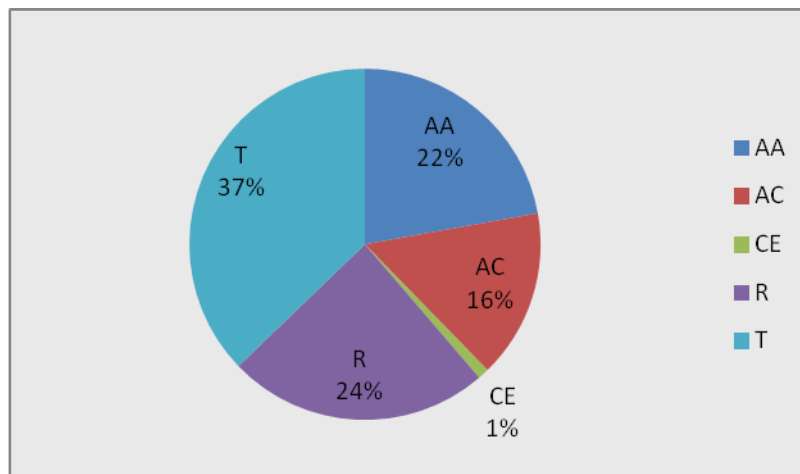


Figure 1. Workload distribution (Professors)

The random snapshot of workload distribution provided by our sample suggests that academic administration takes 22% of professorial time; more time than allocated to research. Professors' community engagement plays a marginal role in their time allocation.

The distribution is markedly different for Senior Lecturers. Table 3 shows that Senior Lecturers are the work horses of the institution with regards to teaching. Interestingly they also report doing even more administration than the professors. In spite of the fact that they need to build up their research profile, research on this level is down to a 13% level.

Table 3: Workload distribution (Senior Lecturers)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Av
AA	4.5	1		3	0.5	2	4	1.5	4	5.5	2.6
AC		1	0.5		1.5		2	1			0.6
CE									1		0.1
R	1	3	0.5		3	2.5	2.5		1		1.35
T	2.5	2	8.5	6.5	5	7	1.5	8	3.5	1	4.55
H	8	7	9.5	9.5	10	11.5	10	10.5	9.5	6.5	9.2

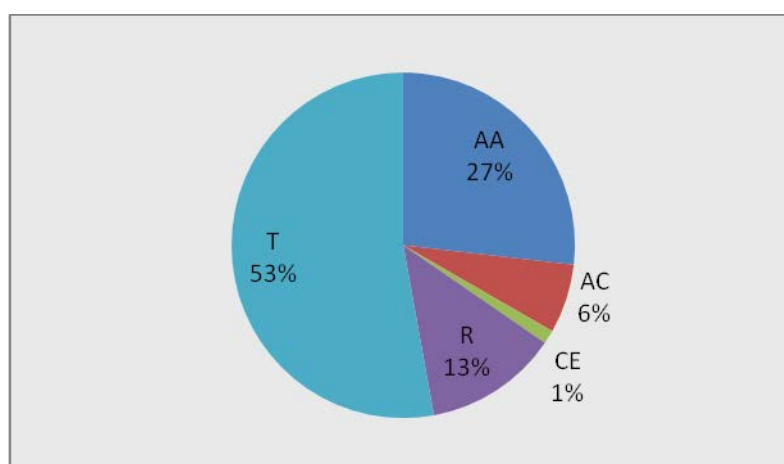


Figure 2. Workload distribution (Senior Lecturers)

Table 4 shows the workload distribution reported by (Junior) Lecturers. They share with the Senior Lecturers that they have a high teaching load. Interestingly, the share in AA is similar across the three different categories.

Table 4: Workload distribution ((Junior) Lecturers)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Av.
AA	2.5	0.33	1.5	0.25	4.33	1	2.25	0.75	3.5	4	4.75	3.25	1	2.26
AC			0.5	4.75	0.5		1		3	4		1.5	2	1.33
CE				0.5	0.5							0.67		0.13
R	0			2	2	1	0.25		2		1.5			0.67
T	8	5.25	6.5		3.25	5.5	3	6.25	2		1	4.5	6.25	3.96
H	10.5	5.58	8.5	7.5	10.58	7.5	6.5	7	10.5	8	7.25	9.92	9.25	8.35

The fact that (Junior) Lecturers report low research engagement may be due to their perception that, for instance, doing a PhD is not seen as research, because they themselves are in the role of apprentices rather than researchers.

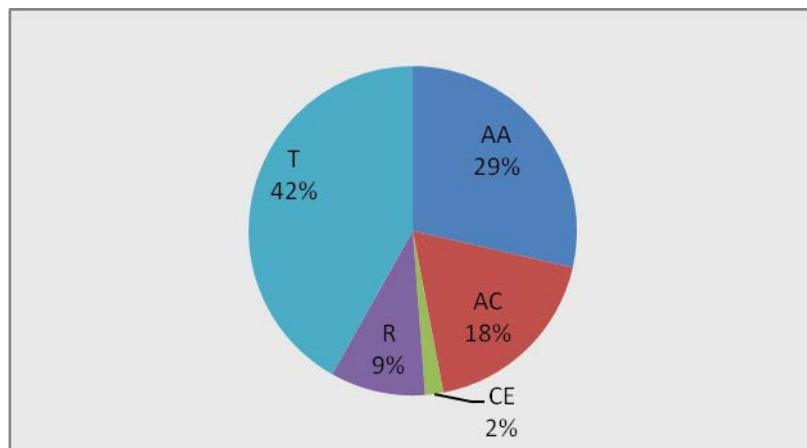


Figure 3. Workload distribution ((Junior) lecturers)

The next figure compares how the five workload categories are distributed among the three categories of employees: It confirms that in terms of teaching the Senior Lecturers are the work horses of the institution. Somewhat contrary to expectations it seems that all groups report as having about a third of their time to deal with administrative issues. Contrary to expectation because one would have expected professors would carry the main load of administrative work.

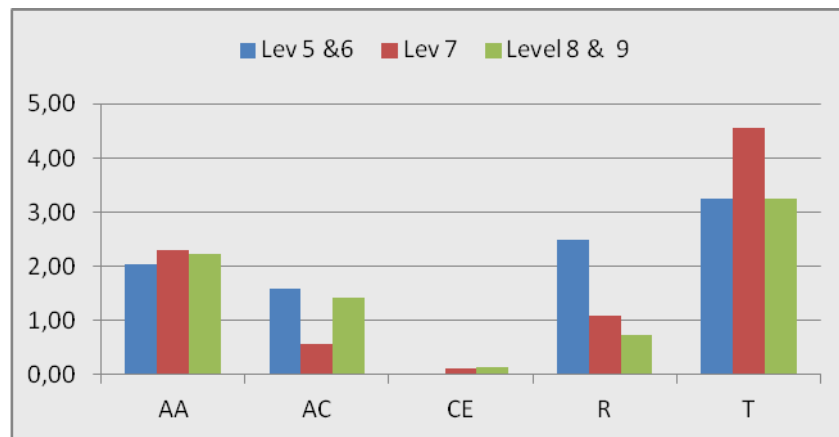


Figure 4. Overview of time spent on academic activities

More in line with expectations is that professors are able to dedicate more time to research than other staff members. Remarkable is that community engagement is a marginal activity, especially in this college in UNISA that has the most CE projects registered in the university. We can now look how the actually reported activities relate to the expected performance.

Key Performance Areas (KPA) requirements

Figure 4 confirms that across the different staff levels much time (between 20 and 30%) is allocated to academic administration. Our findings are in line with the trend identified by the time-capturing research cited earlier (Du Plessis & Bester, 2014) which confirms that the academic administration (AA) is increasingly encroaching into core academic activities. Table 5, however, shows that AA, in spite of absorbing a large part of academic time across all staff categories, does not figure in the KPA structure at all.

Table 5: KPA requirements

%	Level 5 & 6	Level 7	Level 8 & 9
AL*	5 to 10		
AC	5 to 15	0 to 10	0 to 15
T	30 to 50	30 to 60	30 to 60
R	30 to 50	30 to 50	30 to 50
CE	10 to 20	10 to 20	10 to 20

Notes: * AL = Academic leadership which applies to professors only

Given the increasing role of AA this neglect creates considerable frustration. It is necessary to align the KPA requirements better to the actual work done by acknowledging AA as part of the academic workload.

Comparing the expected time allocation as expressed in the KPA distribution, the following observations can be made:

- The reported time allocation for professors (Levels 5 & 6) is in line with the KPA requirements in teaching (T) and Academic Citizenship (AC); research (R) is slightly below expectation while Community Engagement (CE) is way below expectation as expressed in the KPAs.
- For Senior Lecturers (Level 7), AC is in line; T is in line; R is considerably below expectations; CE is considerably below expectations.
- For (Junior) Lecturers, AC slightly above expectation; T in line with expectations; R considerably below expectation; CE is considerably below expectations.

Two general remarks: AA does not figure in the KPA but it figures in all categories as a major workload item (about 20 to 30% across categories); considerable work is done while no expectations of substance or excellence in academic administration are expressed in the KPAs. On the other hand KPAs express all academics to dedicate 10 to 20% of their time to CE. All staff categories underperform considerably in this respect. This may be due to lack of clarity what is expected in this category, or simply to work overload.

Performance management and workload

This study reveals that the tasks and time spent by academics triangulates very well with the data in the ABC Report (Du Plessis & Bester, 2014). What should be noted though is that these two data sets capture the *activities* that academics report, and could therefore be referred to as descriptive. In contrast, the performance system is results-driven and focuses on the *expected outcomes* of these activities, rather than on the activities themselves, and could therefore be described as normative. The descriptive narrative of the academics' tasks and time in this study (in percentage terms) correlates well with the normative outcomes expected in the performance system in terms of tuition, research and academic citizenship. Typically, these three activities and outcomes make up what is generally understood as scholarship and the kudos that academics strive for to be known as experts in their fields; the carrots inherent in the profession (scholarly standing), as well as the carrots in terms of monetary rewards in terms of promotion and performance bonuses. The sticks in this environment are the unremitting pressure to achieve the expected normative outcomes or lose out on performance bonuses, at the same time being hampered by approximately 25% of work time being unacknowledged and unrecognised.

There are, however, two major areas of discrepancy, namely community engagement (CE) and academic administration. This study shows that academics are able to spend very little time on community engagement which is identified as a core activity and KPA (1% of time is spent on CE in the descriptive analyses and 5-15% in the KPAs). Typically, CE is put on the back-burner if time runs out since there is no direct measurable reward; i.e. there is no carrot for the individual. There is also no carrot for the institution since it is not funded by subsidy as tuition and research is.

A significant finding of this research is that academic administration takes up 25% of academics' time in any typical day, which is not accounted for at all in the performance management system. The aim of performance management systems is to measure individuals' performance and reward them accordingly (Ngcamu, 2013; Parsons, 2000). These rewards are often related to the key performance areas of an individual. Some of the rewards (referred to as carrots) can be financial in the form of salaries or bonuses and non-financial such as skills upgrade or career development. If Academic Administration is not measured, there is no recognition and there are no rewards for the work performed in this area, meaning that there are no carrots.

In the course of this study it also became clear that the normative results-driven performance management system (managed by Human Resources (HR)) and the descriptive activity-based time capturing (initially conceived as activity-based costing managed by Finance) do not speak to each other in a way that enhances both management instruments. The two processes are completely distinct, managed by different units in the institution (HR and Finance), run according to different time lines and generally resented by academics.

A major recommendation of this study is therefore that the descriptive ABC and the normative IPMS are aligned in the following ways. Firstly, the timelines for the two systems should be aligned closely so as to allow the two instruments to speak to each other. Generally, the performance agreement for a staff member is negotiated and signed in January of a year, with a mid-year review taking place in June, and the year-end performance assessment in November. The activity-based capturing is usually only done the following year, and is usually done by memory and perceived percentages. It is proposed that the activity-based time capturing should be done in May for the first semester and in October for the second semester, and for the results per person and per department to be made available to the line manager as an input into the performance-management discussions. By deliberately aligning the two tools more closely, it is likely that the quality of the ABC data will also be improved.

Conclusions and further research

Our analysis revealed that, at this time juncture in the mega-ODL institution that is UNISA, academic administration at all academic levels is indeed encroaching on core academic tasks. Academic administration is, however, not acknowledged as part of the Key Performance Areas (KPAs) of academics which are measured purely based on the outcomes, such as research papers published and student success rate, and not on their actual daily activities. Core academic activities such as research are increasingly pushed into evenings and weekends, and community engagement is put on the backburner due to more immediate demands. Academics recorded working on average 8.6 hours on a typical day with a typical distribution of 3.7 hours for tuition, including postgraduate supervision (43%), 2.2 hours for academic administration (25%), 1.4 hours for research (17%), 1.2 hours for academic citizenship (14%), and 0.1 hours for community engagement (1%). Finally, this study recommends the alignment of the actually experienced academic activities with the outcomes-based performance measurements.

The findings presented in this paper may lead to further research, such as the following:

- To what extent is (more) academic administration inherent in ODL (as opposed to residential universities), and what effect does this have on staff morale and academics' sense of job satisfaction at ODL institutions?
- How do these findings compare with findings in similar mega-ODL institutions globally, or with residential universities in South Africa?
- What would academics consider to be (a) appropriate time spent on academic administration, (b) appropriate measures of performance for academic administration, and (c) appropriate rewards for academic administration?
- To what extent is the increase in academic administration linked to increased student numbers, increased expectations for reporting and audit requirements in higher education, increased use of technology sometimes perceived as being ineffective?
- To what extent does the increase in academic administration result in resentment and poor working relations between academics and support staff?

In terms of the methodology used in this paper, it is clear that academics resent all requests to capture their time and activities, and view it as adding to the administration which is already a negative. The voluntary sampling done in the College of Human Sciences does, however, confirm that the ABC is to some extent reliable and provides valuable information that may be enhanced if it could be linked to the performance management system.

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