Sourcing and reporting data from several sources: The case of the VC's quarterly report to Council

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1

INTRODUCTION

Background

- Vice Chancellors typically need to report on a regular basis to Council about the State of the university. A report of this nature obviously can contribute in important ways to an enhanced understanding of the specific higher education institution.

- Institutional research offices are sometimes requested to prepare such a report for the VC or at least to contribute to such a report.

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Problem statement

- A report of the VC on the state of the university typically requires inputs from a variety of sources, some of which might be outside the traditional terrain of institutional research → teamwork crucial.
- It is important to identify what the content is that will be required for such a report, whether the content should be the same between reports or differ.
- Furthermore, it is required to identify the appropriate sources for the information required.
- A report of this nature can have important political connotations, so it is important to consider these as well.

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A few further comments

- For good impact it is important to consider the audience and provide the required information in a clear and consistent manner to facilitate and enhance an understanding of what is happening in the institution.
- The principles applied for this report can also be used for reporting to other levels and areas of the university to enhance the understanding of what the university is dealing with and how these aspects are addressed.

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Some of the issues at hand

- Who should be responsible for such a report?
- What should be included in such a report?
- How do we consider the calenderised aspects of different events happening at different times?
- How is the content different based on where we are in the year? Should it be different?
- How do we integrate various sources of information in a consistent manner to enhance understanding about the state of the university.

An attempt will be made to highlight these considerations based on experiences with this matter over an extended period.

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Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is:

- To use the case of a VCs Report to Council to clarify and consider some important reporting principles.
- To consider some lessons from experiences with contributing to this report.
- To distil some principles that can be used for this and other reporting in the university.

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OUR CASE STUDY
Methodology and research design

- **Philosophical orientation**

  The philosophical orientation followed is a relativist/interpretivist approach where multiple realities and meanings exist. The researchers also co-create these realities and meanings.
- **Case study methodologies/approaches**

  The social constructivist approach was followed.
- **Type of case study**

  A configurative, ideographic case study, or illustrative case study will be followed that do not want to contribute to theory but will attempt to enhance practices.

Applied topology of the case study

The researchers applied the topology suggested by Thomas (2011) to document crucial aspects of the case study such as the boundary, subject/analytical frame, purpose, approach and methodological aspects.

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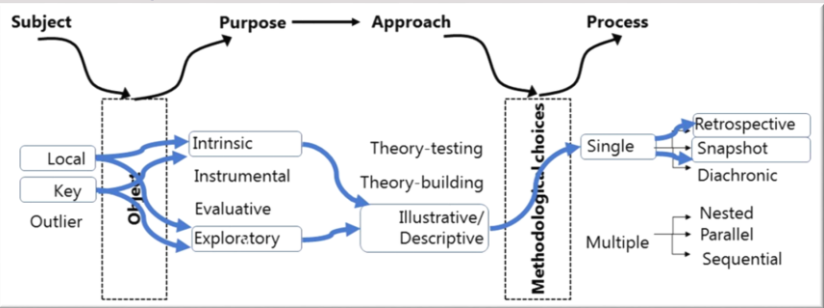
Applied topology (continued)

- From the applied topology, it is evident that the case study is a local case study on a key topic namely the VC's quarterly report to Council on the state of the university.
- The purpose is to explain how applying various institutional intelligences and data from several sources to explain the state of the university.
- The approach used is intrinsic and illustrative descriptive methodology and the process is a single case study, mostly retrospective, with elements of a snapshot.

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Generalisation and validity

- **Construct validity**

  The data used in this case study is largely based on the experiences of one individual, supplemented by some experiences of the co-author, but is based on experiences over an extended time period covering the reign of seven Vice-Chancellors and several Councils. While some of the issues and contexts changed over this period, there are also some that remain dominant.

- **External validity**

  Although the case study was based on the experiences in a specific institution and the culture, contexts and issues differ between institutions, it is our view that the principles can be used for similar reporting in other higher education institutions.

- **Generalisation**

  You may be able to use some of the principles in your institution or apply it to other reporting.

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SOME THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS
Volkwein's 3 analytic functions of IR

Institutional reporting and policy analysis

Institutional Research (3 analytic functions)

Planning, enrolment and financial management

Outcomes assessment, programme review, effectiveness, accreditation
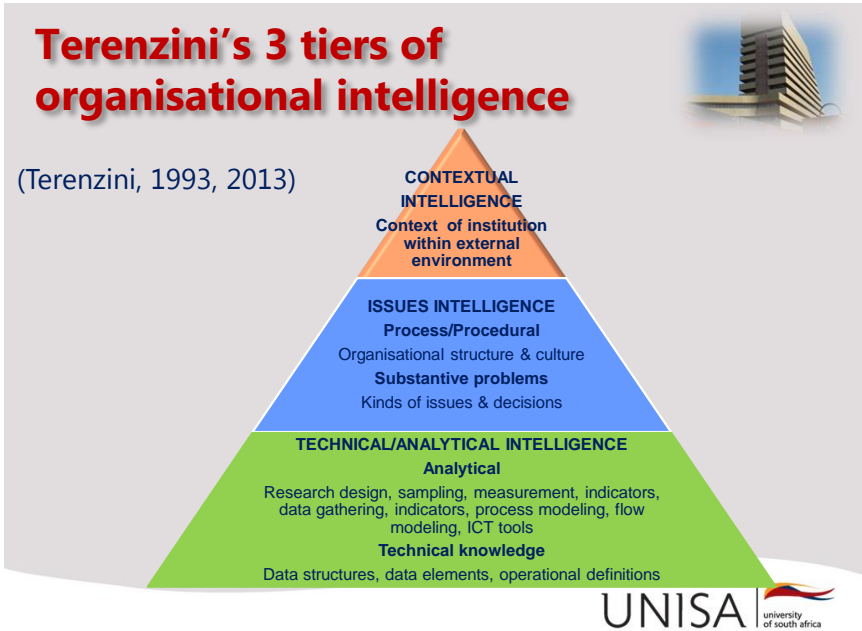
(Volkwein, 2008)

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The relevancy of the three analytical functions of IR for the VCs report to Council

- There is a clear and obvious link with the top of the triangle (*institutional reporting*).
- However, for reporting to the highest level of Council it is also imperative to include information from the other two functions of IR.
- It can therefore be concluded that all three analytical functions of IR is relevant for the VC's reporting to Council and its subcomitees.

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Terenzini's 3 tiers of organisational intelligence

(Terenzini, 1993, 2013)

CONTEXTUAL INTELLIGENCE
Context of institution within external environment

ISSUES INTELLIGENCE
Process/Procedural
Organisational structure & culture
Substantive problems
Kinds of issues & decisions

TECHNICAL/ANALYTICAL INTELLIGENCE
Analytical
Research design, sampling, measurement, indicators, data gathering, indicators, process modeling, flow modeling, ICT tools
Technical knowledge
Data structures, data elements, operational definitions

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The relevancy of Terenzini's levels of institutional intelligence

- For reporting to Council it is crucial to distil the crucial issues. All the issues may not be important to report but the strategic issues needs to be reported as well as key operational issues that are impact or could be impacting on the university. A risk management approach could be useful to identify which issues to report on.
- Contextual intelligence is crucial, especially during the early stages of the Council life cycle. Most Council members are not familiar with higher education matters, so it is an important role to provide context to Council.

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Calenderised reporting

- University activities typically follow a cyclical pattern.
- It therefore make sense to base the institutional reporting on these calendarised events.
- Following this, the planning of institutional reporting is managed in line with the natural rhythm of the institution's activities. This should form the core of the institutional reporting (other needs can then be based on a ad hoc planning basis or pure ad hoc basis).
- Reporting of the VC on the state of the university clearly forms part of the calenderised events and the reporting can therefore be planned.
- Furthermore, the content of the report should also consider where we are in the cycle at that point in time.

The target audience Council

- For good impact, important to consider the audience and provide the required information in a clear and consistent manner to facilitate and enhance an understanding of what is happening in the institution.
- The life cycle of the Council needs to be considered.
- Consider the range of Council members and their backgrounds.
- We need to remember that some Council members don't have a background in higher education governance.
- Councils often exert pressure for comprehensive sets of indicators of performance and progress linked both to external benchmarks and internal objectives.

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The Vice Chancellor

- It is important to take the management maturity and background of the VC into account. Remember the VC needs to present the report.
- Consider the potential analytics gap.
- Furthermore, it is essential to build a rapport with the VC and where applicable their supporting team.
- The personality, management style and management maturity will also impact on the report.

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Some thoughts on the structure of the report

- **Obviously largely dependent on the views of the Vice-Chancellor and to some extent the Council.**
- The following seems to be a good and neutral structure that allows enough room for variation within the broad structure and therefore works:
  - Higher education context and issues – international, content and national.
  - Wider contexts and issues that may impact on the higher education context and issues.
  - Institutional context and issues and how these relate to the contexts and issues above.
  - Institutional responses to the above.

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Structure of the report (continued)

- Go beyond reductionist quantification:
  - Danger of hooking into the routine consideration of quantifiable elements (*management by numbers*) without pursuing the more interesting and difficult questions about what makes performance change and improve (*explanations*)
  - Understanding strategic importance and supporting strategic management goes beyond merely understanding the institution in information terms (*Three tiers of organisational intelligence*).
- Lastly, be flexible.

Skills required

- **Robust understanding of higher education**
  Robust understanding of the higher education environment – globally, continentally and nationally
- **Robust understanding of business**
  Robust understanding of strategic and key operational aspects, including financial, logistic implications for the institution.
- **Robust understanding of transformation and change management**
  Robust understanding of transformation and change management and the interaction of these initiatives with the broader institution.

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Skills required (continued)

- **Analytical skills**

  Ability to make analytical sense of the complex and messy higher education, institution, transformation and change management imperatives. Ability to integrate external and internal contexts and issues.
- **Presentation skills**

  Ability to use visual presentation, tabular presentation in an easy understandable, user-friendly manner.
- **Writing skills**

  Ability to write clear and concisely.
- **Ability to integrate the above**

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SOME FRESH PERSPECTIVES AND REFLECTIONS
Lessons Learned

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Lessons Learned

In Prof Sid Nair's presentation it was emphasised that:
- "IR is the powerhouse of data to make/support informed decision making"
- "IR seen as the Engine room of the university"
- "IR practitioners are now playing an active and visionary role in strategy and VC's office"

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Lessons Learned

- Understanding the background of your VC and the kind of support that he/she will require from the IR office
- Knowing your target audience
- Having a structure
- Having a core group that will drive the process

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Lessons Learned

- Having a core group that will drive the process
- Striking a balance between standardised calanderised reporting and other various sources of information
- Data integrity is of the essence -- credibility and consistency
  - Having one source of truth

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Lessons Learned

- Student-centred approach in reporting
- Be relevant to the institutional strategy, mission and vision
- Be vigilant -- shifts in Council meeting dates can throw your plan schedule off

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Conclusion

- The triangulated view "called the Bermuda Triangle in IR" presented by Dr Dhaya Naidoo this morning summarises it all

  Information ⟷ Knowledge ⟷ Wisdom

- Learning how to navigate your way through politics and staying focused to the course

- In the unfolding era of the 4th and 5th Industrial revolution will we still be talking about the preparation of the VC's report?

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Thank you for your interest and time

Questions and discussion

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