

Institutional Research in Higher Education in South Africa: Looking Ahead 18

Karen Webber, Nicole Muller, Jan Botha

The fact that the Southern African Association (SAAIR) is nearing its 25th year, is evidence that Institutional Research (IR) has built a strong presence in South African higher education. Unfortunately, this is not yet evident in other countries in the region. The professional practice that has become known as “institutional research” is, of course, much older than the Association that was established by IR practitioners. Similarly, IR encompasses much more in South and Southern Africa than the activities of the Association.

IR continues to widen its areas of influence and support, and IR practitioners are called upon to assist in a myriad of decision-support tasks that will help to make higher education in South Africa and the region only stronger. IR practitioners are valued for their analytic and technical skills and their higher education practices and processes. They are also valued because of their ability to place the issues within the context of the specific institution, cognisant of unique student, staff, or historical and cultural issues that must be considered.

As we reflect on the formation and current status of IR in South Africa as evidenced in this book, it is notable that the SAAIR was established in 1994, the year in which the first democratic elections in the country took place. South African society, including the higher education system, changed significantly in the first two decades of democracy. Despite these changes, the student protests in South Africa that erupted in 2015 and that continue in 2016, can be attributed to the students’ experience and their belief that much more remains to be done: huge inequalities remain in the system and in institutions, the demand for study opportunities outpaces the available opportunities, student fees have become unaffordable for most students, and at a deeper level, the curriculum and the ethos of higher education institutions still predominantly reflect Western values, traditions and practices. The transformation agenda that was inaugurated in 1994 remains unfinished. The story of IR in South Africa is closely intertwined with the transformation agenda, both in terms of the gains of the past twenty years, and also of the many changes that lie ahead.

Priorities for future directions in IR in South Africa identified in this book

In many of the chapters, the authors comment on possible future developments for the specific aspect of IR which they have considered. Several prominent themes emerge from these comments. Firstly, there are calls for a more proactive role for IR practitioners to champion institutional change and organisational renewal and to make evidence consequential for

changes in policies and practices. Secondly, there are calls for IR practitioners to develop new skills sets and enhanced scholarly activities. Thirdly, there are calls for a sharpened understanding of the identity of IR professionals as third space or blended professionals, and to take account of the consequences of such a stance.

Chetty *et al.* (Chapter 1) identify gaps for the Southern African Association for Institutional Research (SAAIR) to fill, in particular suggesting that the Association needs to champion change proactively. The issue of change and transformation is picked up by Muller *et al.* (Chapter 4), with the emphasis on moving the practice of IR in South Africa to become more proactive and to influence change. Nel (Chapter 6) emphasises the evolution of IR in supporting continuous organisational renewal and improvement. She points to new roles for the IR professional such as becoming a scholar and knowledge manager that can assist universities to thrive in complex contexts. Wilson-Strydom *et al.* (Chapter 13) explore the role that IR can play in facilitating institutional change through a deeper understanding of our students. They propose that IR professionals in South Africa would do well to consider the importance of making evidence consequential for modifying policies and practices in learning and teaching.

Visser and Barnes (Chapter 5) argue that new skillsets will be required of IR practitioners, largely because of the impact of new developments in business intelligence and data analytics. Working with data is recognised as being a strong role of IR practitioners. As technology changes, the sophistication of integration and analysis is strengthened and Bleazard (Chapter 10) challenges IR offices to develop integrated data sets, information systems and reporting processes for accurate and comprehensive reporting to various stakeholders. It is equally important for IR offices to be able to support the Learning Analytics needs of the institution and its lecturers. Lemmens and Henn (Chapter 12) contend that IR staff members must develop skills to support LA processes and to aggregate and report on non-typical student data. Malherbe-Fourie (Chapter 11) poses a similar challenge to IR practitioners, namely to include the results of scholarship and research on teaching and learning undertaken by academics and postgraduate students, given that such studies can contribute to providing a more holistic view of the institutional context.

Visser and Barnes (Chapter 5) consider staffing requirements in IR offices and put forward a proposition to devise mentoring programmes which include mentoring of older professionals by younger colleagues in relevant technological skills. The notion of blended professionals is also discussed by Botha and Hunter-Husselman (Chapter 15). It is considered to be a potential strength in developing a cohort of IR professionals. It is clear from the chapters on doctoral education (Bitzer, Chapter 14), research related information (Botha and Hunter-Husselman, Chapter 15) and engaged scholarship (Favish, Chapter 16), that institutional researchers need to be more active in collaborating with other professionals in their universities, in order to integrate relevant data that provide a more holistic view of the institution.

Moosa and Murray (Chapter 7) make the important statement that IR practitioners must be vigilant to assess the impact (whether positive or negative) of government steering, and that IR, as part of academic planning, should identify pressures on academic freedom. Prinsloo (Chapter 17) reminds IR practitioners of the need to be critical, transparent, accountable and ethical in the way they approach and use data.

Looking at the future of Higher Education and implications for IR

As we look to the future, higher education in South Africa, and certainly on the African continent, will face new challenges that include access to an even greater diversity of students, insufficient funding, possible changes to governance and academic structures, rapidly changing technologies, increasing requirements for quality assurance and institutional rankings, and balancing the missions of teaching, research and engagement. IR practitioners have the knowledge and skills to assist adeptly in providing decision support for many of the issues that challenge our increasingly globalised world of higher education.

There are numerous drivers of change in higher education, and the actions of government, civil societies and market forces have shaped the directions for higher education's future (Dill 2014; Pusser 2014). The breadth and depth of IR in the future depends on the environment within which the higher education institution will operate. Similar to the U.S.A. higher education in South Africa must address key issues. These include tuition and fee policies, postsecondary alignment with secondary education, state/government funding, and concerns of violence and respect on campus (for US detail see the AASCU Policy Brief 2015). Despite particular issues and challenges faced by each country or region, Hazelkorn (2011) identifies three common factors relevant to the future of higher education that affect most countries around the world and that have become more critical since 2008, namely that HE must (a) improve the quality of the student experience, (b) ensure suitable higher education systems that meet the needs of all constituent groups, and (c) increase and strengthen knowledge and innovation while multi- and cross-disciplinary critical inquiry is maintained. These challenges are particularly arduous because of increased participation rates and lower government funding.

While there is more institutional autonomy in some parts of the world (Neave & Van Vught 1994), in South Africa there are voices pointing out the increasing restrictions on institutional autonomy and the burgeoning requirements for accountability, as evidenced in changes to the High Education Act in recent years (Bozzoli 2016, Lange & Luescher-Mamashela 2016). In South Africa, the government sets the policy environment and the broad parameters that institutions are expected to fulfil in pursuit of the state agenda. Relatedly, the increased emphasis on accountability and quality assurance has elevated the role of IR. National and local accreditation and accountability systems enable IR officials to play an important role in data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Historically, IR and planning offices have been charged with responsibility in extracting, validating, and reporting institutional data. Having access to information, tools and methods for analysis has underpinned the foundation of IR to undertake a range of studies better to understand institutional performance and to provide the basis for institutional repositioning and setting strategic directions.

Decisions made by HEI leaders are clearly influenced by funding needs and sources. While there are different levels of each by type of institution, there are four main streams of institutional funds: government, student fees, "third stream" or enterprise, and philanthropy. Each of these entities prompts higher education institutions to respond to a variety of

objectives. All of these drivers and developments are adding a layer of complexity to the nature of IR work in general.

These developments have given rise to a strengthened role for the practice of institutional research, planning, and decision support in institutions. While the pivotal role assumed by IR practitioners has been cemented through the requirements for institutional information, the increase of accountabilities beyond those to government is shaping the nature and practice of IR across institutions. This prompts IR practitioners to be adept at providing data for general institutional management and accountability and for awareness of political climates. Mindful of these issues, IR practitioners can become drivers of data analysis and information distribution, both highly valued elements of decision support.

Greater Involvement in Strategic Planning and Policy Development

While fulfilling internal and external reporting requirements is central to the practice of IR, it is important that IR be an active participant in the development of strategies and policy setting. While IR professionals are needed to provide information for internal and external accountability demands, they can be utilised to inform and leverage strategic change and organisational planning. IR practitioners can assist well in developing and providing information for strategic planning, annual benchmarks, scenario planning, forecasting, and long-range planning. With deep knowledge of higher education trends and needs, IR practitioners can contribute to discussions on the roles and value of higher education, both locally, regionally, and globally. Since data visualisations are becoming increasingly popular, it is even more important to have knowledgeable IR practitioners actively involved in strategic planning discussions to ensure that data are situated within the context of the institution and local government issues.

Reflections on the Future of Institutional Research and Planning

The forces of change that are rapidly transforming higher education around the world include globalisation, demographic shifts, rapid technological changes, and innovation. These key drivers are having an impact on every facet of higher education. Technology has increased the timely accessibility to larger amounts of data, along with the capacity for analysis to support decision making. In most instances, technology has also provided greater access to a larger group of students (i.e. those who do not live close to the physical campus), but it also has the potential to increase the technological divide for those students who do not have access to the technology. Globalisation has had many effects. It has exponentially increased the mobility of people, skills and capital, it has increased the trade flow between countries, and encouraged the borderless diffusion of knowledge. Demographic shifts have widened diversity in the student mix. All these changes are influencing the way higher education institutions are perceived to benefit society.

Given the variety of roles and functions performed by IR practitioners, it is not surprising that tensions exist as a result of the varying expectations about what IR does within the institution, and what it does for the education sector overall. Volkwein (1999, 2008) describes the contradictory 'faces' by which IR practitioners can be characterised in terms of

their organisational role and culture and the purposes and audiences of IR. These tensions, apart from remaining unresolved given the nature of IR and the evolution of HE across the globe, are also the challenges that are likely to define the IR profession in years to come, regardless of the type of institutions in which IR is practiced or exercised. Other researchers have also discussed the tensions confronting IR (Huisman 2013; Webber & Calderon 2015).

As changes continue to occur in institutional funding, the governance boundaries of institutions are likely to be further altered and traditional academic structures modified. For example, where there is an increase in the number of interdisciplinary faculty members who are jointly funded by two or more academic departments, institutional practitioners must rethink how to count the effort, research and teaching outcomes of academic staff, and which unit will receive credit for each activity. Changes in institutional structures like this offer the opportunity for IR to navigate through the transformation, steering a course that supports sound decision making and clearly articulated strategic directions. Changes in institutional governance, together with globalisation and technological transformation, add complexity to the nature and practice of IR. These shifts are likely to demand greater discernment from IR practitioners in the way they advise senior management. The more information that is collected, the greater the complexities in managing it; and yet this exponentially widens the scope for analysis and provides an opportunity for exploring new possibilities and for fostering institutional innovation. Innovation requires IR practitioners to have a very good understanding of the data as well as the ability to interpret and draw inferences about a variety of internal and external data sources (Webber & Calderon 2015).

Higher education institutions need knowledgeable and engaged IR and planning practitioners. To maximise IR's effectiveness in decision support, IR units need decision makers who provide support, vision and commitment in resources for the objectives institutions seek to achieve. While there is a distinction between IR and higher education research, there are some important questions that fill the overlapping area. In concert with colleagues who study the future of higher education, it is important for IR practitioners to identify current challenges and considerations for higher education reform.

As we look to the future of IR in South Africa, here are some questions that call for consideration:

- As the country grapples to move towards a new dispensation that will ensure the financial sustainability of the higher education institutions and affordable higher education for all academically deserving students, will IR professionals live up to the expectations to provide expert advice to policy-makers for finding a long-term solution for these complex issues?
- As institutions move forward to provide greater access to a wide array of students, what are the implications for students and staff?
- How does higher education contribute to the country's employment rates and overall socio-economic development?
- How is globalised education affecting the curriculum and organisational processes?
- With increased calls for accountability and evidence of transformation (including the renewal of the curriculum and changes in institutional cultures), how (if at all) can progress in transformation be measured?

- A strong case has been made for institutional research to help improve institutions: but how can IR professionals play a role redesigning and transforming their institutions?
- Is there a role for IR professionals to address the gaps in the dissemination of information between the system hierarchies (between national and institutional levels) that result in misunderstandings or misinterpretations of contextual realities?

Answers to these and other similar questions enable the IR practitioner to blend technical and analytic knowledge with a deep knowledge of the institutional and general structures, functions, and dynamics of higher education. This blend of proactive knowledge and decision support positions IR to contribute to strong institutions and to be a valued asset to organisational leaders.

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