

Sharon Thabo Mampane

Understanding and Application of the Institutional Performance Management System within Higher Education Institution Departments

Abstract

This conceptual paper draws on the understanding and application of institutional performance management system (IPMS) by managers in a higher education institution's department. Managers in HEIs are tasked to develop and support staff at all job levels and are accountable for their performance. The implementation of the IPMS in higher education institutions could enhance the growth and development of the department and its staff. The paper highlights practices of IPMS as well as identifies the successes and challenges in understanding and applying IPMS within HEIs, to provide a consolidated practical advice for universities in South Africa. Staff development and support are central to ensuring that commitments made, are seriously translated into relevant actions in the department. Such actions by the institution lay a strong foundation for improved performance. The purpose of the paper is to unpack and contextualise the understanding and application of institutional performance management system (IPMS) of staff, by recognising its merits depending on the context and circumstances where it is applied. This qualitative paper analysed literature studies that include books and articles written on performance management systems in higher education, to establish how performance data is used to improve institutional staff performance. Findings reveal that HEIs' performance criteria in IPMS, do not always serve to monitor and evaluate the department's progress on planned goals, objectives, and initiatives. The paper, therefore, serves as a foundational piece that highlights gaps in higher education institution managers' understanding and application of IPMS, for supporting and improving staff performance.

Keywords: institutional performance management systems, higher education institution, staff development, accountability, monitoring, evaluation

Introduction

This paper explores how managers of higher education institutions (HEIs) understand and apply the institutional performance management system (IPMS) in South Africa, using staff performance data. In particular, the paper gives attention to the capacity of IPMS as a constructive approach to assist employees in achieving performance expectations through a process of monitoring, review and improvement, in an institutional department, in the university (Ramataboe, 2015).

Performance management is a goal-oriented process that is directed towards ensuring organisational processes are in place to maximise productivity of employees, teams, and ultimately, the organisation. Staff performance 'data' refers to staff information that assists managers to gain better knowledge about their employees (Wayman, Jimerson & Cho, 2012). Therefore, data refers to any qualitative or quantitative source of information provided by the staff for

performance evaluation, for decisions about organisational and instructional improvement. Hence, institutional managers' understanding and application of IPMS using performance data, is imperative for performance evaluation. Performance management is a dynamic, ongoing, continuous process, whereas performance appraisal is a one-time event, each year (Nankervis & Compton, 2006). Performance appraisal is a system used to evaluate an individual's, or team's job performance. This paper, therefore, highlights the performance management practices for the recognition and reward of academic staff's performance in the established key performance areas.

Institutional managers who provide continuous learning and professional growth and development to staff, enhance their performance. IPMS, therefore, is a formally set, continuing, and systematic evaluation, that should operate as a process that motivates and aids individuals in developing professionally, through performance management. The work of Marishane (2015) is all about improving performance through data usage, and being accountable for decisions made in the process. He states that performance data is important, not only for examining performance, but for generating informed decisions, and planning for sustainable improvement (Marishane, 2015). The HEI's educational managers appraisal of academic staff performance, should be done on an ongoing basis, in two cycles, every year. At the beginning of the year the staff members should enter into an agreement with the departmental manager, about the outputs planned for the year. During this process managers should assist the employees in identifying their personal and professional development needs, and providing them with a supportive performance management framework and criteria. The performance commitments, deliverables, performance standards and time frames, are developed and recorded in the agreement. Once the agreement is signed, the agreement planning and formulation stage, is completed.

Key performance areas used in IPMS for staff appraisal

Higher education institutions have a comprehensive set of key performance areas (KPA's), to measure the achievement of performance activities. The KPA's differ per academic post level. This paper focuses on the IPMS of academics below the professorship, on level 6, 7 and 8, in an institution. Level 6 are associate professors, level 7 are senior lecturers, and level 8, are lecturers. All academics on post levels, 6, 7 and 8, have to satisfy the three KPA's. Associate professors (post level 6), have to also provide leadership to the academics below their level.

The IPMS focuses on these levels because these are levels that academics have to progress through, before becoming full professors. The aim of IPMS is to determine whether performance management enhances staff and institutional performance. Meeting the criteria of these KPA's, ensure employees get incentives such as a performance bonus, the following year, only if the performance score is higher than a 3, out of a score of 5. KPA 1 focuses on academic leadership, mentoring and skills' transfer to other colleagues, and, requires associate professors to provide such mentorship to their juniors. Associate professors have to transfer their research and tuition skills to upcoming colleagues in the department and across other departments, in areas such as article writing, accessing and infusing information into articles and book chapters, and guidance through research proposal writing and proposal reviews. Although academics on post levels 7 and 8 have to

identify a mentor who can guide them throughout this process, associate professors, too, should be mentored by the full professors (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018).

KPA 2 focuses on teaching and learning done by all academics. All academics are responsible for tuition of a module (course), and provide additional support to students via e-mail, and through institutional discussion forums. Involvement in tuition differs according to the level occupied by the academic. The rating or scoring is given for participation in institutional activities. KPA 3 focuses on research outputs (articles and chapters), student supervision, and academic citizenship, locally and internationally. KPA 4 also requires academics to collaborate with other colleagues in community engagement and research projects, locally and internationally. All the above KPAs are criteria for measuring HEI staff's performance and criteria priorities, commitments, and aims, using relevant benchmarks and targets for actual performance outcomes.

The understanding and application of IPMS in institutions

HEI departmental managers utilise both qualitative and quantitative measures to evaluate their academic employees' performance in leadership, tuition, publications and community development. The identification of specific goals is the starting point for the IPMS process, and the beginning of a continuous cycle. Job expectations are established after the job analysis. The next step involves examining the actual work performed, and performance is appraised. The final step involves discussing the appraisal with the employee. A critical factor for an effective application of IPMS in institutions, is for performance agreement to be aligned with both the staff members' job description, and the particular department's operational plan. IPMS should ensure that support is provided for both institutional managers, and staff members, through the monitoring and adjustment of the implementation of performance management strategies, in order to make changes, where necessary (Nankervis & Compton, 2006). Many researchers argue that managing staff requires elements in employment relations, which lay emphasis on the employees' compliance, quantitative outputs, managers' tasks, and the development of the organisation (Barney & Wright, 1998; Lado & Wilson, 1994; Guest, 2011).

Three basic purposes are key when planning for an appraisal interview: the employee's performance, focusing on specific accomplishments; support for the employee in attaining set goals and personal development plans for the next appraisal period and the provision of suggestions on established goals that are not achieved; as well as support from the manager and the institution (Becker, Antuar & Everett, 2011). The formal appraisal interview is conducted at the end of an employee's appraisal period, and all employees know when their interview will take place. This process tends to increase anxiety, though interviews with top performers are often a pleasant experience. Supervisors are sometimes reluctant to meet face-to-face with poor performers since such an appraisal review session may create hostility, and do more harm than good to the employee–manager relationship. To minimise the possibility of hard feelings, the face-to-face meeting and the written review must aim at performance improvement, and not criticism.

Progress against the deliverables and performance indicators identified, should be recorded in the agreement document and the supervisor should provide advice and guidance to the incumbent as required. The performance conversations should

focus on the constraints and unplanned for issues, that could impact on the achievement of the deliverables required in the incumbent's performance agreement (Nankervis & Compton, 2006). Poor work performance should be dealt with proactively as soon as it occurs, and should involve a proper diagnosis of the actual causes of poor work performance, and appropriate corrective measures.

Challenges in IPMS application

Recent research, together with considerable anecdotal institutional evidence, suggests that many senior managers still regard performance management as a mechanistic, annual ritual, which is a necessary tool, though there is minimal recognition and understanding of its effect (Armstrong & Baron, 2005). Not all performance turns out as planned, nor is this always solely the result of non-performance. Sometimes, the performance targets established, cannot be achieved within required timeframes with the resources provided. In other circumstances, events change and the original performance targets are no longer valid. If this occurs, very little advantage is gained by rigidly adhering to the original performance targets and constantly identifying performance shortfalls. In these cases, a process of replanning and reformulation of 'more realistic' performance targets should be entered into. Nevertheless, if a performance shortfall does occur because the incumbent has a skill or competency limitation exposed during the review stages, then corrective actions must be taken to address the poor work performance (Williams, 2002).

Although legislation requires that appraisal systems be non-discriminatory in the programme's overall process of equity and fairness in rewards and recognition of outcome, literatures reviewed reveal a lot of biasness and favouritism, an indication that support activities are poorly performed (Armstrong & Stephens, 2005). The result may be confrontation and undermining of the goal of motivating employees. The situation may only improve when several sources provide input such as the employee's own self-appraisal. Success or failure in performance management depends on organisational philosophies, and attitudes and skills of those responsible for its implementation and administration (Hedge & Teachout, 2000). Weighting of KPAs in the performance agreement is sometimes not consistent with those in the approved job description, and staff members may complain about differing and unfair job description, performance measures, targets and standards.

Further challenges of IPMS identified were the minimal training of institutional staff about IPMS management, and where it occurs, it focused on managers and supervisors rather than employees. Regardless of the system used, employees will not trust a system they do not understand. Regular programme reviews and scrutiny of research outputs should be explored through regular surveys and questionnaires. Qualitative indicators could be evaluation of the staff's teaching, research opportunities and training, and administrative barriers in IPMS management (Noe et al., 2017).

Research design

This paper employed a descriptive research methodology wherein literature analysis of documents was done based on data extracted from secondary sources of

information. This conceptual research focused on the concept or theory explaining or describing the phenomenon, institutional managers' understanding and application of IPMS within HEIs. IPMS' constructive approach of assisting employees in achieving their performance expectations is outlined through a process of monitoring, review and improvement. The increasingly important role managers play in IPMS management, necessitates the training, development and support of managers with leadership and IPMS management skills, to evaluate staff performance in their departments (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Koh et al., 2011; Turner & Sykes, 2007). Managers who are knowledgeable about the departmental output requirements (DoE, 2000; DBE, 2011; Sharitha, 2013), can coordinate intervention strategies and approaches within the department to ensure staff members perform their tasks accordingly (Louis, Dretzke & Wahlstrom, 2010; Louis et al., 2010). All these skills require innovative ways of support and training for improved performance. The performance management of an organisation's employees is intended to increase organisational efficiency, and staff accountability within HEIs (Adcroft & Willis, 2005; Boland & Fowler, 2000). This conceptual paper therefore utilised this research methodology to get deeper understanding of HEI managers' understanding and application of IPMS that could enhance staff performance (Brown & Heywood, 2005). The inductive approach has allowed the researcher to interpret the managers' understanding and application of staff IPMs by analysing the institutional assessment system, the institution's assessment criteria, and staff members' support for achievement of outputs.

Implications of IPMS on staff performance

IPMS information is necessary for critical management functions, like, maintaining control of current operations and planning for future decision-making about compensations and promotions of staff (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2007). The increasing demand for greater accountability by HEIs compels emphasis of staff performance appraisal. Staff appraisal is a highly important issue to be effectively embraced by academic professionals as an essential aspect of their work (Ellett & Teddlie, 2003). Institutional managers, therefore, need to understand how to design effective systems for performance evaluation and incentive compensation. This means that managers should constantly be measuring, evaluating, compensating, designing and changing their assessment and evaluation systems. The reason is that wrong appraisal schemes can lead to inaccurate performance appraisals, low motivation, non-commitment, and staff disloyalty (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998; Bruns et al., 1992). Reid, Barrington and Kenney (1992), state that lack of commitment and unclear aims are the main reasons why 'certain' appraisal schemes fail to realise hopes. The implication is that HEI managers should be vigilant about IPMS and particularly attentive to leadership and management practices in the general, and task performances.

Conclusion

This paper conceptualised the management practices for the recognition and reward of academic staff performance in key performance areas. Performance appraisal evaluates how well individuals perform in their duties and responsibilities,

provides an assessment of the individual's needs, and defines possible potentials for further development. The results of the evaluation can be used as either a process of control or a means of empowerment, or both. The purposes of staff evaluation, therefore, relate to improving individual performance for greater organisational effectiveness. Thus, to the institutional manager, the ultimate goal of performance appraisal is achieving staff development, professional development and organisational development. If managers understand and can apply the IPMS instrument, significant benefits may result for institution as well as personal development, and individual academics' success. Departmental managers' responsibility is to monitor and evaluate performance of duties that allow it to function and exist. Staff support in key performance areas may result in managers handling responsibilities related to institutional growth. Recommendations are for continuous training in the use of performance data for performance related tasks to make informed changes in institutions through feedback to institutional staff from measured performance.

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Prof. Dr. Sharon Thabo Mampane, University of South Africa, South Africa