Career Path in a Young University

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Case Study: Université Des Mascareignes

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Abstract

The Université des Mascareignes (UDM) was set up in 2012 following an ambitious need for the then Ministry of Tertiary Education to boost tertiary level education in the Republic of Mauritius with a possibility of attaining 100,000 on-campus students. With the coming of a new government in power, tertiary education is subject to scrutiny and more strenuous controls. This has had the effect of bringing systemic changes within the young university that UDM claims to be. At the present state, without having appointed directors and chairmen for the effective running of the university, academic and non-academic staff appear to be lost within this change. They are questioning the future of the new university especially with regards to the proposed career path that could be of critical importance to long-serving staff and deserving employees. Being at the crossroads at a particular conjecture in its relatively young history, this article purports the need to develop or maintain career paths for all staff so that there is motivation and hope for the future of the university. This paper is essentially an analytical article based on recent facts and recorded in the form of minutes from formal discussions between caretaker management and staff in an animated session where academic and non-academic staff questions exchanged hard-nosed questions. For the sake of confidentiality, the primary data assessed is not displayed in the research through published findings. The arguments are however duly supported by scholarly literature available for insight into the problem area. The study supports that strategic leadership, motivation and reward including the need to adapt to the present systemic change could be a source of staff satisfaction and the perspective of a better future in a young and promising university.

Key words: university, systemic change, career path

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the fourth public university in Mauritius, the Université des
Mascareignes, a fusion between ex-Swami Dayanand Institute of Management and the Institut Supérieur de Technologie, there have been lots of expectations from the academic and non-academic staff of the new university. With a work experience spanning 20 years and beyond for certain staff, the career prospects of each and everyone within the university looks rather bleak. A recent report submitted to the University explains that a minority of positions are officialised while the University demanded a substantial number of posts to create the critical mass of staffing needed to launch a full-fledged university. Obviously, the heart of university education lies in teaching and academic excellence while from government sources, no position apart from that of lecturers has been mentioned. The growing tension between enrolment demand, constrained budgets, and greater accountability has resulted in a discouraging environment for the academic profession worldwide. No university can achieve success without well-qualified, committed academic staff [1]. This has instantly triggered a high level of dissatisfaction among staff who expected that the authorities would accept offering promotional positions in the university.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

To understand the contemporary academic profession, it is useful to examine the status and working conditions of the academic profession worldwide [2]. Well-established universities like Nottingham University (UK) claims that its procedure aims to ensure that the University offers promotion opportunities to staff taking account of the individual’s career profile and pathway [3]. The non-recognition of higher grades or promotional positions within the proposal formulated by the Ministry of Civil Service Affairs, made official to staff, clearly makes the structure of the university look like one affected by chronic sclerosis. This term was voiced when the first director of the university was appointed stating that the priority of the Université des Mascareignes would be to promote its staff in the shortest delay. The development of the polytechnics as tertiary institutions was based on a strategy of elevation of technical institutes or by government pronouncement [4]. The absence of a clear transformation strategy was one of the critical flaws of the polytechnic upgrading process, the

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1 Université des Mascareignes is a fusion between ex-Swami Dayanand Institute of Management and the Institut Supérieur de Technologie accredited as a public university in 2012. Also visit website: www.udm.mu
ramifications of which are still evident in the polytechnic system today [5]. A structure typical of a medium-sized polytechnic could not be adapted to a university which normally claims having lecturers, senior lecturers up to professor grade. Since the report handed to all staff of the university claims a reduction in the number of posts available, this will in no way help Université des Mascareignes progress to higher levels comparable to existing public universities in the country.

KEY ACTIONS SUGGESTED

The need for strategic leadership

The Université des Mascareignes clearly needs strategic leadership following the departure of its two former directors; one being of French origin. So long as the directors were in office, the university operated fairly well since strategy for long-term survival (up to 2020) were commonly agreed and discussed by all staff of the university. This comprised inter-alia the definition of career paths for all staff, the immediate promotion of non-academic staff to acting positions including the need to include financial incentive schemes for staff involved in research and teaching excellence. Since the director position was based on state nominations, it has been subject to changes whereby the position is no more filled since December 2015 and staff are eagerly waiting for suitable directors to emerge as university leaders and demonstrate how they could bring the desired change within the university. It can be suggested here that organisations led by visionaries who are not properly supported by strong managerial leadership may destroy wealth even more quickly than organizations led by managerial leaders [6]. When organisations restore strategic control and allow the development of a critical mass of strategic leaders, these leaders will be a source of above-average returns [7].

Systemic change and challenges

Achieving systemic change relies on cultural shifts that will require adequate time, resources, and coordination. This alignment cannot occur in a vacuum. It is essential that funders, change agents, and policy makers are well informed of their mutual activities, and that they mutually shape their actions in order to effect systemic and lasting change [8]. Université des Mascareignes is a young university since it was created in 2012 but a fairly old institution seen from its twenty years of existence and the number of students who have graduated since 1995. In the same way, its academic staff joined the coveted
lecturer position since that time and has never obtained any promotion which, to day, remains the unique case in Mauritius. Representations with the Pay Research Bureau since 2003 have resulted in deadlocks whereby the authority promoting career paths and attractive pay for high calibre staff has always paid lip service to it stating that without official employers, nothing could be achieved. For three consecutive reports, no amendment could be brought by the PRB with the pretence that without having an employer makes it difficult for the pay administration institution to consider any claim made by staff within pre-salary amendment consultations. This has resulted in maintaining salaries in the same grade for all staff without enquiring into what could be done to encourage staff to move ahead.

It is interesting to note here that the systemic change at the university level has entailed the following. Firstly, research is mandatory for a university and this is achieved through an intellectual environment strong enough to sustain a meaningful intellectual culture [9]. The Université des Mascareignes is no exception. Whether it is overt or not, its staff has published since more than a decade. Secondly, the creation of a university automatically asks for higher education and research up to the doctorate level. This has been achieved by a few staff without prior encouragement and a majority has already embarked on doctoral programmes spanning nearly half a decade. The pressures of new agendas, new students and new degrees are challenging traditional pedagogical frameworks in doctoral education [10]. Thirdly, programmes have firstly shifted from diploma courses to degree courses validated through a licence and eventually moving up to a Masters programme to be soon launched by the university. The leadership of a French director also fostered the need to set up a Doctoral School with a research and innovation aisle that has already selected students for doctoral degrees.

All these were unknown to the Université des Mascareignes earlier but have now become part and parcel of the institution through a leveraging of resources from the same staff. Institutions of higher education impact their communities in myriad ways beyond physical development. A growing

2 The PRB stands for the Pay Research Bureau, a state-based organisation in Mauritius, establishing salary scales on a regular basis for public and para-public officers in Mauritius.

3 Doctoral School also known as Ecole Doctorale, an aisle of the University set up in 2014 for PhD and Doctoral students.
number of universities and university systems have mounted initiatives to make these points of contact as organised and effective as possible, for benefit of school and community alike [11]. Despite all the effort done within this systemic change, staff find no opening for a career path at the university.

**Motivation and intrinsic reward**

From the situation described above, there is every reason to call for a general review of the situation at the Université des Mascareignes and save it from an institution crisis or debacle. The PRB rather informally stated that due the fact that the Université des Mascareignes was set up after the publication of the report, it would subsequently set up a special committee to review the situation at the university and bring about the respective changes. A University professor and consultant, mandated for the review exercise, prepared a detailed report validated at the board level of the university. No move has taken place so far and the next PRB report will be published during the second part of this year.

The argument raised by university staff-both academic and non-academic-calls for a serious reflexion. What is a university without professors and advanced positions for all staff? What is a university if its constraints are limited to budget and small capacity? Elsewhere, small-sized universities are incubators of knowledge or intellectual capital and their staff are duly recognised. Developments of this kind within the sector have spawned a range of terms to describe the transformation of the idea of a university; the ‘entrepreneurial university’ [12]. They attract local people and provide a space to develop new businesses as a result of interactions with researchers and research ideas generated in the universities, acting as what some have called a “knowledge hub” for the local/regional innovation system [13]. This comes from rewarding them not only financially but also intrinsically. Promoting existing staff to senior positions and fulfilling the ambition of long-term deserving researchers at least to Associate Professor positions would be a first step to recognising their ability. The nature of the linkages between research and policy, and research and practice, are at the heart of much of the current debate on the value and impact of educational research [14]. It is agreed that a lack of interaction with academic staff has been the crux of all the miseries of staff since the inception of a polytechnic institution systemically
transformed through hard work by its staff to a full-fledged public university.

**On national and international openings**

In the short history of the Université des Mascareignes, the opening of its staff to internationally recognised institutions is like an exception to the rule. Training with Singapore Polytechnic followed by academic training at Challenger TAFE Australia and recently a comprehensive training for leveraging of teaching skills up to a European degree offered by Université de Limoges, partner of the Université des Mascareignes, makes it clear that professional standards are being constantly maintained by the university. This allowed lecturers to offer flexible and negotiable learning objectives and outcomes and learning contracts for individual needs and interests [15]. Research staff have published in countries like India, USA, Poland, Germany, just to name a few and their work has been recognised by academic search engines. There is also full evidence of successful participation of academic staff in international conferences held in Mauritius like DEASA, RESUS or HRDC, among others [16].

**CONCLUSION**

**A Career Path for Salvation**

This article now sums up the idea that a career path is a salute to the ongoing effort maintained by academic and non-academic staff of the Université des Mascareignes. Some staff will retire in a couple of years or a decade. The academic profession must again become a profession-with appropriate training, compensation and status [17]. We must bear in mind that their contribution to the development of talent in Mauritius has been of prime importance. Talentship has significant implications for virtually every element of human resources, including measurement, strategy, competencies, leadership development, and HR infrastructure [18]. By constantly upgrading their skills without due support from their institution, by financing their research or conference papers on their own, by contributing articles of general interest to the public through the press, it has become a moment to think of rewarding staff.

The Université des Mascareignes is presently at the crossroads with its teething problems like not having its director and chairperson. In an analogical way, “priority of practicality” and “financial reductionism” would mean here bringing each and every school into adjustment with the economic reality of the time [19]. If the university is to rise to the challenge, it
requires autonomy, an independent decision-making process that would allow for individual policy-making regarding its own development [20]. This again calls for restructuring and revamping activities and opportunities for long-term serving staff. To this end, it becomes an imperative to harmonise academic tertiary education in Mauritius and consider the equal and egalitarian role, influence and perspective of lecturers in universities. It would be most welcome if the highly respected position of lecturers across all the tertiary institutions, private or public, would be regulated in the same way as professionals like doctors, engineers and accountants, among others [21].

This alone might not count too much since work is still being achieved by all its staff and courses are completed on due time. This call for action with regards to the University, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Civil Service Affairs and the Pay Research Bureau and it should not be laconically perceived like a cry in the desert. Set with the flagship of ‘Savoir, c’est pouvoir’4 (Thy knowledge symbolises power), let us not make the Université des Mascareignes a white elephant but an educational centre that has its share of the cake in the world of tertiary education.

REFERENCES

[2] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

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4 ‘Savoir c’est pouvoir’ is the official slogan of the Université des Mascareignes.
Education, Association of American Colleges and Universities.


[16] RESUS International Conference on Sustainable Development, 3-5th March 2015, Rose Hill Campus, Université des Mascareignes.

[17] Ibid 1.


[20] Ibid.