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Council for Higher Education kowtows to Makgoba

The recent decision by the Council for Higher Education to suppress the publication of its audit of the University of KwaZulu-Natal bodes ill for the council's reputation, as it sets a dangerous precedent.

There is a time-honoured tradition in South Africa of government departments and agencies releasing unpalatable information during the month of December, when it is most likely to go unnoticed. December 2010 saw the Council for Higher Education (CHE) place an announcement on its website (http://www.che.ac.za/auditing/instantaudited/reports/UKZN_Resolution_Oct2010.pdf) that it had decided not to publish the report of the audit panel on the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), which conducted its work in October 2008. In terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997, all universities are audited for independent quality assurance. The panel, under the chairmanship of Martin Hall, then Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cape Town and now Vice-Chancellor of the University of Salford in the United Kingdom, provided oral feedback in the form of a live-stream to the UKZN community that same month, and presented its report to UKZN Vice-Chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba in June 2009. To date, all but two of the country's 23 universities have been audited by the CHE, and the final reports of all these audits have been published within a year of the audit taking place.

But Makgoba prevailed upon the council not to publish the report, on the grounds that Hall was biased against the university. This was apparently because when Makgoba took disciplinary action against two senior academic staff members in November 2008 (<http://www.sajs.co.za/index.php/SAJS/article/view/19/11>), immediately after the audit panel's visit, Hall wrote a letter confidentially to the council, subsequently leaked to *The Mercury*, expressing his concern that Makgoba's action was 'a direct affront' to the panel. Makgoba responded in a remarkably similar vein, claiming that Hall's letter had 'compromised' the audit process. Interestingly, the council chose to ignore Hall's concern and to investigate Makgoba's – by setting up a review panel to consider his claim, comprising Thoko Mayekiso of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Mark Hay of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (who has recently taken up a senior position at the CHE) and Mashpye Kgaphola, Vice-Chancellor Designate of the Mangosuthu University of Technology. This panel's findings are made public in the December announcement. It affirms that the audit report 'meets international standards of quality assurance practice', but claims to be unable to establish whether or not Hall's letter had impacted on the contents of the draft report. However, it concludes that the leak thereof had 'substantially compromised the audit process', and (hilariously) that the 'value of the draft report may be limited given the long time lapse since the audit visit in October 2008'.

On the first score, Hall has responded (<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2011-01-14-varsitys-voices-of-dissent-gagged>) by emphasising that the written report reflected the oral feedback that was provided to the entire university community the month before his letter was written, and three months before it was leaked to the press; and furthermore that it is implausible that any personal bias that he might hold could 'mesmerise an eight-member panel from seven different South African universities and an independent auditor from Australia'. With regard to the alleged reduced value of the report, no one other than the CHE itself could be held responsible for taking a full eighteen months to decide to suppress it.

Their decision to do so will inspire no confidence in the body by the university community, nor will the nonchalant response of its chief executive Ahmed Essop that 'the CHE will take into account the issues raised by the UKZN audit process in revising the audit manual for the second cycle of audits'. This is a great pity, as there is general consensus that South Africa badly needs quality assurance of some sort in its higher education system. The entire sector, in particular members of UKZN, was relying on the CHE report as a basis for moving forward, as an internal report relating to management issues at the university lacked credibility on account of its membership having been handpicked by Makgoba (<http://www.sajs.co.za/index.php/SAJS/article/view/73/54>). Suppressing the CHE report merely casts a shadow over the future of a university which should be a crucial institution in the development of the nation, and in particular of the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

But more serious are the wider implications of the council's decision, as it sets a most dangerous precedent. If by lobbying the CHE a university vice-chancellor is able to subvert the audit process if its findings happen to be critical of management, then the council's authority is clearly questionable. The CHE chair, former Director-General of Education Chabani Manganyi owes the academic community an explanation if he expects anyone to take an audit by the CHE seriously again.

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