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Effective Performance Appraisal: Asking The Right Questions

In education, as in the corporate world, a critical task that must be undertaken is the effective management of performance in order to enhance the work of the individual and the organisation. Appraisal is inherently complex because it has multiple stakeholders and multiple purposes. This complexity gives rise to several tensions that create challenges for both the appraiser and the appraised. It is valued (or not valued) by different players for different reasons and in different seasons of a career and appraisal systems should be adaptive and responsive to changing needs in education. Policy, processes and practices need to recognise and address both inherent complexities and changing demands in ways that are productive. Whilst there is some evidence of studies of performance appraisal in higher education, there is a considerable gap in the literature in relation to what constitutes valued and effective appraisal practice.

To find out the extent to which appraisal is effectively practised in tertiary settings it is first necessary to establish some standards of effectiveness. These standards relate to both policy and practice which the theory-base indicates should cover aspects such as context, scope, intent, value, construction, constituent elements, process, implementation issues and review to provide a sound structure for appraising and improving staff performance. Utilising these elements in the creation of an evaluation standards framework is the first step in conducting an evaluative research project and requires the researcher to ask preliminary questions about whether the right questions are being asked.

The forum created by the international conference of the Association for Tertiary Education Management provides an excellent opportunity to get feedback about a draft 'standards of effectiveness framework for performance appraisal' for use in this study. Using a power point presentation that incorporates some workshop elements to make the session interactive, is proposed as a way of checking what participants view as the most essential staff appraisal elements and why these are valued.