

# “Employee participation and productivity in a South African university. Implications for human resource management”

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## Employee participation and productivity in a South African university. Implications for human resource management

### Abstract

Employee participation refers to giving employees and their representatives opportunities to collaborate in matters that pertain to the management of the organization especially where employees are directly concerned. This research therefore examines employee participation within the context of a university of technology in South Africa. Universities of Technology (UoT) are a new phenomenon in South Africa. As part of the public university system, they are faced with a different set of challenges from the more comprehensive and traditional universities. UoT's offer practice based learning in the areas of business, engineering and technology, thus suggesting that they have a role to play in closing the gap in skills in these areas. This study asked the question: to what extent are employees of the faculty in question integrated into matters that pertain to the management of the faculty? This main research question was designed to interact with the following sub-questions: Do you think employee participation improves productivity? Are there platforms for employee participation? Do you think management reasonably considers your input in the faculty? These questions have relevance judging from vast research that indicates a significant reluctance by management to accept employee participation as a necessary practice in organizations. Data was collected using the qualitative approach. The interviews were tape-recorded, while in some cases, notes were taken. The population for this study comprized 12 of the 30 senior lecturers in a faculty at a University of Technology in South Africa. The findings suggest that while there is a desire on the part of the academics to be incorporated into matters of concern to them and the faculty, there seemed to be an obvious neglect of the contributions that academic staff make in the faculty.

**Keywords:** labor relations, employee participation, employee engagement, South Africa, university of technology.

**JEL Classification:** L250.

### Introduction and background

Recent developments in the way employees are managed in South African organizations have brought about the need to seriously consider employees as major stakeholders in organizations. At a time when employees in other parts of the world are regarded as the main source of competitive advantage, South Africa is still enmeshed in a labor crises typified by industrial actions. Public commentaries indicate various labor issues of concern in South Africa. One of these is the accusation by labor that employers do not incorporate them into matters that affect them. This has often resulted in workforce discontent, industrial action and various forms of labor dissatisfaction. These have severe negative impact on the organization. Proof of this lies in the many employee attitude surveys conducted in several South African organizations. South African higher education (HE) institutions are not immune to the fall-out of poor employee participation. Employee participation refers to giving employees and their representatives opportunities to collaborate in matters that pertain to the management of the organization especially where employees are directly concerned. There are several benefits in employee participation. Franca and Pahor (2014) are of the opinion that employee participation positively affects the work environment. The inability of employees to exercise control over their working

lives and the alienation that result are seen as some of the problems that participation may solve (Busck et al., 2010). According to Rothmann and Rothmann (2010), workers are more likely to experience physical, emotional or psychological discomfort if they are unable to engage in their work roles. Engagement in work roles has many dimensions but more significantly, engagement signifies a positive attitude which an employee holds towards an organization (Robinson et al., 2004). In the absence of a positive disposition towards one's organization, there is the likelihood of dissatisfaction. Evidence shows that employee dissatisfaction impacts negatively on both the organization and the employee. Dissatisfied workers tend to look elsewhere – either for new employment or they intentionally distract themselves from work. Also, when a work environment is not conducive, workers resort to staying away from work. Individuals who dislike their jobs may experience negative health effects that are either psychological or physical. A situation of this kind may lead to decreased productivity. Conversely, Price, Kiekbusch and Theis (2007) and Rothmann (2008) report that employees who have high levels of job satisfaction tend to experience better mental and physical health and when this occurs, employees' commitment and loyalty are extended, which then impact positively on customer satisfaction.

In as much as there is an abundance of literature that postulate the positive impact of employee participation on organizational productivity, literature is silent on

the impact of employee participation in a transforming organization such as the University of Technology (UoT) where this study took place. This research therefore examines employee participation within the context of a university of technology in South Africa.

Universities of Technology are a new phenomenon in South Africa. They form part of the public university system. Public universities in South Africa are divided into three types: traditional universities, which offer theoretically-oriented university degrees; universities of technology (Previously Technikons), which offer vocational oriented diplomas and degrees; and comprehensive universities, which offer a combination of both types of qualification. Given that UoT's are a new phenomenon, they face several challenges. In acknowledgement of these challenges, a new higher education qualifications framework (HEQF) has been implemented to accommodate UoT's (HESA, 2009). The issue of 'accommodation' therefore raises a fundamental question of respect and recognition. As Ramdass (2009) observed, a major priority for South African higher education was the need to recognize UoT's as a major national asset given their history. Having been products of Technikons, their graduates are often looked down upon as inferior to those with mainstream university qualification. UoTs offer practice based learning in the areas of business, engineering and technology. South Africa faces an acute shortage of skills in these areas thus UoT's have a fundamental role to play in closing this gap. According to Mda (2009), while educational institutions are expected to serve as breeding grounds for skilled labor that South Africa needs, it is plagued by critical shortage of teaching faculty and research scholars (Yizengaw, 2008). This shortage is brought about by among others, unattractive working conditions (Kapur and Crowley, 2008). An unattractive working condition is characterized by poor facilities (Iwu and Ukpere, 2012), uninspiring organizational culture (Venter et al., 2009) and non-involvement of university staff in matters that affect them (Massarik and Tannenbaum, 1999).

Of the 16 most problematic factors of doing business in South Africa that are listed in The Global Competitiveness Report (2013-2014), an inadequately educated workforce ranks first (with 19.7%). Related to this problem are problems of remuneration, productivity, leadership and management style. To have an educated workforce, South African academics need to experience job satisfaction. Several reasons have been provided for academic staff job dissatisfaction. One of those is an unattractive work culture, which prevents effective academic staff participation in matters of concern to them. The effect of an unhappy work environment is felt in the many

numbers of academics who seek greener pastures elsewhere. With academics seeking greener pastures elsewhere especially in non-academic jobs, the purpose of higher education may not be fully realized.

If South African UoTs should respond to the skills dearth issue and the challenges of globalization, it must seek ways to improve productivity levels. This cannot be achieved through adversarial or conflictual relationships between unions or between management and labor, but can best be achieved by a more cooperative relationship between unions and between labor and management (Klerck, 1999). According to Voss and Gruber (2006), in order for public HE institutions to provide services of good quality to the students (who are the customers of public HE institutions), the academics should be knowledgeable, well-organized, encouraging, helpful, caring to students' needs, approachable, experienced, friendly and should have good communication skills. Rendering services of good quality will help improve the productivity (that is more graduates) of public HE.

This study presents benefits in a variety of spheres. Firstly, Venter et al. (2009) argue that meaningful employee participation in decision making is relatively new in South Africa (SA), thus this study adds to the scanty literature on employee participation in public higher education (HE) institutions in SA. Secondly, this study presents the benefits of employee participation to a Faculty. Thirdly, this study gives the first valuable insight on the impact of employee participation on the productivity of a Faculty at a university. Lastly, this study is significant for the discipline of Industrial Relations in that it provides better insight into HE industrial relations.

## **1. The concepts of employee participation, engagement and productivity**

**1.1. Employee participation.** Westhuizen (2010) defines employee participation as "... the totality of forms, that is direct (personal or by the employee) or indirect (through the representatives of the employees) by which individuals, groups, collectives secure their interests ... or contribute to the decision making process". The importance of this definition lies in its delineation of the two forms of employee participation in decision making, namely direct (by employees themselves), and indirect (through their representatives). Busck et al. (2010) insist that the benefit of employee participation is not simply rooted in the job the individual performs in an organization but also in other activities such as participation in meetings at a department or organizational level or through elected representatives. They go on to say that employee participation should no longer be seen

as a means for promoting individual or collective wage earners' interests, but also as a contribution to the success of the company and of the individual on the premises of the company. Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) regard this as formal and informal systems of relationship. A formal, direct and individually focused participation can take the form of face-to-face interactions between supervisors and their staff by way of informal oral and verbal participation, while the other can be in the form of written information or suggestions. Although Leat (2007) thinks that employee participation may 'represent some sort of erosion of management's ability to take decisions unilaterally without consulting or paying any attention to the views or wishes of employees', Kalleberg et al. (2009) consider the association that employee participation has two positive outcomes such as improved skills development and reduction in job-related stress.

Considering the concept of employee participation, several benefits exist for employer and employee. Firstly, making employees to participate in the decision making of an undertaking is an acknowledgement of the vital role that employees play in an organization, and is also recognition of their economic rights (Venter et al., 2009). Secondly, engaging employees in decision making is an extension of the principles of democracy in the workplace, where employees can exercise greater influence over decisions that affect their lives at work (Lansbury and Davis, 1992). Lastly, engaging employees in decision making will help to reduce turnover, absenteeism, the number of grievances, and will result in a more cooperative relationship between management and labor (Massarik and Tannenbaum, 1999).

**1.2. Engagement.** South Africa is experiencing a high staff turnover and as a result millions of rands are lost each year. Not only is the high staff turnover resulting in decreased productivity, it also results in acrimonious disputes between labor and business. Many studies have, on the basis of the face-offs between labor and business, suggested a number of interventions to curb, not only the incessant high levels of labor turnover, but also the disputes that emerge. One of such interventions is increased employee engagement.

Improving employee engagement opportunities is perhaps the most powerful medium used by most organizations to increase organizational productivity (Macey, Schneider and Barbera, 2009, p. 2). This is because engagement is a positive attitude, which is held by an employee towards an organization and its values (Robinson et al., 2004, cited in Ferrer, 2005). Cook (2008) adds that organizations that have

higher levels of employee commitment and engagement outperform their competitors in terms of performance, productivity and profitability.

In order for employees in an organization to effectively engage in decision making, the following conditions must be met: effective engagement of subordinates; management commitment; management style; an appropriate organizational culture; training; and trade union support (Venter et al., 2009). With regard to management style for instance, Mendes and Stander (2011), citing the work of Greasley et al. (2008) are of the opinion that a leader who uses engagement or participation creates benefits for both the organization and employees, as engagement improves the performance of an organization and reduces role conflicts, role uncertainty, absenteeism and turnover amongst employees. Therefore, management style is a key antecedent of employee engagement (Cooper and Xu, 2011). Autocratic management, which vests power, authority, and decision making in management, is deemed to be incompatible with employee participation in decision making. Conversely, in a democratic style of management, managers acknowledge the value of employee input; foster a culture of information sharing; promote cooperation; and encourage employees to participate in decision making (Venter et al., 2009).

An engaged employee is aware of business setting, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization (Robinson et al., 2004, cited in Ferrer, 2005). Engaged employees give more of what they have to offer. As a result, an engaged workforce is more effective, efficient and productive (Macey, Schneider, Barbera, and Young, 2009). One can deduce that engaging the workforce in the decision making process, is a tool that can be used by an organization to increase its effectiveness, efficiency and productivity.

**1.3. Productivity.** The term productivity is defined severally by different authors as an important concept that requires the attention of management scholars. In fact there seems to be common agreement that in order to meet its goals, vision and to improve its effectiveness, efficiency and productivity, the management of an organization should engage all stakeholders in the operations of a business.

According to Hughes, Avey and Norman (2008), there is a substantial relationship between employee participation and organizational productivity. Isabirye (2007) also found that organizations could, through participative management become "world class" by improving work performance and productivity. Similarly, the Gallop Organization which studied the impact of employee participation in decision making

in 7,939 business units in 36 companies, found that employee participation in decision making is directly associated with increased performance, customer satisfaction, effectiveness, productivity, profitability and a reduction of employee turnover (Konrad, 2006, p. 1). These findings are in line with research that was conducted by Defourney, Estrin and Jones (1985). In their study they found that corporate productivity is generally positively related to measures of workers' participation. Similarly, Conte and Svejnar (1988) state that organizations or firms that offer worker participation in management have a tendency to be more productive. Therefore, following Bhatti and Quereshi's (2007) definition, productivity is a performance measure, which encompasses both efficiency and effectiveness.

In this study, the terms effectiveness and efficiency are used to determine the impact of employee participation on the productivity of the faculty under review.

## 2. Statement of the research problem

At a time when people are regarded as the main source of competitive advantage, South Africa is still embroiled in a labor crises epitomized by industrial actions. Reports by the South African Department of Labor (2012, 2013) indicate various labor issues of concern in South Africa. Evidence of polarized perspectives of the obligations of parties to the employment relationship is notable in the sentiments of the labor movements which widely contradict those of the employers. Workers often accuse their employers of not incorporating them into matters that affect them. This has often resulted in workforce discontent, industrial action and various forms of labor dissatisfaction. These have severe negative impact on the organization. Following this, this study asked the question: to what extent are employees of the faculty in question integrated into matters that pertain to the management of the faculty? This main research question was designed to interact with the following sub-questions: do you think employee participation improves productivity? Are there platforms for employee participation? Do you think management reasonably considers your input in the faculty? These questions have relevance judging from vast research that indicates a significant reluctance by management to accept employee participation as a necessary practice in organizations (Venter et al., 2009; Weiss, 2004). The main aim of the research question was to gauge the perception of the academics in the faculty with regard to their participation in matters that concern faculty management. It was hoped that one would be able to establish whether employee participation has any impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the

Faculty. The assumption of the study therefore was that if employee participation impacted both the faculty's efficiency and effectiveness, therefore the faculty would experience high levels of productivity.

## 3. Research methodology

This section presents the data collection methodology that was employed, the population and sample, and the research ethical statement.

**3.1. The data collection methodology.** Data was collected using the qualitative approach. The research was qualitative because the researchers conducted personal in-depth semi-structured interviews. In terms of semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a list of themes and questions that should be covered, although these may vary from one interview to another, and interview schedules and guides are used (Wellman et al., 2005). Semi-structured interviews allow respondents some freedom to talk about what is of interest or important to them.

The interviews were tape-recorded. Tape-recording enabled the researchers to focus attention on the participants (Ally, 2009) rather than taking notes, which can be distracting. However, recording the interview may make participants reluctant to disclose contentious issues. Hence, the researchers decided to take notes in cases where a participant was not comfortable with tape-recording.

The interview guide for this study comprised thirteen questions which addressed points of interest for the study. The thirteen questions were further categorized into five themes in order to assist the researchers achieve the objectives of the study. The thirteen questions contained in the interview guide were derived from literature, as well as from information that was obtained during the preliminary investigation to gain background knowledge on the topic. According to Panneerselvam (2004), the validity and reliability of questions contained in an interview schedule largely depend on theoretical studies of the topic under investigation, and the views of the research participants. In fact, every research instrument must be assessed prior to use for both validity and reliability purposes (NNSDO, 2005) in order for the instrument to prudently measure what it set out to measure (Coetzee and Schreuder, 2010), and also to lend some credibility to the findings of the study (Welman et al., 2005). The reliability of the data collection instrument was tested through the assistance of some academics in two faculties in the institution. Comments raised by this pretest group were considered bringing about a slight rework of the interview guide. Subsequently, a senior member of the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) was asked to evaluate the guide.

**3.2. Population and sample.** Intent on finding ways to create participatory academic environment, and in order to provide new and valuable insight to the discussion on employee participation in public HE, the population for this study comprised 12 of the 30 senior lecturers in a Faculty at a University of Technology in South Africa. The reason behind the use of senior lecturers as the main subjects were to be assured of rich and in-depth information.

This study used a non-probability sampling technique in the form of snowball and convenience sampling methods. A snowball sample is a technique where one subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who, in turn provides the name of the third, and so on (Brewer and Miller, 2003). Houser (1998) adds that in a snowball or chain sampling, the researcher contacts participants and requests them to identify individuals who have knowledge of the topic. Convenience sampling is a sampling technique in which participants are selected because they are available or easy to find (Grinnell and Unrau, 2010).

**3.3. Ethics statement.** Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, anonymity of participants was strictly assured and assumed names were used during data analysis and report writing. The data that was collected from the study was not disclosed to anyone and was only available to the researchers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, while authorization was obtained from the institution. Essentially, these protocols were observed with the intention of obtaining informed consent both from the lecturer and the population. According to Mack et al. (2005), informed consent is one of the most important tools for ensuring that participants understand what it means to participate in a particular research so that they can decide in a conscious, deliberate manner whether they want to be part of the research or not. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis, and participants were free to withdraw from the study whenever they wished, without reprehension by the researchers.

#### 4. Data analysis and results

Data analysis is the process of arranging, and giving meaning to the mass of collected data (Delpont, Devos, Fouche and Strydom, 2005). The data collected was analyzed qualitatively using themes. Thematic analysis refers to the identification of themes within a collected data (Ezzy, 2002). In fact, strengthening the justification for the use of themes, Hillenbrand and Money (2000) are of the opinion that the ability to cluster data enhances the understanding of a study by grouping the collected data in terms of its similarity, which in turn leads to the identification of high level themes. Two themes namely Impact of Employee Participation on Productivity and Enablers

of Employee Participation emerged principally from the analysis.

To set the stage, we decided to capture the subjects' understanding of the concept of employee participation. The responses are shown below.

#### 4.1. Participants' understanding of the concept of employee participation.

*P9: "Employee participation... I think how I understand it, is to be in a position to make all decisions regarding your own work situation, that means that no one is prescribing you what to do and how to do it..."*

*P4: "It means giving a voice to employees to influence what affects them. It means having your views respected as an employee, as a key stakeholder within the organization"*

*P10: "...in principle I will say it probably means that people's inputs are requested and opinions are obtained when decisions are made..."*

*P11: "It is a scenario where employees will also be involved in decision making process. So it becomes easier for them to own the decisions and implement them"*

*P1: "Employee participation to me does not necessarily mean that the employee does take the decision, because the employee is not mandated to make the decision. However, I think it is absolutely important that the employee is given the necessary opportunities to give inputs towards the decision... to me I understand on that maximum inputs but not necessarily the decision itself..."*

It can be seen that the participants' understanding of employee participation differed. However, the common understanding is that employee participation means that management should consult with employees in order to get their inputs before making a final decision on issues that will impact an employee's job performance.

**4.2. Theme one: impact of employee participation on productivity.** The aim of this theme was to investigate if employee participation in decision making had any impact on productivity. To achieve this objective, the researchers used effectiveness and efficiency, which constitute measures of productivity (Bhatti and Qureshi, 2007).

*4.2.1. Impact of employee participation on effectiveness.* Most of the participants believed that employee participation does have a positive impact on academics' effectiveness. The responses are as follows.

*Participant: "I will say very, very, very, positively employee participation is always beneficial or has the potential of being beneficial most of the time...."*

*When you have employees participating and the decision is implemented, they work because they were part of the decision... is not you decide as the manager.... Employee participation can speed up problem identification... as a result effectiveness will improve... ”.*

*Participant: “It does because a motivated employee would be one who would be willing to produce more... ”.*

*Participant: “Yes... firstly, I think the decision making will be better, things will become more creative and more innovative if people are given a chance to participate in decision making because I think a lot of the time very important view points and ideas are neglected because people aren't included. So I think from that point of view, the product that we deliver to our students as the clients will be enhanced. And secondly, I think from a personal point of view, people will feel like they belong, and I think their commitment to the organization will improve because they will feel like they have been heard and even if the participation does not have a direct impact on performance in the long run it will because people are going to be more committed to the institution, proud of the institution, more satisfied in their work because they feel like they are heard. So for those reasons, I definitely think that participation will increase performance of staff ... ”.*

*Participant: “It does affect because an employee is the one who implements. So you need their buy-in to be able to implement. Without a buy-in they can sabotage any thing to be implemented... ”.*

One of the participants did not totally agree with the above views. For this participant, employee participation may affect effectiveness positively or negatively. This is evident in the responses below.

*Participant: “Well, the thing is that, it could be a two-edge sword. And I think it will depend on the attitude of management whether they are proactive or reactive... ”.*

Considering the responses, the subjects' perception of employee participation is that it has a positive impact on effectiveness.

**4.2.2. Impact of employee participation on efficiency.**  
Most of the participants were in agreement that employee participation positively impacts efficiency.

*Participant: “It does affect because if an employee participates in decision making, then the employee will be able to participate in the implementation of whatever is put in place. They become motivated and they become more efficient... ”.*

*Participant: “Yes, definitely if employees in today's times feel that they are forced to do unpopular things, and they have no choice in which option they get, then they are definitely, I think unproductive, unhappy people are not productive... ”.*

*Participant: “Yes I fully agree with that... ”.*

*Participant: “Very much so, very much so with the condition that the employees see and feel that their decisions have an impact. They will try to become more involved in decision making, but if they see that their decisions are going nowhere, they will withhold their decisions. So if you give them the opportunity, make sure there are results”.*

We found that only two of the subjects differed with respect to the positive impact of employee participation on an academic's work efficiency. One of the participants that differed stated that employee participation in matters of the organization can only have a positive impact on efficiency if it is managed well.

*Participant: “... is very difficult to say in general.... I think if it is managed well, and people feel that their voices are heard, I think it would definitely improve people's motivation level and the attitude towards the workplace... ”.*

Another participant was of the strong view that employee participation could have a negative impact on efficiency.

*Participant: “... I think that participation can actually decrease efficiency in the sense that it takes longer to get things done when you get people to participate... ”.*

With due consideration of the differing viewpoints, one gets the point that most of the participants considered their inclusion in matters of the faculty as necessary and possibly contributory to efficient execution of their duties. This does suggest that overall; employee participation has a positive impact on efficiency. This finding is in line with the views of Klerck (1999) who found that employee participation in matters concerning them increased the efficiency of an organization owing to an increase in the flow of information, and an increase in organizational efficiency, which would signify an increase in its productivity.

One of the participants stated that there are no guarantees that if employees are given the chance to participate in decision making, it will affect productivity positively, but the possibilities are high that it will increase productivity.

*Participant: “... there are no guarantees, but the possibilities are high... ”.*

Another participant indicated that employee participation in decision making can affect productivity negatively if it is not managed well.

*Participant: "... is a two-edge sword. It depends how it is managed.... It could affect it negatively if it is not managed well, but it would not necessarily affect it positively if it is there".*

One can deduce that if employees are given the opportunity to participate in decision making, it will impact effectiveness, efficiency and productivity positively. These findings are in line with research, which was conducted by Defourney, Estrin and Jones (1985). In their study they found that corporate productivity is, in general, positively related to measures of workers' participation.

These findings corroborate the views of Klerck (1999) who asserts that employee participation in decision making increases the efficiency of an organization owing to an increase in the flow of information, and an increase in organizational efficiency, which signifies an increase in its productivity. Similarly, Bjorne and Torunn (2006) point out that employee participation in decision making significantly influences organizational productivity.

#### **4.3. Enablers of employee participation (Theme 2).**

The aims of this theme were to examine the platforms through which employees in the Faculty can voice their opinion and also to ascertain whether through the platforms, employees effectively participate in decision making. The responses are shown below.

*Participant: "Well there are Forums where staff can raise issues. They can raise issues in departmental meetings, they can raise issues at the Faculty Board. Whether or not that will be acted upon or taken into consideration is hard to tell. Other than that, I am not really aware of anything... in the faculty specifically".*

*Participant: "There are not really mechanisms per se, but the organizational set up is such that it allows... no mechanisms of that nature, every now and then there can be ad hoc meetings which are driven... in terms of something that we have created, you need to tell me about it. I am not aware of anything like that...".*

*Participant: "... we have various forums. We have on the department side to have regular departmental meetings, if you are part of a committee, we have teaching and learning committees, we have research committees. You are able to voice your opinion in these committees. And we also have faculty board meeting once a term and where certain issues can be raised and certain decisions*

*have to be made. So there are sufficient opportunities for people to voice their opinions through departmental meetings, through open door policies... through committee meetings and through the faculty board".*

*Participant: "... if you just look at the system, you have subject committees, for instance that is the beginning for decision making concerning your work.... Departmental meetings, faculty board meetings which is normally at the end of every term...".*

*Participant: "... we do participate through one on one meeting with the management at different level. We do use communications, emails, face to face meetings, departmental meetings, faculty board...".*

Most of the research participants stated that there are forums or platforms through which employees can participate in decision making. These include: Emails, Questionnaires, One-on-One or Face-to-Face Meetings, Subject Committee Meetings, Teaching and Learning Committee Meetings, Research Committee Meetings, Departmental Meetings, Faculty Board Meetings and Senate. It seems therefore that there are platforms or opportunities through which employees can voice their opinions or participate in decisions that affect them in the faculty. The big question is how effective are these platforms or opportunities in promoting employee participation?

**4.4. Effectiveness of platforms.** It is apparent that there are channels for participation in the faculty. However, the researchers went further to seek the reactions of the academics to the questions (1) how effective are these platforms for engagement? (2) In your opinion, do you think management values your inputs?

The responses are presented below.

*Participant: "... no in that aspect there is nothing.... Even though we have departmental meetings, faculty board meetings, etc., but that is the theory, in practice comments and suggestions you make nine times out of ten times are not implemented or are ignored...".*

*Participant: "... there are opportunities to declare your unhappiness, but I don't know always if they work the way they were intended to work, because of a variety of reasons.... They are effective in a perfect world, but we don't live in a perfect world. So I don't believe they are effective as they should be...".*

*Participant: "These are difficult questions to answer. Some of them are effective, some of them are not effective for the pure reason that the people who are in charge of carrying out decisions lax in*

*things.... Decisions are not carried out in practice.... I think that is lacking in this place... ”.*

The responses above are indicative of an ignored academic faculty.

## 5. Discussion

Employee participation may be beneficial for public HE institutions for three main reasons: political, social and economical. Politically, it is vital because engaging the employees in decision making is an extension of the principle of democracy in the workplace through which employees can exercise greater influence over decisions which affect their lives at work. Socially, employee participation can improve service delivery, job satisfaction, commitment and labor relations. Economically, cooperation is seen as bringing about greater commitment, performance and motivation on the part of employees which will result in higher productivity (graduates). The discussion is based on the themes.

**5.1. Impact of employee participation on the Faculty's productivity.** The researchers' measures of the Faculty's productivity were effectiveness and efficiency.

Most of the respondents for this study believed that if employees were given a chance to participate in decision making, it will enhance effective delivery of services to the students.

When employees in HE are given a chance to participate in the decision-making process, it makes them feel that they are part of the institution. This increases their commitment to the institution and makes them more effective in the way that they perform their tasks suggesting that they will even become more effective in the way that they do their work if management actually implements their inputs practically. Maslach et al. (2001) burn out and engagement model suggests that engaging and allowing employees to participate in matters that pertain to them presents a sense of community. A sense of community presupposes that members of a community (in this case academic staff of the UoT) are encouraged to participate in matters of the community and are rewarded for their valued contributions. This is in line with Khan's (1990) employee engagement model which emphasizes the need to allow employees to make important contributions. This enhances the perception of organizational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

A high number of positive responses obtained in this theme indicate that employee participation will encourage the respondents to deliver effective services to the students of the Faculty, thus improving the effectiveness of the Faculty.

The next question related to the impact of employee participation on efficiency. Results, which relate to the impact of employee participation on efficiency, were obtained. Ten of the twelve respondents stated that employee participation makes them to be efficient.

Since most of the respondents stated that employee participation makes them effective and efficient, one can, therefore, state that employee participation has a positive impact on the Faculty's productivity. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the measures used to measure the productivity of the Faculty for this study were effectiveness and efficiency.

These positive responses are indications that employee participation has a positive impact on the Faculty's productivity.

**5.2. Enablers of employee participation.** The respondents stated that there are more than enough platforms or forums in the institution and Faculty where employees can voice their opinions. However, the respondents stated that the problem they have is that management most of the time ignores their inputs. In order to get a balanced view, the researchers interviewed the Manager of the Faculty for this study to get management's opinion. The Faculty Manager stated that in the Faculty, the rule or norm is that of academic freedom. That is, employees are free to participate in decision making. This notwithstanding, the management of the Faculty sometimes used its prerogatives in the form of "Executive Ruling" to decide on certain issues under debate for the interest of the Faculty. Perhaps it is in cases where management decides on issues under debate using its prerogatives (executive ruling) that made most of the respondents to state that management most of the time ignores their inputs.

The results for this variable showed the highest negative responses throughout the personal in-depth semi-structured interviews. Most of the respondents stated that there are forums, platforms and opportunities in the Faculty where employees can contribute their inputs. These include: Emails, Questionnaires, One on One or Face to Face Meetings, Subject Committee Meetings, Teaching and Learning Committee Meetings, Research Committee Meetings, Departmental Meetings, Faculty Board Meetings and Senate.

It is evident that there are more than enough platforms in the Faculty through which employees can voice their opinions. Sadly, it seems there is no reciprocal communication between faculty staff and management.

**5.3. Implications for (Faculty) human resource management.** In order for a meaningful employee participation to exist, management should as much as

possible endeavor to translate the opinions of the employees into practice. If employees see that their inputs are not taken seriously, they will become discouraged and will look at the decision making process as a management affair and nothing to do with them. As noted earlier, both faculty and management should enjoy open communication. Open communication can be perceived as a demonstration of concern by management. Therefore a practical implication for human resource management is the need for them to understand the importance of social exchange in organizations (Saks, 2006). This would improve employees' perceptions of the support they receive from their organization. As Saks (2006) contends 'engaged employees are also more likely to have a high-quality relationship with their employer leading them to also have more positive attitudes, intentions and behaviors'.

Essentially, for employee participation to be effective, it should emerge from the core of management. Management should really become committed and participative, and should depart from fears of losing its managerial prerogatives. The danger in a dissimilar practice is that management of the faculty will not be able to retain their employees as well as maintain good relations with them so that they can perform well and continue being productive (Holman et al., 2003). Employees play a key role towards the functioning of any organization (Daft and Marcic, 2010). This indicates that a good relationship between employees and faculty management will yield favorably higher levels of productivity. Thus management of this faculty must try to incorporate their human capital in matters that pertain to the functioning of the faculty, which would ensure an enduring relationship and advancement of the faculty (Hall, 2008).

Research has indicated that employees tend to be dissatisfied if they do not enjoy the confidence of management in the affairs of the organization. The impact of their dissatisfaction is felt in the levels of staff turnover, absenteeism and low levels of productivity, worker union disturbance/disruption of business and physical and psychological malaise such as severe distress, and burnout. Increased absenteeism and turnover can subsequently lead to increased workload on the academic and non-academic staff that are left behind, poor response to students' queries and organizational problems and conflicts. If South African public HE institutions should respond to the challenges of globalization, it must seek ways to improve productivity levels. This cannot be achieved through adversarial or conflictual relationships between unions or between management and labor, but can best be achieved by a more

cooperative relationship between organized labor and management (Klerck, 1999).

It is evident that almost all of the respondents believe that employee participation has a positive impact on the Faculty's effectiveness, efficiency, and productivity. We therefore recommend that the management of the Faculty should strengthen its relationship with staff of the faculty by allowing the employees to participate in the decision-making process. This as can be deduced from the responses of the respondents will make them to render services of good quality to the students. Rendering services of good quality to the students will have a positive impact on the effectiveness, efficiency and productivity of the Faculty, which consequently project a better image for the institution.

We however note that employee participation may not necessarily be the only factor that improves job satisfaction and worker productivity. Studies have disclosed the need to consider different aspects of a job that contribute differentially to a worker's overall productivity on the job. Several facets that workers are able to discriminate between, and that may differentially be related to the extent to which each worker is satisfied with the job have been suggested. These include satisfaction with work, pay, and opportunities for promotion, supervision, and co-workers. Robbins et al. (2009) call these a complex summation of a number of discrete job elements. They however opine that summing up employee responses to a number of job factors would likely achieve a more accurate evaluation of job satisfaction. While the researchers propose much deeper integration of academic staff of the faculty into matters of significant importance to them, we are also of mindful of some other factors (beyond the facets of job satisfaction alluded to earlier) that enhance the productivity of academics in HE institutions. These include student ratio per lecturer, access to research funds, attendance to lectures by student and academic, good neighborliness (the entire academic community) and so on (Psacharopoulos, 1988). What is however critical given our study is that the infusion of faculty staff in matters that pertain to faculty management will no doubt improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the faculty.

## 6. Research limitations

Owing to the fact that this study involved only a single Faculty in a University of Technology, the results cannot be generalized to the entire institution. Furthermore, the sample of participants was small therefore one can expect gaps in the findings. The researchers may have realized more in-depth insight

into the subject had they used a self-administered questionnaire containing both open-ended and close-ended questions especially considering that the subject matter is a sensitive one. This would have provided the participants with the opportunity to respond as inconspicuously as possible.

## Conclusion

Employee participation has often been heralded as a solution, if not the panacea, for low institutional effectiveness, efficiency and productivity. The findings of this study strongly corroborate the above assertion. The findings indicate that employee participation in decision making has a positive impact on the effectiveness, efficiency and productivity of a Faculty in a HE institution. Institutional productivity is a basic goal of management in today's public HE environment. This is because higher productivity (graduates) in

any public HE will attract new students. The primary objective of any public HE institution is to deliver services of good quality so as to produce more graduates (productivity).

Very few of the participants said: '*...there are no guarantees [that employee participation will bring out productivity]; ... it could actually decrease efficiency ... [because] it takes longer to get things done....* While we acknowledge these seemingly dissenting views, the views do not necessarily dilute the utmost significance of the engagement of employees, in whatever sector, in matters that pertain to the management of an organization. The views and in fact the outcome of this study can however be considered for future research and that way possibly contributing to the ongoing discussion of the concept of employee participation in light of the contemporary labor market.

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