Managerialism and higher education governance: Implications for South African universities?

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Abstract

This article identifies some of the implications of corporate forms of higher education governance for the management of South African universities. It explores corporate higher educational governance with reference to institutional autonomy incorporating academic freedom. It is the contention of this article that the primary driver of higher educational governance seems to be economic rationalism underpinned by a conception of corporatisation. This ideal is rooted in, and influenced by, a neo liberal interpretation of globalisation with a strong preference tendency towards managerialism. Such managerialism claims to improve efficiency and effectiveness via financial accountability, quality assurance and performance evaluation, notions that have become increasingly popular in the governance model of South African universities. These managerialist ideals, embedded in a neo liberal conception of globalisation, have specific implications for higher education governance in the sense that they have the potential to limit or erode academic autonomy and freedom because managerialism thrives in situations of ‘control’. Such control it is argued, militates against academic autonomy and freedom. The article/s argue that a more defensible form of higher education governance can be achieved when governance in such institutions is enacted along the lines of what it means to be a community in an African humanist sense.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Education set as its goal a single national system of education without regard for race, class, religion or ethnicity, identifying the years 1994 to 1999 as the ‘years of change’ in response to the landmark achievement of democratic governance in this country. This in effect was theoretically accomplished with the provisions of the South African Schools Act of 1996 and the Higher Education Act of 1997. Education policy has impacted on most institutional forms of higher education, since the promulgation of these Acts. The rationale of the Education Department (as representing government) is to enact policy in such a way that the higher education system produces citizens who can effectively participate in a global economy. At the same time, the physical shape of higher education institutions had undergone modification through mergers,
shrinking to 17 institutions. These mergers were realised in an atmosphere of conflict, stress and strain. The context of restructuring has an historic foundation steeped in racial, ethnic and cultural separation.

The National Plan for Higher Education seeks to redress and transform higher education by means of five strategic policy aspirations, which include the governance of universities. With reference to institutional governance, Education White Paper 3 (1997, 41) states that ‘it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to manage their own affairs’, which implies institutional autonomy. This autonomy should, however, be exercised in tandem with public accountability (1997, 36). An autonomy that is meant to prevail concurrently with public accountability seems contradictory, because autonomy means the ability of universities to organise their own affairs without interference (from the state or its representatives). Public accountability refers to a regime of quality assurance via a set of external procedures and mechanisms that would regulate higher education, transforming the institution of higher learning into an organ with less autonomy. These accountability measures would therefore suggest a trend towards undermining the ideal of autonomy. To further cloud the issue of autonomy, the Education Minister has the power to intervene directly in the institutional affairs of higher education institutions. This becomes problematic, even though it is claimed that the Minister shall only intervene in exceptional circumstances. One such circumstance refers to ‘serious financial mismanagement’, an issue that the Minister reluctantly had to address. The point is, notwithstanding this seeming reluctance, the upshot was an amendment to the Higher Education Act ensuring that the Minister has intervening powers. However, other ‘exceptional’ circumstances are not spelt out, meaning that it falls within the realm of the incumbent Minister’s interpretation. What this implies is that the Minister has the prerogative to exercise his or her right to intervene as he or she sees fit. In the short term this might not seem to be a major threat, given the current Minister’s verbal assurance (in her opening address at the CHE Colloquium, November 2004) that she shall institute a revision of policy if such policy appears to be counter productive, alternatively that intervention shall follow a procedure of negotiation with the ‘dysfunctional’ institution. The concern is that the policy amendment remains and could possibly be invoked, given a different political scenario. The point is that a future Minister does not have to abide by the verbal guarantees of the incumbent Minister. It could therefore be interpreted that a potential future Minister has legal discretionary powers to exercise his or her will as he or she wishes. This might mean that the Minister could subvert or advance previous policies which could perhaps have debilitating implications for institutional autonomy.

The question is how did these apparent policy shifts arise? In this article, it is contended that they have their roots in what earlier has been referred to as the neo-liberal agenda of globalisation, incorporating the notion of managerialism. Before these concepts and their impact on institutional governance are discussed a glimpse is given into the roots of higher education governance structures in South Africa.
2 GENESIS OF EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The genesis for the transformation of higher education in South Africa has its roots in the struggle for liberation. The context of restructuring and transformation has its historical foundation in the findings of the Eiselin Commission informing policy in 1958 with the Bantu Education Act. The Commission’s report claimed that the basic function of education would be to guarantee the preservation of cultural identity (Behr 1988, 32–37). This understanding of ethnic exclusivity, in turn, lay behind the Extension of University Education Act (Acts 40, 43, 47, 49 and 50 of 1969), which formalised the system not only of racially, but also ethnically divided universities (Behr 1988, 194). Thus Fort Hare, Western Cape, Durban-Westville and the University of the North became distinctive ethnic/racial institutions. The struggle for liberation, including a reconceptualisation of higher education, found practical expression in the National Education Crisis Committee, later to be transformed into the National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC), incorporating the Mass Democratic Movement. Many of these struggles emphasised a demand for the democratisation of institutional governance structures, in particular the Councils, and the establishment of alternative structures of institutional governance, namely broad transformation forums (Cloete and Kulati 2003, 2). Levine identifies three stages in the struggle for higher education transformation, of which the final phase refers to a process of governance where ‘decision-making is more participatory and accountable’ (Levine 1991). However, the focus of the governance debate was on issues relating to structural reform rather than on how higher education institutions ought to be organised and managed. What should be noted is the difference in governance practices between former advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. Initially, governance of black (other than white as perceived by the apartheid state) institutions of higher learning was state-controlled, including administrative and executive powers regarding the composition of management, academic structures, funding, access and the appointment of senior staff. On the recommendation of the Van Wyk de Vries Commission (1973), formerly advantaged institutions achieved a strong form of institutional autonomy with hardly any state intervention in their institutional governance affairs (Cloete and Kulati 2003, 4). One should note, however, that when the state’s security apparatus identified individuals whom they perceived as a threat to internal policy (apartheid), such individuals were isolated and harassed in the hope that they would desist from their activities, which (it was claimed) they pursued under the ‘pretext’ of academic freedom, alternatively institutional autonomy.

Influenced by the broader struggle for liberation, as well as the contesting relationship between government and institutions of higher learning, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996) was instituted to make recommendations on a framework for institutional governance. It was within this council that the idea of a co-operative model of governance was mooted. Co-
operative governance was located within a state supervision model, with academic freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. Autonomy is to be exercised within a framework of government leadership through funding/planning and in co-operation with public institutions (such as the NQF and SAQA) to ensure accountability (White Paper 1997, Section 3.6). In this regard the legislation makes space for stakeholder representation, including the Council (supreme governing body), the Senate (decision-making body with reference to academic matters) and the Institutional Forum (previously unrepresented groups to advise Council). Having given a glimpse of the development of institutional governance, this article will now discuss the role that globalisation played in determining this process.

3  GLOBALISATION’S ECONOMIC RATIONALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON POLICY

Economists, sociologists, political theorists and politicians all over the world have noted that the world has undergone significant change, especially since the 1970s. The crux of these changes involves the formation of an international market economy ruled by multi-national corporations (Isaacs 1997, 10). The international economic crises of the 1970s with their concomitant erosion of welfare policies framed the type of libertarianism that drives globalisation. The major proponents of libertarianism are Hayek and Friedman (both Economic Nobel Laureates), who promote market capitalism as the route towards rescuing disadvantaged communities from their plight (which, they argued, was sustained by the ‘welfare state’). Globalisation is rooted in capitalism and can, therefore, be described as the current phase of capitalism. International flows of capital, consumer goods, people and products of culture and knowledge are premised on the rapid advances of communication and information technologies. Will Hutton in conversation with Anthony Giddens argues that this change is all-encompassing, carrying an inevitability and momentum even superior to the power of the state (Hutton and Giddens 2001, 2). This could be interpreted as globalisation having an effect that is so wide-ranging that it seems to infiltrate most aspects of human life. It invades economic, cultural, social and political interactions in such a way that people all over the world are somehow affected by it. If such reasoning is plausible, one may reasonably argue that globalisation will impact on higher education institutional governance in South Africa.

The contention here is that higher education’s institutional governance can be traced on the affinity of globalisation with managerialism. Put differently, managerialism insists that institutions should function on sound market economic principles, where economic rationalism and the profit ideal drive the institution. On closer scrutiny one finds that this is nothing other than a neo-liberal interpretation (of globalisation) framed by multi-national institutions such as the World Bank,
International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. These institutions inevitably impact on policy development, including higher education policy in South Africa.

To give a practical expression of the impact of globalisation on internal policy in South Africa, one example is cited. At the time when the Education White Paper was being framed, the African National Congress (ANC) government deemed it necessary to scale down the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), preferring Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) as its macro-economic policy GEAR). This policy follows the so-called Washington consensus, which expected countries that wanted to join the ‘global economy’ to apply macro-economic discipline, curb government spending by emphasising accountability, effectiveness and efficiency in the hope that this will attract foreign investment, which would stimulate employment and therefore economic growth (Cloete and Kulati 2003, 7). Cloete and Kulati argue that ‘this new legislative framework, together with market competition and the emergence of new public management, put enormous pressure on institutions to devise new ways of managing’ in order to fulfil the requirements for transformation (2003, 7). It is these ‘new ways of managing’ that is referred to as managerialism. In the next section the concept of managerialism is explored.

4 THE NOTION OF MANAGERIALISM

Managerialism is not just a concern for the effective and efficient management of institutions. The ‘ism’ points to an ideology, to a faith or belief in the truth of a set of ideas that is independent of specific situations (Trow 2002, 13). Managerialism is focussed on providing quality higher education at the lowest cost by improving the ‘efficiency’ of institutions. Institutional management is elevated for the reason that it ensures the steady improvement of higher education via public accountability by way of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). In this conception management would provide this continuing improvement in quality and efficiency (financial costs) through the establishment of criteria and mechanisms for continual assessment of higher education programmes which, in turn, is linked to funding. Put differently, only externally accredited programmes are funded, meaning that the system rests upon a system of ‘reward and punishment’. The bureaucratic agencies create criteria of performance, the rules for reporting and accountability necessary for assessment, and for the application of formulas linking assessed ‘quality’ and funding.

Peters et al. (in Burbules and Torres 2000, 118) claim that managerialism is one of the main elements in the paradigm shift that favours a neo-liberal education policy discourse. For neo-liberals there is one form of rationality more powerful than any other, that being economic rationality. Such reasoning is potent because of its potential to combine economic, social and political dimensions for the sake
of rational choice as a principle of legitimacy. Individuals, therefore, become rational choosers as consumers of commodities, which include education. The logic is that university education is paid for, and therefore, transformed into a commodity (that is bought just as any other consumer product is).

Efficiency and an ethic of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms, thus creating a closer linkage between education and the economy (Apple in Burbules and Torres 2000, 59). Consequently, there are calls for ‘education for employment’, closely linking the role of universities with the manpower requirements of industry, or alternatively connecting the education system with the project of making the economy more competitive. Within both projects – namely education and the economy – individuals are said to become free autonomous choosers. It is within this sense of individuality that the notion of neo-liberal governance finds expression and legitimation. Individuals have a sense of freedom to choose and make decisions in the course of their daily lives. However, Foucault argues that autonomous choosers (in the neo-liberal sense) ‘will not be free, because forms of rationality and the laws within which the free market operate and function will shape people as particular kinds of subjects so that they will choose in certain general ways’ (in Burbules and Torres 2000, 120). By choosing in these ways, not only will they be governed but also, more importantly, self-governed. What this means is that governance of this type has an instrumental slant. It seems that most practices that the individual engage in as an ‘agent’ of society are governed by neo-liberal market rules. However, the greater concern is that the individuals who make these ‘autonomous choices’ are self-governed, because they believe that their choices are autonomous, when in reality they are not.

Managerialism claims that there is nothing distinctive about education, meaning it can be conceptualised and managed like any other service or business institution. Peters et al. (in Burbules and Torres 2000, 111–112) posit that part of reason for the success of the globalised notion of managerialism is its claim for such generic aspects, that is its applicability to all spheres of administration and its homogenisation of all technical or institutional problems as management problems.

On another level, managerialism might be interpreted as substituting the trust relationship between government and universities. The major managerial mechanisms employed by the South African Education Ministry are quality assessment and funding. Having given some background into some of the ideals of a neo-liberal form of managerialism, the situation in South African universities (as institutions of higher learning) is explored to ascertain whether there is a connection between such managerialism and institutional university governance.

5 THE CHANGING FACE OF HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Regarding institutional governance, section 31 of the Higher Education Act specifies that, for the purpose of governance, all higher education institutions must
have an ‘Institutional Forum’ with the representatives of management, Council, Senate, academic and non-academic staff as well as students. All the stakeholder representatives meet in this forum to identify problems, mediate interests and advise relevant structures such as the Students Representative Council (SRC), Senate and Council (National Commission on Higher Education 1996, 204). Such a structure is consonant with the ideal of decentralisation as propagated by neoliberalism (thinning of the state’s role), which is also in line with managerialism, reinforcing global capital’s insistence on co-operative governance. The notion of stakeholder representation fits well with managerialism in the sense that it creates a system of checks and balances, where the one group does not have the institutionalised power to overwhelm another group, thus improving the chances of administrative control. Within such a framework, the argument is that it reinforces a stronger form of democracy.

Section 31 further states that the Institutional Forum should have a major influence on transformation. This may be interpreted to mean that the rules regarding institutional transformation shall be galvanised in this forum; however, the Institutional Forum may only serve in an advisory capacity. The upshot of this is that, although it is envisaged that major decisions shall come from this forum, it does not have decision-making powers. This piece of legislation is important for the reason that it goes to the heart of the question relating to ‘autonomy’. Ensuring that the Institutional Forum only has advisory powers negates their (the combination of stakeholders) ability to enforce decisions that might potentially go counter to the intentions of the recommendations of the market/multinationals. Conversely, the governance structure has a built-in mechanism to ensure that autonomy is restricted (in the guise of co-operative governance), and that policy implementation is in line with state recommendations under the pretext of ‘accountability’. Interpreting such a scenario, one may reasonably argue that not only is the system of management skewed along managerialist lines, but also that the structure reinforces managerialist tendencies. Now, a potential critic could possibly argue that managerial tendencies (say within Council or Senate) might potentially be undermined or reinforced depending on the agents participating in that structure. The upshot is that not the structure but rather the individual agents determine whether to succumb to managerialism as argued for. The point is that when the structure bolsters managerial tendencies it becomes much more difficult for individual agents operating within that structure, to resist – in fact, in most cases they comply. It is in this sense that it seems that many higher education institutions have adopted a managerialist governance model.

Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas (2003, 77) interpret these managerialist tendencies and accountability measures as a form of bureaucratic control driven by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC). They argue that for academics these ‘emerging’ bodies with their array of criteria for public accountability generate a tension between freedom and autonomy, on the one hand, and the transformation
agenda of higher education policy on the other (2003, 78). A case in point is the Council on Higher Education’s (CHE) Quality Committee’s review of structured Master’s of Education programmes that calls for a fulfilment of 11 criteria which are, in turn divided into 10 sub-minimum requirements (thus totalling at least 110 predetermined minimum standards) that should be fulfilled before accreditation/funding is approved. Confirming the argument by Enslin et al., monitoring by these institutions would have a direct impact on how academic staff would respond. Such assessment criteria will inevitably influence the direction and work of universities in general and academics in particular. Accountability in this sense leads to minimising a university’s prerogative to run its own affairs without ‘outside’ interference. The next argument would be that an African(a) philosophy of education, with specific reference to the idea of community, has the potential to enhance effective institutional governance. It is contended that institutional governance can best be achieved when enacted along the lines of what it means to be a community in an African-humanist sense.

6 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A COMMUNITY IN AN AFRICAN-HUMANIST SENSE?

According to Letseka (2000), the importance of communality to traditional African life cannot be over-emphasised. This is because community and belonging to a community of people constitute the very fabric of traditional African life. Gyekye (1997, 221) defines tradition as ‘any cultural product that was created or pursued by past generations and that, having been accepted or preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been maintained to the present’. The conception of communality/community is a ‘lived experience’ in African tradition, which is comprised of ‘socially embodied practices where the pursuit of goods internal to such practices sustains and strengthens the tradition’ (MacIntyre 1981, 223). African tradition advocates a notion of community that makes provision for internal goods or socio-ethical values such as honesty and justice (which according to Wiredu are moral values in the strict sense, meaning they are inherent in every cultural outlook), as well as values unique to an African cultural tradition, including rendering mutual aid, interdependence, collective action on the basis of trust and an obligation on the individual to think and act in the interests of, and for the continued existence of, the group (Gyekye 1997, 252). These ‘unique’ values have also been nurtured through the vehicle of the Black Consciousness Movement, making them the predominant values among students in previously ethnic higher education institutions.

It is contended that these are also the types of values that should inform institutional governance at the higher education level. These values embedded in the conception of African communality/community are the same principles that drove the Black Consciousness Movement (of the 1970s) towards organisational commitment and independent thinking (Kunnie 2000, 215). The presumption,
however, is that African society favours communalism at the expense of individual interests and desires. The idea that community in an African traditional sense curtails independent thought and places a premium on collective thought (everybody should think the same) is erroneous. Nyasani (Nyasani 1989, 21) contests this interpretation when he argues that ‘the individual becomes infused into a larger individual which is the community, the clan or the tribe’. The individual, according to this line of reasoning, becomes part of the community through personal choice, thus expressing his or her individuality. The thrust of the argument will be in the concepts of trust and interdependence as constitutive meanings of community in an African traditional sense.

One of the constitutive features of trust within a democratic framework revolves around the requirement to implement an effective form of legitimacy, which believably can best be attained via deliberation. Decisions reached through collective deliberation provide the (higher education) community with reasons to abide by such decisions, thus giving legitimacy to those decisions that are implemented. It seems undesirable that policies favouring managerialism should be devised and implemented without the input and support of institutional stakeholders (academic staff or the student population). Such a system is premised on control, which goes against the grain of institutional autonomy. The upshot of this is that, although the model of decentralisation is premised on reinforcing democracy, the reality emphasises control.

It has been argued earlier that managerialism seems to be the preferred current model for governance because of the potential mistrust between government and the academe. The impression is that academics cannot be trusted to deliver the products that market capital demands. To ensure such delivery it seems prudent to government that it should remove some degree of autonomy from academics. Regarding the notion of interdependence, Mokgoro (in Pityana 1999, 144) claims that the value of human interdependence ‘has been viewed as the basis for a morality of co-operation, compassion, communalism, concern for the interests of the collective, respect for the dignity of personhood, with emphasis on virtues of that dignity in social relationships and practices’. In short, in African societies human interdependence and trust is perceived as placing a premium on achieving solidarity through the individual’s engagement with other people, but such engagement is of a specific kind.

It is important to emphasise the notion of ‘concern for the interests of the collective’ as specific to engagement in an Africana interpretation of community. In such an understanding the community ideal has preference over the individual’s quest. Put differently, stakeholder representatives would only contest such views or policies that have a direct bearing on their stakeholder group. This, however, does not translate into their voices being silenced; on the contrary, it is precisely because they work towards the cohesion of, and in the interests of, the collective (university) community that they shall not contest such policy. They deliberate in the Institutional Forum, producing convincing arguments that are persuasive to the
extent that other stakeholders realise that the agreed-upon outcome is to the benefit of the collective community. It is such an interpretation of community that has the potential to enhance higher education institutional governance. The governance research report on higher education reinforces this interpretation when it claims that ‘for co-operative governance to succeed, all stakeholders need to commit themselves to a code of conduct based on the acceptance of joint responsibility for the future of higher education in South Africa’ (Council on Higher Education 2002, 32). It is necessary that such a code of conduct should be premised on the notion of community in an African traditional sense.

On another level, one may argue that the institutional governance structures of universities can best be described as an aggregative community, where numbers play an important role and where most decisions are reached through voting. Community in the African traditional sense is more attuned to a community as an association. In such a community outcomes are not determined by votes, but much rather by engaging with one another in a quest for consensus. Obviously every deliberation process will not lead to consensus; however, in the absence of consensus, there is enough space for understanding opposing views. In this regard deliberation allows space for an understanding that people ‘agree to disagree’. The point is that this form of governance softens managerialism’s seeming bias towards economic rationalism and a notion of control does not come into play.

In a practical sense institutions of higher learning should implement what could be referred to as ‘post-level expectations’. The underlying rationale is to generate income for the institution, which is done through predominantly producing successful Masters and Ph.D. candidates, as well as publishing in accredited educational journals. Much of the tension at institutional level, particularly between Council and Senate, involves the generation of such income. In devising policy the notion of community in an Africana philosophical sense should be incorporated. Deliberation, where all the voices have the same possibility to influence and shape the finale decision, should inform the route towards the development of such institutional policy. This would make the outcome more legitimate, meaning that all those party to the deliberations have reason to abide by the decision. However, such policy will not impact on the student and non-academic stakeholder groups. Interpreting community in an Africana philosophical sense would translate into these stakeholder groups participating in deliberations, whilst not contesting the policy outcome regarding the generation of income via academic output. They could, however, reinforce such arguments that would further strengthen the collective community as opposed to intensifying the influence of one particular stakeholder group.

**CONCLUSION**

Community in an African traditional sense has built-in mechanisms to deal with issues relating to participation, deliberation and co-operative interdependence, thus
clearing the way for more democratic practices within higher education institutional governance. If such a conception of communality is invoked on other levels of institutional governance, it is likely to result in transformation that would become more practical and meaningful. Incorporating an Africana philosophical interpretation of community has the potential to counter what Kulati referred to as ‘higher education institutions experiencing periodic crises which ... can be attributed to an institution’s inability to manage the new governance dynamics effectively’ (2000, 182).

This article argued that central to the African(a) philosophy of education debate is the notion of communality. It has further argued that values constitutive of community in an Africana philosophical sense can be interpreted as uniquely African. It then explained how the values embedded in such an interpretation of community can lead to more democratic practices in higher education institutional governance, thus leading to practical and meaningful transformation.

REFERENCES


CHE see Council on Higher Education.


