Is democracy possible in university governance? A case of the University of Limpopo

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Abstract
University governance remains a controversial issue in South African higher education as it was during the Apartheid era. Neave (1998) in Harry de Boer and Leo Goedegebuure (2001, 163) rightly say that ‘governance within higher education is a most complicated and challenging issue. Of all issues currently under discussion, few are more controversial than those pertaining to the institutions of governance’. This article examines the extent to which governance of the University of Limpopo is democratic, pursuant to a foray of policy papers and legislation on the transformation of higher education. In other words, ‘To what extent has the governance of the University of Limpopo transformed towards democratic practices since South Africa became a democratic country? If not, what are the constraints?’ I argue that the University governance has not been sufficiently transformed if by transformation we mean a procedure in which collective decisions are arrived at through reasoned deliberations.

INTRODUCTION
Higher education institutions in South Africa are generally established by statute and are by and large public institutions. As a result, they greatly depend on state funding, public support, endowments, student fees and funding from private corporations. Notwithstanding that, they are government institutions; they are governed by their own institutional statutes with senates and the councils at the helm, accountable only to the Minister of Education. Councils consist of ministerial nominees and representatives of public interest including key stakeholders. What interests me for the purpose of this article is that these higher education institutions ‘are guaranteed academic freedom and autonomy in terms of the Bill of Rights’ (Barney Pityana 2004, 1). I agree with Felicity Coughlan, Divala, Enslin, Kissack and Mathebula (2007, 81) when they say that ‘the avowed intention in policy since 1994 has been to transform higher education system in the spirit of an open and democratic society. One of the fundamental principles guiding the process is democratization, which requires that governance of the system of higher education and of individual institutions should be democratic’. Tersely put, this assertion by Coughlan et al. implies that the key to any institutional governance ought to be democracy. Then, what is institutional governance?
Governance, according to Pityana (2004, 2–3), can be interpreted as ‘a process that enables people to utilize and steer collective power to manage their affairs in the most efficient and effective manner, in accordance with their needs and aspirations, and in conformity with their cultures and traditions’. The question of democracy, being central to governance, raises yet another question as to what kind of democracy could be a constitutive good of institutional governance(s).

In order to answer this question, I shall look at forms of democracies in brief. Quite obviously, not just any form could suitably support the smooth-running of modern higher education institutions. I shall, therefore, look at four of them, namely, direct democracy, participatory democracy, aggregative democracy and then deliberative democracy, and subsequently decide on the one that I think is the most appropriate that ought to underpin institutional government structures.

I will again very shortly discuss globalisation and marketisation as twin metaphors which underpin the making of government policies, on education in particular. I argue that these two forces have a bearing on how higher education should be run and thus forming boundaries within which certain decisions have to be made and carried out: in a sense, they intrude from the outside.

In my discussion on the extent to which the University of Limpopo has moved towards a state of democratic practice(s), I reinterpreted the policy documents, especially the White Paper 3, with regards to policy in higher education, and compared what it says with what is being practised. In a sense, I have done this in order to establish whether what is being practised by the university governance of the University of Limpopo is in line with the transformative and the democratic ethos which it so clearly spells out. In order to ascertain the findings, I conducted a survey as well as interviews with people who participate in the governance of the University of Limpopo. The population of my research consisted of two union members, two members from the human resources department, and heads of departments. Both purposive and convenient sampling methods were used to select the twenty-two respondents. The criterion for my choice was that the people should have been with the University since before 1994 and were currently in managerial positions. As this survey was conducted during the winter recess, most of the people in these key managerial positions were on leave. Hence, those who participated were the two Union representatives, two employees of the human resources department, and eighteen heads of departments. The rationale for my choice was based on the fact that all the participants, especially heads of departments, were in a position to attend senate and council meetings. I now turn to a discussion on forms of democracy.

**FORMS OF DEMOCRACY**

I here note that there are many forms of democracies and I therefore want to discuss each one of them briefly and indicate the one that I think would best underpin institutional governance(s). Among those that fall within the scope of this article are direct, participatory, aggregative and deliberative democracies. I argue that the kind of democracy suitable to institutional governance(s) is democracy with praxis.

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DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Rousseau in Bobbio (1987, 43) argues that,

No true democracy has ever existed nor ever will “because it presupposes a number of conditions which are unlikely to prevail simultaneously”. He goes on to say that true forms of direct democracy requires, “a state so small that it is possible to call the whole people without difficulty and each citizen must be in a position to know all of his neighbors. Secondly manners must be so simple that business will be kept to a minimum and thorny questions avoided. Furthermore it requires a considerable equality in fortune and in rank. [And he concludes that], were there such a thing as a nation of Gods, it would be a democracy. So perfect a form of government is not suited to mere men.”

I agree with Rousseau when he says, in one of his criteria, that this kind of democracy ‘can only apply to small states’ and in situations where people are ‘equal in fortune and in rank’. The implication of this is that, in present day modern societies, this kind of democracy cannot be applied; thus, it cannot sustain institutional governance(s).

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Bobbio (1987, 45) states that ‘representative democracy means that collective deliberations, which concern the whole community, are taken not directly by members, but by people elected for this purpose’. This definition is almost appropriate, but it lacks the moral underpinnings necessary in human deliberations. So, it can also not sustain the pressure of modern University governance(s).

AGGREGATIVE DEMOCRACY

This model of democracy seems to regard democracy as an ‘electoral device’. Participants in this kind of democracy do so purely for instrumental motives. They merely come together (aggregate) in favour of a particular political party and the policies they choose to vote for, are for their own advancement or gain. Aggregative democracy is by its nature selfish and, it appears that as a result, it cannot sustain any institutional governance. Coughlan et al. (2007, 81) aver that ‘it takes various forms ranging from stark winner-takes-all “majoritarianism”, at one end of a continuum, to forms of aggregation that are mediated by proportional representation, at the other’.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Benhabib in Coughlan et al. (2007, 81) says that this kind of democracy ‘is best understood as a model of organizing the collective and public exercise of power in the major institutions of a society on the basis that decisions affecting the well-being of a collectivity can be viewed as the outcome of a deliberation among individuals’.
considered as moral and political equals’. It is in deliberative democracy where I find the moral aspects that appear to be essential in any human dialogue. I argue, therefore, that deliberative democracy, because it embodies moral qualities such as inclusion, equality, reasonableness, public process, and compassion ought to be a constitutive good for any governance. I argue here that respect does not stand alone as an independent moral quality or a quality to be found either in inclusion or compassion only; but, it is a golden thread that links and binds all these moral aspects together and make them inseparable. Without respect as an ointment of the deliberation process, deliberations would come to a halt.

Inclusion
Inclusion implies the acceptance of each and every person who forms part of the deliberations without favour or creed, sex or social orientation, religion or culture. These are in themselves not sufficient criteria against which any one can use against the other not to join deliberations. Benhabib in Mafumo (2010, 176), confirms this when he says, ‘deliberations are concerned with the involvement and cooperation of all citizens in public debates as equals who are free, accountable and reasonable in order to solve contemporary social problems’. Mafumo (2010, 177) reiteratively asserts that ‘as an ideal, inclusion embodies a norm of moral respect for individuals’. Dewey (1917, 101) agrees with Benhabib regarding the inclusion of others in democratic deliberations. He opines that ‘The extension in space of a number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving full import of their activity’. I understand Benhabib and Dewey to mean one thing, that is, the epistemological gains that stem from free associations and genuine deliberations.

Equality
Once people are included in any form of deliberation, equality becomes the norm. All stakeholders ought to be treated with respect and be granted equal opportunities in initiating a dialogue, an opportunity to question, answer and be listened to without fear of victimisation. Those who have included others or who have a standing in society, must not expect not to be corrected or asked questions because respect does not only constitute humble affirmations of what is being said but it is also exhibited by demonstrating to the other where one has gone wrong.

Fay, in Waghid (2002, 99), briefly reminds us of this quality when he says:

Respect demands that we hold others to the intellectual and moral standards we apply to ourselves and our friends. Excusing others from demands of intellectual rigor and honesty or moral sensitivity and wisdom on the grounds that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion no matter how ill-informed or ungrounded, or – worse – on the
grounds that others need not or cannot live up to these demands, is to treat them with contempt. We honor others by challenging them when we think they are wrong, and by thoughtfully taking their [justifiable] criticism of us. To do so is to take them seriously; to do any less is to dismiss them as unworthy of serious consideration, which is to say, to treat them with disrespect.

**Reasonableness**

Young, in Mafumo (2010, 179), describes public reason as ‘best viewed not as a process of reasoning among citizens, but as a regulative principle imposing limits upon the individuals, institutions and agencies which ought to reason about public matters’ This means that participants must show respect by attentively listening to the other in deliberations and to respond with respect.

**Public process**

Mafumo (2010, 181) avers that ‘Participants in deliberation form a public in which people hold each other accountable. The public comprises a plurality of different individuals and collective experiences, histories, commitments, ideals, interests and goals. People face each other to discuss collective problems such as effective racial integration under a common set of procedures’. Clearly, I understand this assertion to mean that the deliberative process consists of people who stem from different social, political, religious and economic orientations, to mention but a few. It is this understanding of the differences in people and their life-orientations that could help to ease deliberations. What is more important is the notion that deliberations should not be based on wild speculations, but must consistently remain procedural and I argue, public (transparent) and also normative. I agree with Dewey (1917, 101) in this regard when he avers, in line with the above discussion, that ‘A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of joint communicated experience’.

**Compassion**

Nussbaum (1997, 301) in Mafumo (2010, 182) explains that compassion is ‘a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune or suffering’. This suggests to me, a sense of empathy, that is, literally stepping into the shoes of the other. Compassion to me implies a mere ‘fellow-feeling’. In the context of this article, it means that stakeholders ought to feel for the others in deliberations and try to imagine what the other is experiencing, why s/he is saying what s/he says in that manner. It is only when one is able to stretch one’s mind beyond the self that one begins to realise that when one suffers, one dramatises one’s own suffering because one is also human. All these imply respect for the other in deliberations.

I now turn to a brief discussion on the impact of globalisation and marketisation on education policies and how these policies come to bear on university governance(s) of the University of Limpopo in particular. It is my conviction that those in governance...
may have good intentions regarding how best to run an institution in a democratic manner but find themselves having to contend with disabling policies. To say this is to imply that these policies seem to constrict academic freedom and autonomy.

THE INFLUENCE OF GLOBALISATION AND MARKETISATION ON GOVERNANCE(S) OF UNIVERSITIES

Without venturing too deeply into the nature of globalisation and marketisation, suffice to say that these twin metaphors have had a centrifugal movement from the United States and Europe and have now become world phenomena. Nzimande, in Adams and November (2005, 210), defines globalisation as ‘the transformation of the world into a single market that is controlled by multinational companies, traditionally emanating from the developed countries of the North’. Ntshoe in Adams and November (2005) says that ‘it is associated with ideologies and hegemony of Westernization’, while Dale, in the same author(s), avers that ‘it is variously taken as representing an ineluctable process towards cultural hegemony, as a set of forces that are making nation-states obsolete and that may result in something like a world polity’.

These definitions suggest two things to me: firstly, that globalisation and marketisation are incessant processes; secondly, that they subtly impose rather than deliberate. I strengthen this argument by turning to Adams and November in Waghid (2005, 211) who also argue that ‘homogenization or universality tends to undermine the progress of the local (individual or institution) in the sense that it curtails deliberation. The upshot of this is that when deliberating is undermined it engenders less democratic practices or what can be referred to as thin democracy.’

Unfortunately, higher education policies have, unavoidably, borrowed some pieces of policies and legislation from globalisation and marketisation. It is only logical that an undemocratic practice cannot lead to any democratic practice. I agree with Gultig (1999, 1) that ‘the “marketization” of higher education has tended to widen gaps rather than redress past inequalities, and done little to make South Africa more “competitive” within a global, innovative economy’. To say that this is not true, is equivalent to saying that one can still obtain a straight line from crooked timber.

Broad national policies, therefore, come down too heavily on higher education governance with the result that democracy remains too ‘thin’, to the extent that one can say, like Rousseau in Bobbio, (1897, 43) that ‘democracy only obtains in the world of gods’. In line with the spirit of these policies, governances have to do the maximum with the minimum because everything and anything is budget driven. Buchbinder (1993, 334) rightly observes that ‘The symbol of the time is attend to the deficit’. Underlying this practice is ‘efficiency’ and ‘competitiveness’ in the climate of globalisation and marketisation. Social knowledge is underplayed while research is held up and linked to the global market. This commodification of knowledge has caused us to witness retrenchments and the privatisation of services. What then is the position of the South African Qualifications Framework (SAQA) and Council on Higher Education (CHE)?
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While I have nothing to say about how these bodies have been structured, I only want to comment that they appear to be bent on creating a homogeneous system of education which goes against the grain of deliberative democratic practice. The value of democratic practice is that it is essentially epistemological in the sense that one readily learns from the deliberations of others. The logic of this is that we have nothing to learn from what we have in common but we have a lot to learn from our differences. To say this is equal to saying that these bodies seem to stifle academic freedom and institutional autonomy because they prescribe what I must teach and how I must teach it. It is this, in the first place, that appears to suggest that academic bodies such as the senate and council cannot be said to be democratic because they act on a prescription of what has to be taught and how that has to be taught. De Boer and Goedegebuure (2001, 164) sum up this situation when they say, ‘In many cases corporate managerialism and line-management have reflected systems of elected executives and affected the powers of senates and academic councils’.

UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE: A CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

The point of this article is to find out the extent to which the University governance is democratic. I choose to do this because the White Paper 3 (1997, 35) on Higher Education made a statement that ‘For the first time in their history, our higher education institutions have the opportunity to achieve full potential, but they will not do so until their system of governance reflects and strengthens the values and practices of our new democracy’. However, the Minister of Education acknowledges that always apparent in matters of governance are the lack of ‘consensus’, ‘struggles of control’, and even ‘conflict’. In order to validate my claim that thin democracy exists in the university governance of the University of Limpopo, I conducted a survey and interviews with the personnel of University of Limpopo in order to obtain their views regarding the extent to which the University governance has transformed towards the goal of transformation. The said population consisted of heads of departments, the human resources personnel, and union representatives. As mentioned above, the rationale for my choice was that they, especially heads of departments, have a stake in the board and senate meetings, and others serve on the council. As such, they would be in a better position to tell whether the university council has moved. The procedure is that decisions are taken at the faculty level, and approved or not approved at senate level where faculties meet to discuss inter-institutional matters. Their responses follow hereunder.

The open-ended questions that were disseminated and collected reveal that the majority of respondents had been engaged by the university for a period of twenty years or more, For example, one of them, who is a head of a department now, assumed his duties here in 1985, as did six of the respondents in 1990. Regarding the question as to whether they participate in discussing institutional matters, the answers were in the affirmative, although the reasons for their participation were different; some participated because they were representatives of an organisation,
while others did so because they wanted to advance the interests of the university, and a few others participated on the basis of being committee members. However, they all agree that issues are openly discussed and constituencies are urged to make submissions in time for the agenda lest they take other members by surprise. This, to me, has constituted an assurance that democracy is, although in part, certified.

Regarding the question of whether they think deliberations are fair and effective, the respondents, almost all, agreed that they were democratically conducted, but differed on whether they were effective or not; their argument was that although they were always locked up in meetings, there was no proper application despite their good intentions. Contrarily, few other respondents asserted that although they met under democratically conducive climates, they were afraid of being vociferous because, in the language of one respondent, ‘they [those in governance] are directed by policies from above’. Another respondent was on record as saying that, ‘Discussions are intended to be democratic but sometimes you are referred to policies’. Now the question is who developed those policies anyway.

In response to a follow up question as to whether there were constraints with regard to discussions, some said that there were none while others argued that if you were in a high position and you became too aggressive you would be victimised or dismissed. ‘This is the place’ one said, ‘where there should not be any divergent view or opinion’.

Another question was whether they thought that the university was fully democratic. To this, many participants responded that it was democratic, while a few others expressed utter dissatisfaction with how democracy was being practised. The many who said that it was democratic, argued that the mere consultation process of other members of organisations and the submission of their general views to higher management bodies, was in itself indicative of democratic governance; while the few who said that it was not, said that they were advised to join unions, otherwise no one would take them seriously if they contribute as individuals. Two respondents expressed concern over how heads of departments and directors of schools were being appointed. The respondent said, ‘Democracy you say? I think that this University is far from being democratic.’ When the respondent asked for reasons s/he cited a personal experience when they were requested to choose an acting head at one of their departmental meetings. When the head had been elected and about to resume his duties, the results of the election were frozen without any explanation of any kind. The respondent went on to say that he was even more thankful that he was not heading a department; he said, ‘But I don’t have regrets because I am even freer to express my independent views’.

With regards to the same question as the above, another respondent said, ‘It is tough out there; you are said to be in management, yet you just read policy after policy which you must speak for it’. The last question asked whether they had anything to say about the governance of the University of Limpopo, which was not included in the questionnaire in as far as democratic advancement was concerned. Twelve of the respondents did not have anything to say while eight advised that it
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was important that there should be a systemic revisit to notions of democracy by those in governance, because some members within governance were trying hard to keep democracy alive, while others had not yet made a shift in this regard at all. They suggested that the governance of the University of Limpopo should give itself sufficient time to rehearse democratic practices in order for members to live fully democratic lives. They further argued that, no doubt, statutes, policies and rules of the game abound, yet they were not followed and in some cases, just ignored. Another respondent even said, ‘Do you think democracy is possible in Africa? Or even in this world?’

My reading of the survey results, although it has not been conducted on a large scale, seemed to confirm that many of the decisions had not been taken as a result of informed democratic deliberations, which embody the aforementioned notions. The implication given by the respondents was that, in the first place, there had been a concerted effort to democratise governance, since all the respondents had affirmed it. Mothapo (2007, 43) argues in support of this when he says that,

According to the present researcher’s observation [refers to himself], proper governance structures were put in place which advocated for corporative governance at the university. These structures were established in terms of the King Report II (2002). The insignificant process that had been made was only bedeviled by forms of appointments into positions of power.

Mothapo (2007, 44) went on to say that ‘the majority of his respondents indicated that the manner in which management positions were filled impacted negatively on the quality of leadership that should demonstrate the democratic ethos’.

The above response suggested to me that even though there were structural arrangements in place, there was still a general misreading of democracy as praxis by certain members of the governance. By this I mean that it is one thing to talk about democracy, and another to practise it. This became very clear when some respondents could not identify their role as representatives of organisations at the meetings. To say that ‘I am a committee member’, I argue, is sufficient evidence that one did not remember the mandate, or knew very little about why one attended the meetings as a representative of one’s constituency. The deliberative process, I believe, would require purpose especially from those who act on behalf of others.

That there was little application was not my focus; I only became interested in their fear of being vociferous for fear of being victimised by senior members. To me, this condensed the fact that there appeared to be some instances when participants, chose to toe the line; possibly because they did not have other options in their lives, for example, the respondent who hopelessly stated that this was the place (referring to the University of Limpopo) ‘where there should not be any divergent view or opinion’. This I understood as implying that there were still some areas within governance structures that had not yet transformed sufficiently to deal with the democratic requirements. By silencing these other voices, they knowingly or unknowingly denied themselves what I argue, are the epistemological gains which
result from what I call inclusive deliberation. It is only when one momentarily forgets about the position one holds and opens one’s boundaries in deliberations with others that one’s perspective of the world changes for the better. This only happens when one listens to others with the purpose of wishing to understand the situation of the other. To me, this intimidation by other members is a serious disregard of the spirit of the constitution which, I believe informs White Paper 3 on Higher Education. Mothapo (2007, 44) explains that his respondents ‘indicated that the leadership at the university did not communicate or really articulated issues of transformation in the manner they should, hence, the culture itself was not receptive to transformation’.

This urges me to conclude that much has to be done with regard to democratic education. The very fear to confront each other in search for the truth, or differently put, to avoid the adoption of a ‘belligerent attitude’ (Waghid 2010) in deliberations, is to refuse to accept that people are different, which I understand not to mean pointless arrogance, but rather, an invitation of the other to join in seeing what is worthy of joint persuasion. In this context, it becomes a stepping stone towards finding each other in dialogue. Human dialogue, I believe, is made necessary by our differences; had we been similar in thought and in orientation it would not be necessary. I argue therefore that it is our opposite[ness] that forces us to communicate and at times to communicate belligerently.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed the four forms of democracy and am fully aware that these are not the only ones. My intention was to show that among the four forms of democracy, the only one that can carry the weight of modern institutions is deliberative democracy because it embodies mutual respect among all participants. I have argued that respect, over and above being mutual, is not an independent moral quality that stands alone in any deliberation, but is a quality that runs like a thread in all moral aspects. For example, it is morally reprehensible to say that one has included everyone in deliberations when they are not treated with respect.

Attention was also paid to globalisation and marketisation as twin metaphors which, through policies, infringe on institutional governance by imposing, [through policies] how universities should be governed. This is shown by how institutions flout collective decisions in an attempt to align themselves with global and market expectations. To be told what to teach and how to teach it, or which research is to be funded, and which one is not, appears to stifle institutional autonomy in particular, and academic freedom, in general.

This matter appears more complicated when one looks at the case of the University of Limpopo. According to respondents, it appears that some of those in governance attempt to force a wedge between democratic theory and practice. Respondents argue that little space is created for adequate deliberations. This confirms the notion that what appears as democratic practice is but a thin veneer over current practice. To say this is to confirm my argument that it is not possible to democratise the university
governance, if by democracy we mean a procedure in which collective decisions are arrived at through reasoned deliberations. The case of the CHE and the prescriptive manner of approach to aspects of teaching and research, appear to stifle creativity and heterogeneity.

Findings of a small-scale survey clearly indicate that much has to be accomplished in as far as institutional democracy is concerned. By this I refer to deliberative democracy, which I have argued embodies epistemological values. These values are inclusion, equality, reasonableness, public process and compassion, which I found absent from the responses of the participants. Those who share in deliberations learn from others. This makes sense if one realises that it is impossible for one to be all-knowing.

The ability to listen to the views of others is of unequalled value. For that reason, it is important for those in governance to rehearse deliberative democracy and teach it by example and not by precept.

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