

The Importance of Student's Representation in the Governance Structure of Historically Black Universities in South Africa

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Abstract: *This paper was developed from a study that looked at the role of the university council in bringing about effective governance in a South African historically black university. Institutional governance is concerned with notion of power and how it is managed to bring about desired objectives. As such perceptions are fundamental to this process. In the post-1994 transformation of the South African higher education system, university governing bodies were put in charge of the transformation of the universities under their leadership. Through the State policy of cooperative governance, the State demanded that university councils create governance structures and systems where different institutional stakeholders are to participate in the university governance process to achieve the goals of university transformation. However, the processes of implementation were challenged by stakeholder contestations around issues of contextual interpretation. Since 1994 several stakeholder groups have always been on strikes and protests over unfulfilled expectations and unresolved historical imbalances. This paper examines how student issues are being handled through university students' vivid representation in the internal governance structures and, also, how such representation could bring about effective governance across historically black universities in South Africa. This paper argues that proper handling of university student issues is significant for the university transformation, especially as regards historically black universities in South Africa. The paper ends with a re-imagination of stakeholders' representation in the different internal governance structures of historically black universities in South Africa for further research.*

Keywords: Historically black universities; university governing councils; cooperative governance

Introduction

Internationally, there is concern on how university governing bodies are providing effective leadership to the universities in the face of competing narratives such as globalization and neoliberalism that are strongly affecting the forms of management in universities. In order to remain internationally relevant, universities have had to adopt hostile management and governance practices to survive (Cloete and Maassen, 2002; Kezar and Eckel, 2004; McDaniel, 1996; Keller, 2006). The consequences have been devastating in terms of: alienating student and staff stakeholders in the university; the establishment of business governance practices; and processes and behaviour that caused institutional climate that

continues to threaten the core university business of teaching, learning and research. As such, university governing bodies are struggling on how to boost confidence, engagement and support amongst its key stakeholders like the university students who have been affected by these ambitious neoliberal economic policies. The inclusion of ‘stubborn’ stakeholders like the university students in the leadership of the university governing bodies was expected to make governance work well. But instead, it has created uncontrolled university student protests over issues of representation, access, equity, responsiveness and change (Omal, 2017). Thus, there is a knowledge gap on how to moderate vivid representation in key internal structures of the university leadership without affecting the leadership and governance of the university. This article is examining how student issues are being handled through university students’ representation in the internal governance structures in order to bring about effective governance across historically black universities in South Africa.

In the local scene, the role of the university councils in providing effective governance in post-1994 universities remains a subject of critical debate (Council for Higher Education (CHE), 2004; Omal, 2017). The central debates are similar to the international debates but in this case, the university councils are being questioned on how they are able to provide effective governance in the face of competing higher education stakeholder demands and expectations of access, responsiveness, equality equity, participation, representation and accountability (Hall et al., 2002; Department of Education reports on University of the North, 1997; University of Transkei, 1998; University of Fort Hare, 1999). To provide effective governance, university councils have tended to rely on their committees of council to provide the leadership to guide the university council on key issues. However, the different committees of the university council have faced several challenges in trying to provide good governance on critical issues. The challenges have centred on issues of composition, communication and stakeholder micro politics Hall et al., 2002; Department of Education reports on University of the North, 1997; University of Transkei, 1998; University of Fort Hare, 1999).

This paper argues that institutional stakeholders ought to support and have positive attitudes towards what the university governing bodies are aiming at in terms of effective governance. Unsupported procedures are always difficult to implement because they don’t have the public will and support. In such situations, university students should have representations in the different internal governance structures of the university governing council where university student issues are being handled. Participatory representation brings about trust, faith, external confidence and institutional reputation. This paper is divided into four sections: The first part of the paper provides the background to the study. The second part provides the conceptual framework. The third part examines the challenges facing the post 1994 South African universities. The fourth part examines rethinking of effective stakeholder governance across comprehensive university environments.

Governance and culture

This paper uses the concept of culture as an organizing framework in a multi-theoretical approach within a variety of competing perspectives being brought to the framing of effective university governance by governing bodies. This paper makes use of this organizing concept within a unique form of a micro-political framework developed on the work of the following writers: Blasé, (1998) on micro- politics, Bourdieu (1996) on species of social capital, Foucault (1991) and his concept of *circuits of power* located within social critical sociological perspectives which foreground interests, power and power relations as mediators and sometimes drivers of human interactions (Cross and Naidoo, 2011, 518).

The attributes of effective university governance are drawn from the White Paper of 1997 on the goals of higher education transformation (CHE, 2004) and the hunch is how the university council functions with university senate and university institutional forum to generate forms of effective governance. These organizing concepts rooted in the conflict of social action shall be used as analytical tools to provide the argument for this paper. Also critical to this paper is the notion of how the empowered constituencies, a creation of the post-1994 transformation of the South African higher education governance, is able to progressively influence the different university council decision making processes characterized by preference for certain forms of institutional regulation, internal organization and leadership. In particular, it shall be used to explore:

- i) How councils have unique governance pact between different stakeholders represented at the university council to bring about effective university governance in comprehensive higher education environments.
- ii) Complex institutions, especially university councils, are composed of individuals or groups with different forms of social capital.
- iii) These empowered constituencies possess different dimensions of individual and collective assets such as power, funds, public favour, influence and followership.
- iv) The notion of how these empowered constituencies in university councils could bring about forms and modes of practices that could constitute effective governance.

According to Steyn and van Zyl, (2001, 20), institutional culture is the *sum total* effects of the values, attitudes, styles of interaction, collective memories - the *way of life* of the university, known by those who work and study in the university environment, through their lived experience. As 'sum total', institutional culture has the capacity to refer to any and every aspect of experience at university, from parking to policing, from the sites and names of buildings to any and every joke told on campus (Steyn and van Zyl, 2001). Eckel (2003) suggests that culture shapes the governance process in profound ways and that cultural theory is important to understand governance. The concept of culture has been used in a variety of ways to inform us about life in organizations and that there are many viable modes of inquiry available to undertake an analysis of workplace culture. That is culture is referred to as the repeated specific goal oriented behavioral acts by an individual or groups of individuals at

different levels of social reality desired at achieving certain set objectives or repeated goal oriented practices, in which micro-climate in an organization can largely contribute to shape the organizational culture and climate (Rajbhandari et al., 2017).

There are three domains of university governance cultures as knowledge bases that are prevalent across higher education leadership and governance literature; the bureaucratic, collegial, and political models (Baldrige and Riley, 1977). However, emerging research on higher education governance over twenty years ago has generally been focused on four major analytical models: bureaucratic–rational, collegial, political, and garbage can or symbolic model (Baldrige et al., 1983). As such, university councils exist at the interface of these competing knowledge domains to bring about good governance practices within unique institutional contexts complex. The successes and fruitfulness of these interfaces depends on the levels and dimensions of stakeholder micro-politics going on within the university councils at institutional level. These actions have a strong effect on the type of governance culture as a model of governance practice the university council adopts to bring about effective governance.

The challenges of facing the post 1994 South African universities

Comprehensive universities are those higher education institutions that were formerly historically black disadvantaged institutions that existed in the former homeland areas of South Africa by the creation of the apartheid state (Asmal, 2002). However, by a series of different acts of the post-apartheid state, these ailing institutions were converted to comprehensive universities and some into universities of technology. Comprehensive universities across the former different homeland areas now offer vocational and degree qualifications to the university students. These categories of institutions are vulnerable to stakeholder protests due to unresolved historical debts, expectations and unfulfilled stakeholder post- 1994 independence political dreams.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) in 2004 in transformatory mode laid out the responsibilities of the university council, senate and institutional forum in bringing about effective university governance. It stated that the university council is responsible for the university governance of the university (CHE, 2004). The university senate is responsible for the academic affairs of the university (CHE, 2004). The institutional forum is responsible for tutoring of the university governing council on the university transformation process (CHE, 2004). This tripod governance system was supposed to work together but report to the university council through the different committees of the university council.

However, the CHE (2004) did not specify to the different university councils how this tripod university governance alliance is expected to work together to bring about the different processes of institutional transformation from the university council level. Rather it was expected that the different university governing bodies in conjunction with the other governance bodies in the tripod alliance in the different university contexts should be able to figure it out. In the post-1994 South Africa, this university governance process has been characterized by continuous conflicts and differences of different magnitudes at the

university council level, university senate level, and institutional forum levels (Department of Education reports on University of the North, 1997; University of Transeki, 1998; University of Fort Hare, 1990; University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2011). In conclusion, the relationships between the university students and their university governing councils have remained complicated. The 2015 university fees must fall protests demonstrate the unresolved tensions and contestations.

Rethinking stakeholder governance practices as best practice

The agency to bring about effective governance in light of competing imperatives of university transformation and decolonization has created more tensions between the university leadership and its key stakeholders - the students in governance. How the university governing councils respond to these contestations is key for effective governance in universities. In response to these tensions, the university governing councils have repositioned themselves through the following ways: composition, setting up university council student committee, considering stakeholder interest, minding about union influence, fostering agreed complex autonomies, and professionalization.

The composition of the university council

The South African Higher Education Statute (1997, 26-27) stipulates that university councils have to be composed of a diversity of both internal and external stakeholders. The university council is composed of different stakeholder representatives from different groupings within and outside the university. The university students as stakeholders have only two representatives to the university council. These stakeholder representations vary from institution to institution in the South African higher education landscape (Department of Education, 1997). The different stakeholder constituents have strong say on who represents them in the university council and its different committees.

Table: 1 showing the distribution of stakeholders in the university council

Stakeholder groupings	Number in the university council
The senior executive management	4
senate representatives	2
convocation	2
student representatives	2
academic employee	1
service employee	1
administrative employee	1
organized business/ private sector	6
Appointees of the Minister of Education	5
Donor representation	2
Resource persons	3
Provincial representative	1
Municipal representative	1

Source: university council of Venda University, 2011

However, this diverse composition has become theatres of stakeholder tension and hostility. Diverse composition of the university council has several merits: it brings to the university council namely a culture of debate, tolerance and opportunities for more stakeholder access as well as participation and representation by the stakeholders from their different governance constituents.

The university council and student affairs committee

The university governing council has delegated its authority to the university student's affairs committee to expertly prepare, inform and advise them on any issues relating to the university students in the university. University council acts on the recommendations from the university student affairs committee.

The effectiveness of this committee structure is dependent on several factors manifest in the perceptions of the university student structures towards how university student affairs are handled by the university leadership (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). The participation of university students as key institutional stakeholders at the committee level of the university council is important because of the following reasons:

Composition of the committees of council

The different process of how individuals become part of the university council determines how they will eventually in the different decision making spaces in the university council. The university council in their seating recommends individuals to become part of the different committees of council. It is at this point that exclusion does happen. Certain key committee structures of the university council have no student representation. Their deliberate absence is that they are considered too partisan which may affect the effective functioning of these committee structures. The question of size can be an instrument of exclusion or inclusion in the university governance process (Hall et al., 2002).

The question of the size of the committees of council is of concern to the institutional stakeholders. The size of the committees of council is decided by the university council. Small sizes are preferred over bigger sizes. The preference for small sizes is due to need for quick decision making on critical information for the general council. Even in the small committees of council it is important, that the different committees of council are comprised of institutional stakeholders whose issues are handled by these committees. This ensures issues are well prepared for the university council to have understanding what to respond to. However, there is need to avoid dominance of certain institutional stakeholders in the different committees of council.

Stakeholder Interest

The increased interest to be part of the committee of council is due to ensure that stakeholders are part of the decision making processes of issues pertaining to the

stakeholders (Makgoba, 1999; Kulati, 2000). Interest is the basis for accountability, transparency and confidence in institutional values. But who is ready to fight for your interest apart from you. Whatever you don't fight, you do not deserve though it is yours. Governance is about keeping your interest in plain sight.

Union influence

Why should the university be afraid of organized revolutionary leftist university students as radical stakeholders in the different committees of council? What are they saying that the university cannot work with them? Major changes in higher education have been introduced due to the application of leftist revolutionary union strategies to pressurize management for change (Horrell, 1968; Moja and Hayward, 2000). Today universities have changed to survive the onslaught. But to sustain this revolutionary vibe requires the strategic political professionalization which is fundamental recipe to fight change and, as well, counter revolutionary forces that may spoil the student cause in this precarious field of higher education.

Committee Stakeholder autonomy

The amount of autonomy the different committees of council have is determined by the university council. The different committees of the university council need space to consult, investigate and come up with well researched information to advise the university council on the best possible course of action on a particular issue of concern. However, committees of the university are known not do this. In spite of this challenge, listening to the committees is key to the effectiveness of the university council (Chait et al., 1996). Listening to these key structures is listening to the voices of the different institutional stakeholders. But it is known in real practice that university councils often do not listen to the technical advice of their committee structures. This has been a key root and recipe for governance dysfunctional (Department of Education reports on University of the North, 1997; University of Transeki, 1998; University of Fort Hare, 1990; University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2011). This is because the different committees of council consult with different institutional stakeholders to collect key stakeholder intelligence to pre-warn, and for-arm the university councils for strategic positional and action.

Committee stakeholder professionalization

The different committees of the university council have clearly defined tasks and responsibilities (Bennett, 2002). These strategic roles are delegated errands from the university council. Hence, it is important that individuals with the right skills and abilities are deployed to the committees of the university council. The biggest challenge to the professionalization of the different committees of council is politicization of the committees of council operate and carry out their work (CHE, 2000). The exclusion of the university students as mentioned in certain key committees of the university council as best practices is a political decision and it will take having a political counter revolutionary artillery fire

boldness to undo this and sustain this change. This is making governance work for fruitful transformation in the current purely contested academic field and resilient post-colonial institutional governance habitué.

Conclusion

This paper examined how the university governing council would improve vivid representation of university students on key committees of university council where their affairs are being handled and what this means for effective governance in comprehensive university contexts. This paper has argued that although there are institutional governance structures to enable selection of student representatives to the university council, there is limited participation in key internal committees of the university council. The university governing council has given several reasons not to include university students in certain key internal committees of the university council. These reasons range from being too partisan to being politically correct. These kinds of results have the following implications for effective governance and further research: The university governing bodies should encourage more university student representation in the different key internal governance structures of the university council where their affairs are being handled. The processes of more representation as best stakeholder practices should be based on the following aspects; competence, moderation of size, structure, union and external political influence, interest, and leadership autonomy at the level of the committee structure. University governing bodies are as best as the nature and functioning of their different committee structures.

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