

Governance of the institutional leadership and student organisation interfaces in South Africa's Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the governance of the interface of student organisations with public higher education institutions in South Africa. It appraises relations between institutional leaders and student organisations, given the current turmoil in the institutions of higher education in South Africa. Institutions are products of mankind and their operations and evolution tend to portray the underlying human personalities and personal traits of those who hold power in key stakeholder positions. Higher education institutions have various stakeholders who are required to pursue common vision, mission and goals. Legislatively, stakeholders should ensure that they promote co-operative governance; however, the institutional interfaces of the leadership and student organisations in higher education institutions are riddled with protracted conflicts. The article asserts that shoddy transformation is stifling good governance of relations between leadership structures of higher education institutions in South Africa. As a result of position-making and the making of positions, which are broader characters of the South African society, albeit democratic, compromises are hard to establish in circumstances wherein stakeholders unidimensionally pursue rigid mandates driven by powerful interest groups.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education (HEIs) in South Africa are established by the *Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997* and comprise internal and external stakeholders such as the employer, employees, students, suppliers, other role players and interest groups. Higher education institutions referred to in this article are public universities in South Africa. Leadership structures within the various HEIs stakeholder groups are expected to promote co-operative governance. The ideal is a relational environment among the stakeholders that is sound,



mature and collegial at all times. Unfortunately, there are times when the relations between these two role players are strained. The purpose of this article is to appraise relations between the student organisations and institutional leadership structures in the light of the current developments taking place in the South African public universities. The article argues that when the role players pursue agendas outside of the collective mandate, there is bound to be divisions which may defeat the spirit of co-operation.

The institutional theory is used to undergird the article, which uses secondary literature from journals, web-based, government documents and newspaper articles. The article is structured as follows: the introduction gives an outline, the background covers the essence for the choice of the topic, theoretical frameworks provide the basis for comprehending phenomenon under the study and ensure that the terms used are defined and contextualised. HEIs' internal stakeholders and their roles are outlined. A brief overview of the state of higher education with specific reference to public universities is provided. The challenges confronting higher education associated with transformation are examined. Co-operative governance in HEIs together with stakeholder expectations is dealt with. Then, governance of relations between institutional and student leadership structures is outlined, after which recommendations and conclusion are presented.

BACKGROUND

The *Higher Education Act*, 101 of 1997 puts forward co-operative governance as a new model for governing higher education (Department of Higher Education & Training 1997). This implies that the internal governance structures, for purposes of this study (institutional and student organisation leadership structures) have to take into consideration the principles of co-operative governance (Bonakele, Mxenge & Thabakgale 2003:4). Higher education institutions render a valuable service of providing a public good in the form of education, and thus have a special place in the lives of any country's citizenry, South Africa included. Tertiary education delivered through HEIs, enables recipients to enhance their earning abilities, to live longer and contribute towards the strengthening of democracy (Herber & Mncube 2011:234). It is for reasons such as the above that this article probes relations between the two major stakeholders in the HEIs at this juncture. Section 26(2) of the *Higher Education Act*, 101 of 1997 sets out the internal structures among other things to build strong and effective governance within the institutions of higher education (Department of Higher Education & Training 1997:24).

Institutional leadership and management structures comprising different stakeholder groups exist with the object of delivering quality services and offerings to a contingent of users and beneficiaries. Various stakeholders (internal and external) exist within the institutions of higher learning. The council is the highest governance structure (governing body) within an institution of higher education. The student representative council (SRC) is the structure representing the student body and exists first and foremost to cater for and promote the interests of students within an institution of higher education. Throughout this article the structure that represents the students (SRC) will be identified as the *organised studentship*. The two structures namely, institutional leadership and organised studentship need each other for a number of reasons, among others, to create a platform for engagement

and interaction especially on matters affecting HEIs including other developments within the higher education landscape.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The aim of any theory, according to Williamson (2007:6), is to simplify reality. In this article institutional theory will be used to undergird the study on relations between HEIs and student organisations. Thoenig (2011:2) argues that institutional theory defines public administration as a component of political life and questions why resources and power are allocated unequally within the agents in the public sector adding that some public agencies have more influence than others. This theory is relevant for this article for two reasons: HEIs fall within the public sector, and relations between the leadership structures of students and institutions involve power. This theory will guide the development of the article towards explicating phenomena thus making scholarly contributions to existing knowledge. The concepts will now be explained in the section that follows.

Conceptual Frameworks

The need as well as the value in concept definition in a research study including this article, among others is to ensure that readers understand the context under which those terms are used. The failure to do so may increase chances of being misunderstood by the readers. Governance refers to a situation in which responsibility is executed in an effective, transparent and accountable manner (Sebola 2014:996). Governance according to Lipczynski, Wilson & Goddard (2013:109) includes ways in which organisations can best manage their contractual relationships, and the *Businessdictionary.com* (2016:1) argues that governance refers to the establishment, implementation and monitoring of policies, (by the institution's governing body) as well as establishing the conditions to ensure that the powers of members are in congruence with their primary duty of promoting the prosperity and viability of the institution. *Corporate Governance* is another important concept; it refers to the systems by which firms are directed and controlled (Lipczynski *et al.* 2013:121). This article argues that a HEI will have a structure with interlinked sub-structures/layers fulfilling the reporting/accounting requirement. Stakeholders are, according to Mainardes, Alves & Raposo (2010:77), individuals or groups that have the power to directly impact on the future of the organisation. From the descriptions of the key concepts above, co-operative governance was omitted on purpose. Other than the theory that underpins the article (institutional theory), co-operative governance has been cited as a requirement that the stakeholders in HEIs are mandated to observe in carrying out their work. Further to this, this article focuses on governance and not necessarily *good governance* and the reader will make an own judgement as to whether interactions between the stakeholders qualify as good governance and if so, good for whom?

STAKEHOLDERS WITHIN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Higher education institutions have various stakeholders, role players and interest groups.



The establishment, composition and functioning of a council, other governance structures within the institutions of higher education including the SRCs is prescribed by the *Higher Education Act, 1997* (Bonakele *et al.* 2003:4-5). Government (Ministry of Higher Education and Training), employees of higher education institutions, students, other clientele such as suppliers, competitors, donors, communities and societies form part of the stakeholder/role players and interest groups (Maric 2013:222). For governance purposes the following structures namely, council, senate, principal, vice-principal, institutional forum, SRC and other structures as determined by the institutional statute, are created in the higher education institutions (DoHET 1997:24). The council of an HEI is the highest governance (governing body) structure and is constituted in terms of section 26 of the *Higher Education Act, 1997* (DoHET 1997).

The focus of this article is on the institutional and organised students' leadership structures within HEIs. The student representative councils (SRCs) are established in terms of section 35 of *Higher Education Act, 109 of 1997* (Centre for Higher Education Transformation 2003:4). The responsibilities of the following HEIs stakeholders (Hall, Symes & Luescher 2002:32) are:

- Government is required to exercise its powers in pursuit of the public good, in a transparent, equitable and accountable manner, taking into account the social, cultural and economic needs and concerns of all potential beneficiaries of higher education and should allow "the maximum degree of practicable autonomy and show a commitment to consultation and negotiated solutions to problems" through taking a proactive, guiding and constructive role.
- Managers of HEIs are required to be willing to interact and establish relationships with a wide range of partners. They will be responsive to national and regional needs, and will promote a favourable institutional environment.
- Students have legitimate expectations and demands which should be met while recognising that the potential benefits of higher education offer a privilege which carries its own responsibilities. Students have a role to play in the facilitation, and orderly continuation and transformation of academic programmes.

Governance extends from the ministry which is the political head, the council with the vice-principal as the accounting officer. Other role players include academic, research, administrative and other personnel, students, parents and various other interest groups in their capacity as service providers and users of institutional products and services. Among its various tasks, leadership structures of higher education institutions are expected to craft the vision of the institution together with relevant stakeholders. Once the vision is in place, it needs to be socialised for purposes of buy-in among all stakeholders. It is disturbing for any institution when there are role players that come up with unexpected surprises and demands as these may lead to loss of trust and spirit of companionship.

BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

There are various issues that confront higher education institutions throughout the world and South Africa is no exception. Institutions of higher education in South Africa before

1994 were segregated. Those who were predominantly black were inadequately and or poorly resourced in all respects. Higher education system among its varied negatives was skewed in its structural development and unequally financed (Universities South Africa 2015:1). The quality and relevance of the syllabi offered in most of the predominantly black institutions of higher education was questionable. The call to reform higher education, even though it had always been echoed previously, gained momentum after 1994 as alluded to by Badat (2010:2) when observing that post-1994, a wide array of transformation initiatives were undertaken with a view to effect institutional change in South Africa. The aforementioned could have been among the reasons that led to the creation of a commission for the transformation of the higher education in South Africa by the first democratically elected president of the Republic, Nelson Mandela just six months into the new dispensation (Cloete, Maassen, Fehnel, Moja, Perold & Gibbon 2004:8). Summits, conferences and other engagements have taken place in the name of transformation over the years.

The National Education Crisis Committee organised a conference in Johannesburg in 1985; another conference in Durban in 1986; including regional and national conferences. If one reflects on the history of *transformation struggles* in South African higher education after 1994, the following are worth mentioning (Universities South Africa 2015:4): the *White Paper on Higher Education Transformation*, 1997, the *National Plan for Higher Education*, 2001; a *New Institutional Landscape for Higher Education*, 2002; the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions*, 2008; the *Declaration of the Higher Education Summit*, 2010; the *National Development Plan*, 2012; the terms of reference of the *Ministerial Oversight Committee on Transformation in South African Public Universities*, 2013; and, the *White Paper for Post-school Education and Training*, 2014. The developments cited above seem to suggest that the HEIs stakeholders are serious about confronting issues and challenges facing the sector. The following section will consider certain of the challenges that confront HEIs with specific reference to transformation.

TRANSFORMATION CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Transformation in higher education touches on almost all the facets of institutional life such that very few if any stakeholders will not have issues and expectations of redress. According to Universities South Africa (2015:2), the term *transformation* in South Africa is generally held to refer to a comprehensive, deep-rooted and on-going social process seeking to achieve a fundamental reconstitution and development of the universities to reflect and promote the vision of a democratic society. In the forefront of the transformation continuum are issues such as governance, leadership, student access and success, staff equity, relevance in the areas of teaching content and context and the institutional culture among others. In 2015, the Minister of Higher Education and Training promised to push for higher education transformation in the wake of various student-initiated movements (Universities South Africa 2015:3). Organised students expect the resolution of challenges



in the area of transformation from both the Ministry of Higher Education and Training and HEIs immediately.

Transformation is considered to be a process (Universities South Africa 2015:4). If it is indeed a process, those affected by transformation challenges must acknowledge that the resolution of issues and challenges that affect them may not all be resolved at once. Further to this, issues and challenges of transformation must be financed. Those plans of the role players' design are contingent on the financial and other resources that an institution of higher learning has at its disposal. This article maintains that the environment in which HEIs operate demands that strategic planning is done with input from internal as well external stakeholders. For that reason, there is no way that the issues (pressing) would not be prioritised and ranked within those overarching plans. Higher education institutions, it must be observed, are not in business first and foremost to make profits and have to be mindful of the importance of the service that they offer to their constituency, particularly students. It will follow that HEIs are still bound to balance their books to keep themselves afloat.

Students are the main recipients of the HEIs' services. HEIs do have customers such as users of research and other services. Mainardes *et al.* (2010:78) concur when advancing that the services of higher education institutions extend beyond teaching and therefore other stakeholders will exist. HEIs' stakeholders working co-operatively, craft strategic as well as other plans (operational) to realise identified objectives. Grant (2001:114) reckons that a strategy is "the match between an institution's internal resources and skills". This could explain why HEIs have chosen to outsource certain skills especially those that are not core to their operations. Besides recruiting personnel with requisite skills, it is also vital for HEIs to know who their customers are. Higher education institutions rely on various sources for revenue to fulfil their obligations. These sources include the Department of Higher Education and Training, students, other customers including those who buy research outputs, donors, the alumni of HEIs and others.

CO-OPERATIVE GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

The key elements of co-operative governance are partnership, co-operation and effective articulation of interests (Bonakele *et al.* 2003:4). The institutional leadership structure is expected to exercise leadership across the board within the higher education institution and the reasons for that will follow. Whilst stakeholder leadership structures are bound to work co-operatively, their constituencies expect their leaders to push for the expectations closest to their hearts as well as to deal with challenges that directly affect them at times without compromise. When the plans and strategies have been crafted they need to be communicated to the wider audience of the stakeholders of the affected institutions. Co-operative governance might not expect role players to pull in opposite directions. In the event that such a situation takes place, the result is likely to result in the failure to realise set objectives/goals. It was earlier stated that fruitful engagement between institutional leadership and organised studentship requires that surprises are minimised by agreeing on issues that need to be tackled with the available resources and capacity. Bonakele *et al.* (2003:1)

suggest that SRCs ought to evolve towards becoming student government structures capable of playing a role in co-operative governance instead of being mere representative structures. They add that co-operative governance is also grounded on balancing participation with effectiveness and accountability (Bonakele *et al.* 2003:4). Whilst the council is tasked among others with the responsibility to govern the higher education institution, SRCs apart from representing students in all aspects of student life, have the responsibility of acting in the best interest of the institution (Bonakele *et al.* 2003:4).

Relations between Institutional Leadership and Organised Studentship

Higher education institutions and students need each other. Writing the foreword in Klemencic, Luescher & Mugume (2016:xi), Altbach affirms this view when submitting that HEIs would not exist without students. Higher education institutions cannot survive without students. The very reason (primary) for the existence of higher education institutions (mission) is teaching. Students as well, cannot prosper in their learning endeavours in the absence of higher education institutions. From a theoretical viewpoint, the relationship between the leadership structure of the institution of higher education and organised studentship should be that of equals. In practice though, the expert knowledge, resourcefulness, depth and astuteness both in the field and in life favours the former to the latter. That is the reason why the institutional leadership structures need to provide guidance and mentorship to the organised studentship even when specific action is not taken at times. Klemencic *et al.* (2016:17) observe that the place of students in higher education governance differs from institution to institution including whether the institutional leadership structure views students as either minors or as adults. They concede that where students are viewed as minors they are likely to be excluded from decision-making and if the students are viewed as adults they will be involved in decision-making.

Of fundamental importance however, is that interaction should be guided by the presence of mutual respect, trust, fairness and transparency from both parties, as this will assure better served higher education institutions at all times. In the study undertaken by the National Union of Students on the relations between students' unions and higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, it emerged that positive working relationships existed between the aforementioned role players in higher education as well as a high level of commitment (Committee of University Chairs 2011:1). Organised studentship expects the resolution of challenges in the area of transformation from both the Ministry of Higher Education and Training and HEIs without delay. Universities South Africa (2015:4) consider transformation to be a process. If it is indeed a process, those affected by transformation challenges must acknowledge that the resolution of issues and challenges that affect them may not all be resolved at once. Further to this, issues and challenges of transformation must be financed. Those plans that the role players design are contingent on the financial and other resources that an institution of higher learning has at its disposal.

The recent hashtag *#fees/outsourcing/Afrikaans/Rhodes/Statues*—must fall campaign, according to Munusamy (2015:2) is a political failure and signals a tipping point. Stakeholders should, besides identifying and prioritising issues, establish mechanisms to



solve problems. If it could be established that some of the issues listed above were not prioritised it could negatively impact on resource planning and allocation. These issues must be emphasised though they are relevant and affect stakeholders in these institutions and must be addressed. However, if they had not been on the terms of engagement, raising them unduly put pressure on the resources that were planned for other programmes. This might explain why it is sometimes difficult and almost close to being impossible, to entertain costly initiatives that had not been budgeted for a specific time period such as those cited above. As in keeping with the title of the article, institutional leadership and organised studentship/student organisations were of the topic. Most SRCs/organised studentship are aligned to worker trade unions/political parties. These include those aligned to the African National Congress, Democratic Alliance, Economic Freedom Front, other parties and those that are neutral.

Whilst this is not unacceptable and somehow reinforces as well as embraces the democratic principles including that of association, care should be taken that it does not adversely affect relations among the internal structures of higher education institutions. *University World News* (2016:1) observes that South African students may be tired of having their interests overshadowed by intra-party politics in the post-apartheid era. Whilst aligning with structures external to HEIs is not viewed as out of line, a problem arises when the mandate is suddenly swayed towards agendas not immediately on the agenda. This sometimes creates unnecessary tension and institutional instability. An institution matches required resources (especially) human, to its operational needs. The *#outsourcing* must fall demand to name but one, has the potential to challenge the financial capability of an institution. If the students' expectations are not met/addressed they surely feel alienated. If the language they choose to use/resort to is violence this has the likelihood of defeating the spirit of co-operative governance in HEIs. This researcher concedes that actions as witnessed in many of the HEIs in South from the latter part of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 are bound to frustrate relations between the affected stakeholders. A joint statement by the Universities South Africa (2016:25) condemning acts of destabilisation and disruptive conduct at institutions of higher education is pertinent. Other ways must be found to resolve these issues in an amicable manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Leadership structures within HEIs must practice co-operative governance to the letter.
- Developments taking place in the HEIs space must be communicated to stakeholders timeously.
- Leadership structures within HEIs must be bound by collective agreements and time-frames.
- Leadership structures within HEIs must put the interests of the institutions before anything else.
- In the event of differences, leadership structures within HEIs must work to resolve differences in the spirit of co-operation.
- Various stakeholders should, as far as is practicable, commit to pursuing collective agenda to safeguard the interests of HEIs.

CONCLUSION

The article set out to appraise relations between the institutions of higher education and organised studentship. HEIs stakeholders and their roles were identified. The HEIs stakeholders are required to take into consideration the principles of co-operative governance. HEIs are confronted by challenges largely transformational. Stakeholders have expectations but also have responsibilities. The organised studentship is of the view that the institutional leadership structures and government are not serious about the urgency with which transformation issues should be resolved within the HEIs. This has caused confrontation, demonstrations and violent attacks on HEIs infrastructure. The article argued that when stakeholders have opposing agendas this has the potential of creating disturbances which are not in the interest of HEIs and co-operative governance. Recommendations were outlined which it hoped will contribute towards literature on improving relations in public HEIs in South Africa and in other parts of the globe. The article concluded by stating that relations specifically between internal stakeholders (institutional and organised studentship structures) are not healthy as there are issues that draw them apart and unless they embrace the culture of co-operation, the situation may get worse.

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