

Governance of South Africa's Higher Learning Institutions

Complexities of internal stakeholder engagement in universities

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that governance of South Africa's higher learning institutions through stakeholder engagement is a complex phenomenon, rendered protracted by the wide-ranging diversity of interests and, more often than not, contradictory mandates of the multiple actors. Institutional systems for the management of the complex interactionism of the multiplicity of actors have largely been overcompensated by informal processes that reward patronage and partisanship at the expense of good governance. Modern governance systems require that the chain of management operation in organisations be based on stakeholder engagement. These stakeholders are by virtue of their existence in organisations required to work together in order to avoid conflicts which may emanate from silo operations. The article uses literature to argue that the different mandates held by individual stakeholders in institutions of higher learning in South Africa make the attainment of good governance intractable. This article concludes that only a common ground of mandate that can be established for various stakeholders can ensure successful governance through inclusive stakeholder engagement in institutions of higher learning in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Public sector organisations such as universities experiences different forms of challenges in relation to management of the primary activities of academia and other activities for running university business. Although the primary business of a university is academia, there are many activities which are directly related to this function which ultimately may determine the success of this activity or lack of success for it if not well managed through the stakeholder engagement process. There are different mandates carried by internal stakeholders in university governance such as university management, trade unions, students and university

staff. A common management belief is that the governance model for institutions are simple and easy to implement as required in management books, therefore, ignoring the complexities of governance in practice. The success of the university governance structure is much dependent on each of the structures operating towards achievement of common goal for the university other than for an individual structure's objective. In addressing this problem, the article will focus on a theoretical framework for governance, the purpose existence of institutions of higher learning, governance of institutions of higher learning, and the complexities of governance relationships in institutions of higher learning.

GOVERNANCE THEORIES

Much of literature on governance exists in different forms such as good governance, bad governance, corporate governance and cooperative governance. A clear and acceptable model of governance in organisations may not be available as organisations operate independently and differently on various occasions. The concept of governance or good governance may therefore differ in context of typical organisational application based on whether the organisation is public or private. Looking backward it becomes clear that good corporate practices have indeed influenced the global economies and various governments to adopt good governance practices (Yusoff & Alhaji 2012), a model which sets a defined governance relation of the public and the private sectors. Band & Esmark (2013:1-2) indicate that in the public administration environment the concept refers to an empirically observable politico-administrative way of making public policy-making reforming and organising. Broadly explained, Kemp & Parto (2005) accept the complex and uncertainty nature of the concept governance, but defines it as "How one gets acts done through interactive actions (deliberations, negotiations, self-regulation or authoritative choice) and the extent to which actors adhere to collective decisions". In relation to the former, the UNDP (1997:5) defined the concept governance to mean "...the complex mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate their differences".

Modern scholars of Public Administration are of the view that "if old scholars such as Max Weber and Woodrow Wilson were to reappear to the landscape of modern public administration they will in all probability not be able to recognise the field of governance" (Hjern & Porter 1981:212-213) as much have changed from their era of influence. Governance today seem to have achieved much as a model of management where good interaction with stakeholders, whether being internal or external, has been achieved with accountability and transparency being at the fore. Stoker (1998) and Thornhill (2008) have argued that the governance practice model today has made the distinction between the public and the private sector divide to become more blurred. It is indeed the nature of the created interaction among different forces that makes governance unique as a model.

SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: REASON FOR EXISTENCE

The South African universities exist for purpose not different to other universities worldwide.



It is assumed that universities of the globe exist for simple purpose of effective teaching, research and community engagement. On numerous occasions it is argued that the role of an African university is not clearly articulated in the African fora especially because of its doubtful capacity to carry out academic projects with their problems to manage contradictory functions of political ideologies and academic activities (Cloete & Maasen 2012:8). Most would propagate for a developmental role as articulated by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan when he stated:

The University must become a primary tool for Africa's development in the new century. Universities can help develop African expertise; they can enhance the analysis of African problems; strengthen domestic institutions; serve as model environment for the practice of good governance, conflict resolution and respect for human rights, and enable African academics to play an active part in the global community of scholars (Bloom et al. 2006: 2)

It is however acknowledged that other scholars such as Cloete & Maasen 2012:1-4) argue for broader university purposes such as (a) *production* (creation of talents, training and research), (b) *consumption* (general education, community life and holding operations) and (c) *citizenship* (socialisation, critical evaluations and democratisations). Many South African academics have argued that research and community engagement have been little known or emphasised by various university managements. Therefore, making teaching the only known function of a South African university. Sebola (2014) argues that the business purpose of a university (teaching, research, community engagement) is unique and does not need to be compromised. The lack of attention to the other two reasons of existence have indeed made the role of a South African university no different from a high school or a further education and training institution (now called Technical Vocational Education Centres). This explains a poor publication output by African universities which according to Frantz, Leach, Pharaoh, Basset, Roman, Smith & Travill (2012), contribute less than 1% of the global scientific publications. This has been a worrisome factor for long in academic discourses as to why Africans are only labelled consumers of knowledge than being producers of it. The concern has not been properly addressed as the *status quo* remain in most South African universities. The South African Department of Higher Education expects an academic to publish at least 1.25 article output on annual basis (Schulze 2008), however that requirement is hardly met by South African academics. The problem of poor scientific publication output cannot be dissociated from the poor attention to community engagement because the communities are engaged by universities based on local studies done in those communities. Therefore, it is argued that a good correlation may exist on poor scientific publication output and poor community engagement by South African universities. The reason for this abnormality may indeed be linked to the university management's poor understanding of reason and purpose of existence of an African university or poor governance and academic leadership. Unless that is effectively addressed the purpose of an African university will remain unknown to students, staff and labour unions.

The success of each society is mainly based on its educated workforce that aims to contribute to economic growth and social prosperity (Jordaan, Van Heerden & Jordaan 2014; Sebola & Malema 2014). It is believed that an educated workforce produced at universities will be able to solve economic problems through the knowledge and research skills obtained

from South African universities. But on the contrary most South African universities have proven negligence by providing a knowledge, skills and competency mismatch that do not meet employer profiles (Du Preez & Fossey 2012; Jordaan *et al.* 2014). This only means that if purpose and intent of the existence is well known and adhered to such errors would be minimal in universities. The purpose and intent of university business should be known to all governance structures other than a monopoly of one. Thus far, it is argued that only the university management is aware of the expectations that universities must achieve, but reluctant to make staff, students and labour unions to understand the organisational purpose which they must also endeavour to achieve. In most instances the university management claims to operate on good governance principles but have created an artificial fence between themselves and all other internal stakeholders such as staff, students and labour unions. Hence it is argued that the concept *governance* itself may not be a problem in South African universities, except that lack of applying good governance strategies to an organisation may lead to unsuccessful governance practices ending up in conflict resolutions. It is indeed the complex nature of the relationship among internal stakeholders in South African universities that may determine the success of good governance model workable to achieve South African university businesses. That is likely to happen if the university management discharges its responsibility in a manner that is ethical, effective, transparent and accountable (Naidoo 2014). Good governance recognises that those in authority cannot exclude the stakeholders in issues that need engagement before decisions are undertaken (Sindane & Nambalirwa 2012).

GOVERNANCE OF INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

In pursuing good governance for South African universities, the *Higher Education Act*, 1997 proclaims that it is “desirable for higher education institutions to enjoy freedom and autonomy in their relationship with the State within the context of public accountability and the national need for advanced skills and scientific knowledge” (Mthembu 2009:11). Adams (2006), however, argues that the governance structure of South African universities has a built-in mechanism that restricts autonomy in the disguise of accountability. Du Toit (2014:3) also argues that “South African institutions of higher learning have never in principle or practice ever achieved an institutional autonomy”. It is argued that the South African universities are governed through the political philosophy of cooperative governance (Mthembu 2009:9) which to a particular extent may include a governing council, academic senate, institutional forum and student representative council (Mosia 2016). In South Africa universities are managed by councils and university managements that are responsible for operational activities. The councils are, according to the Act, “the highest decision-making bodies of public institutions responsible for good order and governance of institutions, their missions, financial policy, performance, quality and reputation. On the other hand, the University management are responsible for teaching and research, which are the core business of a university” (Council on Higher Education 2002:14). According to Mouton, Louw & Strydom (2013) some council members rarely understand their role in which instance they often act inappropriately and destructively towards the running of universities. There have been many instances in South Africa where the council members differ fundamentally with

the university rectorates. De la Rey (2015:3) indicates that experience, skills and financial expertise are important for university council members if governance has to be achieved.

The council members are external to the university's daily operations and therefore the senate executive management committee (composed of vice-chancellor, deputy-vice chancellor and deans) manages the university operations on their behalf and on daily basis. It is assumed that by the nature of their training and expertise that those in the senate executive management committees which run the university understand their role. They understand how to engage staff, students and labour unions in understanding the noble role of the university in production of knowledge. Councils are often fictitious and members are often not seen at practical university problems which include disputes between university management and staff, and students as well as labour unions. The university management, through their leadership, only reports to the council on the activities they are engaged in. The globe today requires an educational system that would produce skilled citizens that are able to effectively access knowledge, internalise it, produce new knowledge and employ it to the betterment of the society (Van Schalkwyk 2002; Mouton *et al.* 2013). This is the purpose that should be known to all stakeholders engaged in the business of the university. Unfortunately, at some stage not even Council members are aware of the nature of their role in university councils.

While the governance of South African universities include council members and university executive managements, the university executive managements manages the relationship between themselves and important internal stakeholders such as students, staff and labour unions. It is a proper management of this internal stakeholder relationship that maintains order in university environments. More often than not this relationship is managed without emphasising the fact that these internal stakeholder relations exist for one purpose, which is to achieve a common university goal. Most university leaders will prefer to lead from the other fence showing other internal stakeholders that their purpose is different from the academic leadership purpose. This often led to internal stakeholders pursuing individual missions which are not in the best interest of the university business causing regular and unnecessary conflicts. The omission is not only done by university managements. The Report on Stakeholder Engagement on Higher Education Transformation (Centre for Education Policy Development 2010:5) made ten recommendations. None of those specifically consider the role of labour unions in institutions of higher learning such as universities. The recommendations only focused on staff, students and university management matters for successful transformation which include promotion for research, teaching, women empowerment and review of working conditions for staff members. Labour unions are important stakeholders that often, if neglected, have the potential to delay the academic projects if the university managements have to spend most of their time in conflict resolution with them.

COMPLEXITIES OF GOVERNANCE RELATIONSHIPS

Literature on governance show that the concept of governance indeed involves a system of complicated relationship among different parts of the phenomenon (UNDP 1997; Kemp & Parto 2005). Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (2010:1-2) notes that the South

African university governance framework problems are mostly because of the complex responsibilities of councils, university leadership, senior administrators, academics, students, policy makers and external stakeholders. The management of organisations often ignore the fact that the significance of this relationship should be based on organisational purpose. The management often expects that the other parts of the system should operate within strict rule of law that aim at controlling them being part of the same organism. Even though the governance procedures of universities are well documented in the organisation's policies, the procedures make other internal stakeholders to alienate and obliged to operate on observer status on issues of university management in which their opinion seem to count less or demonstrate that they are lesser partners in the governance systems. It can be argued that only the university management as mandated by the *Higher Education Act, 1997* can make internal stakeholders work towards common university goal. In this article it is argued that the governance relationship of South African universities makes the university management relation superior to the other internal stakeholders making it impossible for such internal stakeholders to help in achieving the mission of university purpose. While the university management's purpose is clear as mandated by the Act which is to promote effective teaching and research, the other internal stakeholders (student leadership, staff and labour unions) interests on this purpose is misled either deliberately or not by the South African university governance systems.

Student Leadership

The South African legislative framework for education regards the students' leadership as an important facet of university governance mechanism. Luescher & Symes (2003:20) report that the role of students' leadership at institutions of higher learning is to "act as agents of change in higher education, play a very active advocacy role and build programmatic relationships with communities surrounding the institutions". The history of South African student's leadership within a university cannot be dissociated from the history of social injustices of the past regime and its relation to student protest politics (Luescher 2005:2; Badat 2016:1–5). South African students have played a major role in speaking against apartheid and using the autonomy of the university system to fight against apartheid injustices. The purpose of student leadership in universities is not fixed. Common knowledge dictates that they stood for student's affairs such as quality education for their fellows, access to education and promotion of healthy learning environments. More often than not issues of student governance, student leadership in universities extend beyond the mentioned scope and pushes for national political party agenda than internal university politics (Magume & Luescher 2015). In-fighting for social injustices, often the student leaders have not considered what the university business stood for. It cannot be argued that there is a collateral relation between student leadership politics and the national politics. However, the manner in which some national politics have a bearing on the use of students' leaders for outside university business contradict the academic business required by the same politicians. For example, while the *fees must fall* is a student governance matter, the *Rhodes must fall* can be perceived to be a national matter that could not have warranted instability that halted academic projects at the university concerned. In fact, the university management should have dealt with the matter with student governance before the students could declare a conflict.



Student leaders are characterised by taking an opposing stand against university management rather than being part of the governance system that should fight for a common good. It is clear that access to higher education is still critical in South Africa with affordability problems (Butler-Adam 2016), but the fact that student leaders (most of them learn Economics at the particular universities) can pretend that they do not understand that the country's economic status cannot afford free education, only mean that university management are not engaging student leaders as equal partners of their governance structure. If indeed student leaders are considered equal partners in university governance they may not be seen vandalising university infrastructures that they would need to pay for in the following years. It is understood that as part of the governance machinery system of universities students are to influence decisions regarding transformation of universities (Legoabe 2011:4), however that should be within the limit of the university business. Thabo Mbeki in his address to African Student Leaders Summit at University of Cape Town on September 6, 2010 in condemning the loss of student leadership direction said:

I must say that I have no quarrel with such public and active expression of their displeasure and demands by students of Africa. However, I must add to this that I will certainly quarrel with any actions which result in the destruction of university property and physical abuse of the university administration and staff, given the challenges which African university already faces (Mbeki 2010:4).

It is clear from the above that the approach of African student politics is not supported in the current political landscape. While everyone acknowledges and understands the history of African student politics and the fight for freedom of the education of an African child, acknowledges that much has been achieved and that student leaders have to understand that they are now part of the governance system and that they have to exercise their rights and freedom with responsibility.

Labour Unions at Universities

Labour unions in South Africa are powerful sources of economic and political agendas (Schultz & Mwambu 1997; Webster & Buhlungu 2004; Maree 2012; Centre for Development and Enterprise 2013) in which the distinction between unionism and political party become totally blurred. Trade unions in Africa and South Africa have played a major role in the political agenda and democracy (Webster 2007) rather than in promoting better working conditions for employees. In South Africa for example the *African National Congress* (ANC) is still co-managing with trade unions such as *Congress of South African Trade Unions* (COSATU) and its affiliated unions (Kruger & Tshoose 2013). Despite being in a public cooperative governance agreement with the ANC, COSATU as a trade union has publicly differed with the ANC government on various policy issues, which on numerous occasions threatened the existing partnership. It is indeed difficult to manage with a partner who pursues a different mission than the mission of the entire organisation. Trade unions in general everywhere represent the interests of their members whether in academia, private or public institution.

Unionism exists in South African universities to represent the interests of academics and administrative staff. However, in most South African academic institutions union leaders may

emerge from the academic circle, it is a very rare incident. Most leaders of unions in South African academia may emanate from administration and support section of the university. It is a considered view that the business of a university is academic and therefore the passion to attain teaching and research by university management is understood better by those in academia than support staff in administration. Since unions are in the business of governance relation within universities they are also expected to operate within the limit of the objectives of the mandate of university management. Often the union leaders within the university understand the scope of their mandate within the limit of constitutional rights in which they rarely care about how their failure to promote a pragmatic environment causes damage to the university business. Wage disputes are often a cause of conflict with the university management. It is not clear how structures that are in cooperative governance relation should differ to an extent where the business of their organisation should suffer.

University Staff

The university staff in academia includes the administrative support staff and the academics at various levels. The universities employ these two groups of employees in order to achieve the academic goal of a university. Those goals according to Pouris & Inglesi-Lotz (2014) are formation of human capital and building of knowledge development, the dissemination and use of knowledge as well as the maintenance of knowledge. These are academic goals of a university which of course are a primary function. The administrative goals will be achieved through the administrative staff support division. The academic staff participates in university governance through created university committees such as schools, faculties and up to a senate level. Only on rare occasion does the university staff consider the purpose of a university mandate to be theirs. While it is understandable that the university and its employees are in a psychological contract of particular expectations on the delivery of promises, employees should consider the mandate carried by the university management as theirs too. More often university employees complain about low incentives which they think their employer takes little consideration of. Tchaphet, Iwu & Allen-Ile (2014) are of the opinion that South African employees are not considered part of the governance structures of their organisation which explains their continued industrial actions and dissatisfaction. It is a considered view that university management should consider other internal stakeholders to be their competitive advantage in achieving the university's administrative, teaching and research goals. While the most favourable arrangements of a South African university is its autonomous operation (Salmi 2012:1), the university management should guard against acting unconsciously autonomous from internal stakeholders. Effective teaching and research may not be easily achievable unless the university management supports staff and prove to them that it is a collective mission for all and not a management sole mission mandate.

DIVERSITY OF STAKEHOLDER MANDATES IN GOVERNANCE

The *Higher Education Act*, 1997 identifies four major governance structures of a South African university (Mthembu 2009:11) which include the council, a Senate, institutional forum and the student representative council. It is these structures that may determine that



the academic goal of a university is achieved. The goal that universities have to achieve in order to promote the three noble areas which are teaching, research and community engagement are clearly articulated in many documents. But it is also important to note that there are numerous governance challenges faced by South African universities (Cakata 2005; Divala & Waghid 2008; Tsheola & Nembambula 2014) which can only be achieved through an effective governance system. If these governance systems are not well taken care of, then the three areas of university competency which should compel the universities to contribute to social and economic development (Van der Walt, Bolsmann, Johnson & Martin 2002; Pouris & Inglesi-Lotz 2014) possibly become threatened. Only quality leadership that can truly prevail (Bush 2007) in South African universities can achieve the noble missions by encouraging good governance relation with internal stakeholders.

As argued before in this article the university structure is composed of external and internal stakeholders in whom the external stakeholders such as the government, council and sponsors have little influence in disturbing the normal internal mission of a university. This article has argued that governing with the internal stakeholders such as students, staff and labour unions is likely to assist university management to achieve without difficulty the mandate set by the university councils if such relationship is well managed. Literature shows that the South African labour environment has not really changed to adopt a pragmatic approach in which employees are really partners of the governance systems in organisations (Tchapchet, Iwu & Allen-Ile 2014). The different motives of internal stakeholders in the university governance system are still highly visible. The university management remain *elitists* in managing affairs and decision-making, student leaders continues to play the opposition party role, the labour union continues to broker unreasonable salary wages and staff members continue to critique university management for poor wages and conditions of service. The issue of governing together becomes a problem if the same governance team carry different mandates. It requires a better understanding of individual internal stakeholder by the University management that would assist in creating a better understanding of university internal governance relation.

Mouton *et al.* (2013) have noted that South African universities had varying emphasis on their functions as either research universities or teaching intensive universities. That had culminated into other South African universities such as Pretoria, Cape Town, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch and North West University being the top six research universities in South Africa, with the remaining universities lacking in knowledge innovation and development. The three important functions of a South African University which include teaching, research and community engagement can be achieved if university management as a leading structure can allow internal stakeholders to exercise equal responsibility of the university's business. That would assist in resolving unnecessary conflict between the university management and other internal stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The article argued for a common ground for understanding of individual stakeholder engagement purposes in an organisation. It was argued that internal stakeholders such as university management, student leaders, staff and labour unions pursue different own

missions in South African universities. Those different missions often culminate in conflict between the university management and individual internal stakeholders. The conflict often compromises the academic mandate of the university which all internal stakeholders are expected to carry. It is argued that the university management have a tendency to regard the academic business of a university to be theirs while excluding the full participation of others in decision-making. Being a leading stakeholder the university management should share the mandate with other stakeholders so that they can own the university mandate of the Council. That would lessen the conflict and improve effective governance.

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