



Revitalising Higher Education for Africa's Future

Ebrima Sall* & Ibrahim Oanda**

Abstract

Over the last two decades, funding pressures have forced reforms in the legal framework of public universities in Africa. 'Acts of Parliament' and strong government direct control that dominated governance regimes of higher education institutions have given way to broad-based councils with wide representation in university governance organs. The strong emergence of private higher education institutions in the continent has led to the development of alternative forms of institutional management different from those that previously dominated in public institutions. But most of these reforms have resulted in new governance concerns revolving around financing and management, quality of teaching and research, and institutional autonomy. Prompted by the implications of these new concerns, guided by a strong belief that governance frameworks should respect institutional autonomy and institutional management, and that tenets of shared governance are critical to building quality higher education systems in Africa, CODESRIA launched a number of research networks to document governance reforms so far undertaken and to determine how they are reshaping the mission of higher education institutions on the continent. This article provides a synthesis of the findings emerging from the various research networks.

* Executive Secretary, CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal.

** Programme Officer, Research (Higher Education) CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal.
Email: ibrahim.oanda@codesria.sn

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les pressions pour le financement ont forcé les réformes dans le cadre juridique des universités publiques en Afrique. Les « Lois du Parlement » et la forte hégémonie directe qui dominaient les régimes de gouvernance des institutions d'enseignement supérieur ont donné place à des conseils élargis à large représentation dans les organes de gouvernance des universités. La forte émergence des institutions d'enseignement supérieur privées sur le continent a conduit au développement de formes alternatives de gestion institutionnelle différentes de celles qui dominaient auparavant dans les institutions publiques. Mais, la plupart de ces réformes ont eu pour résultat de nouvelles préoccupations en matière de gouvernance, tournant autour du financement et de la gestion, de la qualité de l'enseignement et de la recherche, et de l'autonomie institutionnelle. Incité par les implications de ces nouvelles préoccupations, guidées une forte conviction que les cadres de gouvernance devraient respecter l'autonomie institutionnelle et la gestion institutionnelle et que les principes de la gouvernance partagée sont essentiels à la construction de système d'enseignement supérieur de qualité en Afrique, le CODESRIA, lança de nombreux réseaux de recherche pour documenter les réformes de gouvernance jusqu'ici entreprise, pour déterminer la manière dont celles-ci remodelent la mission des institutions d'enseignement supérieur dans le continent. Cet article fournit une synthèse des conclusions qui ressortent des divers réseaux de recherche.

Introduction

This paper draws on and summaries research findings from the CODESRIA Higher Education Leadership Programme (HELP). HELP is a recent initiative included on the council's research activities as a special programme on higher education leadership and governance. With the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the programme was conceived to reflect on issues of governance and leadership in African universities especially during a period that the institutions are undergoing tremendous transformations in terms of their coverage, institutional and student diversity and curriculum offerings. The programme is in its final first phase. Under the programme, CODESRIA commissioned 14 different research groups, four books and a series of conferences and workshops. The research groups focused on various broad themes related to higher education governance. These are:

- Evolution of governance models and implications on academic mission of the Universities-broad oversight governance practices, including new funding models, and division of authority to nominate representatives to the governance bodies,

- Emergent practices in the working of governance bodies – University Councils, senates and faculty boards,
- Gender aspects of governance transformations,
- Processes of constituting leadership and implications to the day-to-day management of the institutions as academic institutions – how are VCs and other top management positions are filled and the implications of this on the management of the institutions,
- Role of faculty/academics and faculty unions, and how they are engaged in the leadership and academic processes of the institutions,
- Student governance (What frameworks exist to govern student academic and welfare conduct) and student involvement: participation in governance – how this is changing and in what direction and the implications on the evolution of the institutions as academic institutions,
- New leadership models and emergent practices in issues quality assurance.

The work from the various research groups document changes in governance practices taking place in the universities in their historical and contemporary contexts. These include indicators of the governance and management transformations that are taking place in the institutions, how the pressures for expansion and accommodation of entrepreneurial practices are impacting on the governance and management practices and implications on the academic culture of the institutions, processes of constituting various university governance organs such as councils, senates and student organisations, implications of increased privatisation on university autonomy over financial and academic matters, emerging forms of accountability (such as performance contracting for staff); and participation (of students, academics, business people, donors and the local community, for example) in the governance of the institutions. Central to the interrogation of these issues is to get a sense on the direction in which they are driving the institutions in terms of their academic missions.

The Context: Governance and How it Should Apply to Higher Education

Governance is a broad pillar, which encompasses rights-based issues and broad participation as well as effective delivery of crucial government services and development results. It includes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, support for democratisation processes and the involvement of citizens in choosing and overseeing those who govern them, respect for the rule of law and access to an independent justice system for all. It also

involves access to information, a government that governs transparently and is accountable to the relevant institutions and the electorate, and effective checks and balances both in terms of an effective legislature and decentralisation.

Globally, higher education institutions have been under pressure to change as their fast growth and contribution to economic success is seen as vital. The universities and other institutions are expected to create knowledge, to improve equity, and to respond to student needs – and to do so more efficiently (OECD 2003). They are increasingly competing for students, research funds and academic staff – both with the private sector and internationally. In this more complex environment, direct management by governments is no longer appropriate. The thrust of the debate regarding higher education governance in these contexts is to examine how the governance of higher education institutions can assure their independence and dynamism while promoting key economic and social objectives (OECD 2003). In these environments, higher education institutions need to develop a creative balance between academic mission and executive capacity; and between financial viability and traditional academic values.

The rising influence of the business enterprise model as an organisational ideal has in most countries constituted an increasing institutional contextual pressure for change over the last decades. Few doubt that the expectations that face universities and their performance are changing. A number of processes have been identified as drivers behind the changing ideals or values that institutional leaders are supposed to sustain (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2002). The rise of mass education during the 1980s and 1990s has made higher education and its costs more visible and contributed to a more intense focus on how higher education institutions are organised and managed. New ideas about university management and funding have come to the fore and drastically altered the ways in which higher education institutions are managed.

The idea that universities ought to be organised and managed as business enterprises and become ‘entrepreneurial’ universities (Clark 1998) has deeply influenced the debate about organisation and leadership in higher education. There are views that support new governance frameworks that include new alliances and forms of cooperation between economic enterprise, public authority and knowledge institutions. They argue that such an alliance is necessary and will have desirable consequences for higher education institutions and knowledge production (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997; Gibbons et al. 1994). Those against these views have argued, on the other hand, that stronger external influence over academic institutions, symbolised by the rise of ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) and the ‘ruin’ of the university as the cultural institution (Readings 1996), leads to the breakdown

of internal value systems that sustain academic freedom and independent, critical scholarship. Both positions tend to share the assumption that a radical change has taken place in systems of higher education governance and focus on how new ideals and policies based on those ideals have changed the operating conditions for universities. The implications of such changing expectations are, however, contested issues. Two different positions/models of universities governance have been articulated in the literature. These are:

- A stronger role for central authorities in the determination of university objectives and modes of working. This is true of universities which used to be under detailed central controls and those that used to enjoy large degrees of autonomy, such as the Anglophone universities (Kogan et al. 2006; Musselin 1999, 2004; Neave 1998).
- The creation of powerful managerial infrastructure which now parallel and, to some extent, replace the academic structures of deans, heads of departments and professors. In the latter case the implication is that government by professionals or academics which used to be based on collegial decision-making bodies have been integrated in the administrative line of the organisation and thus become part of top-down decision-making structures.

This reverses the basis of legitimacy and the movement of decision-making premises. Whereas decision making used to be based on collegiate bodies that, at each level of the organisation, were composed of representatives from the organisational level below, decisions are now often entrusted to leaders who are appointed by and supposed to implement the policies of leaders on the organisational level above their own such that departmental chairs are appointed by deans and deans by vice-chancellors. The creation of directorates concerned with the business development, marketing, quality assurance, international connections of the university have been part of this governance reforms.

In many countries the power of academically-dominated senates has been paralleled or replaced by Management Boards or university councils who incorporate representation from the world of business. These and their chairpersons in particular reinforce the corporate nature of the reformed university. This approach has, in many instances, reduced the influence of collegial approaches and the power of the faculty even in determining the academic direction of the institutions.

In Africa, university governance and leadership have been troubling issues that the institutions have had to confront over the years. During the first decade

of independence (1960-1970), university governance in most African countries was closely tied to the state mainly due to funding relationships. During this period, governance reform movements in the universities were about democratisation and the inclusion of staff and students in decision-making (University World News 2009). From the 1980s, however, there has been a decline of higher education in terms of funding from governments and student enrolment in most of Africa, and this includes erosion in management capacity, facilities and academic delivery capacities (Kinyanjui 1994; Mamdani 1993; Saint 1992). The fiscal crisis and the resultant decline in state funding were considered a major cause of the decline; and this decline was blamed on bad governance practices and called for the design of new ones. From the 1980s, the governance debate shifted toward issues of efficiency and accountability, accentuated by the introduction of New Public Management (NPM), which altered the structure and policy processes of public bodies in an effort to make them more efficient and effective. Henceforth, reforms in higher education in Africa focused on governance issues not as an end in itself, but to look for a strategy of financing alternatives to promote an expanding system of higher education and managing the universities more efficiently and effectively (Sanyal 1995). The discourse on higher education governance in Africa in most of the 1990s, entailed a much more direct ideological and political attack on the institutional and professional autonomy of universities which often resulted in a semblance of autonomy on the part of the institutions (autonomy to generate and spend with less government oversight); with little regard to the quality of the academic processes in the institutions.

Today, a variety of new types of higher education institutions exist. Student demographics, access and delivery modes have changed too. In the midst of these changes, traditional modes of higher education governance and leadership are slowly disappearing. Central to these changes is a constant questioning whether the new governance regimes are responding well to the academic mission of the institutions. This is especially so given the general perception of poor quality academic programmes in the institutions that are commonplace. Reading through the literature and findings emerging from the field, there is a feeling that in most African universities coming out or struggling to come out of the financial crisis of the 1980s, and 1990s, good governance and leadership has meant the capacity of the institutions to generate own revenue outside government provisions. The higher non-government revenues are used to run the institutions, the more that is seen as a benchmark for better governance practices. Such a notion leaves out the nature of management practices and processes within the institutions required to build and sustain robust higher education institutions for Africa's development. Such issues as shared governance, meaningful academic reforms,

strategic planning, consultation, transparency and accountability to stakeholders – students, lecturers, parents and the public – satisfaction, as well as the role of the university in development are increasingly receding from consideration. Not surprisingly, despite the much talked about transformations, tensions that dominated the institutions during the first two decades of independence between academics and the political establishment over broad issues of institutional autonomy and academic freedom are re-emerging. Only that this time, the tensions are between university management, academics and students over the sharing of dividends and spoils from the entrepreneurial cultures that the institutions have embraced (Oanda 2011).

Key Emerging Trends on Governance and Implications

Constitution of New Oversight Bodies and their Effectiveness

One of the most fundamental changes in governance has been the receding of direct government involvement in the management of universities. This has taken two forms. First the practice where presidents of countries were also chancellors has been largely done away with. New university Acts are now in place which spell out clear guidelines on how university governance and management bodies are constituted and the qualifications of office holders. The second development has been the establishment of various oversight bodies to provide oversight for accountability and quality assurance on behalf of governments. The various studies document changes that have, in theory, removed direct government control from the day-to-day management of the institutions. Over the last two decades, the studies reveal that most universities studied have moved from the political governance model, under which the universities were established as national institutions at independence. University Acts that created the institutions as national public institutions have been repealed and new charters awarded. Where this process has not been accomplished, there is still high degree of interference from the political establishment on how the institutions are managed on a day-to-day basis.

New higher education councils have been created to directly provide governance oversight for the institutions. But the new oversight bodies are largely unfunded and work as government statutory bodies. The studies have also indicated the emergence of an amalgam of various governance models (not one single model is dominating). For example;

- 1) The corporate managerial model: most of the institutions adopted this from the 1990s as a response to designing strategies to generate resources outside government. Strategic plans in the institutions chaired by strategic

planning committees replaced university budget committees most of which were based in education ministries; university curricular were reorganised and more vocational-oriented courses were introduced to offer what were considered 'market-oriented programmes'; new mission statements were drawn, often including the fact that the institutions were focusing on international programmes and quality assurance offices and quality audits and evaluations were included as management instruments in the institutions. The data from the various themes show that these new centres of governance and institutional management increasingly gained clout over traditional academic units as new centres of power in the institutions. The studies also document how this period saw the decline and suppression of academic and students associations as centres of university governance, despite their legal recognition in University Acts.

- 2) The College governance model: Governance reforms in some instances have entailed the dismantling of the universities into various independent colleges and directorates. It would seem from the studies that most of the flagship universities are moving towards the college model as a way of managing the expanded university system. The new governance and management changes in the universities have also transformed the manner the institutions are managed on a day-to-day basis in terms of authority and reporting structures.
- 3) The third model emerging is a hybrid model of the first two. Here, and as data from case studies point out, there is a balance between collegial and corporate models. Government still retains some regulatory power, as is happening through the national councils. Both government and the universities also allow a degree of private sector participation in governance. The new frameworks allow for the nomination of individuals to represent the private sector in university councils. The national councils also include membership from the private sector. At the institutional level, however, there seems to emerge strong centralised bureaucracies revolving around the leadership of vice-chancellors and new bodies such as management boards that tend to contradict the traditional role of university senates. This model seems to create a schism between grassroot academics (those largely performing teaching duties); and those academics that have joined the administrative ranks and who largely perform administrative functions under the direction of management (especially those that have been appointed as directors by the vice-chancellor to lead the reform process) and the vice-chancellor.

Generally, there has been more willingness from governments to create autonomous governance bodies. Where this has not happened, there are

feelings that academics themselves have subverted the reform process. Increased participation of the private sector in the governance of universities is more evident though this has not been uniform in all the countries. Focus on alumni, including the Diaspora alumni as important stakeholders that can influence the governance and academic revival of the institutions is emerging as a strong governance reform. New funding of governance models, especially government-funded loan schemes could be critical to broadening the funding base and expansion of enrolments.

Some negative outcomes of the reforms noted from most cases can be seen in the trend towards diminished collegiality and faculty and student participation in constituting governance bodies. The emergence of new executive bodies, such as management boards and executive deans, have removed decision-making powers from faculty boards and university senates in crucial academic matters. The new governance systems have justified this on the basis of adopting fast decision-making, business-like practices as opposed to the wide and long consultation processes that traditional faculty-based systems entailed. Another development is the retreat to appointive practices as opposed to electoral processes in constituting faculty deans and heads of departments. Some university statutes now provide that under the college system, deans and heads of departments are appointed, reversing an earlier practice where these offices were occupied through a process of elections. Schools under the college system have become optional. The only required units are the departments. The principal of the college is the chief executive of the college and, as such, he or she is responsible for academic, administrative and financial affairs of the college. While this practice makes decision-making processes faster, it limits direct faculty participation in university governance and accords fewer premiums on academic merit in the constitution of various university governance bodies.

The reforms have also concentrated in the introduction of corporate systems to expand student enrolments especially at the undergraduate level, while failing to introduce changes or reforms in the area of epistemic governance and other critical knowledge production processes. Expanding undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments have taken place in the context of collapsing staff development systems. Quality assurance standards have focused on benchmarking the efficiency with which a lot more students are brought into the institutions and processed through than on core learning outcomes. In most of the universities, appointment requirements to various academic grades fluctuate based on criteria other than academic. Support systems to strengthen teaching and research has also been compromised. An increasing trend in this regard is the focus of the institutions to produce more PhD graduates as a response to university ranking criteria with little regard for the quality of

such PhDs. This trend will obviously hurt more efforts to revitalise higher education in the continent. Issues of quality at all levels, including academic appointments, have been the greatest casualties from the reforms. Since performance contracting, growth in post-graduate enrolments and throughput rates in PhD programmes have been included in university rankings and favourable appraisal of university management – emerging evidence from field data reveal that institutions are getting flexible on these benchmarks in ways that undermine quality academic programmes and research.

The reforms have not entirely reduced the tensions that over time undermined the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education institutions. Rather new zones of conflict limited to within the institutions have emerged. The manner in which these tensions are addressed and resolved, or remain unresolved, are major hindrances to moving the academic agenda of the institutions forward. Tensions have emerged between the faculty and university management over the sharing of dividends from the reform process – either through cash pay-outs or appointment to lucrative management positions within the universities. New containment strategies from university management to control the activities of staff and student unions abound as are divisions between faculty that support the new management trends in the universities and those that advocate for more focus on the academic mission and processes of the institutions.

Student Governance

Some of the case studies have focused on examining the existing frameworks that govern student academic and welfare conduct and student involvement – particularly, how this is changing and in what direction and the implications to the evolution of the institutions, especially in the context of increased setting up of private universities and privatisation of public ones. Data comparing trends in public and private institutions tends towards the conclusion that, the more the privatisation, the less the engagement of students in governance issues. Statutes exist that legalise and regulate the activities of student governance bodies. But such bodies do not seem to have any overriding power in the decisions taken by university organs such as senate and management. Data points to the lack of genuine student representation in governing bodies, especially with the increased privatisation of public universities. The reason for this, as the studies indicate, is that the governance reforms were partly a response to an era when student activism was seen as part of the problems affecting higher education institutions. Hence for the reforms, especially those related to user charges to succeed, the old political model of university leadership that provided much space for student input into the governance process had to be dismantled. The

studies however note positive aspects associated with the reform process such as universities strengthening institutions in charge of student welfare such as the student deanery and other welfare authorities.

A key avenue for student participation in university governance is student self-governance structures such as student councils and/or associations. Data from case studies show that besides student governments/councils/associations/unions, a host of other organisations or structures for student self-governance have been allowed in most institutions. However both institutional meddling and external political influence in the affairs of the student organisations have distorted the focus of the organisations to non-academic engagements. Students are not questioning the quality of learning facilities or processes, and a majority of them do not feel represented. In one of the case institutions, 64 per cent of the students who responded to the questionnaire pointed out that they had never participated in the activities of student organisations because they did not seem to address their concerns. National politics and political parties have also returned to wield tremendous influence on student self-governance structures and processes. This is particularly so for students' government councils/associations/unions. A high proportion of respondents affirmed that all of the 11 possible areas of influence analysed by the study were greatly impacted on by national politics and political parties.

At the broad institutional level, diversity policies exist designed by the institutions to ensure that those elected to student governance councils represent the diversity of the student body in terms of age, gender, disability, ethnicity, nationality, study programme and year of study representation during elections. The studies show that, in principle, universities have developed diversity policies as part of governance reforms governing student representation in the governance process. However, the smaller proportion of respondents who agreed that election of student representatives to university governance structures caters for the diversity of the student body suggests that the observance of such a policy may be a bit of a challenge.

Impediments to effective student involvement in university governance also differ in public and private universities. Data suggests that in private universities, there is less zest for student involvement and student leadership does not have a direct linkage to management structure. Proxy representation is widespread and encouraged. Apathy among students also abound with poor attendance in meetings, indifference to governance process which makes it difficult for student leaders to gather issues from different students and to give feedback to the students, lack of adequate support systems and fear of victimisation of students leaders who become too vocal. In public universities,

impediments to effective student representation include large student numbers which makes it impossible to mobilise and represent everyone's needs, the diversity of students' views and needs which is too large to harmonise and represent effectively, compromised student leadership by university management and infiltration of leadership by national politics which often leads to the balkanisation of the student body by creating parallel camps.

Gender Aspects of Governance Transformations

Two studies examined how the changes in governance in the institutions are affecting the gender composition of members of the governing boards. In some cases, there is still continued domination of various governance boards by men – council, senate and academic boards. Interestingly, in all these governing bodies, women are virtually absent or lowly represented. It is from these bodies and committees that vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, principal officers and heads of establishments emerge. In some cases, national constitutions have made provisions for gender equity which is slowly transforming the gender composition of governance bodies. In both cases, trends towards embracing gender equity in the constitution of university governance bodies seems to be slow, sometimes resisted and the process determined not by the academic community but external forces to the university.

Summary: What Governance Reforms Provide Greater Promise to Revitalise HE institutions and their Academic Missions in Africa?

From the studies reported here, it is clear that governance reforms need to be more broad-based to involve faculty and staff in a manner that is more realistic. The best model of governance and institutional leadership is one that can deliver strong academic institutions that respond to local challenges. This has not been the case. While leadership has been innovative in seeking alternative funding strategies, intellectual accountability and output has been weak. Institutional level accountability from management is still weak. The councils for example may not have the capacity to provide oversight for academic processes, while the senate may be subdued by powers of management. Government residual powers in management still remain a threat to real governance autonomy, while faculty and students are more often overlooked on issues of policy and institutional governance even though they are important stakeholders. The private sector, though important, has not been given a real voice. Local philanthropic groups and individuals who often provide bursaries are not broadly engaged in university governance,

including curriculum design and delivery. Strengthening the oversight capacity of external oversight bodies to be able to resist unorthodox interference from the political establishment, especially in financial matters, accountability and appointment of institutional level leadership should be prioritised. Well-Managed staff development initiatives that do not lead to brain drain have the capacity to create internal academic governance oversight and provide a base for future institutional leadership. Well-functioning quality assurance systems at the institutional level, in a broad sense, can contribute to enhancing the academic standing of the institutions.

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