

**Higher Education in South Africa:
Governance, leadership and management challenges**

HESA Fellows Workshop

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Introduction

My brief is the 'governance, leadership, and management challenges in South Africa'.

I don't want to be presumptuous any claim any deep knowledge or insight into the challenges in these domains in different parts of the world.

What I do know is that whenever I am at a meeting, as I was at meeting in Maputo two weeks ago, at which vice-chancellor's or academics from universities in other countries in Africa are present, and I hear their litany of grievances and complaints - which have not changed much during the past decade - I give silent thanks that I will be boarding a SAA flight and returning home to a university in South Africa.

Whether it is a South African or African university that I am returning to, or just a university in South Africa and Africa, is another matter and for another day.

and the world, as opposed to theories, conceptions or practices of leadership, management and governance, and I propose to faithfully adhere to this brief.

Leadership

1. Leading universities, which are complex institutions, is intellectually, emotionally and physically demanding. There are myriad institutional, academic, governance, management, administrative, relational and financial challenges that must be confronted, and diverse needs, requirements and demands of various constituencies – students, academics, support staff - and different external constituencies - that must be addressed and mediated.

The needs of every constituency, department and individual cannot always be easily or immediately met. One tries to address needs in ways that are hopefully principled and yet flexible, without creating precedents that are dangerous, unsustainable and inequitable.

In much as there are legitimate expectations of our universities there are also sometimes misguided expectations and unreasonable demands placed on universities that have the danger of corroding the value and core purposes of universities.

It is not evident that the demands on and efforts of VC's, DVC's and other leaders in these challenging circumstances are always appreciated, especially by those at a distance from university leaders.

2. A university is very different from a business corporation. Whereas a business tends to be a hierarchy, a university is a holyarchy, meaning that the different component parts and specifically the academic units have, quite rightly and as befitting academic freedom and intra-institutional autonomy, substantial autonomy.

In these circumstances, despotic and dirigiste, even if enlightened and socially committed leadership, is unwise. There is no alternative to continuous engagement and persuasion around key issues related to the progressive transformation of universities.

3. Of course, there can be no compromise on certain values and principles and ethical and constitutional imperatives, such as social equity, inclusion and justice (not just social and cultural but also epistemological) in higher education. However, even here, there is scope for robust engagement on the appropriate strategies and pace of transformation, just as with scores of other issues there has to also be vigorous and considered discussion on the direction of change, as well as the strategies and time-frames for change.

There can be no other way if there is a commitment to democratic, transparent, and participatory policy- and decision-making and planning that also ensures a strong academic voice.

4. In the context of inadequate financial resources university leadership continuously confronts profound social and political dilemmas and has to make difficult and unenviable choices related to the size and shape of the university, the social composition of students, student and staff equity, quality, kinds and levels of qualifications and academic and research programmes, remuneration and accommodation issues and the like.

Universities are fragile institutions. Too much ill-considered and frenetic change without continuities can make a university dysfunctional. Equally, no change can make a university moribund.

The challenge is to map a deliberate, bold and resolute, yet sober path with continuities and discontinuities as appropriate to given and changing conditions.

5. Democratisation, creating socially representative bodies of academics and administrators and the transformation of the institutional culture are significant and especial challenges at historically white universities.

At these institutions institutional culture has been historically produced and reproduced by the current academics and administrators, who are predominantly or largely white.

To the extent that discourses of equality, democracy and transformation have been embraced – to what extent is a moot point - this is to be welcomed. Yet, we have to be vigilant that declarations about equity and transformation are not accompanied by only the most modest notions of transformation, and timid practices that ultimately undermine and inhibit the kinds of changes that our universities need.

Traditions, customs, rituals, images are important. But they can ossify in unfortunate ways that imprison our thinking, induce blind spots, and generate practices that are alienating, discomforting and exclusionary.

The values that must be the bedrock of our institutional culture must be clearly distinguished from the historical cultural traditions and practices that serve as impediments to a more open, vibrant, democratic and inclusive intellectual and institutional culture.

An overriding challenge is creating and institutionalizing a culture that respects, affirms and embraces difference and diversity, and sees these as strengths and powerful wellsprings for personal, intellectual and institutional development. As Andre du Toit has noted, 'the enemy' in the forms of colonial and racial discourses 'has been within the gates all the time', and endangers 'empowering intellectual discourse communities'. 'Ongoing transformation of the institutional culture' is a necessary condition of academic freedom.

6. All too often 'transformation' is seemingly reduced to simply changing demographics, numbers and proportions, and pursuing and achieving 'race', gender and disability equity goals.

As fundamentally important as social equity is, a narrow conception of transformation is inadequate for the agenda of transforming universities.

Transformation has to be fundamentally a revolution in *thinking*. It means openness to rethinking, and changing, how we *think* – about ourselves and about the 'other'; about what we deem 'natural', and 'normal'; about what are supposedly self-evident characteristics of academic quality and excellence; about what and whose knowledge counts; about learning-teaching, curriculum and pedagogy, and our research questions; about universities and their purposes and roles; and about our society and its challenges.

This revolution in thinking must provide the courage to act and do things in new and different ways; to recast old social relations and build new social relationships that help us to transcend our fractured past and the divides of our society and institutions; and to embrace changes that are necessary in our institutions as a consequence of new constitutional and ethical imperatives.

To the extent that we embrace a revolution in thinking, we will create the prospects and potential for our development as dynamic universities, scholars, administrators, citizens and people. Otherwise we will be ineffectual and, perhaps, even become socially irrelevant.

7. Similarly, it is necessary to make a distinction between transformation and *development*. Development and transformation are not always parallel vectors. We have to consciously and purposively link transformation and development, otherwise there is the danger that we may transform without developing, or without laying the basis for development.

Management

8. Management is constantly challenged to find creative, effective and efficient ways of ensuring that there is an environment and culture that is conducive to learning and teaching, research and community engagement, of supporting imperatives and new programmes, of balancing competing goals and needs, of recruiting and retaining talented staff, of mobilising new sources of funding without compromising institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and of ensuring financial sustainability.

The professionals that are required for the critical and diverse management responsibilities are not always readily available.

9. The artist Anton Brink writes that ‘our personal, social, political and cultural dogmas have made a kind of comfort zone for the mind, free of the responsibilities of choice’, which, he says, means that we conspire to make a particular kind of ‘world, yet we regard ourselves as being “not involved”’

Management has to be vigilant about conduct, practices, self-fulfilling prophecies, self-comforting perceptions, and dangerous platitudes that induce inertia, complacency and insularity, and stifle creativity, improvements, transformation, and development.

As befitting a university, management must be open to interrogating what we consider to be self-evident, and the popular and trite notion that ‘if it ain’t broken, don’t fix it’. We must subject to critical scrutiny what we consider to be ‘tried and tested’ ways. Are the ‘tried and tested’ ways appropriate to our rapidly changing context? Are they congruent with our professed imperatives and goals? From the perspective of whose values and which social groups ain’t it broken?

10. Management on occasions is confronted with ‘recommendations’ from external bodies, that border on prescriptions and which display inadequate understanding of (and the diversity of) institutional contexts and are characterised by a blunt “one size fits all” approach.

While well-intentioned, these recommendations are irksome. Some recommendations of the ‘Soudien’ report are of this nature (Recommendation 7.1: Retention of Black and female students should be linked to creation of posts; Recommendation 8.4: Confidence-building training programmes for women; Recommendation 11.4: Establish an independent Office of the Ombudsman to receive and deal with all complaints relating to discrimination).

It is preferable that problems and challenges are raised and that the precise strategies and instruments to address these are left to the management and more generally, to the university.

11. Management is greatly dependent on a layer of competent and efficient administrators in diverse areas of the university. Administrators, in turn, require a respectful and developmental management with the necessary knowledge, expertise and experience of universities and the capability to design and implement the necessary systems and processes and procedures for effective and efficient administration. The absence of either or both layers is a recipe for myriad problems.
12. Management seeks a University Council that understands the purposes of a university, is committed to the sustainable development of the university, is able to provide wise and considered guidance and advice, ensures that the necessary information is provided, policies are approved and in place and decisions are made timeously on key issues, is critically empathetic, shields management from unfair attacks, links management to external funding sources, is prepared to make tough decisions and effectively monitors and holds management accountable for the performance of the university.

In the absence of a University Council with an active membership that understands its role and diligently attends meetings and plays these diverse roles, either the management and/or internal constituencies come to dominate without any effective external oversight and accountability or there is tardiness or paralysis of decision-making with debilitating consequences for the university.

13. In practice many responsibilities are shared responsibilities of the University Council and management and require a partnership between the two. The challenge is to clearly and explicitly demarcate and distinguish between the powers, roles, functions and responsibilities of the management and the Council respectively, and to ensure that the Council meaningfully contributes to the functioning of the university. Both intrusion on the part of a Council into the day to day responsibilities of management and a lack of effective control over management are to be avoided.

Governance

14. *Governance* is purposeful efforts to guide, steer and regulate a university, including the values and principles, structures, mechanisms and processes by which the university makes policies and takes decisions in pursuit of *its* social purposes and goals *and* that of the university system as a whole.
15. Multiple mechanisms of *participation* (ranging from provision of information, seeking advice, engaging in consultation and involvement in policy- and decision-making) and structures of participation (committees, Faculty Boards, Senate, Institutional Forum and the Council) are necessary for the effective agenda building, discussion and policy- and decision-making that is necessary for democratic transformation.
16. A university can be characterised by relatively effective and efficient management and administration and simultaneously by poor governance. Instances are where policy- and decision-making are concentrated within the university management rather than principally Faculty Boards, Senate and the Council, and external bodies determine decisions on important issues.

17. It is not always clear whether members of the University Council have a clear conception of their roles and responsibilities.

It is vital that members of the University Council understand that they are *trustees* who govern in the interests of the university as a whole, while also taking into account the goals of the overall university system. That is to say, they do not serve as delegates or representatives of specific constituencies.

It is valid for Council members to articulate the concerns of their constituencies during the deliberations of the Council but, ultimately, decisions have to be taken in the general interests of the whole university.

The lack of clarity on this issue on the part of Council members can turn a Council into a negotiating forum, make it dysfunctional and paralyse its work.

18. Since governance has to do with who decides, how decisions are made and where decisions are made, it is related to issues of *power* and *legitimacy*. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind that which people and structures make decisions and how decisions are made is as important as the actual decisions themselves.
19. Governance also has to do with the optimal functioning of structures and is necessarily tied to issues to do with *efficiency* and *effectiveness*. Efficiency in relation to the process of governance (without undermining debate) and effectiveness with respect to the achievement of goals must also be key considerations in governance.