

Governance Reforms in African Higher Education: The Missing Link

By

N.V. Varghese
Head of Governance and Management in Education
IIEP-UNESCO

Introduction: From state-controlled to market-mediated governance

The state enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the development of higher education during the post-independence period in Africa. Public funding and government control of universities characterised the structure of governance during this period. It was common in many countries for the Head of State to become chancellor of a major national university.

There was limited access to higher education under this framework, since expansion of the system was constrained by the availability of public funding; however, increasing social demand created continued pressure to expand the system. In the absence of adequate public funding, the pressure to expand resulted in proliferation and diversification of providers and multiplication of modes of delivery. In the process, the State became one of many actors rather than the sole actor in providing and managing higher education in the region.

It may be true that the reduced role of the State in provision and funding encouraged a shift from “State-control” to a “State-supervision” governance model and encouraged market logic in higher education decision making. Universities became autonomous, government interventions and administrative controls were replaced by incentive systems and accountability measures to steer institutions to achieve their missions. Across countries, markets became a dear and mediating force while governance structures and decision-making processes encouraged market friendly reforms.

Emergence of a new governance structure

The permeation of market forces in higher education decision making in Africa is evident in the phenomena of wide-spread privatisation of public universities and proliferation of private institutions. Governments passed new laws, granted autonomy to public institutions, created buffer bodies, introduced performance monitoring and established external quality assurance mechanisms to help govern higher education institutions effectively in the changed context.

New higher education legislation defining the roles of the government, buffer organisations and the authority of the governing bodies was passed in many countries. Consequently, Heads of State were replaced by eminent scholars as chancellors of universities. Governing Boards also appointed Chief Executive Officers and Vice-Chancellors of universities.

Public authorities created buffer bodies to support the governance of higher education systems—to implement policy, monitor performance and ensure accountability. National Councils of Higher Education or their equivalents were established in most Anglophone

African countries. Countries such as Nigeria went a step further to establish separate buffer organisations for universities and non-university tertiary institutions.

Francophone African countries more often have separate departments or ministries of higher education than buffer bodies, although some countries such as Rwanda have a buffer organisation. It seems that more and more Francophone countries are in the process of establishing buffer bodies.

It can be argued that higher education institutional autonomy was seen as a convenient mediating position between governments and markets. Institutional autonomy helped maintain the image of a public institution while enforcing market principles in its operation. Autonomy permitted institutions to set priorities, evolve strategies, develop study programmes and courses, select institutional leaders, recruit staff, diversify funding sources and decide on internal resource allocation criteria. Autonomy was accompanied by new institutional structures of governance such as Governing Boards.

Governing boards and new accountability measures

The process of constituting governing Boards/Councils varied across countries. Governing Boards in Francophone countries were very often composed mostly of internal members while those of the Anglophone countries have larger numbers of external members, including, at times, international experts. In countries such as Kenya, there are separate management Boards at the institutional and school levels headed by deans appointed by university Councils. Thus, autonomy transformed the nature of institutional governance, including the processes of appointment of Vice Chancellors, the constitution of governing Boards, and selection of chairpersons and Board members.

Did these new structures reduce governmental control of university governance? There is no doubt that the new governance structures reduced direct government control and intervention on day-to-day institutional management; however, governmental influence in decision making continued indirectly through the development of frameworks for the new governing bodies and more directly through the government's role in the appointment of the chairperson and Board members. For example, in most countries the institutional head, the chairperson and Board members are appointed by or in consultation with the government.

Institutional autonomy and the new governance structures have been framed within national accountability systems. Institutions are increasingly accountable for their performance in meeting societal expectations, realising targets, maintaining excellence and using public funds responsibly. Strategic plans, performance indicators, monitoring and evaluation reports, institutional audits and quality assurance are all measures indicating increased accountability. One of the most commonly found structures in most countries is the presence of external quality assurance bodies, which are entrusted with ensuring the quality of higher education in private and public institutions.

Effects of changes in governance

Did these reforms substantially contribute to changing the higher education system? Although there is limited empirical evidence on the effects of governance reforms, some conclusions can be drawn.

In the early 1990s, universities in Africa were in a state of despair. Governance reforms allowed universities to design their own survival strategies. Privatisation measures – cost recovery and income-generating activities – helped many universities survive. For example, such reforms initially helped Makerere University move “back from the brink” and later helped increase enrolment; improve staff salaries, working and living conditions; arrest staff depletion; improve the market relevance of courses and reduce reliance on State funds.

Studies conducted by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) show that higher education governance reforms in Africa helped institutions reduce their reliance on the government and focus on serving market and local requirements. The reforms also helped diversify the resource base and decentralise internal resource allocation. Institutions became more market-oriented in their approaches and results-driven in their operations. Performance monitoring increased research outputs in South Africa and improved operational efficiency in Ghana while performance contracts improved accountability in Kenya.

The reforms also seem to have resulted in some undesirable effects, such as widening inequalities in access to higher education and subsequently to the employment market. The market processes favour those who have the capacity to pay and seems less friendly to equity concerns. Since institutional pressures to expand stem more from financial rather than educational considerations, the objective to maintain, if not improve, quality is compromised. In many instances, this market orientation seems to have distorted the academic heartland of universities.

Another trend is that development partners have supported the reforms in many institutions. It seems that the very same reforms that helped reduce reliance on national governments have increased reliance on external agencies. The implications of the changing relationships between government, institutions and external agencies need closer examination.

Conclusion: Future challenges

There is no doubt that institutional governance reforms introduced in the 1990s helped higher education institutions survive, systems expanded and the region experienced the highest global growth rates in higher education in the 2000s.

The challenges faced by African higher education systems today stem from compulsions to improve quality as measured against agreed-upon benchmarks for excellence and global standards in the context of “massification”, harmonisation, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and competition from private and cross-border institutions. Cross-border mobility of institutions, teachers, students and study programmes within and outside the region necessitates focus on harmonisation, investment in quality and the establishment of global standards.

The governance challenge within institutions relates to issues of power and responsibility as dealt with by Boards and other stakeholders. There are instances where Board members represent a distinct category of stakeholders and take a partisan view and undermine shared governance from the point of view of the public good. At times, academic considerations are accorded low priority compared to financial compulsions.

Further, it has been found that even under similar legal provisions and political systems, the effectiveness of governance strategies varies depending primarily upon the quality of leadership. Changes in governance structures are not necessarily accompanied by measures to reinforce leadership capacities to make governance more effective.

Leadership at the institutional level is challenged to find an appropriate balance between expansion and quality improvement, between academic priorities and financial considerations, between efficiency and equity concerns, between local relevance, global standards and rankings, among others. By all accounts, the quality of leadership has been emerging as the missing link in ensuring effective governance in higher education in Africa.

The review of the decade-long Senior University Management (SUMA) programme of the African Association of Universities in 2002 and the initiation of two new programmes—leadership management (LEDEV) and management development (MADEV)—reflect the continued interest in strengthening leadership and management of higher education institutions in the region. Furthermore, the establishment of a Pan-African Institute of University Governance (IPAGU) in Cameroon, an African Leadership Centre in Kenya and the introduction of a Higher Education Leadership Programme as part of CODESRIA's special programmes agenda are good examples of the most recent initiatives to refocus attention on the crucial but neglected aspect of reinforcing leadership capacities to ensure effective governance of higher education in Africa.