

Towards Quality Governance and management of West African Universities: The Way Forward

Patricia Agnes Ovigueraye Etejere
Department of Educational
Management,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin.
pat_6etejere@yahoo.com
+2348033906833

Olumayowa Kabir Aliyu
Department of Educational
Management,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin.
bigmayoradam@gmail.com
+2348091262766

Aminat Ozohu Aburime
Department of Arts Education,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin.
amburime@yahoo.co.uk
+2348126001820

Oyeyemi Jumoke Jekayinfa
Department of Arts Education,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin.
yemijek@yahoo.com
+2348149332414

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Abstract

Internal governance in West African universities is faced with considerable government participation in the performance of their traditional functions. External governing relationship is a function of government policies of the institutions and their commitments to stakeholders. The pressure to 'deliver the goods' in good quality as well as the desire to meet international standards in the twin era of globalisation and information and communication technology have put a lot of strain on governance and management of West African universities. This paper therefore sets out to re-visit governance and management roles in the university system as they relate to West African universities. The paper discusses the concepts of management and governance and it highlights some empirical information relating to governance and management in selected universities in developed countries. The status of ranking of some West African universities is depicted in the write-up. Suggestions on the way forward include emphasis on current practices in management orientation, autonomy, accountability and participation in university decision-making. The paper concludes that West African universities should articulate clearly their mission. Recommendations are then put forward for better governance and management of the university system.

Introduction

Despite the hopes raised by decolonisation and the ambitious post-independence education programmes by West African countries, majority of the West African universities continue to face serious challenges in governance and management roles in the universities. Notwithstanding the increased recognition university

education plays in economic, political and social development of these West African countries, governance and management roles in the universities do not carry as much priority as they should in ensuring this development.

West African universities have often been characterized by the same management ills that have plagued national administration and other sectors of the society. These ills include the inability to contribute directly to policy making and the development of a national vision, the inability to enhance quality output whether in the form of research, knowledge generation or graduates, as well as corruption, patronage systems and power struggles.

One of the main aims of governance in universities is to avoid mismanagement in the institution through the distribution of power and authority. Achieving academic and managerial self-governance is the utmost goal of most university institutions. Therefore to ensure quality university governance and management of West African universities, there is the need to review the inner university managing hierarchies and the internal goal setting. There is also the need to review and regulate the decision-making powers of key actors in these institutions.

The concepts of governance and management in universities

The concept of governance in higher institutions is interpreted in different ways by different scholars. However, the underlying implication emphasizes a structure which encompasses the process for making decisions at the institutional or system level. Gallagher in Middlehurst and Teixeira (2012) defines governance as:

the structure of relationships that bring about organizational coherence, authorize policies, plans and decisions, and account for their probity, responsiveness and cost-effectiveness ... Management is achieving intended outcomes through the allocation of responsibilities and resources, and monitoring their efficiency and effectiveness ... (p. 529).

In higher education, governance refers to the way in which institutions are organized and operated within the system and how they are related to relevant external bodies. This relationship is seen as one that aims to enhance the attainment of the objectives of higher education in such institutions.

While drawing a distinction between university governance and management, Onah and Onah (2004) referred to how these concepts are conceived in Nigeria. According to these two scholars, university 'governance' in Nigeria is ostensibly in the hands of the governing councils whose members are appointed by the proprietor or the government in power to steer the affairs of the relevant institution. On the other hand, they see university management as being exercised by the Vice-Chancellor and a range of officers with a variety of job descriptions. It is the governing council of each university who either appoints or recommends these officers. The university personnel in general and the students in particular are usually the people that are managed and led in such a way that institutional goals are achieved.

Empirical studies on governance and management of universities

Salmi (2009) links high-ranking universities to three connected factors: concentration of talent, abundant funding and appropriate governance. Other crucial governance features which are needed include the presence of inspiring and persistent leaders, a strong strategic vision of institutional direction, a philosophy of success and excellence and a culture of constant reflection, organizational learning and change. Countries are now recognizing the importance of quality institutional governance arrangements.

In most countries like the United Kingdom, United States of America, Denmark, Austria, Ireland, Scotland and so on the governing board is seen as the highest authority in the university. This body sets the strategic framework in which the chief executive officer can operate while maintaining a supervisory function to ensure that this framework is respected. The Committee of University Chairs (CUC, 2004). Apart from the strategic outline, the committee of university chairs stated that other tasks which are expected of the governing board are: risk management, financial accountability and control.

Over-burdening the governing board can be a crucial issue, especially if the board meets infrequently. Hence, a committee culture is evident in several of the reviewed governance arrangements. While audit committee is normally obligatory by law, the UK, Scottish, Israeli, Quebec and Dutch guidelines recommend remunerations and nominations committees in some form. The Israeli and the Quebec guidelines proposed a wide variety of committees. The Danish arrangements stated that committees should be formed only if a benefit will result from the step (Johansen, 2003). The Quebec guidelines also stated that many committees may dilute the roles and responsibilities of the board (IGOPP, 2007, p.12).

As university systems around the world have become larger and more complex, governments have found it more effective to disengage from direct management control of individual institutions and instead, to steer them at arm's length by increasing their autonomy while putting in place mechanisms of accountability to ensure that enhanced freedoms are not misused. In spite of these however, governments' inability to administer dozens of institutions, thousands of academic staff, and tens of thousands of students may have led to the poor ranking of West African universities in the recent ranking of African universities.

The place of West African universities in the league of universities in Africa

Below is a list of top 50 universities from the 2017 League Table of the top 200 universities in Africa.

Table1: University Ranking in Africa (Top 50)

S/ N	Name of university	Country
1	University of Cape Town	South Africa
2	University of South Africa	South Africa
3	University of Pretoria	South Africa

4	University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa
5	Universiteit Stellenbosch	South Africa
6	University of KwaZulu Natal	South Africa
7	University of Johannesburg	South Africa
8	University of Nairobi	Kenya
9	The American University of Cairo	Egypt
10	University of Western Cape	South Africa
11	Rhodes University	South Africa
12	Cairo University	Egypt
13	North-West University	South Africa
14	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	South Africa
15	Universiteit van die Vrystaat	South Africa
16	Universidade Eduardo Mondlane	Mozambique
17	Makerere University	Uganda
18	University of Ibadan	Nigeria
19	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	South Africa
20	Mansoura University	Egypt
21	University of Ghana	Ghana
22	Kenyatta University	Kenya
23	Universite de la Reunion	La Reunion
24	Universite Cheikh Anta Diop	Senegal
25	Egerton University	Kenya
26	Moi University	Kenya
27	Durban University of Technology	South Africa
28	University of Dar se Salam	Tanzania
29	University of Lagos	Nigeria
30	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology	Ghana
31	The German University of Cairo	Egypt
32	Ain shams University	Egypt
33	Tshwane University of Technology	South Africa
34	University of Botswana	Botswana
35	Obafemi Awolowo University	Nigeria
36	University of Khartoum	Sudan
37	Universite Mohammed V	Morocco
38	Strathmore University	Kenya
39	Addis Ababa University	Ethiopia
40	Universite Abou Bekr BelKaid Tlemcen	Algeria
41	Al Akhawayn University	Morocco
42	Namibia University of Science and Technology	Namibia
43	Universite des Freres Mentouri de Constantine 1	Algeria
44	Zagazig University	Egypt
45	Universite des Science et de la Technologie Houari Boumediene	Algeria
46	Ahmadu Bello University	Nigeria
47	Université kasdi Merbah de Ouargla	Algeria
48	University of Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe
49	University of Fort Hare	South Africa

50	Assuit University	Egypt
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Source: http://www.4icu.org/top_universities_africa/

In Table 1, only seven universities in three West African countries are ranked among the 50 top universities in Africa. The analysis goes thus:

Nigeria is ranked 18, 29 and 46

Ghana is ranked 21 and 30

Senegal is ranked 24.

The above university ranking is based upon a precise and step-by-step set of rules that includes five (5) unbiased and independent web metrics. These web metrics (web measurements) are called uniRank University Ranking. They are:

1. Moz DomainAuthority; this predicts how well a website will rank on search engine results pages (SERP). It is used when comparing one site to another or tracking the ranking strength of a website over time.
2. Alexa Global Rank; this is a toolbar that collects data on browsing behaviour and transmitting them to Alexa website where they are stored and analysed.
3. SimilarWeb Global Rank; this is a scoring method that determines a website`s position relative to other websites. It is calculated by the number of unique visitors together with the number of page views and it is based on desktop and mobile web traffic.
4. Majestic Referring Domain; this is where your backlinks are coming from. The backlinks are the links on the websites that links back to your site.
5. Majestic Trust Flow; this provides web categorisation. It consists of a number predicting how trustworthy a page is based on and how trustworthy sites tend to link to trustworthy neighbours.

These are various terms used to describe the science of recording and interpreting web statistics. They involve the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of web data for the purpose of understanding and optimizing web usage.

The aim of the uniRank University Ranking is to provide an approximate popularity ranking of world universities and colleges based upon the popularity of their websites in terms of traffic, trust and quality link popularity. This is especially intended to help international students and academic staff to understand how popular a specific university or college is in a foreign country. It does not, by any means, claim to rank higher education organisations or their programs, by the quality of education or level of academic services provided.

The question now is: why are West African universities not ranked among the first top 10 universities in Africa? Does this have anything to do with governance and management in these universities? What should West African universities do to be ranked among the first top 3 universities in Africa?

Way forward for universities in West African countries

Context, mission and goals

A key element in defining university governance is the overall framework of the system and the interaction between institution and state. For public universities where the main source of funding comes from the state, a national law often centrally defines the legal framework. In the public system, the law defines a university's legal status and can go as far as determining its institutional goals. One critical challenge that confronts countries when developing a higher education system is the extent to which the system should be oriented towards meeting high level research goals as opposed to providing teaching and access to a wide majority of people. For example, the California Master Plan of 1960 constitutes an effective way of organizing a differentiated public education system to cater both to research excellence and to provide access to a large segment of the population (Altbach, 2011).

The California Master Plan was developed by Clark Kerr and it established a successful three-tiered public higher education system that has been used in the U.S.A and also around the world. It makes a clear distinction between:

1. research universities that cater to elite researchers, offer PhD programmes, and have a clear research mission.
2. traditional universities that offer Bachelors and Masters degrees where the main mission is teaching and there are no PhD programmes.
3. community colleges, which focus mainly on two and four-year programmes and are not involved in research.

The definition of each university's mission is fundamental to the governance structure and correspondingly, this system allows the state to differentiate funding and to align resources with the mission and goals of the different types of institutions. The clarity of goals of the university system is therefore the first element in assessing university governance. A mission represents a shared understanding of the core purpose of the institution. While it is informed by an institution's history, it must continually be re-interpreted to meet the contingencies of the times.

Altbach and Salmi (2011) indicated that important factors for defining sound governance include clarity in the mission, definition and the alignment between mission and goals. Therefore, the context, mission and goals dimension takes into account three sets of indicators:

1. the definition of the university mission, the process followed, and the stakeholders involved.
2. the definition of the goals, their implementation, and the monitoring mechanisms to evaluate them; and
3. the legal framework and national context in which the universities operate.

Management orientation

Management without vision cannot adapt; leadership without effective management remains merely visionary (Johnstone, 2010). Strong leadership and strategic planning are key elements of a well-performed university. Management refers to day-to-day but no less critical decisions of operating the institutions: admission, registration, certificate of degrees for students, appointments, remuneration and promotion of the academic and other staff, construction and maintenance of facilities, scheduling classes and assigning of staff to classes and laboratory spaces and so on.

The management orientation dimension revolves around the head of the university and the available governing body, their composition, the process for selecting or appointing its members, their roles and responsibilities, their reporting lines, their accountability measures, and the duration of assignment. This dimension also includes the clarity of the body's mandate; the alignment of their mandate with the university's mission, goals, and legal framework; the accountability measures for governing bodies; and mechanisms for measuring governing body performance. For example, strategic planning is a tool used by well performing universities and as reported by Altbach and Salmi (2011), its use is a significant factor for success.

Autonomy

There is a strong international trend to increase the autonomy of public universities by making them independent and self-governing. This emerged from the need to make universities more responsive to social and economic environments and more able to adapt to changing technologies and innovation. Academic autonomy and academic freedom are critical elements of well-performing universities. To be successful, Rosvosky (2001) observed that academic staff must be involved in the decision-making of the university. Research universities especially, need the full involvement of academic staff in decision-making, and typically have a greater degree of professional power and a stronger guarantee of academic autonomy than other academic institutions. (Altbach, 2011).

University autonomy is important and needs to be accompanied by competition to deliver optimum outcomes. Aghion, Dewatripont, Hoxby, Mas-Colell and Sapir (2010) submitted that the factors correlated with a well ranked institution are:

1. independent budget;
2. freedom in student admissions;
3. payment incentives for faculty-based performance;
4. independent hiring of staff;
5. autonomy for definition of their curriculum; and
6. considerable amounts of funds obtained through competitive grants.

Financial autonomy was defined by indicators such as the ability of universities to: set tuition fees, accumulate reserves, and keep surplus on state funding, borrow money, invest money in financial or physical assets; own and sell the land and buildings they occupy; deliver contractual services; and attract funds on a competitive basis while academic autonomy takes into account the responsibility for curriculum design; the extent to which universities are autonomous to introduce or

cancel degree programmes and to determine academic structure; the overall number of students; admissions criteria; admissions per discipline, evaluation of programmes, evaluation of learning outcomes; and teaching methodologies.

Human resource autonomy is related to the recruitment procedures for the appointment of senior academic staff, the status of employees, the procedure for determining salary levels, salary incentives and workloads, human resources policies, care development policies, and performance management.

Higher education institutions must be given autonomy to manage their internal affairs, but with this autonomy must come clear and transparent accountability to the government, parliament, students and to other societies (Oredein, 2007).

Accountability

The accountability dimension indicators looked at academic accountability to civil society or social responsibility, and financial accountability. The indicators addressed are: clarity in the definition of accountability lines at all levels (academic staff, managerial staff, administrative staff and governing bodies); the process for evaluating the completion of institutional goals, student achievements, graduate insertion in the labour market: institutional evaluations (internal and external) and accreditation; methods used for evaluating the performance of students, teaching staff, administrative staff and managerial staff; the process for auditing university accounts; and the process of risk management and dealing with misconduct.

Participation

In the participation dimension, the extent to which different stakeholders are taken into account in the decision-making process was proposed for analysis. A wide range of stakeholders have interest in university matter, depending on the type of institution as well as on the overall framework of the system, which can be accessed through an established and simplified web structure. Common stakeholders included in decision-making are students, academic staff, government, industries representatives, donors, community associations, unions and alumni.

The ability of academic staff to participate in decisions concerning the university is one critical factor not only for improving democratic practices but also for determining academic excellence. Altbach (2011) reported that one of the primary factors of success of the university is mainly in the hands of the professors; key decisions concerning academic policy and direction, even if initiated by administrators, receive input from the academics.

Conclusion

It would appear that West African universities have particularly suffered from the unsettled nature of public policies. The universities may not have benefitted from the grants expected but they have had to increase their capital. Some questions and issues have been raised, discussion around which would seem desirable.

West African universities are in transition and in a complex and changing environment. There is therefore a need for each of them to articulate clearly where they are heading for and why, and relate their objectives to appropriate governance

and management structures, bearing in mind what is happening elsewhere in the world in general and Africa in particular.

For these universities to achieve success and ranked among elite universities in the world and Africa, structures, roles, capabilities, leadership, systems and culture must all be pulled together and aligned with other strategies, because one without the other will create misalignment and success will not be realized.

Recommendations

In the light of the above exposition, the following were proffered:

1. The Governing Councils of these West African universities should take direct responsibility for the development of the institutional mission and set the strategic directions of the universities. The mission should be reviewed periodically and revised in response to change in the community.
2. A new mission statement with specific objectives should be developed so that the performance of the universities could be assessed from time to time. Each West African country should look at their economic development in the past decade and develop a mission statement that will be geared towards sustaining and enhancing the country's economic development.
3. The universities should explore means to involve academic members and other lay council members more in the development and activities of the university and to provide opportunities for them to promote the work of the university within the community.
4. West African universities should establish special committees that should be tasked with working with the universities' governing councils to review the mission and strategic directions of the university and to determine major policies in relation to the allocation and deployment of resources.
5. Appropriate training and development programmes should be organized for academic managers in the university system. This would enable them acquire the desirable management skills for their respective roles.
6. Finally, the universities should also establish an audit committee with membership consisting of lay council members reporting directly to the council. It should be tasked with monitoring the performance of management in providing value for money and in carrying out executive decisions that are in keeping with the mission and strategic directions set by the universities governing council.

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