Editorial

Reimagined University Bureaucracy and Mid-level Academic Leadership in Africa

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In absolute numbers, university growth in Africa has been modest relative to elementary and secondary education. Yet, in the last two decades, institutional growth has been unprecedented, ushering many graduates into middle-class status while enhancing the academic workforce and research capacity on the continent. From around three dozen national universities at independence in the 60s, the number of universities in 2017 stood at approximately 740 (Dahir 2017). They represent a broad mix of types, ownership and missions, cementing further the differentiated demand for higher education. Moreover, the surge in enrolment has been impressive. In the period 1970 to 1975, university enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa shot up by 90 per cent (Mugaju 1991). In numerical terms, the rise from 3.53 million students in 1999 to 9.54 million in 2012 represents a remarkable 170 per cent total enrolment growth on the continent (ICEF Monitor 2015). The contrasting student mix is equally impressive: full-time versus part-time; government-sponsored versus privately sponsored; and young high-school graduates versus mature adults.

These impressive developments notwithstanding, universities are still hamstrung by a governance crisis. Growth has occurred in concurrence with an increase in the disruption of learning owing to faculty and student strikes and campus closures. Hierarchical decision-making epitomised by increased administrative power at the pinnacle, coupled with the rapid incursion of corporate and business models in university management, has further exacerbated this crisis. The assault on faculty and student voices in university affairs has never been so apparent than in the current dispensation of university growth.

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The crisis occurs as universities seek to redefine their governance structures in the context of historical traditions that have determined the character of universities. The traditional governance model is constructed around faculty dominance in decision-making, both in academic and administrative affairs. In many universities in Africa, particularly state institutions, this collegial governance model is actualised either through elections or politicised appointments. These modalities for appointments to leadership roles do not guarantee the best organisational leaders who command the respect of their colleagues and can steer the institutions or their subordinate units to realise their missions. Furthermore, few universities provide induction or training in basic leadership strategies and management skills to enhance the capacity of the leaders in the discharge of their roles.

Yet universities are also a bureaucracy, the administrative set-up that carries out functions related to policies and programmes. The word 'bureaucracy' conjures up the image of a rigid, hierarchical and repetitive government entity that is corrupt and inefficient but with an overbearing reach. Others see it as a specialised and supportive service that assists in the delivery of desired outcomes. As universities in Africa have grown in scope, and overall reach, so have the administrative complexities increased and become more arduous. Accountability requirements by governments, accreditation agencies, donors and other stakeholders have meant that universities must be deliberate in the management of both internal and external affairs lest their worth be questioned.

University academics cannot ignore bureaucracy despite their allegiance to the collegial model of governance. Doing so, they might suffer the fate that has befallen several USA universities where a specialised class of managers has taken over university business, amassed inordinate decision-making power, and rendered academics impotent in influencing important decisions about classrooms, libraries and labs. At those universities, decisions on teaching and learning are rationalised according to neoliberalist short-sighted matrices, including cost-cutting, enrolment projections and job prospects. To reinvigorate and make the university in Africa sustainable, we need to envision it as consisting of what Meranze christens a 'new community of scholars' (Meranze 2020: 30). Sustainable universities in Africa, according to Paul Zeleza, will be:

> better resourced, improve institutional access, equity and accountability, become more innovative in their curricula, teaching and learning, produce employable graduates, raise research productivity and conduct research that addresses the continent's pressing challenges, and establish more robust engagements with the public and private sectors, civil society and international partners. (Ligame 2019)

The critical areas of university bureaucracy that academics need to be alive to include, inter alia: strategic planning, human resource management, student services, information technology, multi-campus management, commercialisation, curricular innovation and change management. Through the Higher Education Policy Engagement Initiative (HEPI), the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) has initiated a governance and leadership induction programme for mid-level administrators, including chairs, directors and deans. These middle-level administrators are the buffer between the top leadership and the academic faculty and students, thus being in the best position to provide a mediating role in the leadership of academic functions at the foundation levels. Their strategic place and role in the overall academic hierarchy makes it imperative that they are endowed with basic knowledge and skills in the operations of the university bureaucracy.

The articles in this volume are the results of projects undertaken by a select cohort of middle-level academics from several universities across the continent who were convened by the HEPI in Accra, Ghana, in June 2019. The articles focus on a gamut of governance issues that have a bearing on mid-level university leadership. Some are empirical, with specific field data that gives insights into the manifestation of the governance issue at hand in particular institutional contexts. Other articles are more reflective, providing an introspective analysis of the subject matter. The articles do not represent the complete universe of all the governance issues in universities in Africa, but they do provide us with a snapshot of the variety of challenges that the mentees have experienced in their respective institutions. Their reflections on and interpretations of these issues provoke us to critically reconceptualise our understanding of the meaning of mid-level leadership in the context of universities in Africa. More importantly, they underscore the need to eschew the bifurcation between institutional governance and the work we do as university teachers and researchers.

References

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