

**THE RESEARCH DESIGN FOR ANALYSING THE ROLE OF THE
UNIVERSITY COUNCIL IN BRINGING ABOUT GOOD
GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH AFRICAN COMPREHENSIVE
UNIVERSITY.**

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Abstract

University governing bodies in comprehensive universities in post-1994 South Africa have been grappling with various forms of institutional instability that have been manifesting through periodic institutional protests. Indeed, some of these institutions have come under administration. A significant amount of this institutional instability may be attributed to the dysfunctionality at the institutional structures, systems and cultures of the different university governing councils. This research design was developed to examine the role of these governance aspects of the university council in a comprehensive university context at bringing about effective governance. This research design was guided by the following research questions from the research project: To what extent are institutional structures, systems and cultures within university councils perceived as contributing to effective institutional governance practices in comprehensive universities? What forms of data could be developed from this relationship? The research design utilised the concept of structures, systems and cultures developed from a multi-theoretical approach being brought to the framing of good university governance by governing bodies. The research design used for this research project was a Sequential-exploratory mixed method research paradigm and justifying the location of the study within the interpretive paradigm. The research design explains the advantages and disadvantages of each of research methods explicitly and justifications for using documentarily sources, interviews and surveys after the interviews. The paper ends with a proposition of a methodological framework on how to collect data on research involving stakeholders in university governance across governing bodies' contexts.

Key words: *Comprehensive universities, university councils, stakeholders, interviews, documentarily sources, surveys*

1. Introduction

The role of stakeholder- governed university councils in governance dysfunctionality across the former historically disadvantaged universities in the post-apartheid South Africa higher education sector has been a subject of much debate (Hall et al, 2002; CHE, 2004). The stakeholder drivers of this debate are the periodic foot soldiers of university students, and staff at the face of numerous protests at the different institutions of higher learning. These actors are a symbolic deep disempowered stakeholder characterization of the nature of governance challenge that has often warranted several forms of state intervention to avert the ever occurring governance crises in these ailing university institutions.

Thus this paper is set out to understand and examine the nature of the university governance challenge across the former historically disadvantaged universities (HDIs) university governing councils are grappling with in the process of providing good governance. Several independent assessor reports about the probable causes in the affected institutions show the several causes of these prevailing institutional governance crisis. An examination of independent assessor reports reveals a complex synopsis of the causes of governance dysfunctionality ranging from national, institutional and individual factors (Department of education reports on Fort Hare, 1999; University of Transkei (Unitra), 1998; University of the North, 1997). The reports point out critical failures at around how universities through their stakeholder university councils are not well positioned to deal with unresolved issues of university transformation, massification, responsiveness, and accountability as raised by the white paper on Higher education transformation (DOE, 1997).

From interaction with independent assessor reports, the White Paper on Higher Education Transformation, (1997), subsequently referred to as the White Paper on HE, recognizes that governance arrangements in higher institutions continue to be characterized by struggles for control, lack of consensus and even conflict over differing interpretations of higher education governance which give rise to tensions and sometimes to turmoil. Among the different stakeholders in higher education, there exist competing views, priorities and expectations about university governance. In contrast to the findings from the independent assessor reports, I would claim that governance dysfunctionality is rooted in the how the stakeholder-governed university councils as complex organisations were operating and functioning within

their different institutional contexts in terms of their processes, procedures, values, practices and principles.

Basing on the data collected from the documentary sources- the independent assessor reports, all of which were sent to the Minister of Education, a common theme emerges. Thus, there is a picture of institutional governance dysfunctionality located within structures, systems and cultures of university councils. This paper makes presents a case of how the university councils as organisations are made up of different stakeholder groups, each of which seeks to satisfy its own self-interest. These groups use their power within the university council processes, systems and practice to influence the distribution of resources within the organisation. As such good governance within such similar institutional contexts demands an engagement with these stakeholder narratives. The slow processes of transformation are closely related to these stakeholder discourses the root cause of the prevailing university governing council crises.

The paper is structured in the following way: The first part of the paper begins by providing an understanding of the nature of the university governance challenges in the post-1994 South African universities. The second part of the paper examines the research design of the paper. The last part of the paper presents the conclusion of the paper through proposition of methodological framework on how to collect data in complex political contexts involving numerous stakeholders with different interests and ideologies and areas for further studies.

1.2. The nature of the university governance challenge in the post-1994 South African universities

University councils throughout South Africa, in the post-1994 period, inherited a cocktail of neo-liberal economic conditions and the legacy of an apartheid regime. The governance architecture was characterised by state interference, fragmentation and gross inequalities, and inefficiencies and ineffectiveness. Moreover, the councils were, generally, not accountable to the needs of society and to the stakeholders within and outside the system (CHE, 2004a). As a consequence, the reconstitution of university councils as part of the state transformation agenda was intended to bring about effective institutional governance across HEIs along the principles of co-operative governance (Kulati, 2000; Cloete, 2002).

Despite the recasting of the university councils, there have been recurrent incidences and pockets of dysfunctionality. These have been particularly evident in the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), despite the merger process (Refer to the independent

assessors' reports of the following: Fort Hare, 1999; University of Transkei (Unitra), 1998 and subsequent green paper by Habib, 2001; University of the North, 1997; Mangosuthu University of Technology, 2008; Tshwane University of Technology, 2010; University of Limpopo, 2007; University of Kwa Zulu-Natal, 2011). Judging from these reports, all of which were sent to the Minister of Education, a common theme emerges. Thus, there is a picture of institutional governance dysfunctionality located within structures, systems and cultures of university councils. The reports present aspects of institutions whose university councils have not carried out their mandate effectively, and whose relationship with Vice-Chancellors, and management had all but broken down. Instances are reported in which university councils have abdicated their responsibility for governing to powerful interest groups, or, in the case of one institution, to the Vice-Chancellor. Instances of cronyism within university councils are reported that led to the subversion of due processes well as apparently creating spaces for serious corruption. Stakeholder groups were reportedly wielding influence inappropriately outside the bounds of a properly-constructed Institutional Forum; this was either through co-option in terms of patronage, factionalism, or through inappropriate attempts to dominate the governance process and to marginalise Senates. Reference is made to the struggles of other governance structures, such as institutional forums, in defining the roles they ought to play in deepening institutional transformation, and in transcending the hitherto adversarial nature of campus governance dynamics (Hall et al., 2002).

This has created institutions at risk of periodic crises which are ostensibly precipitated by specific incidents around student fees, alleged financial mismanagement, or labour disputes. However, Kulati (2000) claims that these crises stem from the institutions' inability to manage the new governance dynamics effectively. CHE (2002) states that it is not clear why a process is struggling to succeed when it was meant to strengthen better performing institutions and deal with the inefficiencies of HDIs. This observation raises concerns about how the unplanned changes that took place had the effect of exacerbating differentiation and stratification of institutions, thus reinforcing the differences which had been created by apartheid. To date, we do not understand why this happened. Also, little is known about the following issues: firstly, are there certain structures, systems and cultures that have a propensity to make university councils dysfunctional and if so, does this propensity also apply to other institutional structures of university governance such as university senates and institutional forums? Secondly, what university council responses would promote effective

governance practices in contexts where there is a periodic risk of governance dysfunctionality, and tensions between other university governance structures?

2. Conceptual framework

This paper used the following concepts as an organizing framework: “structures of university councils”, “systems of university councils”, “cultures of university councils” and “empowered individuals” or “groups of individuals”. These concepts were derived from:

2.1.Structures of the university council

The concept of structures of university councils is coined from the structural functionalist perspective of organizations by works of earlier theorists (Parsons, 1960). The university council as an organisation has its structural framework and functions (Kezar & Eckel, 2004).

2.2.Systems of the university council

The concept of systems of university councils is drawn from the systems perspective of organizations by the early writers (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Systems theory is used to investigate any objects that work together to produce some result and it focuses on structures, relationships, and interdependence between elements. Using this perspective, university council systems are conceptualized in terms of a simple input-output model Garratt (1996)

2.3.Cultures of the university council

The concept of culture of university councils is to be examined using the cultural-organization perspective discussed in the teachings of Durkheim (1947). Organizational culture is a system of assumptions, values, and interpretive frameworks that guide and constrain organizational members as they perform their roles and confront the challenges of their environment.

2.4.Empowered individuals or groups of individuals

The concept of empowered individuals or groups on university councils is drawn from the works of (Blasé 1998; Bourdieu 1996; Rousseau, 1987; Foucault, 1991).

2.5.Effective university governance

In the context of South African comprehensive universities, the term “effective university governance” shall refer to how university councils function with university senates and university institutional forums. The attributes of effective university governance are drawn from the White Paper of 1997 on the goals of higher education transformation which include

the following: *equity and redress, development, democratisation, quality, effectiveness, efficiency, academic freedom, institutional autonomy.*

The several use of these organising conceptualisation is to bring more understanding to what constitutes as modes of effective governance practises within the comprehensive institutional context. It makes use of these organizing concepts within a unique form of micro-political framework developed from the work of Blasé (1998) on micropolitics and power relations as mediators and sometimes drivers of human interaction (Cross & Naido, 2011), of Bourdieu (1996) on species of social capital, and of Foucault's (1991) concept of "circuits of power" located within critical sociological perspectives which foreground interests and power. These organising concepts rooted in the conflict of social action shall be used as analytical tools to explore how:

i) University councils have unique governance pact between different stakeholders represented at the university council to bring about effective university governance in comprehensive higher education environments (Rousseau, 1987) and particularly his notion of the *social contract*. ii) Complex institutions, especially university councils, are composed of individuals or groups with different forms of social capital. In this study, they are viewed as empowered constituencies. Reference will be made to Bourdieu and his work on species of social capital. iii) These empowered constituencies possess different dimensions of individual and collective assets such as power, funds, public favour, influence and followership. Reference will be made to the work of Bourdieu in this field. iv) The notion of how these empowered constituencies in university councils could bring about forms and modes of practices that could constitute effective governance. The notions of how they are in position to devise strategies through structures, cultures, systems characterized by preference for certain forms of institutional regulation, internal organization and leadership. Reference will be made to the work of Foucault and particularly his notion of "governmentalisation of the state" and "circuits of power" (Foucault, 1991 and 1980, pp.96–99). v) Interactions between individuals and groups in university council have ways of influencing how power is used to bring about effective university governance.

3. Research Design

The notion of cooperative governance as applied in the university governance created an environment whereby different stakeholders from different backgrounds were supposed to come together under a governance pact in the university council to bring about effective governance. These stakeholders bring with diverse stakeholder ideologies, interests,

expectations, perceptions, thinking on what constitutes as effective governance. An understanding of these diverse perceptions is critical to what constitutes as governance practises that are fit-for-good practises within such institutional environments.

3.1. Epistemological orientation

To collect this kind of required information, a mixed method Sequential exploratory design (Creswell, Plano Clark et al., 2003) involving aspects of a descriptive phenomenological-based approach located within the interpretive paradigm and surveys located with the positivist research paradigm was used in the collection and analysis of the data in a case study (Smith, 1978, stake, 1997; Yin, 1997, 2003) of one comprehensive university. The collection of data involved the use of document analysis (Payne & Payne, 2004), face-to-face in depth interviews (Corbetta, 2003, O'Leary, 2005) and surveys (Groves et al, 2004) to as a single data collection strategy.

3.2. Case study

According to Cohen and Manion (1997), the interpretive, subjective dimensions of educational phenomena are best explored by case study methods. In this study, one comprehensive HE institution in South Africa was selected for the study. The selection criteria was as follows: the university was threatened with administration but was able to recapitulate out of it; the university was formerly a historically disadvantaged institution; has a functional university council with a history of governance tensions; has experienced recurrent institutional crises; has a strongly stakeholder-driven university council and finally they should be formed as a result of mergers of HEIs post 1994 or converted from technikon to university status to offer both technikon-type programmes as well as a range of university-oriented programmes.

These criteria, according to Patton (2002), should allow selection of cases rich in information for the study. Case studies are sometimes criticised for the questionable validity of generalisations. Moreover, there is a perception that it is difficult to define boundaries of the cases, and there are problems in negotiating access to study settings and allowing for the effect of the observer (Denscombe, 2003). Although case studies usually provide little basis for scientific generalisations, their outcomes can be generalised into theoretical propositions (Yin, 1994).

3.3. Procedure of data collection

The data was collected and analyzed in the following manner;

In the first phase of data collection efforts were made to assess the official council and assessor's reports and documents, public and government reports, and gazettes of universities available in the public domain. A thematic analysis (Creswell 2002, Miles and Huberman, 1994) then took place based a comprehensive review of professional and research literature with a purpose of identifying the major underlying themes. The emerging themes from the analysis of the documentarily sources were used to construct and develop an interview protocol to conduct interviews with university council members in the case study.

In the second phase of the data collection interviews were conducted across members of the university council. Purposive sampling (Bowling 2002) was used because the researcher wanted to collect relevant information that could answer the research question which could mostly be got from members of the university council. A thematic analysis then took place based a comprehensive review of professional and research literature with a purpose of identifying the major underlying themes. The emerging themes from the analysis of the interviews carried out from the members of the university council were used to construct and develop an interview protocol to conduct interviews with members of university teaching, non- teaching staff and university students in the case study. In the third phase of data collection surveys were carried out across university students, members of the university teaching staff and non-teaching staff within the university. Convenience sampling (Patton, 2002, Parasuraman et al., 2004) was used to collect information from university students and the university staff of the university.

3.4. Procedure of data analysis

The analysis of data for the study was carried out in the following manner;

In the first phase of the documentary qualitative data analysis (Bailey 1994:194, Scott 1990) involved the analysis of official council and assessor's reports and documents, public and government reports, and gazettes of universities available in the public domain. A thematic analysis then took place based a comprehensive review of professional and research literature with a purpose of identifying the major underlying themes. The emerging themes from the analysis of the documentarily sources were used to construct and develop an interview protocol to conduct interviews with university council members in the case study.

In the second phase of data analysis after conducting the first phase of interviews with members of the university council, a thematic analysis then took place based a comprehensive review of professional and research literature with a purpose of identifying the major underlying themes. The emerging themes from the analysis of the interviews carried out from the members of the university council were used to construct and develop an

interview protocol to conduct interviews with members of university teaching, non- teaching staff and university students in the case study.

The first stage of survey data analysis after the data entry using SPSS format, involved the use of descriptive analysis (Keith & Punch, 2009). It involved the use of frequency distributions, means and standard deviations (variations). In relation to the research questions, one, two and three the use descriptive data analysis was done to show the frequency distribution of each variable across the survey groups of respondents in the study. It showed the responses of the university students and staff on each of the variables in terms of percentages. The next stage of the data analysis involved the use of correlations to explore if there are any relationships amongst the data. Using a Pearson moment correlation coefficient (Keith & Punch, 2009) all the theme items on the survey instruments were correlated against each other in this process. The researcher was interested to see if there are emerging relationships, the strengths of these relationships and what this means as modes of effective governance.

3.5. Instruments

A total of 331 useable survey forms were received from the students and staff from the university. The study had two separate survey instruments for the university students and the university members of staff. The survey included four major components (a) demographic information (b) University council structures (c) university council systems (d) university council cultures. On a 5-point Likert-type scales (Keith & Punch, 2009) of [5 for very strongly agree; 4 for strongly agree; 3 for neutral / disagree or agree; 2 for strongly disagree; 1 for very strongly disagree] the participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of university council structures and processes as contributing to effective university governance on the following item scales; recognition of the university council as the highest decision making body in the university, the different subcommittees of the university council work harmoniously, the exiting university council structures enable effective staff and student representation and contribution to debate, the university council provides structures which enable students and staff to select their own representatives to the university council, student and staff representation vividly reflects on university committees were student and staff affairs are handled.

In second part of the survey instrument the participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of university council systems and processes as contributing to effective university governance on the following item scales; staff and student representatives to the university council keep their constituents informed and solicit constituent's views whenever

appropriate, the university council recognises student and staff participation and input in decision making, the university council follows appropriate process for staff and student disciplinary hearings and grievances appeals, the university council uses viable audit processes to monitor institutional matters presented to it for action. In the third part of the instrument the participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of the university council institutional cultures as contributing to effective university governance on the following item scales; the apparent university council governance structures and systems make it possible for a wide range of staff and students to participate in the leadership of the institution, the laid out university governance structures promote negotiations and communications among different university constituents to be carried out in an open environment of good faith and civility, the university council and its subcommittee processes support a culture of public debate and tolerance which accommodates differences and competing interests, the external stakeholders have confidence in the institutional values which guide the university council governance structures and systems.

3.6. Validity and reliability

The value of scientific research depends on the ability of individual researchers to demonstrate the credibility of their findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The use of documents, interviews and surveys within a single project provided spaces to explore useful and confirm linkages between the emerging patterns of evidence from the data. The study used theory triangulation which involved the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data, methodological triangulation which involved the use of multiple methods to study effective university governance by university councils in a comprehensive university. The reliability test for the instrument was done using the Cronbach alpha coefficient (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994, McIver & Carmines, 1981, Spector, 1992).

3.7. Limitations

The study had limitations to grapple with which includes the following; the study had deal with variations of sample sizes which had potentials to influence the study. Secondly the researcher had to grapple with missing values in the data from the survey instruments for the university students and university staff. The eta squared (Howell,1997, McCall,1990, Huck,2009) used to calculate the effects size to see the effect of the different data sizes on the data, effect of missing data on the data.

3.8. Ethical issues

Blaxter et al. (2001) argues that the conduct of ethically-informed research should be the goal of all social researchers. In particular, the researcher observed several ethical safeguards, including privacy, self-determination, anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent. Firstly, before the study began, the researcher obtained ethics clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand's ethics committee to ensure that the research was ethically acceptable. Secondly, a letter requesting permission to conduct research was accompanied by a consent letter for participants.

4. Implications of the study

There are several implications at the level of governance and methodology that are emerging from the way the data for this study was carried out data;

4.1. Governance level

The results of this study show that the institutional structures of the university council are business oriented in organization although strongly characterised by institutional stakeholder relationships. This has led to conditions and instances where the systemic due processes of the university council are prone to stakeholder control. This is due to instances of unpreparedness for general council and committee meetings an outcome of sectoral deployment of individuals who have little if not no idea of the due processes at the systems level of the university council and reliance on informal stakeholder constituent networks as a mode of trust governance. The implication of governance stance has caused contestations between the less empowered institutional stakeholders represented at the university council and the university council over practices that are seen as perpetuating marginalisation of the less empowered institutional stakeholders represented at the university council. As a result, it has led to adoption of partisan modes of stakeholder institutional governance practices like caucuses, stakeholder deployment, protest, and unionisation. As a result, with this kind of data, one is making sense of the diverse stakeholder ideologies, interests, expectations, perceptions, thinking on what constitutes as effective governance. An understanding of these diverse perceptions is critical to what constitutes as governance practises that are fit-for-good practises within such institutional environments. The concept of good practice in higher education governance refers to those actions that are fit for institutional purpose and broadly compatible with professionally recognised standards and practice. In the United Kingdom (UK), the CUC (2004) reasons that the higher education sector should be talking about “good principles” and the need for “good process” whenever seeking to review and refine practice.

4.2. Methodological level

This paper proposes some methodological ideas however to comprehend the significance of these aspects, requires that one positions these ideas within a historical narrative. A stance that privileges an understanding of what could be learnt from the past (heritage) as parts of the bigger higher educational institutional narrative aimed at framing of effective governance practices that are fit-for-purpose as best practices within particular institutional contexts. Heritage is where we keep what we aspire. Thus, whatever that happened in the past as memories may not necessarily be part of the institution's inheritance.

The process of the generation of the data from the documentary sources then semi-structured interviews and finally surveys was crucial for study because of the chronological dimension it brings to the understanding of institutional contexts and its inherent governance challenge. This framework was used to provide a chronological exposition of the institutional governance challenge at the university council level and to show how the university councils in comprehensive university contexts have responded as a way of bringing about institutional effectiveness. Firstly, from these multi-methods approach the study was able to show how the governance problem at the university council came about a process that could not easily have been possible with use of other methods of data collection in a similar study.

From the use of this methodological approach it is clear that the university governance challenge at the university council has its roots in the model of university governance that was started through the colonial, apartheid and strongly felt during the post-apartheid periods. These institutional governance challenges are foundational and generational in trend that tends to manifest themselves through the current institutional structures, systems and cultures of the university council and eventually the whole institution. This adds to the already exiting understandings of the different ways methods of research would be used in problem solving in the university governance processes. Secondly, this study had several methodological issues it had to grapple with. This study struggled with how to use the more data that was emerging from the mixed method research approach that was used. This study had to grapple with the several methodological difficulties regarding challenges in data collection and analysis which were addressed along the line. At the outset it was expected that using the approach of documentarily analysis, interviews and then surveys would generate a more manageable data that could sufficiently answer the question, instead at the end this was able to answer well research questions 1, 2, and 3. The research question 4 was complex. Trying

to come up with the modes of effective university governance led to creation of numerous hypothesis to test as emerging modes of institutional governance that were not initially anticipated from the literature and the methodology. As a result, one has to think of working from the back to the front to initiate a kind of flow.

5. Conclusions

This paper set to provide a research design that could be used to examine the role of these governance aspects of the university council in a comprehensive university context at bringing about effective governance. The results of this study show that the institutional structures of the university council are business oriented in organization although strongly characterised by institutional stakeholder relationships. This has led to effective governance practices being tied around forms of stakeholder propositions such as increased sectoral deployment of constituency cadres to champion particular stakeholder interest at the university council. The implication of governance stance has caused contestations between the less empowered institutional stakeholders represented at the university council and the university council over practices that are seen as perpetuating marginalisation of the less empowered institutional stakeholders represented at the university council.

As a result, in the post 1994 South African higher education dispensation, the emergence of stakeholder governance has been associated with different stakeholders from different backgrounds coming together bring about transformation of higher education institutions through effective governance practise. These stakeholders have brought with them diverse stakeholder ideologies, interests, expectations, perceptions, thinking on what constitutes as effective governance. An understanding of these diverse perceptions is critical to what constitutes as governance practises that are fit-for-good practises within such institutional environments. To collect this kind of required information, a mixed method Sequential exploratory design involving aspects of a descriptive phenomenological-based approach located within the interpretive paradigm and surveys located with the positivist research paradigm was used. Firstly, a salient strength of the qualitative research as part of the sequential exploratory research design employed for the study is that its focus is on the contexts and meaning of human lives and experiences for the purpose of inductive or theory-development driven research. It is a systematic and rigorous form of inquiry that uses methods of data collection such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and review of documents.

Quantitative research is a mode of inquiry used often for deductive research, when the goal is to test theories or hypotheses, gather descriptive information, or examine relationships among variables. These variables are measured and yield numeric data that can be analysed statistically. Quantitative data have the potential to provide measurable evidence, to help to establish (probable) cause and effect, to yield efficient data collection procedures, to create the possibility of replication and generalization to a population, to facilitate the comparison of groups, and to provide insight into a breadth of experiences. However the positivist research is accused of failing to recognise the difference between social and natural world. Positivism fails to recognise the importance of the interpretations and meanings that individuals employ to make their reality intelligible. Positivist research is accused of reliance on instruments and procedures which hinders the connection between research and everyday life.

Combing the two methods, therefore, offers the possibility of combing these sets of strengths, and compensating for the weakness. In mixed methods studies, investigators intentionally integrate or combine quantitative and qualitative data rather than keeping them separate. The basic concept is that integration of quantitative and qualitative data maximizes the strengths and minimizes the weaknesses of each type of data. The idea of integration separates current views of mixed methods from older perspectives in which investigators collected both forms of data, but kept them separate or casually combined them rather than using systematic integrative procedures. One of the most difficult challenges is how to integrate different forms of data. Thus mixed methods researchers use and often make explicit diverse philosophical positions. These positions often are referred to as dialectal stances that bridge post-positivist and social constructivist worldviews, pragmatic perspectives, and transformative perspectives. To deal with the tensions created by their different beliefs mixed methods research represents an opportunity to transform these tensions into new knowledge through a dialectical discovery. All studies draw upon one or more theoretical frameworks to inform all phases of the study.

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