

Chapter 86

The Role of University Leadership in Advocating Social Justice in South African Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions in South Africa are undergoing remarkable changes. Traditionally, universities have been governed on a scholastic, academic, and research basis. This promoted an authoritarian and autonomous governance system, which clearly justified separate education under apartheid. The new democracy in South Africa vowed to change the system to ensure equity, diversity, and justice in education. Universities had to transform to benefit the underprivileged, disadvantaged, Black population of the country. This resulted in universities having to conduct their activities in a corporate style and, as such, required a commitment by all stakeholders to succeed. University leaderships are important role players who are pivotal in ensuring that social justice prevails. This chapter will investigate the role of leadership in shaping vision and mission in addition, ensuring policy implementation at the various higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice leadership highlights a style of leadership that promotes engagement in a university leader's practice to transform the environment. This chapter outlines the development of this role historically, and highlights some important tasks for current leadership. It is prefaced by the analysis of concepts of social justice and leadership, as it is specifically applied to higher education, and will examine the interconnectedness of governance, management, and social justice leadership in higher education.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7706-6.ch086

Furthermore, this chapter intends to advance understanding of how leadership roles and practices were made to accommodate the democratization and transformation of institutions through social justice practices in recent years in South Africa. It will situate the discussion in some aspects of social justice by examining the discourse underpinning leadership with a view towards university administrations and how they shape their practices to embrace social justice as a central rather than a peripheral issue.

BACKGROUND

Equity and access to education is of significant concern in relation to social justice, especially in terms of fairness and diversity, particularly as education is linked with an individual's socio-economic status. In South Africa, education has been viewed as being the pinnacle to transformation in the higher education environment. Therefore, university leadership have become important role players in the higher education arena. Following the historical legacy, the current leadership have articulated a more open position on social justice in order to contribute more to awareness of the institution's vision and mission; yet, they face many challenges. Here, the premise is that higher education leadership is critically important and that no one size fits all approach and no one best model holds true for all institutions (Shields, 2014).

Collegiality prevailed pre-1994, in South African higher education. Academics were left alone to teach and conduct research, basically running their own affairs (Dearlove, 1995). A non-bureaucratic way of working in a comfortable environment suited everyone. Managers and university leaders, on the other hand, were administrative and non-democratic, and were autonomous in the running of the institutions. However, post-1994, this position of autonomy was challenged by the state, whereby the state's view towards the role of universities and social transformation was derived from a policy inevitably open to reading in two opposing ways (CHE, 2004). The state stressed that universities must contribute towards economic and socio-political transformation, yet the nature of the transition from Apartheid to a democratic government, its macro-economic state policies, and the constraints of globalisation, have led to two opposing tendencies (CHE, 2004). Firstly, universities were expected to perform as viable corporate enterprises, producing graduates to help steer South Africa into a competitive global economy. Secondly, universities were expected to serve the public good and produce critical citizens for a vibrant democratic society. In order for universities to become financially sustainable and have a competitive edge, they had to aggressively market programmes, which resulted in some form of commodification of education. The contradiction is that if we are to serve the public good especially the majority who are economically disadvantaged and have had poor schooling during apartheid, how do universities then justify high fees. The under privileged learners will not afford higher education and this is not acceptable in terms of the equity and access policy. So the two points discussed have to balance and priority must be given for access to higher education.

The new legislative framework in South Africa placed enormous pressure on executive leaders at institutions to devise ways of administration at institutions. In a very short time, these institutional leaders had to grapple with becoming more skilled in a corporate sense and, at the same time, more democratic in having to deal with new power relations between constituencies and the institution, and between the institution and civil society.

The White Paper 3 (1997) embraced the notion that universities will be autonomous and governed by a participatory democracy of stakeholders, and not just academics alone. This had implications for relationships between the state and higher education, and higher education and civil society. Kraak (2001)

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