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Deans and university management in Kenya: Changing circumstances and roles

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1.1 Background

This study is part a research project being administered by CHEPS and is still at its formative stages. The intention of the research is to examine and analyze the changes in deanship in university management. It and brings together four researchers from different countries and will adopt a comparative approach and thus have an international perspective. The study focuses on the ways in which both internal and external change factors have impacted on the role of the dean and on its impacts to higher education management.

1.2 Problem Statement

Governance roles of different societal organizations and actors are changing. Traditional ways of governing society, politics and economy are changing creating problems of governability, accountability and hence legitimacy. Changes have been witnessed in the forms and mechanisms of governance and shifts in the location of governance and changing governance capabilities (van Kersbergen & van Waarden, 2001).

As higher education expands, traditional institutions such as universities undergo some changes. The changes factors facing world universities are myriad and varied (Carnoy, 1999; Clark, 1988; Sawyerr, 2002). They include among other things issues of governance, stakeholder demand, financing, ethos of new public management together with local challenges and global realities. Such challenges demand consequent changes in the way universities operate, and in essence in their basic operation units such as faculties. Thus, faculties-headed by deans-being the core units of higher education institutions, have to also bear the impacts of these changes.

While the form and rapidity of change in higher education systems differ in different parts of the world and even among universities themselves, it is without exception that change is taking place in higher education in more fundamental ways and with differing consequences. Studies in Kenya's higher education (Abagi, 1999; Okech & Amutabi, 2002; Ngome, 2003 & Sifuna, 2003) recognize shifts in governance and management of higher education in Kenya.

If such is the case, as it seems to be, the thrust of this study will then be to examine the nature of these changes, their impact on the higher institutions and the resultant implications to deanship with respect to management and governance of these institutions.

1.3 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study will be;

- To investigate, analyze and explain the changing role of deans in the management of higher education institutions in Kenya.
- To establish how changes in the Kenya's higher education institutions have impacted on deanship and with what consequences.
- To present an empirically based analysis of the forces shaping university governance and management styles and thus the position of the dean in university management in Kenya.

1.4 Research questions

The study will be guided by the following research question;

- To what extent has the role of the dean changed with respect to management and governance of higher education institutions in Kenya.
- What are the factors that have led to the changes in the role of deans in Kenya's higher education institutions/ system.
- What are the new executive management styles of the "modern dean" and what are their implications to the management and governance of universities in Kenya?

1.5 Governing higher education institutions

As universities all over the world face new realities, the role of governance takes center stage. All social organizations need to be governed (Peters, 2001). Higher education institutions are significant social institutions to which governance and management are essential (van Kersbergen and van Werden, 2001; Peters, 2001).

Due to the rapid and continuous reforms in higher education systems and institutions, their governance styles also need to be adaptive to enable them cope (Gornitzka, 1999). Changes have been witnessed in the forms and mechanisms of governance, in the location of governance as well as in the governance capabilities with respect to the different actors (Van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2001: 4-6) of which deans form a crucial part.

There are various interpretations of governance. This study will take governance to refer to the systems, structures and processes by which organizations make decisions. In this definition, governance works at every level of an organization, but it is at the top where standards are set and guiding principles are determined (Segal, 1999).

The effects of different arrangements of authority are fundamental and affect the way that systems operate, types of changes that occur and the values that are implemented (Clark, 1983). Higher education institution must grapple with the problems of division of labor and the fact that they are differentiated organizations (Dill, 1992; Becher, 1989). As higher education institutions face their grand contradictions, it is today argued that responsiveness, adaptiveness, entrepreneurialism and flexibility are essential strategies for these organizations to survive their turbulent times (de Boer, 2002).

1.6 Contextual Background of higher education in Kenya

Higher education in Kenya is a relatively recent phenomenon (Ngome, 2003; Jowi, 2003 & Republic of Kenya, 1981) with a history of just about five decades. The growth and expansion in higher education has however been remarkable. With only one university in the seventies, Kenya today has six public universities and thirteen private ones with a total student enrollment of about sixty thousand.

Kenya's public higher education has mainly been that of governmental steering (see Maassen & van Vught, 1994; Jowi, 2003 and Ngome, 2003) with the government playing a key role in higher education policy formulation and implementation, funding and governance. The president of Kenya is the chancellor to the public universities, he appoints most members of the university councils and the vice chancellors and other university executives. The vice chancellors appoint the deans and heads of departments. In some rare cases, deans and heads of department are elected.

Due to challenges facing the universities such as financing, governance and management, rising demand for higher education and societal expectations, shifts have been witnessed in the way the universities relate to the government, carry out their internal processes and respond to stakeholder demands (Ngome, 2003; Jowi, 2003; Republic of Kenya, 2000). Significant here are new forms of governance and management and diversification of their financial and resource bases.

1.6.1 *The role of deans*

Higher education institutions are composed of basic units with a cooperate life of their own and which have their own administrative, physical and academic existence (Becher and Kogan, 1992) and perform different functions. Faculties as basic units of higher education institutions are headed by deans. As universities struggle with the problems of reorganization, reform, choice and survival, the role of the dean continually becomes significant.

Deans as heads of major academic sub units in the universities i.e. faculties, schools and institutes and thus form a critical part of the middle management of universities. Deans are usually responsible to the Vice-Chancellor for the academic leadership and management of the faculty. Ideally, the dean is part of the senior management group within the university. Heads of departments and other smaller units within the faculties are responsible to the dean. The authority of the dean thus extends to the resources and staffing matters of the faculty, except for those matters determined centrally. The principal role of the dean is to assist the faculty and its sub units to achieve their objectives.

Ordinarily, deans are to provide effective academic leadership and management of the faculty, chair the faculty council and administer the faculty's resources. However, according to Zeukhle (2003) deans today face intense pressure on multiple fronts requiring them to take on new roles and new approaches to management and governance.

In this study, the role of the “modern dean” will be analyzed with respect to the following major areas:

- *Setting performance criteria for primary processes*
- *Monitoring and evaluating outcomes of teaching and research programmes*
- *Monitoring and evaluating the performance of faculty*
- *Setting budget of faculty and being accountable for implementation*
- *Setting strategic directions for faculty, developing strategic plans and being accountable for its implementation*
- *Contributing to development of institutional policies and their implementation*
- *Strengths and Weaknesses of dean's Position*

1.7 Conceptual framework

Research and analysis of institutional changes and organizational innovations associated with new forms of governance and management within contemporary higher education and universities cannot proceed in an intellectual vacuum (Reed, Meek and Jones, 2002).

This study will thus draw its theoretical orientation from a number of theoretical approaches. There will be application of organization and management theory which will be used to explain the dynamics of organization restructuring and its longer term impacts on organizational change and behavior. Such theories are also useful in explaining the complex interplay between “structure” and “agency”. This will show how structural constraints and action choices in different contexts of organizational change. The study will apply the different models of higher education decision making (See Baldrige, 1983; Mintzberg, 1979; Ellstrom, 1983; Cohen and March, 1991)

There will also be use of New Managerialism as theory of institutional and organizational change (see Reed, 2002), control theory and strategic management theory as they give greater insights into the political and cultural power struggles that are reshaping the governance structures and management systems of contemporary universities. This will be suitable for the study of middle level organization management and practices and show the different but interrelated operating systems.

Within these approaches, there will be keen attention paid to the different histories, experiences, developments, institutional problems and systemic differences that the Kenyan higher education institutions would have with respect to others elsewhere.

1.8 Research design and methods

This study will be carried out in Kenya and will involve a sampling of the universities to allow for a manageable research. The study will be mainly qualitative and interpretative.

Different methods of data collection will be applied. Focused group interviews with deans and other key university actors will be used as one of the main sources of data. This will provide in depth information from deans who are the main subject of this study. In addition documentary analysis of major literature and policy documents with respect to the changing role of deans will also be reviewed. These will include both institutional and government policy documents.

Questionnaires will also be used and if need be, in-depth case studies may also be used. The will also study adopt some form of comparative approach, such as between deans in public and private universities.

With these approaches, there will be keen attention paid to the different histories, experience, developments, institutional problems and systemic differences that the Kenyan higher education institutions would have with respect to others elsewhere.

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