

Achieving progressive ends by conservative means? Policy internationalisation in South African higher education governance in the period of 2001 to 2009

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Abstract

The period of policymaking in South African higher education from 2001 to 2009 presents a model case of 'policy internationalisation' (King 2010). During this period the symbolic policy of national transformation goals adopted in the immediate post-apartheid period was elaborated in policy instruments borrowed, adapted, and indigenized from globalising models of HE governance. In this presentation we reflect on the extent to which international convergence leaves space for the pursuit of national transformation goals. Focusing on the national quality assurance system, we pursue the tensions and contradictions between local and global policies by revisiting the debate between Bundy (2006) and others as to whether it is possible to use conservative means to serve progressive ends (Lange, 2006). Secondly, we consider evidence of local divergence at different stages in the QA policymaking cycle and, finally, we examine the paradoxical role that external QA played in relation to the rise of managerialism.

Panel presentation paper

Taking a longitudinal perspective on higher education change in South Africa since the end of apartheid, three basic periods of policy and governance change can be discerned: 1994 to 2000, 2001 to 2009, and 2009 to 2014. While the first period was primarily concerned with establishing a post-apartheid policy consensus and the elaboration of a set of progressive, transformative goals for the sector, the second and third periods represent different stages and approaches in the process of establishing policy instruments and implementing new policy in areas such as external quality assurance, system-level planning, monitoring and evaluation, higher education funding, and so forth (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, *forthcoming*; also see, Cloete et al, 2007; Badat, 2009).

South African policy development and implementation, especially in the period of 2001 to 2009, presents perhaps a model case of a local experience of 'policy internationalisation' (King 2010) and thus of the influence of global higher education trends on local system reform (Bundy, 2006; Cloete et al, 2007). However, the trend towards international convergence during this period was neither pursued uncritically nor without reference to the local context. We argue that part of the local dynamic of convergence was a process of adapting and indigenising globalising models of HE governance, which sought to decisively break with the apartheid moulding of SA HE, being deeply reflective of the needs arising from the local context, national transformation goals and the legacy of highly diverse institutional histories and their contemporaneous realities.

Looking at higher education policy development and implementation from the hindsight of 2014, we analyse changes in the policy framework for governance and management in South African higher education to see to what extent local convergence with globalizing models of higher education governance leave space for responsive adaptation to national transformation policy goals. We therefore ask, firstly, what evidence is there of local adaptation at different stages of in the policy cycle? For this purpose we consider evidence of redesign and policy indigenisation, interpretive flexibility, path dependence, mock compliance and/or regulatory ritualism (King, 2010). Secondly, we revisit the debate between Bundy, Singh, Seepe and Lange in 2006 (and its critique by Brown, 2010, and others), whether inherently

conservative international policies and instruments can be adapted into localised policies and instruments to serve the progressive ends of transformative national policy. In short the question is whether the ends pragmatically justify the means (Lange 2006). Finally, we examine the paradoxical role that the South African Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) played in relation to the rise of managerialism in institutional governance. On the one hand, we note that the development of evaluative state capacity, of which the HEQC was and is an integral part, did not only coincide with a rise of managerialism at institutional level but was fundamentally implicated in this development. On the other hand, we find subsumed in the commendations and recommendations of HEQC audit reports of public universities during the same period a fairly consistent empirically grounded critique of managerialism along with an innovative conceptualisation of post-managerial governance and knowledge-based leadership and management implicit in the HEQC commendations and recommendations to audited institutions.

We conclude our presentation by returning to our characterisation of the crucial period in SA HE from 2001 to 2009 as one of policy contestation, state steering and the rise of the evaluative state at system level, and the concomitant need for assimilating steering mechanisms: mergers, the rise of managerialism and post-managerialism at institutional level.

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