LEADERS DISCUSS 'THORNY' ISSUE OF GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE

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Politics has the ability to play out in higher education, albeit in differing degrees, regardless of the country and the will of individual universities.

This was the summation of delegates at the final Higher Education Forum for Africa, Asia and Latin America, or HEFAALA, session held last weekend. The inaugural annual symposium took place in Durban, South Africa, and saw 60 delegates from 18 nations tackle issues under the theme "Continental realities, international imperatives".

Addressing the often thorny topic of governance, leadership and management, delegates from a range of countries – Pakistan, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Africa, Uganda, Senegal, Ghana, Cameroon and Malaysia – reflected on their experience of government input into university appointments, leadership and management.

Lahore University of Management Sciences Vice-Chancellor Professor Sohail Naqvi told delegates that the Pakistani president currently appointed university chairs and various board members, while government-constituted selection committees elected vice-chancellors in public institutions. The government also had a hand in private institution selections, albeit to a lesser degree.

He said there were instances when the government attempted to "touch the university's autonomy" – for example, wanting to approve masters and doctoral programmes despite institutions being legally entitled to develop these programmes.

Accountability

"The focus must be on the university's governance regardless of how the vice-chancellor was chosen. He must be accountable for his actions," he said.

Professor Wondwosen Tamrat, president and founder of St Mary's University in Ethiopia, said vice-chancellors of private institutions in Ethiopia were appointed by the institutions themselves, but institutions adhered strictly to the quality assurances dictated by the Minister of Education and the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency.

However, he believed there were too many occasions when the legislation did not translate into practice – like promises by government of assistance in terms of university leadership and management which did not materialise.

Dean of Makerere University's East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, Dr Ronald Bisaso, said the leadership structures in Ugandan public institutions saw the dean reporting to the principal who in turn reported to the vice-chancellor.

Universities differed from businesses, he said, and the country was striving to find a balanced approach which supported both colleagues and the bureaucracy and still "followed the rules".

However, he acknowledged that university leadership had to play a political game, recognising the government as the source of a significant portion of institutional funding.

Organised anarchy

"There is a need to know who's who and what strings to pull. It is a game of organised anarchy as all the problems are brought together and navigated; there is no straightforward approach," he said.

Correspondingly, Bisaso added, if the higher education fraternity believed in commercialising universities, the institution's leadership could not run away from changing trends. Institutions may have their own regulations deserving of respect, but institutional leaders also had to take into consideration accountability and governance issues.

"There is a recognition that you do not have to be the boss to be a leader. We can still retain our traditions, but also need to know what needs to be transformed," Bisaso said.

The Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology based in Alexandria was in the "very exceptional" position of being devoid of government intervention. The university's president, Professor Ahmed El-Gohary, said the institution's president was either Japanese or Egyptian and was not subjected to the same processes followed in Egyptian public institutions.

The institution received full funding from the Japanese government.

The situation in public institutions was different, however. Here, the Minister of Education shortlisted three candidates following an interview process and the president of the university concerned would select one of the candidates. The university president or rector was also government-appointed which meant that the university's leadership and direction hinged on the competency of a single individual.

El-Gohary's comment that there was no guarantee the minister would produce the shortlist raised several titters from delegates, as did a comment from Professor of Geography at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Morshidi Sirat, who said that "sometimes the [Malaysian education] minister was looking for a specific candidate" when the ministry consistently returned the shortlist for more names.

Sirat is a former deputy director-general in the Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Higher Education, and also a former vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

Malaysian law dictated that the minister appoint vice-chancellors, but Sirat said how that point was reached could be a matter for debate.

Leadership training

However, potential vice-chancellor candidates could only be considered once they had completed a three-tier leadership programme. Sirat said that prevented the government from entirely "dictating" who the incumbent should be.

Professor Charles Awono Onana, leader of the African Centre of Excellence in Information and

Communication Technologies at the University of Yaoundé, said the Cameroon head of state appointed university vice-chancellors. Universities were "lucky if they have a good person and can move forward", he said. It was a process the government considered "democratic and progressive".

Noel Kufaine of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Higher Education Training and Development suggested that the problem was less about the process of choosing university leaders, but in how those candidates had arrived at that point in their careers.

"If they have been mentored by a useless person, they can only be as good as that mentor," he said.

Coordinator of the Senegal-based Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, Professor Ibrahim Oanda Ogachi, described leadership as a double-edged sword. There was a need for vice-chancellors and senior management to experience leadership training, but there was also a need for an African approach that created "strong institutions working for their countries".