

# From international governance to individualised learning: The complexity of contemporary higher education

## Introduction

Mary Gobbi

Editor

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When analysing the papers that comprise this edition of the Journal, I was struck by how they represented the many facets of Higher Education Institution (HEI) governance. This ranged from governance at the international level to the individualised self-governance of students with respect to their personal approach to learning. Focusing on the nuances of governance is most timely when the entire Higher Education system is engaged in the struggle to keep safe, educate, research, and innovate in a global pandemic.

First, we are introduced to the concepts of governance at the pan national level in Nabaho, Turyasingura, Aguti, and Andama's paper '*Understanding the governance dynamics of a supranational university: The African pioneering model*'. They adopted the OECD definition of university governance namely it is "the structures, relationships and processes through which, at both national and institutional levels, policies for tertiary education are developed, implemented [and reviewed]".<sup>1</sup> The authors draw attention to the post 2010 emergence of governance models for supranational universities supported by regional regulatory frameworks. In their document based case study of the Pan African University (PAU- launched in 2011), they address the question of how such governance models can operate successfully in what they call 'a multi-layered environment'. While voluntary agreements like the Bologna Process operate at pan national level, they do not have the hall marks of the more extensive governance architecture structure necessary for the success of the Pan African University model which is the outcome of political union. In their analysis, Nabaho et al. demonstrated that while the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) provide the minimum standards for effective governance, a wider

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, "OECD thematic review of tertiary education" (2008), accessed 12<sup>th</sup> November 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/37524697.pdf>.

infrastructure is required to support the Universities and Institutes which are each situated within their own nation state and democratic culture. They reveal the power of the national context upon governance and the overall aims of Supranational University mission(s). They show how the supranational documentary discourse may not be realised at the national level.

Nabaho et al., highlighted the tensions that can arise within and between the external governance levers (e.g. international legislation and national governance) –and the ‘internal’ governance drivers of the institution. In Cassar’s paper *‘Using the Internationally Recognized Frameworks of Nursing Competences to address the challenges of nurse refugees without documentation’*, we see the practical impact of these tensions upon the personal experiences and lives of individuals. Cassar points out the paradox of a global shortage of qualified nurses, yet the loss of skilled nurses who are refugees because they do not possess their documentary proof of their qualifications when they arrive in the host country. The refugee faces a bewildering number of governance structures/barriers which together can seem impenetrable. As Cassar illustrates, the nurse refugee without documents is at one level protected by international laws concerning refugee status and human rights, but at the same time, in Europe or other transnational regions, is subject to legislation concerning the recognition of qualifications which can exclude them from the nursing labour market. From a Higher education perspective, the refugee can be denied access to education, if they cannot evidence their academic credentials. While some mechanisms are in place to enable refugees to access Higher Education, (e.g. European Qualifications Passport for Refugees) there are few examples within the regulated professions. Cassar argues well for the use of the Tuning Reference Points for Nursing to be employed as a vehicle to enable the individual refugee to be evaluated against the relevant regional Tuning Competences for Registered Nurses. Such a review requires both the regulator and the Higher Education Institutions to have inter-related governance structures, policies and instruments that can include ‘assessment or tests of competence’, that may ‘enable a homogenous transnational approach which is consistent across salient parameters’. While Cassar acknowledges other issues of critical concern, she argues that robust instruments of assessment may provide a solution to this challenge. From Cassar’s analysis, we can see that any associated Governance structures would need to address (1) the rights of the refugee, (2) the safeguarding of patients and recipients of nursing care; and (3) the need to be fair with existing professionals/students.

This connection between governance and graduate competence acquisition is evident in Zörner, Mahomed, Zulu, Bader, Tenthani, Cuamba,

and Chingosho paper ‘*Meta-profile and competencies for harmonisation of higher education in sector-specific technology areas: A case study of Renewable Energy in Southern Africa*’. However in this paper we see the role of competences in ‘enabling the harmonising of technology-based education programmes’ which can ‘further enhance enterprise nucleation potential due to intra-African industrialisation opportunities, which includes the extension of local country markets’. Here the competence movement is interfacing with the governance structures already present in the field of renewable energies, the regional economic sector, and the development of regional standards on technology and practice. Their stakeholder analysis revealed barriers to the proposed harmonisation process. These barriers included the absence of local development, state of the art technologies in the relevant field, and a lack of competent professionals. National and local governance is influenced negatively when there are insufficient competent professionals in a sector (in this case renewable energies). For example, this leads to sectoral skill gaps on national committees, government departments, agencies that deal with comparability of qualifications in the region, and workforce forecasting, particularly in the industrial sector. At a strategic level, especially in the developing country context, Zörner et al., have shown the crucial importance of having persons able to interact with industry and engage with stakeholders to predict the future employability needs of graduates. This in turn is necessary so the graduates can effectively contribute to the industrialisation strategies and economic plans of countries.

Departing from international and national dimensions of governance, the next two papers, both from Turkey, focus on aspects of self-governance and efficacy in individuals. As will be shown, the outcomes of their respective empirical studies have implications for the governance of individual universities, academic programmes, and academic staff development. First, Şahin and Kılıç in their paper ‘*Evaluation of the teaching practice course carried out with the Lesson Study Model*’ employed action research strategies to evaluate the teaching practice process of trainee Turkish language and literature teachers before and after their placement. Şahin and Kılıç remind us that teachers need both subject matter and pedagogical competences to be effective teachers for school children and that the teaching academy is responsible for the quality of their education. The pre-intervention assessment identified that the trainees had low self-efficacy beliefs as well as worries about their skill levels. This detailed study, employing extensive qualitative data collection tools, provides significant insights into the changes in efficacy, skills and engagement of the trainee teachers that occur following the intervention of the ‘lesson study model’ which originated in Japan. From

a governance perspective, national research by Çelik and Gül<sup>2</sup> had revealed weaknesses in the Turkish provision of teaching practice education and this study sought to address this gap. The findings of their study has significant implications for the governance of teacher education at both the subject, institutional and national level. In particular, the introduction of the lesson study model with its associated embedded dimensions of reflective practice has been shown to improve teacher self-efficacy and competence. The study has also revealed the anxieties and concerns of trainee teachers within the subject sector and strengthened the arguments concerning strategies that could be adopted at Ministerial level to improve national teacher training programmes. For readers unfamiliar with action research, the paper provides a useful introduction to this methodology.

Finally, in Durnali's paper '*Investigating self-leadership, self-directed learning, and online learning among university students*' we see an additional aspect of governance, namely the individual learner's ability to apply self-governance to their learning capacities and skills. One can see the connection with Şahin and Kılıç's study with its focus on self-efficacy of trainee teachers. Durnali's paper is most timely as it is concerned with distance learning in HEIs. As Durnali points out, 'the spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which broke out in early 2020, has also played a significant role in the increased popularity of distance education'. The rapid and widespread introduction of distance learning education into Higher Education has been unprecedented with academics engaged in rapid adoption as the institutions strove to strengthen their technology structures and platforms to provide the necessary infrastructure. This study which predates the pandemic offers timely information for strategic and operational governance within the HEI sector.

The empirical work underpinning this paper, involved 835 students in Turkey. Durnali investigated the connections and relationships between university students' self-leadership (SL) behaviours, self-directed learning (SDL) skills, and online learning (OL) attitudes in distance learning environments. Methodologically, Durnali used data collected through the «Self-Directed Learning Scale (SDLS),» «Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ),» and «Online Learning Attitude Scale (OLAS) and tested a specific conceptual model. Of interest here is the very critical role of self-directed learning 'in the relationship between self-leadership and online learning among university students'. The study raised issues concerning

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<sup>2</sup> Yaşar Çelik and İbrahim Gül, "Evaluation of Teaching Practice Course According to Teacher Candidate's Opinions," *Asian Journal of Instruction* 6, no. 2 (2018): 82.

student preparedness and support for distance learning. Durnali argued that Universities that ‘provide online education especially in the Covid-19 period’ should keep the concepts of SL, ODL and SDL on their agenda as one of their priority strategic issues. Underpinning these findings are implications across the various institutional governance levels, ranging from educational policies, resource allocation, staff development of the academic staff, student guidance and support processes. In addition, the theoretical framework of the study has a place in the teaching of educational theories and their relevance to distance education, including the support of online educational software/platforms that support Self leadership and self-directed learning.

This collection of papers have together invited us to reappraise the different aspects, roles and efficacies of higher education governance whether it be at the level of supernational structures, international legislation, national cultural aspects, institutional internal governance or the self-governance capacities of the individual academic or student. The papers have reminded us of the complexity and complicated nature of the Higher Education system and during these troubling times, the importance of evidence -based governance decisions at the strategic, operational, and individual level.

In the context of COVID 19, HE governance needs a degree of realistic flexibility in order to instigate rapid change, make safe compromises and conduct appropriate risk assessments. Crucially however, institutions must recognise that any such change ought to be accompanied by as much support as possible for both staff and students. The deployment of digital learning technologies when matched by remote/distance learning and accompanied by reduced social face to face interaction risks not only isolating students but diminishes the self-efficacy of students and staff alike. While the individual papers have illustrated aspects of governance, they have not addressed the new nuances of contemporary governance that includes the capacity not only for what Nabaho et al. refer to as institutional self-governance (the evaluative state) but drawing on Durnali and Zorner et al., for self-governance in the human persons who constitute the academy. A meta narrative could integrate or interface stakeholder governance systems with those of the academy and address gaps related to resource capacity, workforce composition and political influence: factors raised in debate, but not fully explored.

Papers in this edition have considered the role of existing or new Tuning competences in aspects of governance. We must now question the extent to which the multi -faceted nature of the evolving trends in contemporary governance and self -governance are sufficiently included in our Tuning

competences. Indeed, will it be timely post COVID to reappraise the very concepts of Governance itself? How can ‘evaluative’ governance occur in times of crisis when finding the time for analytical reflection is itself the challenge? Indeed, is there something to be learnt from models of ‘realistic/pragmatic evaluation’?

In the context of corporate governance and written before the pandemic, Deloitte stated that, “In a crisis like that of COVID-19 when the stakes are high and scrutiny is intense, the board has a unique role. Stepping in may be uncomfortable but stepping aside is not an option.”<sup>3</sup> This statement raises two questions: Stepping in to do what exactly? And should stepping aside be an option if there is a lack of competence at ‘board’ level?

Readers, perhaps you have some thought or research related to self-governance and that could be raised in the Journal. Your reflections are welcomed.

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<sup>3</sup> Deloitte Global Center for Corporate Governance, “Stepping in: The board’s role in the COVID-19 crisis” (2020), 1, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/COVID-19/COVID-19-The-boards-role-in-crisis.pdf>.

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