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Senate's Stewardship of the Academic Project in Higher Education

Abstract

Most higher education institutions across the world have senates, though their membership and purposes may vary. In South Africa, legislation sets up a bicameral governance of public higher education institutions whereby senate is responsible for the academic functions of the university and reports to council on such functions. Council is the apex institutional governance structure that oversees the affairs of an institution in its entirety. However, the literature suggests that most senates could be more effective in performing their key role of articulating, safeguarding, and nurturing the academic project. In institutions that do not discharge their academic mandates optimally, in particular, senates appear to function poorly. Literature suggests that as universities become more managerial in nature, decision making regarding the academic project often takes place outside of senate. Unfortunately, where senates become spaces of rubber-stamping, or for the playing out of petty politics, they fail to act as responsible stewards of the academic project. To enact their responsibilities fully, senates need to explicitly deliberate their role in the university.

Keywords: Academic project, council, higher education, governance, managerialism, petty politics, senate

Introduction

Globally, most higher education institutions, both public and private, have some form of senate, sometimes called 'academic board' or 'faculty senate'. These structures play complex and varied roles but there is consensus in the literature that few senates perform their key role particularly well, that is the role of stewardship of the academic project. This *Briefly Speaking* considers the framing of the senate in South African legislation before engaging with the national and international literature. It concludes by offering some considerations that might strengthen the performance of the senates.

Legislated mandate of senate in South Africa

Under apartheid in South Africa, universities largely functioned as 'creatures of the state' (Bunting, 2006), either actively supporting the apartheid agenda or complying with it because of self-interest or in the face of state control. Despite the brave activism of some staff and students, this meant that senates were rarely spaces where the

academic project was truly at the centre. In the shift to democracy, there was a sense that if universities were to become spaces that encouraged the development of reflective capacity and willingness to speak truth to power "based on a commitment to the common good" (Department of Education, 1997:11), senates needed to play an important role.

The Higher Education Act of 1997 set the structures for the post-apartheid higher education sector and clearly articulated adherence to a bicameral system whereby institutional accountability is shared between council and senate. The legislation indicates that some issues can be determined by council after consultation with senate, and other decisions of council are valid only when there is the concurrence of senate. This places an enormous responsibility upon the shoulders of the vice-chancellor, who reports to and mediates between these two bodies.

> In situations where senate is not prepared to concur with council in academic matters, or where senate feels it necessary to defend an issue of academic freedom without the support of council, or against council, the full complexity of the vice-chancellor's position becomes apparent.
>
> (Hall, Symes and Luescher, 2002:15)

Morrow (1998:402) argued that it was only on the issue of what is financially possible that "the decisions of the senate need to be ratified by the council". Hall, Symes and Luescher (2002) warned of the importance of regularly re-evaluating the basis of an effective balance between the civic accountabilities of councils and the academic responsibilities of senates. They suggested that the balance between the "collegial governance tradition of senates and the fiduciary responsibilities of councils" would be key in the viability of South Africa's post-apartheid higher education system. Indeed, the tensions between the senate, the Vice-Chancellor and council are typically those with resource implications when the senate makes decisions in favour of the academic project that are unrealisable in the context of the institution's financial situation.

The membership of senate is stipulated in section 28 of the Higher Education Act of 1997, as amended, as follows:

> (a) the principal;
> (b) the vice-principal or vice-principals;
> (c) academic employees of the public higher education institution;
> (d) employees of the public higher education institution other than academic employees;
> (e) members of the council;
> (JJ members of the students' representative council; and
> (g) such additional persons as may be determined by the institutional statute.

Importantly, section 28.4 specifies that:

> The majority of members of a senate must be academic employees of the public higher education institution concerned.

The senate is thus primarily an academic body. Under apartheid, members of senates of universities were largely white and male. The extent to which they were able to critically steward the academic project without simply reinstating the *status quo* was thus extremely limited. Lange and Luescher (2014:134) argue that "a senate can

only be effective in its contribution to transformation if it is sufficiently diverse and if it provides the space for free deliberation and critique, including critique of the university management".

In his highly cited 1998 paper, South African Philosopher of Education, Wally Morrow argued that given such lack of diversity under apartheid, there was great appeal in post-apartheid South Africa to have wide stakeholder representation in senates. But Morrow made an impassioned plea that senate was not the place for representation of all manner of stakeholder groups, but rather it was the space of expertise and professional understandings of the academic project. He argued that while there must indeed be governance spaces for all stakeholder voices (such as councils and Institutional Forums), the senate should not be this place.

> Given that the purpose of universities is to constitute the public space in which academic practices can be pursued and flourish and given the characteristic features of such practices, we can understand why it is that it is accomplished academics who should govern the academic affairs of a university (Morrow, 1998:401).

As senators increasingly reflect the diverse demographics of the country, it is important to pause and ask whether senates have indeed become spaces where "accomplished academics… govern the affairs of the university".

Senates as custodians of the academic project

Twenty years after democracy, Lange and Luescher (2014:116) noted in their analysis of assessor reports (in cases where universities had been placed under administration) that one area of concern pertained to "weak, marginalised or dysfunctional senates". Similarly, Jansen in his 2023 book *Corrupted,* points out that conflict and disrepair in dysfunctional universities generally emerged from the breaching of lines between governance and management of the institution. He raises concerns about the "potential for senate as an academic body to be marginalised from the operations and resources of the university" (p. 26). He further explains that "In every one of the dysfunctional universities …, the senate had been marginalised in important academic decisions" (p. 48).

Jansen argues that in institutions where the academic project is articulated and foregrounded in decision making, the senate "maintains a central place in the functioning of the institution" (2023:54). Again, this echoes Lange and Luescher's (2014:124) note that in high functioning institutions, senates demonstrated "a sustained focus on the academic project … underpinned by open deliberation and effective committee systems able to clear senate business and allow members of senate time for intellectual engagement and to focus on the bigger picture of academic governance".

The role of senate in ensuring the integrity of an institution focused on the academic project is therefore not to be underestimated. In strong and stable universities, the academic project is at the centre of all institutional endeavours, and it is this commitment that drives the allocation of resources

and the agendas of bodies such as senates. In such institutions, every decision is underpinned by questions such as: what is in the interest of the knowledge project, and, what is the interest of the public good?

Where the minutes of meetings senate reveal a lack of debate about the nature of the university, its role in society, its approach to teaching and learning, and so on, senate is unlikely to fulfil its role as custodian of the academic project. Where the minutes of meetings of senate reveal a dominance of administrative matters, senate is unlikely to act as custodian of the academic project.

Jansen (2023) illustrates how other bodies can at times use their power to constrain the senate – he shows how rogue councils, political parties (often through student representatives), and the vested interests of unions have, in some cases in South Africa, threatened the functioning of senate. It thus seems imperative for those senators representing the academy, that is at least 50% of senators, to ensure a strong commitment to the academic project and a sustained understanding of their stewardship responsibilities.

In the 2002 CHE report on governance in the South African system, the authors offered the following warning:

> The Task Team notes that senates, while critical to the bicameral system of governance, tend to be reactive and slow to take the lead in advancing the academic needs of the sector. The Task Team is concerned that this is undermining the critical balance in higher education governance and recommends that institutions review the composition and functioning of their senates (Hall *et al*., 2002:8).

They go on to note issues of poor attendance and the limited extent to which professors exercise their role in overseeing the academic project. The CHE report concludes that senates do not play their role as a vigorous and proactive space of deliberation on matters germane to the university's academic project.

There are varied reasons for such failure. Drawing on the national and international literature, this *Briefly Speaking* reflects on just two of these: the preponderance of petty politics, and the incursion of managerialism.

Senate as a space of petty politics

Senate has legislated mandate and yet the literature repeatedly suggests that agendas of meetings of senates rarely include discussions on the purpose of higher education, the ethos of the institution, the commitment of the university to the common good, and other matters that relate to the academic project. The extent to which it can steward the academic project when there is no debate about what the academic project entails is thus extremely limited. Sadly, there is evidence that many senators are unable to participate in such debates, never mind drive them, because they are too invested in their own personal agendas.

As Morrow (1998:402) argued, having senate discussions on the academic project assumes a shared concern for this "rather than something else such as, perhaps, personal or sectional interests or merely the primitive desire to dominate". In a study

of senates across Canada, Jones, Shanahan and Goyan (2004) found that senate members were often unable to shift from their personal or constituency interests to deliberate the broader interests of the academic project. Minor (2003) suggests senators must have a commitment to the academic project rather than foregrounding their own agendas, or what Jansen (2023) calls 'micropolitics'. Given the dominance of petty politics, it is perhaps unsurprising that the 2002 CHE report on governance concluded that "the senate sector in South African higher education is currently a passive reflection of the *status quo* rather than an active champion of substantive autonomy" (Hall *et al*., 2002:41).

On the other hand, it is useful to reflect on the conditions that may be feeding the petty politics that prevent academics from constructing senate as a space for stewarding the academic project. Possibly the foregrounding of individual interests over the academic project is conditioned by the extent to which academics are positioned as competitive individuals seeking status and power in the neoliberal university. Rowlands (2019) suggests that as the university has become corporate in nature, the 'academic capital' of the individual has become more valued than the 'intellectual capital' of the collective - and this has affected the role played by senate. When there is little deliberation about the nature of the academic project and instead much evidence of institutional systems that pit individuals against one another, petty politics will no doubt flourish. In this, the issue of managerialism is an important factor.

Managerialism as limiting senates powers

In South Africa, senates of the past were constrained by their limited representation, which allowed a false belief that the knowledge practices and interests of the homogenous collection of senators were indicative of those of the broader academic body. Thankfully there have been significant shifts in the demographics of senates. However, rather than the newfound diversity encouraging more robust debates, senates seem unlikely to challenge the *status quo*.

There is broad consensus in the literature that the power and status of senates has diminished (see, for example, Rowlands 2013; Núñez and Leiva 2018; McCann, Hutchison and Adair, 2022). The focus of many senates now seems to be primarily on procedural matters (Rowlands, 2019; McCann *et al*., 2022). Studies in Canada, Australia and the UK have all raised concerns about the effectiveness of senates and question the extent to which they play a role in shaping institutional governance, policies, and processes (Jones *et al*., 2004; Rowlands, 2013; McCann *et al*., 2022).

Núñez and Leiva (2018) in their analysis of the University of Chile's senate suggest that this body is limited in functioning and productivity by its ambiguous authority, discord with other governing bodies, and lack of legitimacy in the university community. MeKonnon, Corbett and Kilpatrick (2018), reporting on senates in Ethiopian universities, suggest that tensions between executive management and senates can result in their reduced functionality. They also focus on how hierarchical institutional cultures can limit debate. In spaces where there is posturing about the use of titles or other traditional formalities, it is unlikely that

there will be robust deliberation about how the university can ensure it is a common good.

Pennock, Jones, Leclerc and Li (2016) in their study of senators' perceptions in Canadian universities found a disjuncture between the desire for effective academic oversight and senate's ability to achieve it. They stressed the need for senate to be a space of trust and respect, and for the clarification of roles and responsibilities. McCann *et al*. (2022:1505) argue that the "creation of a range of executive posts at the dean or pro-vice-chancellor level has weakened the engagement with policy formation and the exercise of decision-making of the traditional university senate". Rowlands (2019) agrees that the diminishing power and status of senate has been concurrent with an increase in the power and status of executive management. These authors agree that academic staff are increasingly seen to play a subsidiary role as one of many stakeholders, rather than the key body responsible for safeguarding the academic project.

Overall, much of the recent literature on the role of academic senates argues that it has shifted to being largely symbolic rather than substantive in university governance.

The shift is seen to emerge at least in part from broader changes in higher education, whereby universities provide workplace training to meet the demand from both individuals, in the form of students seeking social mobility, and from collectives, in the form of industry requiring both the credentialling and skilling such education offers (Ashwin, 2020; Shore and Wright, 2024). This conception of the university arguably reduces its potential to function as a common good, dedicated to the creation, dissemination, and implementation of knowledge for social and environmental justice. Jansen (2023:16) goes so far as to argue that when "students, staff, managers and governors come to the university primarily to gain access to its resources, it ceases to be a university". A narrow focus on the technical aspects of credentialling can contribute to academic deliberations being generally secondary in the agenda of meetings of senates. In this context, the senate then performs mainly administrative roles.

Rowlands (2019) suggests that much of what happens in senate is now simply "invisible housework" that is neither important nor much noticed unless it is poorly executed. One reason for the shift to doing 'invisible housework' is that the agenda of the meetings of senate is often determined by executive management so that the issues discussed by senate are not defined by themselves but by university executives who 'control' most aspects of the university (Rowlands, 2019). Because the university is increasingly managed using corporate practices like strategic planning, staff appraisal, and quality control, Lombaard (2006) argues that institutional autonomy and academic freedom, meant to be at the heart of the senate agenda, become less relevant.

How did we get here?

The move towards managerialism and the increased positioning of senate as a space for rubber stamping and for the playing out of petty politics did not occur overnight.

In South Africa, the possibilities for post-apartheid higher education were clearly inscribed in early documents. The focus on cooperative

governance in the National Commission on Higher Education (1996) gave senate a very particular democratic responsibility. The responsibilities for nurturing 'critical citizens', specified in Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education:1997), also suggest a very particular positioning of the sector. However, the extent to which universities undertook this significant shift in identity was extremely limited. Restructuring of the sector through mergers and the introduction of a plethora of new policies and regulatory structures possibly diluted the focus on being a public good whereby senate was to play a particular role in stewarding the academic project to the benefit of all.

The nation's turn to globalised neoliberalism began to become evident in the rapid shift away from the Reconstruction and Development Plan, just two years after it was introduced. National policies increasingly reference higher education almost explicitly in terms of skills training for the marketplace with little reference to its many other responsibilities to social justice and environmental sustainability. Despite the phrase 'ivory tower', the university is within society and thus susceptible to national shifts, particularly because the state is the public sector's primary source of income. At the same time, as such political and economic moves nationally, the marketisation and metrification of higher education have occurred worldwide (Roberts, 2018; Giroux, 2025; Newfield, 2016; Shore and Wright, 2024). In an era of globalisation, higher education is unlikely to be able to rebuff many of these forces.

This is not to say that such partial explanations for the *status quo* are a reason to accept things as they are. The promotion of collegial governance, Pennock *et al*. (2016) argue, needs to be intentional and needs to be an explicit and ongoing senate activity. While it may not be possible for any university to act as an island, unaffected by national and global trends, it is possible for a university to make far a greater positive impact on society than it can if it is only a training centre credentialling individuals for the workplace. To become what Connell terms "the good university", higher education institutions need much stronger and more committed senates.

Given this general view that senates are performing poorly in stewarding the academic project (and that in cases where their performance is particularly weak, the university is dysfunctional), what is to be done?

What can be done?

Firstly, senate needs to explicitly discuss the academic project. A senate focused on stewardship of the academic project needs to regularly and explicitly state this focus and debate its meaning. The promotion of collegial governance requires intention; it does not occur by default. Senators need to reflect on the extent to which the senate is indeed taking up its responsibility to steward the academic project, in comparison to it fulfilling a role of compliance to externally set regulations. Regular reflection on the functioning of the senate should be undertaken by senate. This should not turn into a monitoring and measuring endeavour, but rather be a place of significant self-critique.

It is not anticipated that senate would reach consensus as to the defining of the specific university's academic project, but it should

regularly reflect upon this so that its decision-making is premised on a commitment to the protection of the academic project.

Secondly, senators need to be actively engaged. It goes without saying that for senate to achieve its role of stewarding the academic project, senators need to attend senate. They also need to realise that they have a responsibility to speak to issues of academic integrity. Failing to attend senate or attending passively without engagement is a dereliction of responsibility for the academic project.

Significantly, senators need to read documents prior to attending senate. Confirming minutes and correcting errors should be a simple matter rather than the lengthy deliberations as to spelling and grammar that so often occur. Where senators raise issues that clearly indicate that they have not read the documents under discussion, they should be reminded of their responsibilities in this regard.

Senators need to enter the senate chambers with an awareness of their responsibilities to the academic project, rather than seeing the proceedings as a tedious administrative task. Senators need to actively ask questions about decisions pertaining to the academic project that have seemingly been determined elsewhere and demand that these are deliberated in senate. They should equally call for administrative matters that can be attended to outside of senate to be dealt with there so that the senate agenda is not so overwhelmed that stewarding the academic project becomes impossible.

Of course, there is no clear line between the dangers of significant academic decisions being made outside of senate, on the one hand, and the dangers of the minutiae of the institution requiring senate approval, on the other. But such discussions need to be had within a shared understanding that senate is responsible for the stewardship of the academic project.

Thirdly, the chairperson of senate should play this role in an exemplary manner. As chairperson of senate, the vice-chancellor has an unenviable position. She or he must simultaneously enable a space of debate while being aware of the need for responsive decision making that can easily be derailed by protracted position-taking. She or he is also often more aware of contextual constraints than senators, especially. Transparency in this regard is vital. Senators need to be kept informed of issues pertaining to the institutional context that have impact on the academic project.

Secrecy and mistrust are common characteristics of the neoliberal university (Shore and Wright, 2024). It is not unusual for senators to be kept in the dark about matters deemed too risky for the university's 'brand' to be discussed more widely. Institutions need to be very wary of when an item is kept off the senate agenda because of institutional risk-aversion.

The chairperson also needs to welcome critique of executive management that a senate committed to the academic project may well feel the need to articulate. Engaging with the substance of such critique without defensiveness is no easy task. As the leader of executive management, the chairperson seeks to share responsibility and protect those who report directly to them; but as the leader of the academic project, the chairperson may need to open space for respectful deliberation as to how the university is managed.

Furthermore, the chairperson needs to monitor the playing out of petty politics and remind senators of the need to foreground the wellbeing of the academic project in their deliberations. Navigating all of these while safeguarding academic freedoms is extremely challenging.

Conclusion

The literature suggests that senates generally fail to sufficiently play their role in the stewardship of the academic project. It seems that the extent to which they fail to undertake this responsibility parallels the extent to which the relevant institution functions as a university. The idea that universities should be a common good, responsible to all people, including those who never step foot on a campus, requires that senate enacts its roles in very particular ways. This entails much more explicit deliberation as to the purposes and processes of senate in the institutions.

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