

What Enables and Sustains Corruption in African Universities?

Jonathan D. Jansen

What if a university is seen by its surrounding community not as a place of higher learning, a site for generating impactful research, or a forum for new ideas, but rather as a highly visible and concentrated resource to be embezzled?

My research on corruption in South African universities certainly did not start with that question in mind. I was initially interested in understanding why chronic dysfunction persisted in a sample of higher education institutions; in other words, why did that set of universities experience constant turmoil marked by often violent student protests, frequent campus shutdowns, ongoing governance dysfunction, and a high turnover in campus leadership?

Interventions did not seem to help. When a public university becomes and remains unstable, the minister of education in South Africa would appoint an assessor to determine the causes of instability and, following a report, would appoint an administrator to take over the governance and/or management functions of that institution for one or more years. The goal is to reset, to fix urgent problems, to place the university on a more stable path forward. In most of the universities that I studied, there would often be relapse, and the cycle of instability and its morbid symptoms (protests, shutdowns, etc.) would recur with devastating consequences for the academia. Why?

I have discovered that the core of chronic dysfunction was an almost single-minded focus across university stakeholders (students, faculty, governors, vendors, etc.) on illicitly accessing the resources of these multi-billion rand institutions. At first glance, the run on institutional resources, from infrastructure grants to the theft of symbolic resources such as degree certificates, made material sense. Several of the more rural universities were located in, and surrounded by, impoverished communities living in shacks, where unemployment was very high and opportunities slim. But there was something much more sinister going on.

Connecting the Inside with the Outside

Over the past two decades, the broader South African society has descended into corruption on an industrial scale, especially in the context of state-owned enterprises—such as various public utilities, from the national train system to the main electricity supplier. Several books have been written on “state capture” to describe the phenomenon where powerful private interests manipulate the rules and regulations that govern public resources for their own benefit.

Against this background, it was always going to be unreasonable to expect universities—as public entities of sorts—to be spared the rampant corruption within the state. Stakeholders from other public entities such as cash-strapped and dysfunctional municipalities sat in the governing bodies (councils) of universities. Students and staff were connected to external vendors who were determined to gain access to tenders by bypassing institutional rules. In short, there were corrupt networks connecting people inside and outside universities, so that every substantial resource was under close attention of corrupt individuals.

The next task was to examine in more detail not only how this corruption in universities was enabled but also how it was sustained. I found two mechanisms that kept corrupt institutions under constant threat of collapse. One was institutional capability and the other institutional integrity.

Abstract

Corruption in universities is not something new. But what happens when corruption becomes endemic to institutional life? What sustains the corrupt practices that lead to chronically unstable universities? This article describes the operations of two important concepts that explain ongoing corruption in African universities: institutional capability and institutional integrity.

The question of institutional integrity is related to the regnant values of an institution.

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Institutional Capability

The question of institutional capability did not, however, simply boil down to “the lack of” things such as ability to govern/manage/administer a modern university; that would have been a limited problem, one that could easily be solved through training and development. It was that these institutions were rendered incapable by corrupted members of the university community. For example, while there were institutional rules established for everything, from the correct ways to tender for university services from catering to gardening, there were parallel rules created enabling corrupt individuals to compete in circumvention of, and despite, formal arrangements. Over time, those informal, unofficial rules became the institutional norm with the result that all the systems, from finance to human resources, were rendered incapable in the irregular bid for resources. A current example from recent times must suffice. Prominent politicians who are in touch with professors inside universities have subverted the admissions requirements for first-degree programs so that members of political elites who only had a secondary school qualification could directly jump to study for a postgraduate diploma or degree without any further vetting by the institution. Two parallel sets of institutional rules—one for the majority and another one for the corrupt minority—exist to this day within some of the institutions studied.

Institutional Integrity

The question of institutional integrity is related to the regnant values of an institution. Once again, I stumbled upon this concept when I compared institutions that remained stable and functional despite their own crises with those that had collapsed under the same pressures. What distinguished the two kinds of universities was that the former had a strong sense of scholastic identity and of institutional values such as academic integrity. Indeed, universities with high levels of institutional integrity kept the academic project at the core of all their deliberations at every level of governance, management, and administration. Any threat to the academic project would be dealt with swiftly. There were strong, uncompromising rules in place that emphasized academic honesty in the day-to-day dealings of the university.

The opposite happened in universities with low levels of institutional integrity: Rules were constantly in flux and open to negotiation, there were seldom consequences for bad behavior, and leadership was often complicit in breaking the rules. In questions ranging from the procurement of millions of rands for a new IT infrastructure to the state-funded student financial aid scheme, the management’s attention was heavily diverted toward either protecting or scamming these resources rather than advancing the HEI’s core activities, such as teaching, learning, and research.

In sum, corruption thrived when the rules that enabled institutional capability were broken, leaving universities vulnerable to abuse and their academic reputation suffering. With chronic instability in place, the more mobile middle-class students move to more secure universities; top professors who are longing for predictable schedules and uninterrupted research time seek an academic home elsewhere, and leading donors that support universities take their money elsewhere. What is left, some would argue, is little more than a low-level teaching college rather than something most people recognize as a university.

Not Only a South African Problem

Unfortunately, this has been the fate of too many African universities across the continent. When corrupt universities break down, middle-class African families send their children to the few good universities in South Africa or to institutions in the West. Sadly, those who remain are poorer students without too many academic choices and faculty without spectacular track record in research and publications.

A corrupt organization can certainly mimic a higher education institution by going through the routines of student admissions, registrations, instruction, assessment, and graduation even with constant disruption and rampant corruption. But is that a university? ▲