Transformation in Higher Education
ISSN: (Online) 2519-5638, (Print) 2415-0991

Decoding South African lecturers' frustrations with neoliberal governance approaches

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Dates:
Received: 29 Apr. 2024
Accepted: 19 June 2024
Published: 24 July 2024

How to cite this article:
Van Vuuren, N., 2024, 'Decoding South African lecturers' frustrations with neoliberal governance approaches', *Transformation in Higher Education* 9(0), a404. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v9i0.404

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Corporate norms and values, characterised by an enterprise ethos, became the new parameters that defined the academic environment. Academics are increasingly becoming concerned about the commodification of higher education and its impact on academic quality and the standards of quality graduates. The voices of South African academics and their experiences within the neoliberal university governance remain underexplored in the current literature. This study aimed to enhance understanding and contribute to knowledge by exploring lecturers' experiences within a corporatised academic work environment. This study took place across public and private higher education institutions in South Africa. A cross-sectional, qualitative, interpretative phenomenological research design was employed. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of 20 lecturers. The data analysis followed the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis. The findings of the study identified three key areas that triggered feelings of frustration with management: (1) participants experienced a lack of management's understanding of governing academic work environments, (2) an erosion of their collegial culture, and (3) a lack of transparent communication.

Contribution: A key contribution of this study, which set it apart from other studies, was lecturers' perceptions that their professional identity, collegiality, autonomy, and academic freedom were in crisis.

Keywords: higher education institutions; neoliberal framework; academic freedom; academic autonomy; academic; lecturer.

Introduction

Globally, there is a growing body of evidence that embraces the prevalence of neoliberalism in higher education with an emphasis on marketisation and consumerist principles (Adams 2006; Levin, Martin & Damián 2020; McKenna 2020; Shepherd 2018; Van Houtum & Van Uden 2022). According to Hartmann (2016:2145), 'neoliberalism typically refers to minimal government intervention, laissez-faire market policies, and individualism over collectivism'.

This ideological shift from a social liberal framework to a neoliberal framework intersects with managerial ideologies that often require institutions to compromise and, in many instances, relinquish their autonomous governance practices (Du Toit 2013; Mckenna 2020; Oleksenko, Molodychenko & Shcherbakova 2018; Shepherd 2018; Wolhuter & Langa 2021). These corporatised higher education institutions, also referred to as the 'modern university' are mainly concerned with micro-managerial control, focusing efficiency, accountability, and favouring managerial principles (Adams 2006; Van Houtum & Van Uden 2022). This had far-reaching implications for academics, including the fact that they now had conditional autonomy rather than complete autonomy (Cloete 2016). Academics are increasingly becoming concerned about the emphasis on commodifying higher education and the shift in governance practices (Cloete 2016; Giroux 2014; Mckenna 2020; Van Houtum & Van Uden 2022).

This article explores how lecturers employed at public and private higher education institutions in South Africa experienced the descendance of neoliberalism. Specifically, the shift in governance approaches from the traditional collegial strategies that promote self-governance to adopting corporate governance strategies that favour top-down hierarchical approaches.

Note: Special Collection: Neoliberal Turn in Higher Education.

Reorganising governance within a neoliberal context

South African higher education institutions have not been insusceptible to the changes brought on by adopting neoliberalism as a strategy to fast-track transformation. Prior to 1994, the education sector, including the higher education sector in South Africa, was segregated, under statutory governance, and financially dependent on the government (Boughey & McKenna 2021; Dlamini 2018; Moore 2015; Ndimande 2013). In other words, it was accepted practice for the government to oversee higher education institutions. After 1994 (post-apartheid), the government required higher education institutions to transform and be more accountable while aligning themselves with the proposed government transformation processes (Dlamini 2018; Stewart 2007). South African higher education institutions faced numerous challenges, such as redressing inequalities, a vast increase in student numbers, access to funding, addressing efficiency and effectiveness, which became key focus points of transformation for these institutions (Bozalek & Boughey 2020; Mlambo 2021; Mzangwa 2019). This necessitated higher education institutions adapting their management approaches to support the government's transformation plan and supervisory role (Shepherd 2018).

Initially, in the aftermath of apartheid, the key focus was on dismantling the division among higher education institutions, while at the same time establishing new governance frameworks to facilitate socio-political reconstruction (Boulton & Lucas 2008). Consequently, there was a high expectation that higher education institutions would fulfil a fundamental role in reconceptualising a socially inclusive society in South Africa (Badat & Sayed 2014; Patton 2016). Thus, a pivotal aspect of embracing neoliberalism in governance was its utilisation of principles such as promoting the use of management tools and measuring outcomes, which enhanced and supported the supervisory role of government (Bozalek & Boughey 2020; Dlamini 2018; Mlambo 2021; Mzangwa 2019; Shepherd 2018).

A large portion of the literature refers to this shift as the corporatisation of higher education institutions and highlights how adopting a corporate governance strategy has impacted higher education institutions and academics on a global scale (Abramov 2012; Coady & Coady 2000; Davies & Petersen 2005; Deem & Brehony 2005; Kolsaker 2008; Levin et al. 2020; Shepherd 2018) as evidenced by the following studies.

Surveys conducted by Teichler, Arimoto and Cummings (2013:178, 181–184) evidenced that South African academics scored the highest out of 23 countries on the following values: 'At my university there is a top-down management style; at my university, there is a cumbersome administrative process; and competent leadership is not prevalent'. Altbach (2000), on the other hand, painted a negative picture of the stance of academics as professionals within the changing higher education work environment. He stated that the adoption of managerial governance approaches and increased bureaucratisation caused a deterioration in the salaries and working conditions of academics. This, in turn, impacted negatively on academic freedom and autonomy. In their study, Sang et al. (2015) aimed to understand the lived experiences of academics in the UK. Through the lens of the 'ideal worker', they concluded that new managerialist approaches change the academic culture.

McKenna (2020:83), in her article, *The Rise of the Executive Dean and the Slide into Managerialism*, highlighted how this shift in university leadership and management could be perceived as working against shared responsibility and academic stewardship of values. With an increased demand on academics to adapt themselves and deliver within a commodified market-driven work environment, viewing higher education institutions as business enterprises challenges academic ideologies regarding academia. This includes their views on academic autonomy, freedom, intellectual discourse, and knowledge production.

One aspect to consider is how traditional academic ideologies uphold and embrace principles of collegial governance, which naturally lend themselves to academic autonomy and freedom (Olssen & Peters 2005). On the contrary, academics feel impelled to adopt and adapt to neoliberal principles that require academics to function outside their previous traditional free-thinking and autonomous spaces (De Boer & Goedegebuure 2009; Hoyle & Wallace 2005; Mckenna 2020; Teelken & Deem 2013).

Levin et al. (2020:10) referred to the 'twin logic' found in higher education institutions. On the one hand, academic logic that embraces an ethos of scientific knowledge and commonality and functions as a norm system. While on the other, a corporate logic also referred to as 'neoliberal logic' that increasingly undermines academic autonomy and freedom. It is within this conundrum that academics are caught between two conflicting systems of meaning (i.e. that of academic logic and that of corporate logic) (Henkel 2002; McKenna 2020).

Found was a noticeable lack of qualitative research in the social sciences addressing the extent to which lecturers perceive the shift towards a corporate governance model within South African higher education institutions. It is with this background in mind, that this qualitative study was conducted to explore how academics experienced the change in governance (i.e. if any) in their work environments.

Transitioning from collegiality to corporatisation

Traditionally, higher education institutions are regarded as one of the oldest social establishments and their core functions primarily focus on cultivating intellect and adding to the knowledge economy (Frank & Meyer 2020). These institutions are recognised as independent, and they usually manage themselves internally because of the belief that those

on the outside do not understand the complexities found within them (Hedley 2010; Taylor 2006). They do not see the need to answer to any outside entities or justify their teaching approaches or research topics and typically comprise cooperating non-hierarchical academic faculties that place a high value on academic freedom and ascribe to a high degree of autonomy and collegiality (Hedley 2010; Taylor 2006). In other words, collegiality and collaboration are recognised and acceptable seminal concepts found in these institutions (Tight 2014).

Collegial governance

The supposition of collegial governance is to promote shared decision-making and collaboration among all stakeholders while operating within a non-hierarchical structure (Gleeson, Abbott & Hill 2010). Collegiate structures are considered a predominant focus on consensus among equally theoretically expert members who specialise in distinct areas of expertise (Waters 1989:956). Lazega (2020) described collegiality as:

> [*N*]on-routine and innovative work, formal equality among heterogenous members trying to self-govern by reaching agreements in committee work and – in the absence of true hierarchy – using personalized relationships to create various levels of collective responsibility and make this coordination work. (p. 11)

Singh and Manser (2002) describe collegiality as a process of integration that encourages individuals to share their concepts to form a shared vision built on collaboration. While Manning (2013) describes the collegial model as one of inclusive shared decision making, fostering and upholding academic freedom and autonomy.

When applying the aforementioned definitions to the higher education academic environment, it can be asserted that academics subscribe to a belief in collegial self-governance, favouring principles such as academic freedom and autonomy.

According to Abbott-Chapman (2005), the collegial model can be described as a governance model that advocates academics' interests and promotes self-governance. Thus, academic freedom reinforces academics' perception that they have a right to participate in the decision-making processes and governance of these institutions. Further to supporting individual academic freedom, it also supports institutional autonomy and freedom (Akerlind & Kayrooz 2003:328; Crebert 2000). This includes the power to determine academic policies, the balance between teaching and research, staffing ratios, the appointment, promotion and discipline of students, curricula, standards, examinations and the conferring of degrees and diplomas; and the control over material resources needed to undertake these activities (Akerlind & Kayrooz 2003:329). Kauffman (1993:225) refers to this as institutional governance that relies on inclusive approaches to governance operating according to collaborative and representative principles that are inclusive of pluralistic views.

In their study, Olssen and Peters (2005:313–314) argue that universities' 'traditional professional culture of open intellectual inquiry and debate has been replaced with institutional stress on performativity, strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures, and academic audits.' This means decisions and practices that were previously subject to mechanisms of collegial governance have now been replaced with a hybrid set of practices that includes broader bureaucratic practices.

This adoption of corporate governance principles challenged the existing model of collegial self-governance and shifted the focus to the financial and managerial aspects of higher education institution governance (Du Toit 2013; Hoyle & Wallace 2005; Mckenna 2020; Shepherd 2018; Wolhuter & Langa 2021).

In recent years, higher education institutions have increasingly embraced corporate governance principles, leading to a departure from the traditional model of collegial self-governance.

Corporate governance

Governance, leadership, and management are perceived as interrelated yet distinct concepts (Fulop & Ramsy 2023:3). Embedded in a neoliberal framework, defining governance can be complex. In Sulaiman and Abdul Ghadas (2019), corporate governance is defined as:

> The interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power and responsibilities are exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their say. (p. 151)

According to Du Plessis, Hargovan, Bagaric & Harris (2014):

> Corporate governance deals with ways to control management, balancing the interests of all stakeholders and other parties who can be affected by the corporation's conduct in order to ensure responsible behaviour by corporations and to achieve the maximum level of efficiency and profitability for the corporation. (p. 5)

In addition, corporate governance encompasses various principles, rules, and practices that govern the management and control of a company or institution. These principles and rules operate within structures and processes designed to direct and regulate organisations and institutions, while at the same time requiring accountability (Gramling et al. 2004).

Corporate governance as a governance approach in higher education means embracing the 'commodification' of education, overshadowing academic individuality in the pursuit of corporate efficiency (Bok 2004). This means collegial governance has now been replaced with a hybrid set of practices that includes broader bureaucratic practices (Olssen & Peters 2005).

Hence, it could be argued that adopting corporate governance approaches within higher education institutions might shift

the dynamic between management and academics from a collegial, collaborative relationship to one resembling that of a corporate entity and its employees. In other words, the governance approach will shift and will mainly focus on measurable outputs, giving those in central management positions authority and control over academics, thus impeding their academic autonomy and freedom (Hedley 2010; Johnson 2006).

Corporate governance operates through managerialism

The corporate governance model employs managerial principles founded on the strategies of corporate efficiency, emphasising financial and managerial accountability for those responsible for managing the organisation or institution (Klikauer 2015; Shepherd 2018; Teichler 2021).

Managerialism, also referred to as 'corporate managerialism' and 'public management', is a well-researched and documented phenomenon and is considered a corporate governing approach not unique to South Africa (Klikauer 2015; Shepherd 2018; Teichler 2021). It has been defined by its ends and the methods managers use to establish corporate ideologies systematically in an organisation and it is usually driven by a top-down governance approach (Klikauer 2015). Managers are thus responsible for fostering and nurturing organisational growth and profitability to ultimately satisfy the expectations of shareholders and customers. It is best described as an ideological reform resting on functional logic that facilitates the application of management tools to effectively assist managers in their decision-making and actions when managing organisations or institutions (Deem & Brehony 2005).

Olssen (2002) asserts that managerialism undermines the academic autonomy of lecturers, dumbing down their role to that of skilled labourers. Levin et al. (2020) agreed with Olssen (2002), stating that there was a conflict between academic and neoliberal logic that was closely linked to corporate logic.

It can thus be argued that thinking of higher education institutions as business enterprises can be foreign to many academics. This is because it confronts their deeply seated ideological beliefs about academia, which include attributes such as academic autonomy, freedom, intellectual discourse, knowledge production, and self-governance. The gap identified is: what consideration has been given to how academics experience this 'penetration' of neoliberalism as part of the changes in the neoliberal governance of these institutions?

Research methods and design

The qualitative study was explorative in nature and located within an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was identified as the methodological approach that allowed the researcher to explore the individual's subjective interpretation of the experienced phenomenon. Guided by the three theoretical perspectives, namely, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, IPA allowed the researcher to find the balance between the voice of the participants and making sense of their accounts, thus creating new knowledge (Smith & Nizza 2022).

Theoretical perspectives: Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis falls under the category of experiential methodologies, underpinned by three theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology explores the processes and relationships of first-person experiences aiming to capture and highlight acts of preconscious and unconscious processes (Smith & Nizza 2022). Hermeneutics intends to provide a deeper comprehension of the text's meaning. Idiography focuses on exploring individuals' unique contexts through detailed, in-depth inquiry. The rationale for choosing IPA for this study was that it allowed the researcher to explore and understand in depth how academics experienced the changes they encountered in the governance of the higher education work environment in South Africa. In other words, IPA provided structure to the researcher while allowing freedom of interpretation (Smith & Nizza 2022).

Sampling

The study took place across six public and private higher education institutions in two provinces in South Africa and applied to academics employed by these institutions. I postulate that all higher education institutions in South Africa experience changes in governance. Therefore, I aimed to explore the individual lived experiences of academics independently from their respective higher education institutions, a theme central to the study. I used the convenient non-probability sampling method to select 20 participants at different stages of their professional academic careers. The criteria that guided the sampling parameters for this study were that participants must have lectured actively at a South African higher education institution for at least 2 years. I argue that rapid, continuous change forms part of the higher education work environment. I also recognise that lecturers who lectured for 2 years would have been less exposed to the changes; however, including their voices was important for a meaningful analysis.

Data collection

The data collection method employed was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. One hour face-to-face, interviews were initially scheduled with each of the 20 participants (i.e. eight participants were from public institutions and 12 from private institutions). The research question that guided the study was, 'What changes have academics experienced, if any, in the governance of their work environments at higher education institutions in South Africa?'

Data analysis

As the aim of this study was to explore in depth participants' lived experiences of the changes in governance in their work environment, the data analysis followed the principles of IPA as described by Smith and Nizza (2022). Firstly, the researcher transcribed each participant's interview verbatim. Secondly, the data was analysed by moving from the parts making sense of the text to the whole (i.e. what was shared meaning between participants). The interpretative process involved two stages: (1) participants trying to make sense of their lived experiences, and (2) the researcher trying to make sense of the participants' meaning-making process. Thirdly, a double hermeneutic formed part of the analysis as participants reflected on their experiences during the interview. During this iterative process, the researcher moved from parts of the text to the whole and back to the parts. Finally, an idiographic approach to each interview transcript was adopted, as in this step the researcher was concerned with the particular rather than the more general (Smith & Nizza 2022).

Ensuring the quality of the study

To ensure the quality of the study, I iteratively explored the data using continuous reflection to prevent my prior knowledge, assumptions, and prejudices from influencing the study's findings. Further to this, I was mindful of existing and previous research concerning higher education institutions as work environments, both in South Africa and globally. To maintain transparency, I documented every step of the research process methodically.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from The Independent Institute of Education Ethics Committee (No. R. 15785 [RPGS04]).

Findings and discussion

In this study, participants used a range of attributes to describe and express their frustration with the corporate governance strategies manifested through managerialist approaches in their academic work environments. Key findings revealed participants' scepticism about the adeptness of management, with specific reference to their competency and level of understanding of the complexities found in academia. They also talked about their experiences of the decline of the collegial culture, noting how academics as professionals were no longer regarded as constitutive members of the higher education work environment but as subordinates of those in management. Additionally, participants highlighted a lack of transparent communication from management and questioned the rationale behind managerial decisions, emphasising the hierarchical nature of a top-down approach to communication.

The ignorance of management

Effectively overseeing academics requires a thorough comprehension of the multifaceted, yet intricate academic work environment, characterised by a culture of freedom, autonomy, and collegiality (Boyd 2014). Bellamy, Morley and Watty (2003) refer to the flexibility found in academic work environments. While Macfarlane (2010) noted that academics perceived themselves as experts regarding the complexities of the work environment of higher education institutions.

Drawing on their academic and institutional logic, participants in this study firmly believed that management lacked the capability to manage and guide them as academics within the academic work environment. While they expressed their frustration in different ways, it was evident from the following extracts:

> '[*T*]hey have no idea what is going on in our workplace. They are sitting in an office somewhere making decisions, this is absolutely frustrating because if there is actually participation in some of the decision making that takes place, we can tell them Hey guys, there is a much easier way to do this.' (Participant 1; lecturer; 31 years old)

> '[*I*]t is all about numbers and money. It is getting big … you just have to produce.' (Participant 3; lecturer; 31 years old)

> 'We are not asked for input ever. We are told how to do things by people who don't know how to do them because they have never done them. That is the worst.' (Participant 4; lecturer; 46 years old)

> 'Another thing is a decision gets made at top level, but the practicality is not necessarily possible.' (Participant 12; lecturer; 34 years old)

> 'If you ask me today what their strategies are, I don't know. They have got weird words, like efficacy … If you say to me, we are working towards and spell out the goals, that to me is logic then I can start working towards.' (Participant 18; lecturer; 27 years old)

What was clear was that participants did not think that management knew how to manage and guide them (i.e. academics) within the complexities found in the higher education work environment. This was in line with a study by Winter, Taylor and Sarros (2000) that implied managerialists lacked an understanding of the academic work environment.

Moreover, participants repeatedly made reference to the ignorance of management and linked it to the increase in their workload. This encapsulated their perception that the increase in their administrative tasks mirrored management's ineffectual corporate strategies of the academic work environment. To support their perception, participants referred to how they were expected to attend meetings that had no bearing on their academic role:

> '[*S*]itting in meetings that do not concern me and has no bearing on what I do from day to day.' (Participant 1; lecturer; 31 years old)

> 'Going to meetings that I don't feel are very relevant. I mean I work in academics. I would be thinking why am I here when I could be doing something else.' (Participant 8; lecturer; 30 years old)

Participants also referred to the surveillance culture management and explained how management employed

various surveillance tracking methods to promote their bureaucratic agendas by monitoring and tracking participants' performance metrics, research output, the performance of their students and the subjects lectured by them. Along the same lines , research by Kenny (2017:897–898), that explored performativity-related academic work, claimed that the neoliberal reforms of higher education institutions fuelled by corporate managerial practices prioritised performativity and accountability. This finding was also consistent with other research that showed how the commercialisation of higher education overrode academics' disciplinary and pedagogical objectives (Anderson 2010; Blackmore & Sachs 2000; Broadbent, Troup & Strachan 2013; Heller 2022; Shepherd 2018; Teelken & Deem 2013).

The erosion of collegiality by excluding the academic

Traditionally in higher education institutions, when referring to management, the concept 'governance' was used instead of management. This was because governance in the context of higher education institutions referred to an inclusive, collegial relationship (Abbott-Chapman 2005; Crebert 2000). Having a collegial relationship allows the academic manager (i.e. deans or members of the senate) to represent the interests of the academics within the traditional self-governance structure found in the traditions of higher education institutions (Abbott-Chapman 2005).

In this study, it would seem that more and more collegial forums were being replaced by hierarchical structures in which the academic was being instructed and informed regarding the decisions made rather than being included in the process:

> 'Another thing is a decision gets made at the top level, but the practicality is not necessarily possible.' (Participant 15; lecturer; 33 years old)
>
> 'I sit on the academic board meeting, and I sit on the senate, but there I get a feeling the decisions have already been made … Does that even make sense?' (Participant 4; lecturer; 46 years old)
>
> 'Our voice is never heard … never …' (Participant 19; lecturer; 30 years old)
>
> 'It is just about what the top management says, it is not about the lecturer …' (Participant 15; lecturer; 33 years old)
>
> 'They are just telling me … and it felt like I didn't have a say.' (Participant 2; lecturer; 32 years old)

Participants described experiencing the silencing of their voices as a threat to their professional status, academic freedom, and autonomy. It would seem from the findings in this study that these forums were becoming spaces where academics were being subjected to and informed about corporate plans and decisions with a disregard for the academic ethos rooted in a collegial culture prevalent in academia. This, in turn, created a dissonance between new management and academia, potentially leading to a fragmentation of the relationship as the academic voice was losing its power to corporatism.

In addition, participants elaborated on how they experienced a de-professionalisation that was intricately connected to the implementation of intensified managerial systems of control and auditing by management. Their descriptions alluded to how they experienced a reduced influence over academic matters and a subjection to new management:

> 'I feel that we are not recognised as much as I honestly feel that we should be …' (Participant 8; lecturer; 30 years old)

They expressed that despite having valuable and constructive insights that could benefit the institution as a whole, their voices were being disregarded and excluded from the decision-making processes. In other words, the voices of management superseded the voices of the academic professional. An emphasis was placed on how management ignored the academic ethos rooted in a collegial culture.

A study by Davis, Jansen Van Rensburg and Venter (2014:8) confirmed the finding of 'a climate of limited collegiality'. In Korten (2015), the corporate management structure was described as an autocratic, top-down approach to management that legitimised governance strategies such as auditing and tracking performance. Historically, faculty boards provided a collegial forum where important decisions regarding academic matters were made. Mayo (2009) argued that the goals of managerialists (i.e. to measure outcomes and track processes) have disempowered academics and have shifted the power to those in management. According to Marini and Reale (2015):

> The more a university is managerially led, the less it will be collegial because the increasingly top-down structure of decision-making and the strengthening of accountability will detract from the individuality and the bottom-up voice of the peers. (p. 112)

Henkel (2005) described the need for academics to play an instrumental role in the decision-making processes aligned to academic autonomy (i.e. accepted that academics plan their own goals and set their schedules). Participants' descriptions of their experiences strongly agree with Henkel (2005). They questioned the adeptness of management in making decisions concerning academic matters and implied that managerial logic was obstructing academic logic:

> 'We are not asked for input ever. We are told how to do things by people who don't know how to do them because they have never done them. That is the worst'; 'There are decisions that high up top management make; for example, your direct line manager will agree to without consulting you …' (Participant 4; lecturer; 46 years old)
>
> '[*B*]ecause if there is participation in some of the decision making that takes place, we can tell them, hey guys, there is a much easier way to do this …' (Participant 4; lecturer; 46 years old)

They thus perceived management as ignorant and not informed when it came to academic matters.

Conscious of their academic autonomy, participants' talk reflected a value judgement as they alluded to how the exclusion of academics was perceived as an erosion of them

as constitutive members of higher education institutions. Academic freedom is considered a core value in higher education institutions.

Traditionally, collegiality has always been perceived as a seminal concept grounded in academic logic and essential to the academic profession. The findings in this study suggested that the experience of participants not being included in the decision-making processes eroded collegiality, their trust and respect for management. Participants experienced exclusion as an obstruction of their academic freedom and it altered their professional autonomy. This finding was consistent with one of the three traditional core values central to academic identity, identified by Finkelstein et al. (2016), namely shared governance.

Lack of communication and transparency

The finding of a lack of communication and transparency coincided with the previous mentioned findings, namely being the ignorance of management and the erosion of collegiality by excluding the academic. Highlighted was the inaccessibility of information regarding the decisions made around the changes because of a lack of transparent communication.

Found in the literature was a gap in the role that the lack of communication played in the context of the changes in higher education as experienced by participants and explored in this study. Traditionally, academics were placed at the centre of higher education institutions, and they used to be consulted regarding decisions that impacted academia. They were viewed as experts in their field and rarely challenged by people outside their peers. Thus, the role of the academic was closely tied to the central functions of higher education institutions. They were free to share their ideas at faculty meetings, the senate, and other collaborative forums. It is a known practice to consult academics on changes regarding academic issues that impact their discipline and academic role (Kolsaker 2008). Traditionally higher education institutions were viewed as cooperative and collegial environments that operated transparently (Olssen 2002).

The lack of motivation, irritation, disappointment, scepticism, and feeling unfairly treated as professionals came to the fore when combining the experiences of a lack of communication and transparency among study participants:

> 'Another thing is a decision gets made at the top level, but the practicality is not necessarily possible.' (Participant 15; lecturer; 33 years old)

> 'I sit on the academic board meeting, and I sit on the senate, but there I get a feeling the decisions have already been made … Does that even make sense?' (Participant 4; lecturer; 46 years old)

> Our voice is never heard … never …' (Participant 19; lecturer; 30 years old)

> 'It is just about what the top management says, it is not about the lecturer … ' (Participant 15; lecturer; 33 years old)

> 'They are just telling me … and it felt like I didn't have a say.' (Participant 2; lecturer; 32 years old)

Furthermore, not having access to information made it increasingly difficult for participants to perform and feel they belonged. Being excluded from decision-making processes, they experienced a sense of alienation exacerbated by the lack of communication and transparency, leading to confusion and vulnerability. A key issue that emerged was how communication and transparency were essential components of a cohesive work environment. Tight (2014:294) referred to 'The idea that university decisions can be made collectively by the academics affected …' and touched on the core value of academic logic. Participants drew on academic logic when describing a need to understand the reasons behind the change. According to Levin et al. (2020), neoliberal logic invaded higher education institutions intending to adjust and replace academic logic. One participant stated that she was:

> '[*A*] person cannot operate if not communicated to appropriately.' (Participant 11; lecturer; 28 years old)

This indicated that academics did not readily accept intrusions into their professional academic domain. Participants further referred to a hierarchal structure that operated in levels of exclusivity, which further influenced the free flow and transparency of information:

> 'I feel that the communication about the change is not so transparent as it should be – that affects my motivation level.' (Participant 20; lecturer; 37 years old)

> '[*T*]he biggest challenge is communication. It is a huge problem, and it frustrates me …' (Participant 17; lecturer; 57 years old)

> 'You made a decision, but have you properly communicated this to everybody … I feel it is unfair …' (Participant 18; lecturer; 27 years old)

> 'I hate it when people play games with you … they know about all the changes that are going to take place …' (Participant 17; lecturer; 57 years old)

Their experiences highlighted a tension between an increase in institutional autonomy and control and a decrease in individual autonomy. This further highlighted a distrust of management neoliberal governance strategies and a suspicion of their intentions.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to explore how lecturers experience governance change within South African higher education institutions. The main focus of this study was not to challenge the transformation of the higher education landscape in South Africa. Instead, it sought to raise concerns and draw attention to the increasing impact of the neoliberal academic work environment and corporate culture on academia. The findings in this study support the ongoing debate concerning the adoption of corporate culture and managerial governance approaches embedded in neoliberalism within higher education institutions. A key finding reported by the majority of participants was how they experienced that the institution where they were employed embraced managerial strategies embedded in

corporate governance. This left them feeling marginalised and excluded from their academic work environment. Participants pointed to their increased workload and attending voiceless meetings as evidence of their belief that management lacked competence to effectively manage academic work environments. As a vehicle to exclude them from decision-making processes, they talked about how management employed a lack of communication and transparency. This, they meant, posed a risk as it fostered a culture of individualism and exclusion which contradicted the conventional academic ethos of collegiality.

By promoting a culture of individualism and competitiveness, there is a risk of eroding the culture of collegiality among lecturers. This can lead to lecturers becoming more self-centred with individuals focused on protecting their professional self-worth and academic standing at the expense of collegiality. What is needed is transparency between lecturers and management on issues related to decision-making, communication and governance that is authentic. Encouraging a culture of collegiality and inclusiveness could result in lecturers having a more positive experience of changes in governance within their academic work environment.

Acknowledgements

This article is derived from the author's doctoral thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at the University of South Africa entitled 'Lecturers' psychosocial experience of change in higher education in South Africa', on December 2022 with supervisor Professor Vasi van Deventer. It is available here: https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/30421/thesis_van%20vuuren_n.pdf?sequence=1.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

N.v.V. is the sole author of this article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, N.v.V., upon reasonable request.

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