

Why Kenya's decision to appoint 'corporate' chancellors won't fix universities

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The choice of chancellors appointed to head universities is a good indicator of the direction in which the state seeks to steer its institutions. It can foster or erode autonomy and shared decision-making.

This has been a big issue in Kenya for decades. But the country [isn't alone](#). The balance between university autonomy and politicisation is relevant everywhere.

In the British tradition, which Kenya generally applies, the university chancellor is a ceremonial head of a university. This titular head is usually a prominent citizen, a business or political leader. The executive academic and administrative head of the university is the vice-chancellor.

Since independence the chancellors of public universities have either been heads of state or their appointees. They preside over graduation ceremonies, can give advice to the university councils, and make recommendations to the cabinet secretary of education.

In theory the chancellor is a ceremonial position. But in practice Kenya's chancellors are able – and even expected – to steer their universities in specific directions. This power is underlined in the three epochs that characterise the evolution of public universities' chancellorship in the country. These are the political chancellor; the academic chancellor; and, more recently, the corporate chancellor.

The corporate chancellor, common since 2013, is a response to [mounting financial challenges](#) facing Kenyan universities. The appointees include successful bankers, businessmen, corporate chief executives, industrialists and philanthropists. The goal is to use their management experience to guide the transition from a collegial governance model to a corporate managerial culture.

But as I [argue](#) in a recent paper, it is highly unlikely that the corporate chancellors will be successful where political and academic chancellors failed.

Political chancellor

The political chancellor was manifest from independence in 1963 to 2002. During that period the head of state was the chancellor of all eight public universities.

Kenya was a one-party political state until 1992. Under this system the president exercised [dominance over the legislature and the judiciary](#). Political dissent was [largely](#) from the academic community. Professors and students critical of the state were [jailed, exiled, or suspended](#) from the universities.

[Read more: A review of Kenya's universities: what formed them, what's wrong with them](#)

As the chancellor, the head of state appointed the university council members and the vice-chancellors and their deputies. All were selected on the basis of their perceived political loyalty to the state. These university administrators steered universities along specific political paths, including firing politically vocal faculty and expelling opposition-leaning students. Political control of universities was the goal of the political chancellor.

As one scholar [observed](#),

University development... (was) guided by directives from sections of the ministries of education or finance and economic development and the chancellor of the public universities.

Academic chancellor

In 2002, the independence era ruling party was defeated by the opposition. This expanded the democratic space with an independent judiciary and an active legislature.

The new head of state declined to be the chancellor of all public universities. Instead he appointed prominent citizens as provided by the public universities law.

From 2003 to 2012, the head of state appointed former vice-chancellors and their deputies as chancellors of the public universities. These appointments happened in the context of a difficult climate for universities.

- There were governance and managerial challenges resulting in student and faculty strikes;
- financial and resource constraints, including the inability of some universities to generate revenue internally; and
- an overall decline in academic quality.

There were expectations that academic chancellors would steer the transformation of universities into institutions that resembled corporate culture. This failed for two reasons.

First, the political class still regarded public universities as instruments for political legitimacy. Around 70% (or 23) of the current 33 public universities were established in the 2012–2013 academic year as each major ethnic group demanded a public university for its region. Political expediency superseded resource constraints as well as the need to stabilise the system for quality enhancement.

Second, academic chancellors lacked experience in what was expected of them. This included an emphasis on the privatisation and commercialisation of university programmes and services.

Corporate chancellor

Since 2013 public universities have continued to experience major financial, and managerial crises.

This heralded the appointment of corporate chancellors. But most universities are still unable to generate additional revenues to make up for a shortfall in government subsidies. Many are [financially insolvent](#) and unable to meet basic financial obligations such as paying salaries and retirement contributions.

[Read more: The power of the purse threatens academic freedom in Kenya's universities](#)

Equally significant have been financial improprieties and corruption. These have further eroded financial viability.

Managerial challenges loom large. Frequent closures due to student and faculty strikes have become too common. And universities are too caught up in bureaucratic red tape to respond quickly to crises. This is a legacy of a prior managerial culture of state control and financing.

The corporate chancellors appointed have been expected to guide universities in their transition from a collegial governance model to a corporate managerial culture.

It's doubtful they will succeed.

What's needed

University ethos differs from business and industry. Businesses are driven by profit. Universities are driven by knowledge production and dissemination. Corporate culture focuses on efficiency and merit. Universities are sensitive to effectiveness and equity. Corporate governance is top-down, while universities cherish shared governance.

In addition, universities are largely political. They influence, and are influenced by, national politics. For their part corporate entities tend to be apolitical.

Given these differences, corporate chancellors are unlikely to be successful in steering universities in the direction of desired reforms.

The government should stop trying to tinker at the edges. Instead it should strengthen internal university administration through shared governance. Under this model, university management would be shared between the council and senior management on the one hand, and faculty and students on the other.

Matters pertaining to academics and student affairs would benefit from input from faculty and students. At the same time finance and personnel would be managed by administrators. This model would ensure that all internal stakeholders were participating in planning and decision-making. In turn, this would make everyone accountable.