EXPLORING ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY, AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In the dynamic landscape of South African higher education governance, this paper explores the intricate relationship between "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability". Over decades, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of these foundational principles, initiating a national dialogue through research initiatives and publications. However, recent developments such as the Covid-19 pandemic underscore the imperative to delve deeper into this discourse, as globalisation is quickly becoming a critical external influence on higher education. Focusing on the subtheme: governance of education in a globalised arena, within the matrix of "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability", the article critically examines the interplay between these essential triadic elements and the overarching impact of higher education governance. Therefore, the aim is to elucidate how these principles intersect and shape the landscape of governance as private higher education institutions become more globalised. Methodologically, a Scoping Review was conducted to offer a wide-ranging outline of the existing body of knowledge. This involved systematically searching, selecting, and synthesising relevant academic literature, journal articles, and websites. Drawing on recent scholarly works, the article navigates the compliance landscape, emphasizing the delicate balance between regulation and "institutional autonomy" within a more globalized educational framework. As the global sphere increasingly influences higher education, the study navigates the compliance landscape, emphasising the subtle balance between regulation and "institutional autonomy" within a more globalized educational framework. Building on the CHE's groundwork over the years in South Africa (S.A.), this study provides insights and "pathways" towards a more global, adaptive, and responsive governance framework for private higher education institutions.

Keywords: academic freedom, institutional autonomy, public accountability, private higher education, globalised education

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of South Africa's transformative journey through the post-Apartheid era, the higher education has evolved significantly (Mahomed 2020). The demise of Apartheid ushered in an era of profound societal change, with higher education playing a critical role in redressing historical injustices, fostering inclusivity, and promoting global engagement (Luescher et al. 2021; Martinerie 2022). This transition marked a pivotal moment in South African history, as the country sought to dismantle systemic discrimination and create an equitable and globally connected higher education system (Motala 2020; Gukurume and Maringira 2022; Mezzanotte 2022).

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) has remained instrumental in steering this transformation, overseeing governance reforms and quality assurance measures to ensure that higher education institutions align with the ideals of democracy, equity, and excellence (Boughey and McKenna 2021). A key focus has been on "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability"—three foundational principles shaping governance structures and policies in an increasingly globalized world (Wangenge-Ouma and Kgosithebe 2020). The introduction of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) by the CHE further underscores the sector's commitment to strengthening institutional responsibility and governance within private higher education institutions (Myburgh and Calitz 2022).

Globalization has emerged as a powerful external force shaping the governance of higher education institutions, particularly private institutions that operate within both national and international regulatory frameworks. S.A.'s higher education system, long excluded from the global arena due to Apartheid-era policies, now faces the challenge of balancing "institutional autonomy" with regulatory compliance in a rapidly evolving global educational landscape (Huisman 2020). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic it has become essential for adaptive governance models that can support emerging challenges and opportunities within this globalized framework (Mohale 2023).

This article aims to examine the intersection of "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" in shaping the governance of private higher education institutions within a globalized landscape. It examines the shifting challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization and their influence on governance structures. The structured of this article is as follows: Section 2 highlights an analysis of the existing literature on "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" in the governance of private higher education institutions. Section 3 outlines the methodology, detailing the scoping review approach used to synthesize relevant scholarly works and policy frameworks. Section 4 critically examines the impact of globalization on governance structures and regulatory

compliance within private higher education institutions. Section 5 discusses key findings, highlighting strategies for fostering a more adaptive and responsive governance framework. Finally, Section 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations, emphasizing pathways for policy and institutional reforms in a globalized educational landscape.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This article aims to examine how "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" intersect in shaping the governance of private higher education institutions within a globalized context. It examines evolving challenges and opportunities that present as a result of globalization and their influence on governance structures.

The specific objectives are:

- To analyze the influence of globalization on "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" in private higher education governance.
- To examine how private higher education institutions navigate the balance between regulatory compliance and "institutional autonomy" in a globalized environment.
- To identify pathways for developing a more adaptive and responsive governance framework that aligns with global trends while safeguarding core academic principles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education governance in S.A. operates within a complex legislative and regulatory framework that seeks to balance "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability". This balance is critical in ensuring that institutions maintain high educational standards while remaining responsive to societal and global demands. The evolving landscape of globalization has introduced new challenges and pressures, requiring institutions to navigate regulatory compliance, financial sustainability, and academic integrity.

Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks Impacting Higher Education Governance

The governance of higher education in S.A. is primarily regulated by the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997), which outlines the duties of key regulatory bodies, including the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (Viljoen and Cilliers 2022). These institutions ensure that governance structures align with national and international standards (Steynberg, Liu, Li and Grundling 2020.). While these regulations aim to safeguard educational quality and equity, they also introduce constraints on "institutional autonomy". The CHE's role is important

in terms of quality assurance as well as promotion of academic standards, ensuring institutions comply with national benchmarks (Gaston 2023). However, regulatory oversight can sometimes interfere with academic freedom, particularly when compliance measures limit curriculum innovation or research agendas (Boughey and McKenna 2021).

"Academic Freedom" and "Institutional Autonomy"– the South African Context

"Academic freedom", the skill that academics have in respect of teaching, researching, and the expressing of ideas exclusive of external control, is a cornerstone of higher education. Nevertheless, it is increasingly under threat due to political, economic, and ideological pressures (Kinzelbach, Saliba and Spannagel 2020). In S.A., while constitutional protections exist, "academic freedom" is often challenged by funding dependencies, governmental policies, and market-driven demands. "Institutional autonomy"—the ability of higher education institutions to govern themselves minus external interfering—has similarly been constrained by increased state regulation (Chankseliani, Qoraboyev, and Gimranova 2021).

The interdependence of "academic freedom" and "institutional autonomy" is particularly evident in private higher education institutions, which must comply with stringent national policies while striving to maintain independent governance (Kallio et al. 2022). The QAF, introduced by the CHE, strengthens institutional responsibility for upholding quality standards (Myburgh and Calitz 2022). While this framework fosters accountability, it also imposes additional administrative burdens, potentially limiting institutional flexibility and academic creativity.

Public Accountability and the Pressures of Globalization

"Public accountability" ensures that higher education institutions remain transparent and responsive to societal needs. It involves multiple stakeholders, including students, faculty, government entities, and the broader community, who expect institutions to contribute to national development goals (Blankenberger and Williams 2020). The challenge, however, lies in balancing accountability with institutional independence. Excessive regulation or performance-based funding models may stifle "academic freedom" by incentivizing conformity over innovation (Solomon 2020).

Globalization further complicates this balance by introducing new pressures. Increased international collaboration, student mobility, and cross-border education initiatives require institutions to meet both local and global standards (Yang, Shen and Xu 2022). While globalization fosters diversity and knowledge exchange, it also necessitates regulatory alignment, which may conflict with traditional governance structures (Karam, Fares, and Al-

Majeed 2021). The need for institutions to remain competitive globally while adhering to national regulations has created tensions between autonomy and accountability (Parcerisa, Verger and Browes 2022).

Theoretical Framework: Utilitarianism and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study draws from utilitarianism as an ethical foundation to examine higher education governance. Utilitarianism can be traced to John Stewart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that advocates that the morality of an action is influenced by its overall utility or happiness. According to utilitarianism, an action is considered "morally right if it produces the greatest amount of overall happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people" (Kay 2023). Therefore, utilitarianism prioritizes maximizing overall societal benefits, making it particularly relevant in assessing the trade-offs between "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" (Scarre 2020). Governance policies that promote efficiency, inclusivity, and long-term societal impact align with this ethical perspective.

In the context of South African higher education, a utilitarian approach advocates for:

- **Efficient resource allocation**: ensuring that policies maximize educational access and quality, particularly for marginalized groups (Chen and Hooker 2020).
- **Inclusive decision-making**: incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives to enhance transparency and public trust (Fitzgerald, Thompson, and Lorentz 2022).
- **Long-term societal benefits**: such as research-driven solutions to global challenges, aligning with the principles of "academic freedom" and "institutional autonomy" (Kay 2023).

Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for assessing the impact of governance reforms in higher education. The SDGs emphasize equity, quality education, and institutional effectiveness, reinforcing the need for governance structures that balance autonomy with accountability (Alamoush, Ballini and Ölçer 2021). By integrating utilitarian ethics with the SDG framework, this study provides a comprehensive lens through which to evaluate higher education governance in S.A.

The literature underscores the complexities of governance in South African private higher education institutions, highlighting the tensions between "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability". Regulatory frameworks ensure quality but can also impose restrictions that hinder institutional independence. Globalization introduces both

opportunities and challenges, necessitating adaptive governance models. By employing utilitarianism and the SDGs as guiding frameworks, this study seeks to assess governance strategies that optimize educational quality, stakeholder engagement, and institutional resilience in a rapidly evolving global context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing a Scoping Review methodology within the interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist paradigm is well-suited to this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex and evolving nature of governance in private higher education institutions. This approach acknowledges that the interplay between "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" is shaped by various socio-political, economic, and historical contexts.

A Scoping Review was selected as the most appropriate method because it enables a broad and systematic mapping of existing literature, identifying key themes, gaps, and emerging trends relevant to the governance of higher education in a globalized context (Kumar and Praveenakumar 2025.). Contrasting to Systematic Reviews, which concentrate on a narrow focus of defined research questions, Scoping Reviews are particularly useful for synthesizing diverse bodies of knowledge and informing future research directions.

Data Collection and Selection Criteria: The study systematically reviewed academic literature, journal articles, policy documents, and reputable websites published within the last five years. The rationale for selecting this timeframe was to ensure that the study captures the most current debates, challenges, and regulatory developments in higher education governance, particularly in response to globalization and recent disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, seminal works that provide foundational theoretical insights were also included to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

The literature search involved the use of multiple scholarly databases, and included Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and institutional repositories. Keywords such as "Academic Freedom," "Institutional Autonomy," "Public Accountability," and "Higher Education Governance in a Globalized Context" were employed to identify relevant studies. The inclusion criteria were:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy reports that specifically discuss governance structures in higher education, with a focus on private institutions.
- Studies addressing the intersections of "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability".
- Research exploring the impact of globalization on private higher education governance.

- Publications from international and South African perspectives to provide both global and local insights.

Studies that did not directly relate to the governance of higher education institutions or lacked relevance to the key themes of this research were excluded.

Data Analysis: The selected studies were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and key insights across multiple sources. The analysis involved categorizing findings into core themes such as:

- The regulatory landscape as well as the influence on "institutional autonomy".
- The role of "academic freedom" in shaping research and teaching practices.
- "Public accountability" mechanisms and their influence on governance structures.
- The pressures of globalization on private higher education institutions.

Through this analytical process, the study aimed to provide an understanding of how these three governance dimensions intersect and evolve within a rapidly changing global educational environment. The findings were then synthesized to offer insights into potential pathways for enhancing governance frameworks that balance regulation with "institutional autonomy" while maintaining "public accountability". By adopting this methodological approach, the study ensured a comprehensive and contextually grounded exploration of the governance of private higher education institutions, providing valuable insights for policymakers, academics, and institutional leaders navigating the complexities of globalized education.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section discusses the governance of education in a globalized arena, specifically examining the interplay between "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability".

Balancing "Academic Freedom", "Institutional Autonomy", and "Public Accountability"

The dynamic relationship between "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" is crucial for effective higher education governance. "Academic freedom" fosters intellectual exploration, while "institutional autonomy" ensures institutions can operate independently. However, both must be counterbalanced with "public accountability" to align higher education institutions (HEIs) with societal expectations and national priorities (Agasisti and Shibanova 2022.).

Findings indicate that "academic freedom" is most effective in environments where "institutional autonomy" is safeguarded (Scalisi 2020; Reichman 2021). Excessive regulatory control can stifle this freedom, restricting scholarly discourse and innovation (Morrish 2020). In S.A., legal frameworks such as the Higher Education Act protect "academic" (Boughey and McKenna 2021). "Institutional autonomy" enables HEIs to manage faculty appointments, curricula, and internal policies without undue interference (Lackner 2024). However, globalization challenges this autonomy, requiring institutions to comply with international quality assurance mechanisms while adhering to national regulations (Bwalya 2023). The CHE ensures compliance through audits and quality assessments, but its regulatory purview remains limited to national governance (Sityata, Botha and Dubihlela 2021).

The Compliance Landscape

Navigating compliance within a globalized educational framework requires balancing regulation with institutional independence. Findings highlight the need for adaptable governance frameworks that preserve institutional integrity while embracing international collaboration (Scott 2021). Many South African HEIs lack mechanisms to integrate global quality standards without compromising local governance structures (Rossouw 2022). An effective governance framework should:

- Facilitate international collaboration without undermining national priorities (Pattaro Moura e Sá and de Kruijf, 2022).
- Promote transparency while allowing HEIs autonomy to implement policies suited to their institutional missions.
- Support continuous improvement by aligning global best practices with local regulatory requirements.

Impact of Globalization on Governance

Globalization influences HEI governance through international collaborations, diverse student bodies, and evolving quality assurance expectations (de Wit and Deca 2020; De Wit and Altbach 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these changes, forcing institutions to adapt rapidly to digital learning models and transnational education initiatives (Tsiligkiris and Ilieva 2022). However, globalization introduces regulatory challenges, as national policies may conflict with international accreditation standards (Zhumagulova 2022).

Key Globalization Challenges in Governance:

Increased Interconnectedness: Institutions are forming cross-border collaborations, but

governance structures lack frameworks to oversee joint research and global partnerships (Yin and Jamali 2021; Lal et al. 2024).

Diverse Student Demographics: International students enrich academic environments, yet governance mechanisms to ensure inclusive policies remain underdeveloped (Tavares 2024; Jooste and Hagenmeier 2022).

International Research Collaborations: Institutions require governance models that regulate cross-border research while addressing intellectual property rights and ethical considerations (Rossoni, de Vasconcellos and de Castilho Rossoni 2024).

Faculty and Staff Mobility: There is an absence of policies governing international faculty recruitment, qualification recognition, and equitable employment practices (De Wit and Altbach 2021).

Quality Assurance and Accreditation: National bodies like the CHE regulate domestic quality assurance but lack frameworks for global standardization (Myburgh 2021).

Market-Driven Competition: HEIs must balance local relevance with international competitiveness in rankings, funding, and student recruitment (Subbarayalu 2022).

Technological Integration: HEI governance must address cybersecurity, data protection, and digital learning ethics in a global context (Marshall et al. 2022).

Crisis Management: Global crises, such as COVID-19, require coordinated governance structures for rapid response and resilience planning (Janssen and Van der Voort 2020; Izumi, Sukhwani, Surjan and Shaw 2021).

Case Studies: Governance Strategies in Private Higher Education

To illustrate governance responses to globalization, this study examines select private HEIs that have effectively managed "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability". These institutions provide insights into adaptable governance mechanisms within a globalized education framework.

Case Study 1: University of the People (UoPeople, USA)

As a fully online private institution, UoPeople exemplifies governance models that integrate global accessibility with quality assurance. The university collaborates with institutions such as New York University and UC Berkeley while maintaining "institutional autonomy" through an independent accreditation process (Fischer 2020). UoPeople's governance model demonstrates how private HEIs can balance autonomy with accountability in a borderless education system.

Case Study 2: Monash University Malaysia

Monash University Malaysia is a branch campus of Monash University. This institution navigates governance challenges by adhering to both Malaysian and Australian regulatory

frameworks. It maintains "academic freedom" and "institutional autonomy" while maintaining compliance with dual accreditation systems (Yenmee, 2020). This approach underscores the need for adaptive governance in transnational education.

Case Study 3: African Leadership University (ALU, Mauritius and Rwanda)

ALU's innovative model emphasizes self-directed learning and global employability. Governance structures promote "academic freedom" and flexibility while adhering to local regulatory requirements. The institution's competency-based curriculum aligns with both national accreditation bodies and global employer expectations (Head and Rutherfurd 2022).

These case studies demonstrate that private HEIs can successfully integrate "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" by adopting governance models that accommodate both national and international regulatory landscapes.

"Institutional Autonomy" and Utilitarian Principles

"Institutional autonomy" complements utilitarian principles by granting higher education institutions the authority to make decisions that align with their unique missions and goals, potentially resulting in outcomes that benefit society (Townsend et. al 2022). However, this autonomy must be complemented with "public accountability" to ensure transparency, responsibility, and responsiveness to societal needs (Kallio et. al 2022).

Regulatory bodies like the CHE play a crucial role in promoting accountability through quality assessments and stakeholder engagement, ensuring that institutions prioritize the public interest and maximize utility through their academic endeavours. Thus, utilitarianism underscores the importance of "academic freedom" "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" in fostering a higher education environment that maximizes overall welfare and societal benefit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure a resilient and globally competitive higher education sector, South African HEIs should:

Safeguard "Academic Freedom": Establish clear policies that protect scholars' rights to free inquiry while fostering diverse intellectual discourse.

Strengthen "Institutional Autonomy": Empower institutions to govern independently in academic, financial, and administrative matters, ensuring alignment with national priorities.

Enhance "Public Accountability": Implement transparent governance mechanisms that balance institutional independence with societal expectations and regulatory oversight.

Adapt Governance to Globalization: Develop policies that support international collaboration, faculty and student mobility, and alignment with global best practices.

Regularly Review Governance Frameworks: Continuously assess and refine policies to address emerging challenges in "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability".

For the Council on Higher Education (CHE):

Expand Quality Assurance Measures: Align accreditation frameworks with international benchmarks while safeguarding local academic integrity.

Facilitate Global Recognition of Qualifications: Strengthen mutual recognition agreements to enhance student and faculty mobility.

Ensure Crisis Preparedness: Develop governance mechanisms for rapid responses to global disruptions.

By integrating these recommendations, HEIs and regulatory bodies can uphold "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "accountability" while remaining responsive to global trends.

CONCLUSION

The governance of higher education in South Africa would entail a balance of "academic freedom", "institutional autonomy", and "public accountability" to remain globally competitive. Currently the CHE has a national governance focus. As globalization reshapes higher education, institutions and regulatory bodies must adopt governance models that foster independent decision-making while ensuring alignment with national and global standards. Strengthening "academic freedom" will empower scholars, while enhanced "institutional autonomy" will allow HEIs to innovate and adapt. At the same time, transparent "accountability" mechanisms will ensure public trust and regulatory compliance. For the CHE, aligning accreditation with international benchmarks, facilitating global recognition of qualifications, and ensuring crisis preparedness are crucial for maintaining the sector's credibility. By integrating these strategies, South African HEIs and regulatory bodies can sustain resilience, uphold academic integrity, and contribute meaningfully to the global knowledge economy.

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