

# The Evolution of University Chancellorship in Kenya

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The evolution of the role of university chancellor shows how the Kenyan government has strategically used that position to thwart autonomy and subvert shared governance in public universities. Though the government wields influence through funding and appointment of university heads, the chancellorship offers another layer of subtle state control over universities' general directions. The type of chancellors appointed sends specific messages on the directions in which the state would like the universities to move, eroding autonomy and shared decision-making internally. While this discussion concerns Kenya, it has significance globally because the balance between university autonomy and politicization is an issue that is relevant everywhere.

In the British tradition, the university chancellor is a ceremonial head of 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. As a former British colony whose first university was a branch of the University of London, Kenya follows this arrangement in university governance. The chancellors of public universities are either the head of state or his/her appointees. The chancellors preside over graduation ceremonies, can give advice to the university councils for the betterment of the university, and make recommendations to the cabinet secretary of education for a visitation to the university.

While in theory the chancellor is a ceremonial position, 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 characterize the evolution of public universities' chancellorship in the country, namely the political chancellor; the academic chancellor; and the corporate chancellor.

## Political Chancellor

The political chancellor was manifest from independence in 1963 to 2002, when the head of state (the president) was the chancellor of all eight public universities. During that period, the independence-era political party was in power, and until 1992, the country was a one-party political state. The state was authoritarian, with the executive exercising dominance over the legislature and the judiciary. Trade unions and women's groups were also coopted into the state political apparatus. Political dissent was largely from the academic community; professors and students critical of the state were jailed, exiled, or suspended from the universities.

The chancellor-head of state appointed the university council members and the vice-chancellors and their deputies, all 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

The year 2003 saw the political defeat of the independence era ruling party 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 and, as provided by the public universities law, appointed prominent citizens instead. 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

## Abstract

At Kenyan public universities, the chancellor is a ceremonial position. Yet, there is an expectation that chancellors will steer universities in specific directions. The sociopolitical context of the evolution of the chancellorship in Kenya shows that there are contextual limits to the success of chancellors in transforming their universities.

**Managerial challenges loom large.**

difficult climate for universities: governance and managerial challenges resulting in student and faculty strikes that disrupted learning; financial and resource constraints, including the inability of some universities to generate revenue internally; and an overall decline in academic quality. Further, external multilateral donors such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and philanthropic agencies like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations insisted on structural reforms to improve governance, efficiency, and accountability.

There were expectations that academic chancellors would steer the transformation of universities into thriving institutions within the context of neoliberalism. This failed for two reasons. First, the political class still regarded public universities as instruments for political legitimacy. A massive expansion of public universities occurred during this era. Around 70 percent (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 in its region. Political expediency superseded both resource constraints and the need to stabilize the system for quality enhancement. Second, academic chancellors lacked experience in university governance within the neoliberal context of university development, with its emphasis on the privatization and commercialization of university programs and services. Academic chancellors, therefore, remained ineffective in steering university transformations.

**Corporate Chancellor**

From 2013 to the present, public universities have continued to experience financial, managerial, and innovation crises of unprecedented proportions, which has heralded the appointment of corporate chancellors. 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 payment of salaries and retirement contributions. By the close of 2019, the public universities' debt stood at US\$110 million. Equally significant have been financial improprieties and corruption, which have further eroded the financial viability of the institutions.

Managerial challenges loom large. Frequent closures due to student and faculty strikes have become too common. Further, universities are too caught up in bureaucratic red tape to respond quickly to crises, a legacy of a prior managerial culture of state control and financing. They are also deficient in innovation, as evident in the absence of interdisciplinary courses and entrepreneurship education in academic programs, and the lack of strategic thinking to cultivate new ideas, enhance creativity, encourage collaborations, and promote inclusion and diversity. To remedy these challenges, the appointment of chancellors since 2013 has focused on successful bankers, businessmen, chief executives of corporations and insurance, industrialists, and philanthropists. These corporate chancellors are expected to provide the requisite guidance to universities in their transition from a collegial governance model to a corporate managerial culture.

Whether the corporate chancellors will be any more successful than the academic chancellors is doubtful. University ethos differs from that of business and industry; the latter is driven by profit, and the former by knowledge production and dissemination. Corporate culture focuses on efficiency and merit, while universities are sensitive to effectiveness and equity. Corporate governance is top-down, while universities cherish shared governance. Furthermore, universities are largely political, influencing, and being influenced by, national politics, while corporate entities tend to be apolitical. Under these contrasting conditions, it is highly unlikely that corporate chancellors will be successful in steering universities in the direction of desired reforms.

Rather than tinkering at the edges with the chancellorship, it behooves the government to strengthen internal university administration through shared governance. Under this model, university management is shared between the council and senior management on the one hand, and faculty and students on the other. Through their representatives, students and faculty exercise responsibilities for specific areas of decision-making. Matters pertaining to academics and student affairs benefit from broad input from faculty and students, while finance and personnel are managed by administrators. This model ensures that all internal stakeholders participate in planning and decision-making, thereby contributing to accountability. ▲

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