

The World of Higher Education Podcast

Episode 1.5: Corruption in South African Higher Education

Guest: Dr. Jonathan Jansen

Alex Usher (AU): Hello, Jonathan. Welcome to the show. Thanks for joining us today.

Jonathan Jansen (JJ): You bet.

AU: There have been books written in many different countries about academic corruption, but usually they're talking about perversions within the academic missions or cheating on exams, paying professors for grades and those kinds of things. But the corruption you are talking about in your book is quite different. It's partly about that academic dysfunction for sure, but it's also partly the actual looting of public resources. Can you tell us a little bit about the corruption issue in certain South African universities?

JJ: The book is about institutional corruption and I use that particular terminology in two senses. First of all, one is not talking here about individual acts of corruption, but something enmeshed in the culture and in the operations of the university to the extent that if you do not steal, you are regarded as the problem. And that's what I mean by institutionalized corruption. But secondly, it also means that the corruption in universities as public institutions in South Africa are not unaffected by the general wave of corruption that is hobbled state-owned enterprises like ESCOM, the electricity provider, for example. So that's my particular angle of corruption in the book. Institutional in those senses.

AU: The kind of corruption you're talking about doesn't affect all universities in South Africa. And in fact, at the start of your book, you give a pretty nifty summary of South African higher education, and it's history and you trace the origins of the problems to the different traditions of English Africans and Bantustan universities. Could you give us a brief overview of that?

JJ: The conditions that make institutional corruption possible lies not only in the present, but in the distant past. That is to say in the ways some universities were able to develop over time, strong systems of academic governance and financial integrity, typically in the former white institutions because they were relatively sheltered from apartheid interference. On the other hand, the started Black institutions like the University of Fort Hare, that's in turmoil at the moment, were compromised in their very regions. They were set up, not as universities, but as training colleges that produced Black students for the public service. So from their very start, they were underfunded. They were perceived as inferior, that is a relative to the white universities, and they were constantly undermined politically. One university gets placed under four, five different administrations, one of which is a corrupt Bantustan system. These ethnic reserves set aside for people viewed as different. Certainly in those ways, the liberal English white universities, for example, continued relatively unhindered, very well-funded, very well-connected, and that those effects remain to this day, as opposed to the black universities, particularly the rural institutions, which have never stopped fighting to simply survive financially and otherwise from one decade into the next.

AU: In addition to some of these ethnic, linguistic, historical differences, there are some other historical legacies that contribute to the problems you discuss in your book. So, for instance, the struggle against apartheid that created a tradition of opposition to educational authorities; education, if I'm not mistaken, was at the heart of the Soweto uprising in the 1970s. But, you also suggest that there was one institutional innovation from the transition era, the period in the early 1990s, just as the ANC was coming to power. One

institutional innovation, the institutional forum is in some cases at least a contributing factor to current problems. What is the institutional forum? How does that fit into the governance of South African institutions? And to what extent are these forums involved in various forms of corruption?

JJ: The political ethos of democratic governance lies very deep and very proud within the consciousness of South Africa's activist communities, including those in higher education. So the institutional forum, for example, was a big table that allowed everybody from students, to union workers, to academics, to ordinary staff, to outside interests, the local mayor, all of those things, so everybody could become part of the governance of the institution. This was sort of a reaction, if not an overreaction to apartheid centralized control of institutions. But that arrangement turned out to be a two edged sword. On the one hand, that ethos democratizes academic cultures in ways that allow for everyone to participate as I had just indicated. On the other hand, when those agencies like students and unions, themselves are corrupted on the run-on institutional resources, then this flat model of democracy wreaks havoc on stabilization efforts. And that is exactly what's happening in the present.

AU: How does that forum sit alongside university councils or university senates in terms of responsibilities?

JJ: Initially, that is in the early years of the post party democracy, you had the traditional authorities, the council, the senate, the management, the executive running the university. And instead of collapsing those, you at the same time had these institutional forums, which had everybody involved. And you can imagine the chaos that this cause in the University when you had two centers of power, to coin the south African phrase. And so eventually the policymakers decided to tame the institutional forum, that is to give the status of an advisory function as opposed to making any article decisions themselves. While needless to say, that pretty much made the forum a toothless body. So it still exists, but it has absolutely no decision making on the big issues. And so most universities activists ignore the institutional forum and take that fight directly into a council, or a senate, or a board.

AU: Yeah. And, and you've talked about how the students and the faculty, or at least the unions play a role in corrupting the institution. How does that work? Is it simply that they are causing dysfunction to further their own professional or academic careers? Or are they actually working on behalf of outside agents to pervert procurement processes?

JJ: A little bit of both. So first of all, the students because in on many of our campuses, the student bodies are representative of the external political parties in Parliament. So for every ANC, there's a student body called SASCO. For every democratic alliance opposition, there is a DA student body, and so on and so forth for all the parties, all the major parties. The result is that the students don't go there to represent student interests. They go there to represent their party heads. You can imagine the chaos that causes, especially around election time. Now because some of these parties are quite corrupt, they also see the students as giving them a foot in the door to the processes of procurement, for example, on, on large infrastructural grants or IT grants, which are running to the billions, you know of rands. So that very often simply undermines governance of these institutions. Then you have external council members in this flat model of democracy represented on the council, but they come from municipalities that have basically stopped getting resources. So now they see the university as this concentrated resource, and they come onto the council not to talk about teaching and learning and IT, but to figure out how they can lay their hands in the loot. And so they are either there directly or proxies for people on the outside. And some universities have, have, have sort of managed that. Well, the dysfunctional universities, I studied about 10 of them in the book, have, have simply not developed a response to that kind of symbiotic area

relationship between insiders and outsiders, in which both benefit from stripping the institutional resources.

AU: One of the very striking phrases in the book it made me sit up when they read it is "that universities are a concentrated and exploitable resource" and this exploitation seems to happen in three ways. There are internal agents who are simply stealing resources. I think we you have some interesting stories about councils, and a couple of VCs in that respect. Second, there are what I would call conspiracies between internal and external agents to defraud institutions through procurement practices, which we just talked about. And third, there are instances of universities simply being shaken down by external agents. You describe a case at the University of Fort Hare, where the local taxi drivers demanded that they get a monopoly on transport to and from the institution because the university was a gold mine and they needed their share. I'm curious, like in terms of money being sucked out of the system, which of these three is the biggest problem? And how much in total do you think is being siphoned away each year?

JJ: We're talking billions, not millions of rands, which in a low-income country like South Africa is a lot of money. As I said earlier, they include the students working with outside political parties, the municipal leaders on the council working with their primaries in the community. Everybody is in it. But because you'll never be able to steal that that magnum of resources on your own, you have to do it with, for example, staff who sit on the IT procurement system, that will give you ahead of time access to the specs so that you can come in just at about the level of the allocation and so on. There is a collaboration among influences that makes it so much more difficult to pin down a particular agent or agency in all of this. So for corruption to work well, you require that kind of collusion by inside and outside parties.

AU: Jonathan, you point out in your book that within higher education is not just universities which face problems with corruption, but also the student loan system NSFAS. Can you tell me about the kinds of problems that that organization has had? How do you commit mass fraud against the student loan agency?

JJ: What the government does is to say we can't manage this kind of money, billions and billions of rands of billion student financial aid on our own. We will create this structure called NSFAS that does the disbursements on behalf of the state. But as in anything South Africa, if you put that kind of money in one agency, it is going to become a target for vultures. I'm a very traditional academic. When I look at the university, I see research, I see teaching, I see chatGPT, I see learning methods. I see all these beautiful, wonderful things about the university as intellectual space. But in a poor community, people often look at the university, not in those academic terms, but as: oh this is good, here's a place in which I can get employed legally or illegal. Here's a place in which I can steal certificates and get degrees from which I didn't study. Here's a place in which I can get access and demand access to infrastructure grant monies for my company that didn't exist just before the grant. So NSFAS becomes, in a way this very visible, very well-resourced state functionally that has to be you know, accessed as well.

AU: What is the way that you would take money out of that, is it that there's not enough safeguards people can set up fake student loan accounts? Where's the money actually leaving the system?

JJ: The money leaves the system in a myriad of different ways. One of which is that you have thousands of students applying using fake names, using fake documentation of dead people on the one hand. On the other hand, you have staff within the space, many of whom make these arrangements with vendors on the outside, the vendor that pays the accommodation, or the vendor that pays the food account to sort of come in at a much higher rate than they're supposed to and then the two parties would take the

difference and split it among themselves. Now, if this is a hundred dollars, there's not much in it for anyone, but this is millions and billions of rands, and that is what makes us such a lucrative practice, but there's many different ways of coming into the system with so much money in which as I said, the vendors, the staff, the students, everybody gets cut.

AU: You're pretty careful to note in the book that some institutions have managed to combat dysfunction. In this respect, you mentioned the University of Western Cape is one which managed to fight its way back from the brink. What did Western Cape do right that the others have not managed to do?

JJ: I got some heavy criticism for the book from my more Marxist leftist friends in the sense that for them, the material explanation is everything and that the state is the full explanation for dysfunction. I don't buy that at all. So, my angle in the book is to sort of say that on the one hand there are these very powerful macroeconomic political forces that condition what happens in universities. But as a university leader myself at different levels, including Vice Chancellor, I know that I have agency, right? I know that my team as enormous agency to be able to do the right thing despite the weight of history. And I've worked in historically white and historically Black universities as a leader. So, what the University of the Western Cape does, the University of Venda does, which is very rural, is three things. Number one, they appoint into leadership people who are very strong, both as academics/scholars, but also as managers of the higher education enterprise. Secondly, they second place these leaders to make policies and procedures that actually make it very difficult for an institution to be corrupt. And then thirdly, and this is very important, they push back openly against corrupt agencies. And that, let me tell you, comes at a very high cost. Just given, as you would've seen in the book, some references to people who were murdered, who were shot, who were assassinated. In fact, we got those cases right now at the University of Fort Hare and others. So, the cost is steep, if you turn off the taps, they're going to come after you.

AU: With that, can I ask you how optimistic you are about this fight against corruption? If I invite you back on the show five years from now, are things going to be better or worse?

JJ: I like the language diplomats use when they come out of a meeting between two superpowers or two rivals. They would use this particular phrase, which I found very interesting, if not shallow, "cautiously optimistic" and I'm very cautiously optimistic. Which, by the way, is one of the reasons I wrote the book. So I write the book out of a sense of intellectual curiosity, obviously. I want to understand why these chronically dysfunctional institutions never seem to get things right. So, that's the intellectual curiosity. But there's also a political commitment, and that is to make the tax-paying public aware of what is being committed in its name and so on. Now there is this story of a journalist who kept entering war zones to do his professional duty, and that was to report on the horror of war. And somebody one day asked him, why do you keep going back into those war zones given the dangers? And I'll never forget the response of when something like this, "if I don't do it, it is easier in the dark." In other words, if we don't shed a light on corruption, it is easier for these people to commit those crimes in the dark. And in that sense, I hope the book makes a contribution.

AU: Jonathan Jansen, it has been a pleasure speaking to you.

JJ: Thank you very much, honor being with you.

AU: Okay. We've been speaking to Jonathan Janssen, author of Corrupted: A Study in Chronic Dysfunction in South African Universities. Buy the book. It is a fantastic read. It remains for me to thank the show's

*excellent producers, Tiffany MacLennan and Sam Pufek, and of course, you the listener, for tuning in. If you have any comments or suggestions for future episodes, please send us a line at podcast@higheredstrategy.com. Join us next week for episode 1.6, when our guest will be Elizabeth Buckner, professor of Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies and Education. And we'll be discussing her recent book, *Degrees of Dignity, Arab Higher Education in the Global Era*. Bye for now.*