

Chapter 8

Neoliberal Reforms in Higher Education: Trends, Manifestations and Implications



F. M. Chipindi and Harrison Daka

Abstract This chapter analyses the spread of neoliberal reforms in higher education, with a primary focus on an empirically specific locale in Zambia, a Sub-Saharan African economy. We argue that neoliberal discourses, introduced into mainstream national policy on higher education in Zambia from the early 1990s have profound effects on the character of higher education in general. The reforms have occasioned significant levels of regulation or control over the actors within higher education by using words that frame and constrain, behaviour leading to the emergence of kinds of individuals who are then rendered governable (Bansel & Davies, 2010). The reforms include cutting public expenditures for social services, which include reducing government support to education and healthcare, as well as a trend toward greater participation by private actors in public life, and in higher education provision and finance (Giroux HA, *Harvard Educ Rev* 72:425–463, 2002; Harvey 2005; Olssen M, Peters MA, *J Educ Policy* 20:313–345, 2005; Zajda J, Rust V, *Globalisation and comparative education*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2021). Ultimately, there has been an institutionalisation of entrepreneurial and managerial modes of organising higher educational institutions, stimulated and advanced by promoting business-like relations between the institutions and industry, commerce, and government.

Keywords Higher education · Neoliberal reforms · Strategic management principles · Sub-Saharan African economy · Zambia

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© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022
J. Zajda, W. J. Jacob (eds.), *Discourses of Globalisation and Higher Education Reforms*, Globalisation, Comparative Education and Policy Research 27,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83136-3_8

Neoliberal Reforms in Higher Education: Trends, Manifestations and Implications: Introduction

Neoliberalism as a political-economic theory was first postulated in the 1940s through the theories of individual choice, monetarism, and public choice. The theory was then popularised in the 1970s and 1980s by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Finally, the influence of neoliberalism was spread around the world through several means, including the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and most notably through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). In the section that follows each of the related concepts that underpin neoliberalism shall be discussed (Zajda, 2020). Since these early beginnings, neoliberalism has spread rapidly to many countries (Zajda & Majhanovich, 2021). As it has spread, its influences began to manifest themselves in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Europe, America, Asia, and Africa. It became common for universities to adopt entrepreneurial models of knowledge production, research, teaching and community service. As a result, some universities, formerly in the United State (US) and Europe and now increasingly in the Global South, have not only developed profitmaking activities but have also become business corporations. According to Ball (2013), some significant universities in the US and Europe are heavily involved in the education business and qualify to be called business corporations because of their marketisation.

Although the effects of neoliberalism on education have been the subject of a robust body of research, insufficient attention has been paid to how the discourses of neoliberalism have been experienced in the global south. This chapter contributes to the advancement of scholarship on neoliberal discourses in education by analysing its manifest effects on the policy agenda of the flagship higher education institution in Zambia, the University of Zambia (henceforth, UNZA). We discuss some of the discourses associated with mainstream neoliberal thought. We then look at the manifestations of the reforms pursued in this part of Sub-Saharan Africa. The reforms are part of a set of globally circulating ideas transmitted through established institutions such as the International Monetary Funds (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). As the discourses circulate, they get contextualised in different spaces. Local actors re-configure them to local realities, meanings, and contexts (Dean, 2012). We conclude the paper by highlighting the implications of the neoliberal reforms.

Neoliberalism and the Primacy of the *Market*

Neoliberalism is centred around the primacy of the free market (Zajda & Rust, 2021). The market, it is assumed, is the best regulator and distributor of both resources and opportunities. Therefore, the state does not impose restrictions on free/private enterprise. This happens in the form of privatisation, which means to sell state-owned

enterprises, goods, and services to private investors (including public education services). For Zambia, this came into being in 1991 with the introduction of Multi Partism and change of policies even in the education system. There is also the elimination of the concept of “public goods” or “community” which means the individual has the core responsibility to manage his own life (Ross & Gibson, 2007, p. 3). This opened up many private learning institutions in Zambia and citizens had the choice of where to take their children. Instead, the market takes a more significant role in public life (Clay, 2008). This is effected by cutting public expenditures for social services, which include reducing government support to education and healthcare, as well as a trend toward greater participation by private actors in public life, and in higher education provision and finance (Giroux, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Zajda, 2021). During this very period in Zambia, there was also the concept of cost – sharing where parents were requested to pay a certain fee for the education of their children.

The Spread of Neoliberalism

There are two principal ways in which the neoliberal policy agenda has spread around the world of higher education. First, the neoliberal policy agenda is transported through international agencies, for instance, the World Bank, the IMF, and some agencies of the United Nations. Torres (2009) argues that calls for the liberalisation of trade in various services, including higher education, facilitate the importation of neoliberal agendas into the development policies of countries in the Global South, such as Zambia. For instance, Matheson (2000) contends that international organisations have been responsible for widespread privatisation of social services in the developing countries: “the World Trade Organisation (WTO) aims to liberalise the service sector further”. The immediate impact would be the privatisation of some services that governments have so far provided. Governments would be obliged to sell off such services as housing, education, and water” (cited in Hill, 2007, p. 122). In the same line after 1991 in Zambia, apart from selling companies and mines, the government of Zambia sold a lot of parastatal houses to sitting tenants. The University of Zambia was not an exception, most of the houses for the institutions were sold to university employee. Ball (2013) also contends that liberalisation of education services led to the transfer of neoliberal policy and practice from the Global North to the Global South. This is in the way of ‘best practices’ such as strategic management and ‘empirically tested’ policy options such as fiscal management, which some universities in Europe and America offer solutions to education problems in developing countries.

The second way the neoliberal policy agenda has spread is that countries in the Global South are compelled to adopt neoliberal policy reforms because of the conditions for loans set forth by the IMF and the WB (Klein, 2007; Moyo, 2009). As a criterion for getting financial support from these international financial institutions (IFIs), developing countries, like Zambia, are left with no choice but to re-adjust

their economies through Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). These SAPs tend to spread neoliberal economic discourses such as privatisation, deregulation and free-market principles (Zajda & Rust, 2021). They require developing countries to adopt such strategies to obtain financial assistance from the IMF and the WB. As we have pointed out earlier, the entry of market-based discourses into mainstream educational policy in Zambia was predicated on the conditions set by IMF and the WB in the 1980s and early 1990s. The SAPs were reflected in the 1996 *Educating our Future* (EoF) policy document, which transformed the higher education sector in the country by institutionalising privatisation, deregulation, and marketisation in the sector.

Neoliberalism and Education in Zambia

In the light of the foregoing, Zambia began to pursue a series of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). The country undertook these reforms with solid encouragement and supervision by the international monetary community, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The SAPs aimed to reduce state control and expand private sector participation in economic and educational activities (Mama, 2006).

These policy reforms had a profound effect on educational policy. For instance, the country's national policy on education, *Educating our Future* (EoF) (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1996), called for deregulation of higher education. Furthermore, the policy sought to ensure that "the human, material, financial and other resources in the control of the private sector be channeled without hindrance into the education sector" (MoE, 1996, p. 4). With these critical proposals, the policy replaced the pre-1990 government-financed model of pre-1990 with a market-driven model, which enabled the proliferation of private establishments in education. In this model, universities were implored to possess a "greater spirit of competitiveness and better awareness and of the importance of marketing themselves more aggressively" (p. 102).

Accordingly, the universities, notably UNZA, began to adopt entrepreneurial models of knowledge production, research, teaching and community service. The quest for "non-government" sources of revenue began to reflect the value proposition of the institution. It has, since the 1990s, articulated elaborate revenue generation plans with solid emphases on none governmental sources of finance. For example, in its 2018–2022 strategic plan, UNZA seeks to reposition itself within the global knowledge economy by offering industry-relevant products such as graduates and research "outputs" (University of Zambia (UNZA), 2012, p. xii). At the height of structural adjustment, the institution has become "entrepreneurial and profit-motivated" (p. 102), as the policy framework sanctioned. These are stimulated and advanced by promoting business-like relations between the HEIs and industry, commerce, and government.

Trends and Manifestations

The proliferation of mechanisms has accompanied the entry of market logic into higher education to quantify the activities of academics and students. Scholars observe the rise of audit technologies. However, while such efforts at transparency can move from the top down, they can also move from the bottom up where transparency can result from demands by those on the bottom who want to see clearly what one has to do to move up the ladder. These reforms appear to have normalised and enshrined the quantification of academic life in the university. For instance, in 2019, UNZA rolled out a performance appraisal system for its academic and non-academic staff. Management used persuasive superlatives to justify the introduction of these tools of measurement. The system ascribes numerical values to various roles that are executed by academics. For example, an academic earns a score for publishing an article and gains another point for supervision of postgraduate students. The aggregate scores from all aspects determine whether the academic has satisfied the performance criteria. As noted earlier, the reforms were articulated in a language that appears to have foregrounded their superiority to any other means of appraising staff.

Scholars have described these behaviours as an audit culture. For instance, Shore and Wright (2000) assert that the idea of academic auditing practices was borrowed from its original associations with financial accounting in which the term implied scrutiny, examination and the passing of judgment. As the concept migrated from the business world into the academy, it changed to create new and compelling ways of thinking and acting about research, teaching, and knowledge production. In higher education, the concept of audit has come to be associated with such discourses as performance, quality assurance, accountability, effectiveness, peer review, and efficiency (Zajda, 2020). Audit culture, they argue, has become a means of producing new subjectivities, for instance, through how people within the academy relate to their workplace, the authority within the neoliberal university, each other, and, more importantly, to themselves.

The performance appraisal system was but one of the other audit technologies introduced by UNZA. The workload policy, introduced in 2020, and the academic promotion, were additional mechanisms that the university introduced. The workload policy provided for a threshold on the number of courses that each lecturer was to teach. The system even prescribed punitive measures for faculty members who fell below the minimum amount of work. However, the lecturer's union fiercely opposed these introductions, denouncing the management to quantify non-numeric dimensions. These overtures had the potential to damage or erode the free spirit of scientific practice.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the spread and impact of neoliberalism on higher education in Zambia. We have traced how strategic management principles were transferred from private industry to the public education sector, ostensibly in pursuit of efficiency, effectiveness, and excellence. These business logics become central values for university functioning and restructuring.

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