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Policy enforcement, corruption and stakeholder interference in South African universities

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Background: The unprecedented and unchecked corruption practices that are prevalent in universities in South Africa have been aggravated by the minimal enforcement of policies and rules by university administrators and managers. This has opened up opportunities for corrupt relationships between internal and external stakeholders seeking to embark on corrupt activities in universities. As corruption is a worldwide phenomenon, this study selected previously disadvantaged universities in South Africa to investigate the effectiveness of university administrators and managers. The research examines the enforcement of policies and regulations in the effort to curb corruption.

Objective: The study further sought to determine the extent to which service providers and politicians are enabled to manipulate the supply chain management and procurement systems, convincing the university officials to overlook quality standards and specifications.

Method: This study was suited to a multi-case study approach, and the qualitative method was used to obtain data. A sample of 20 respondents were approached from different employment categories, including departments, faculties and trade unions.

Results: The major highlights of the study pointed to the following as being the dimensions of corrupt practices in universities: rules and regulations were not enforced by university officials. There were obvious corrupt relationships and agreements among corrupt individuals, without any action being taken against them; there was a clear corrupt relationship between internal and external forces, which included bribery by funders, service providers and suppliers; there was political interference from members of management and council members, driving the corruption agenda.

Conclusion: To fill the gaps that enable corruption in universities, the development of an anti-corruption workforce is a necessity. This can be achieved through skills development, proper intelligence, cooperation from stakeholders, employees refusing gifts and/or bribes and consequence management for those who are driving corruption.

Contribution: The findings of the study can be used to assist university stakeholders, agencies and decision-makers in understanding the nature and extent of the corruption that is prevalent in the institutions concerned. The research could have a positive influence on improving policy compliance and adding value regarding the scant literature on corruption in universities.

Keywords: corruption; procurement; supply chain management; suppliers; universities.

Introduction

Universities are believed to have inadequate governance systems, less-than-functional institutional capacity and inept personal competencies of governance and policy and implementation role players operating within and across institutions. Blockages caused by complicated supply chain management (SCM) policies and inadequate or inappropriate compliance systems have aggravated corruption at universities. The prevalence of corruption, a lack of inclusivity in delivery, political and oversight realities in the tertiary sector and its relationship with state institutions is problematic. Numerous researchers (Mohamedbhai 2016; Santiago 2018) have argued that universities are not immune or spared from fraud and corruption. Chapman and Lindner (2016) have stated that corruption in universities is a concern among governments, academics, students and pivotal stakeholders. A qualitative study by Santiago (2018) investigated the ways in which universities in the Philippines have addressed corruption. They have done this by reviewing policies and existing practices in the fight against corruption by formalising and inculcating key stakeholders. Mohamedbhai (2016) asserts that on a higher level, corruption has

invaded and infected the whole system in universities, and its magnitude is growing.

Against this backdrop, the current research study dissects the pertinent role played by ineffective administrators and managers, allowing them to overlook the university policies in four previously disadvantaged universities (PDUs) in South Africa. Furthermore, the corrupt relationship between administrators, managers and service providers and the effects on the lowering of quality standards and specifications is investigated in this study. This empirical study attempts to determine whether university administrators and ineffective senior or middle managers have led to a lack of enforcement of the laws, rules and regulations. Suppliers and providers may offer bribes to financial, SCM and procurement staff, encouraging them to overlook failures in meeting statutory or contractual obligations or quality standards and specifications.

There have been a number of generic definitions of corruption. The general consensus is that it concerns acts of dishonesty, mainly the perpetrator's pursuit of personal gain. This includes the following:

- The perpetrator's deceit in their effort to receive direct or indirect benefits of a pecuniary or other nature within an organisational or institutional environment.
- The abuse or misuse of office for personal or group gain.
- The use of political office for personal benefit.
- The use of a leadership or management position for personal or group gain.
- Extortion or acceptance of pecuniary or other illegal material benefits by individuals or groups (ed. Rose-Ackerman 2007; Woods & Mantzaris 2012).

Although academic research and debate have been elevated significantly in South Africa in response to corruption and the lack of good governance within the broader context of society, empirical academic research on issues related to ethical behaviour, practices and actions is scarce.

Masete and Mafini (2018) have espoused numerous barriers to the implementation of SCM practices. Their empirical study was conducted in a South African university and included the university leaders' lack of commitment and inability to train and develop stakeholders on the importance of SCM. There appeared to be a lack of awareness and involvement of all stakeholders. In South Africa, the involvement of student leaders in SCM committees who have been involved in corrupt activities has negatively influenced governance in three universities of technology (Sebake 2016). The entrenched and perpetual conflicts between stakeholders, inadequate and ineffective structures and systems, toxic culture, incompetency and a lack of diligence in implementing SCM were additional barriers (Masete & Mafini 2018; Ngcamu & Teferra 2015).

There is a serious limitation of published scholarly work in South Africa on the violations of good governance through corrupt practices in universities. This article therefore sought to determine the extent to which a corrupt relationship between ineffective managers and service providers has caused quality standards and specifications to be compromised as a result of SCM policies and systems being overlooked by university officials. The empirical study attempts to confirm if ineffective administrators and managers and their willingness to be bribed by service providers have exacerbated corrupt practices and lowered quality standards in PDUs in South Africa.

The synthesis of the international and South African literature is vigorously reviewed in the literature review, followed by a discussion on the research methods, data analysis and presentation. The article concludes with the major highlights, propositions and recommendations of the study.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Corruption in South African universities has taken many complex forms and permeates throughout the internal and external university systems, processes and structures, which makes it hard to conceptualise. Mohammed (2013) defines corruption as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with a host of causes and effects. Azelama (2002) defines corruption as an act or omission performed by an employee, which is against the organisation's rules, regulations and ethics with a clear rationale to meet his or her selfish needs to the detriment of the organisation. This paper is informed by an Idealist Theory that shed light on corruption in terms of selfish ideas that are common in the value system of the society (Anazodo, Okoye & Ezenwile 2012). This theory proposes that corruption is the nature of social and moral values that are common in the society and that people's ideas influences their behaviour and organisational culture (Nkom 1982). Furthermore, the research study is imbied with the modernist school of thought that associates corruption with certain traditional practices including gift offerings, parochial tendencies and ethnic loyalty that encourage corrupt behaviours (Anazodo et al. 2012). While the study objectives dwell on the constructs advanced, another dimension of corruption that involves service providers, politicians and contravention of policies in committing the corrupt acts is thoroughly investigated in this study.

Corrupts practices in the previously disadvantaged universities

The PDUs were established as black universities following the recommendations of the Eisleen Commission in 1959. It amended the University Education of 1959, which prohibited the racial integration of the education system except in extraordinary cases as approved by the Apartheid government (Meyer 1974). In October 2013, the Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities identified eight contact universities as HDIs, which included the University of Fort Hare (UFH), University of Limpopo (UL), University of Venda (UV), Walter Sisulu University, University of Zululand (UNIZULU), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences

University (SMHSU). Because of its inherent historical injustices, the HDIs are not financially sustainable with far fewer financial resources and highly reliant to government for its operations. The government of South Africa has established a special earmarked grant to enable these eight designated universities to be injected with the financial resources to implement strategic priorities which are aligned to the government policies (DHET 2021:4). The DHET (2021:5) also cites the geographic location of universities as another factor that necessitated the additional funding from the government, to attract and retain quality academics and researchers.

University of Zululand

Throughout the years, the UNIZULU leadership has been directly related with several well-publicised corrupt acts. These spearheaded by the purchase of seven houses for the use of the University's Vice Chancellor and her 'executive team' in Zini River Gold Estate in Mtunzini. No approved budget was produced. This purchase was completed while the Department of Public Works had completed process of allocating 10 properties to the university, as confirmed by former Chief Financial Officer of the university. There was no authority signed for a deed. KPMG, the university's auditor did not mention the R26 million irregularity in its 2015 audited financial report (Dlamini 2018).

In 2016, the then active Vice Chancellor of the university with an annual salary of R2.9 million received a R478 000 performance bonus at year's end. The university had no policy on performance bonuses. The Vice Chancellor lived in a R5 million purchased house in the North Coast Mtunzini resort. The house furniture cost the university R700 000 while a R4.7 million house on the main campus has been reserved for her. Her curtains cost up to R100 000, while R550 000 were spent for furniture in the homes of the other executives (Mail and Guardian 2016).

Mangosuthu University of Technology

University B has faced corruption at several levels, including supply chain and procurement as well as leadership battles emanating from corrupt acts and their repercussions. Thus an official document submitted to highest government authorities pinpointed the problems in the supply chain and procurement section as in one case for supporting documentation been incomplete for 34 tenders awarded in a period of 18 months (between 01 November 2018 and 30 April 2020). In addition, it was accepted that for another six tenders the university policy was not complied, a fact leading to corruption. Special attention was given to a security tender where allegations of an attempted bribe surfaced. A senior official (or officials) were aware of the bribe, but no steps were undertaken on the issue. There was also evidence that the Vice Chancellor had made several irregular appointments of staff and approved irregular allowances (MUT 2021).

Mangosuthu University of Technology 2021 Presentation to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology, 12 February

At the latest official report, the corrupt acts at the institution mainly rooted on internal leadership differences and fights among the institution's and council's leaderships were included in an independent assessor's report that has discovered a wide variety of ghost employees, payroll irregularities, ghost employees, irregular expenditure, corruption complexities, part-time lecture realities, secondary contracts, leases of students' transport costs and the R7 million water account to eThekwini Municipality. The ghost employees reality was a corrupt issue associated with leadership and human resources corruption realities. The corruption method used was based on the creation of a duplicate employee profile and the manipulation of banking details. In the process, the fake profile was deleted. The investigation of only four cases of employees pinpoint to a theft of R2.4 million as the payroll was breached for a number of times. There were cases where unauthorised employees were enabled to structure their own contracts, change the salary amounts and occasionally the contract duration (RSA Government Gazette 2022).

Walter Sisulu University

A creation of mergers was so corrupt that it was placed under administration in an effort to save it from a complete collapse, a third one facing the challenge in 2011 the others been the UNIZULU and the Tshwane University of Technology. At the time, WSU was classified as a 'technically bankrupt' university because of the perpetual corrupt practices that had destroyed completely its financial and operational and financial viability. Its leadership's corruption was instrumental in the process of exhausting its R250 million overdraft facility in its effort to pay the salaries of its more than 2000 employees. The key corruption acts were because of the institution's poor financial management and human resources practices, poor governance associated with supply chain and procurement as well as internal audit functions, poor governance and almost non-existent information technology systems. The corruption was instrumental in the weak financial, teaching and learning services to mainly rural and poor students in its campuses in Mthatha, East London, Butterworth and Queenstown. Such a reality was also founded on the fact that the newly established university received R400 million to begin its services instead of the required R1.2 billion promised. However, it was clearly stated officially that the university at the time could only be described as 'financially unsustainable and ungovernable' dure to corruption that had directly and indirectly led to suspicion, conflict, conspiracies and distrust (Makoni 2011).

University of Forthare

The UFH has faced a wide variety of corrupt acts at several operational levels including the institution's criminal charges against a Nigerian Professor for irregular admission and post-graduate registration of two students both of them being senior politicians in the Eastern Cape (Dayimani 2021). In their efforts to arrest the professor, the Hawks raided many locations in Bisho, East London and Alice in the process of probing not only student admission fraud but also money laundering acts committed by the fugitive professor who had scammed the university out of more than R5 million in unauthorised and sketchy academic programs offered to the provincial government staff (Mokhoali 2021).

At another level, one of the most debated corrupt cases was the busting of a family business for swindling the UFH out of R14 million. Three family members were arrested. Hawks after a company contracted to the UFH defrauded the institution of R13.9 million. The university paid the company R750 000 monthly for 'specified' cleaning services. The situation worsened when the company claimed separately for additional services that almost certainly were procured in a fraudulent manner or never rendered at all. These were approved by an unknown employee in either the supply chain and procurement or the Finance Departments, and the company was paid more than R13.9 million for additional services. It was established that during the same period more than R4.1 million was paid by the company and in a UFH employee's bank account (November 2022).

Literature review
Supply chain management and corruption in a global context

In their study in Iran, Zuhaira, Tian and Mahmood (2017) examined the role of ethics in the relationship between individual attitudes and corruption in universities, associating individual negative attitude and ethics with corruption. Conversely, in Canada, a recent and fascinating published study by Gray and Carroll (2018) mapped patterns of corporate influence (in the fossil fuel industry) with three Canadian universities. The results showed interlocking networks between these two sectors that decrease the independence of science and trust in research. Meanwhile, in Bolivia in Latin America, Costantino (2019) mentions specific areas of corruption risk that include administration, recruitment and admissions, accreditation and quality control and academic integrity. The author further cites common types of corruption that include conflict of interest, clientelism, nepotism, patronage, abuse of power or influence, misappropriation and fraud and collusion (Costantino 2019).

Mohamedbhai (2015) has shown that although the growing numbers of universities being opened across the African continent has been a positive step forward, the realities of corruption are a real threat for the institutions and the countries at large. The causes of poor governance have been described firstly as an outcome of political interference on the part of the ruling parties and secondly because of a lack of transparent and accountable legislation, rules and regulations. In addition, governments have been remiss in clearly stating that they will not directly or indirectly interfere in the running of the universities (Mohamedbhai 2015).

The overview of the literature above depicts just some of the governance pitfalls in universities, which include system failures, political and university management interference in SCM and procurement systems and processes and the abuse of power, which has worsened corruption in institutions. However, the (in)effectiveness and the extent of non-compliance with policies by administrators and managers, cartels' interference through corrupt means in SCM systems

and processes and the lowering of standards and specifications have not been empirically investigated by scholars. Within this context, the current study attempts to close this significant void.

Supply chain management in a South African context

The management of South Africa's public resources depends on SCM practices. This is the foundation that enables the public sector (in the case of public universities) to deliver honestly and effectively in the continuous efforts that lead to excellence in the duties and responsibilities to the youth and all citizens of the country. For these aspirations to become a tangible reality, public sector SCM in South Africa needs to be based on a number of laws, rules and regulations. This creates a framework founded on the aims and objectives of equality, fairness, transparency, accountability and cost-effectiveness. This is epitomised in a number of laws such as the Public Finance Management, 1999 (Act No. 1 of 1999), the *Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act*, 2000 (Act No. 5 of 2000), the *Broad-based Black Empowerment Act*, 2003 (Act No. 53 of 2003) and the *Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act*, 2004 (Act No. 12 of 2004).

One of the major challenges facing South African universities is the corruption emanating from the supply chain and procurement sections of tertiary institutions. This is a reality that, throughout the years, has led to a wide variety of negative economic impacts and ripple effects at all organisational levels (Dlamini 2016). This is despite the fact that the leaders and managers of higher education institutions have responsibility for planning and implementing an SCM and procurement framework that ensures compliance. This framework should be the foundation of existing policies, regulations and procedures, and the choice of the appropriate structure that can guarantee the effective, efficient and clean utilisation of what in most cases are limited institutional resources (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2016). The South African environment has over the years faced serious and complex challenges related to SCM and procurement. Research has shown that this requires well-planned, -designed and -implemented solutions that are strategic and tactical. The challenges facing universities have been described as being rooted in the following (KPMG South Africa 2016):

- the absence of comprehensive policies
- weak implementation of SCM practices
- poor planning and implementation of annual procurement
- a lack of staff capacity and skill
- corrupt relationships between funders, suppliers and providers.

National and international literature highlight the fact that continuous improvement and the optimal utilisation of functions and processes in SCM have significant positive outcomes for a university's financial position. This is because its success substantially decreases non-compliance risks, leading to a much better fiscal position (Dlamini 2016). This kind of improvement has been declared to be a 'necessity'

and an 'urgency'. Consequently, higher education institutions have been encouraged to explore new, innovative, transparent and effective methods that are instrumental in increasing the effectiveness of SCM, in an effort to achieve their aims and objectives. Under these circumstances, the dictates of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2014) have been instrumental in guiding the country's public universities. This encourages the institutions to closely follow their national duty to plan, design and implement good governance, leading to sustainability, success and progress. Within these parameters and realities, the path to good governance at all levels (and especially SCM and procurement) becomes difficult. This is primarily because of the unpredictability of the existing economic conditions, which have worsened during COVID-19; the greed of potential suppliers, leading to dishonest incentives; a lack of skills and effectiveness of senior or middle management, resulting in laws, rules and regulations not being enforced; finance, SCM and procurement staff being bribe by from potential funders, suppliers and providers and careless and unorganised SCM and internal audit systems (Burger 2016; Ngcamu & Mantzaris 2022; Ngcamu & Mantzaris 2023).

National Treasury's directives to the country's public service entities deal with a wide array of strategies and tactics, leading to beneficial competition through the utilisation of a points system of preference known as 'the 90/10 and 80/20 system'. The strict requirements for potential tender seekers include the following (National Treasury 2015):

- the need to be registered on a database
- the implementation of 'value for money'
- the strengthening of ethical standards
- serious exploration of interactions with potential suppliers
- full implementation of existing, laws, policies, rules and regulations related to the prevention of fraud and corruption at all levels of the SCM systems and processes.

The managers and staff associated with university tenders need to ensure the honesty of each tenderer and the accuracy and confidentiality of the incorporation of tender information (National Treasury 2015).

The research by Owusu-Bio, Manso and Adiwokor (2015) on university SCM realities was based on a study conducted at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). The study considered the identification and understanding of the use and misuse of the internal supply chain (ISC) strategy as an effective and efficient tactical and strategic tool. An explorative qualitative empirical framework was used, beginning with a statement related to its exploratory nature because of 'scanty literature' on SCM in the tertiary education sector. The use of the case study method was based on the collection of primary and secondary sources such as semi-structured interviews with administrative and academic staff. The findings indicated that although a value chain does exist for the internal operations of KNUST (together with ISC), there are problems of a functional and process-based nature. This appeared in an empirical map that showed that the ineffective flow of information within the university seemed to negatively affect its operations. These circumstances had serious negative repercussions because of the inefficient ISC operations at the university. This negative reality had direct and indirect repercussions on the human, financial and physical resources of the institution.

As a result of a debate and serious decisions that were taken by the members of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2013), it became common knowledge that most South African public universities have over the years faced many major challenges, such as fraud and corruption and weak leadership. The decision of the parliamentary body to place a number of the country's universities under administration was regarded as being the correct intervention (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013). The DHET briefed the Select Committee on Education and Recreation on the realities facing the universities put under administration. The discussion included the reasons for the decision and the reality of corruption at all levels, including in SCM. The efforts leading to rehabilitation were described as they related to the corrupt acts, and the specific outcomes and financial implications for the institutions and South Africa as a whole were discussed (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013).

Key issues such as the lack of quality senior university leaders, managers and university council members were queried. There was also a discussion about issues such as vice chancellors' performance appraisals, and the judgement criteria and supply chain realities associated with a R3.15 billion fund for one university's 'turnaround plan' (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013). A report indicated that at the UNIZULU, the serious weaknesses in management and governance were rooted in gross irregularities in the finance and procurement sections. The latter played the most important role in corruption, a situation that has existed for many years.

The efforts to introduce new functions, processes and strategies to combat SCM corruption in universities began with the restructuring of the Office of the Registrar and staff in key sections and divisions. In addition, new procedures and policies were introduced relating to the recruitment and development of new staff. There was a serious revision of the Code of Ethics, with special emphasis on SCM and procurement, and all employees were obligated to declare their financial interests. Following a lengthy forensic investigation that took place, a number of staff members, including members of the SCM department students, were dismissed. At the Tshwane University of Technology, there was an investigation into the causes of perpetual strikes and discontent. The reasons found by the appointed administrator included a lack of ethics and poor governance, based on corrupt SCM, procurement and financial policies, which led to corruption. These issues were reviewed, and new strategies and policies were initiated (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013).

It was shown that the financial crisis at WSU was so extensive that the institution was unable to pay staff salaries (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013). In addition, it was reported that the university faced a complete crisis because of the collapse of the human resources, finance and SCM systems, processes and functions, damaging governance and financial management. An administrator was appointed to bring the university back to financial and operational stability. The first steps forward were a series of disciplinary hearings that led to the dismissal of members of the SCM section, among others (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013).

At the Vaal University of Technology, the factional fights in the institution have led to perpetual governance dilemmas because of a lack of leadership from the council. This has led to corruption, with the university's statute being violated. The process towards the restoration of clean and accountable governance and administration led to a comprehensive forensic audit on SCM, procurement and tenders. This included the appointment of MPL (Ltd), a Gauteng-based company. The university was given a 'clean page' and 'clean audits' for a period, but its vice chancellor was given a final warning. He was soon found guilty of misconduct because once again there was a scandal related to SCM and procurement – this time a laptop tender worth R20 million. This followed an 'independent procurement route accreditation' (Feng 2021).

Methods

The fundamental research approach used in the present study was that of interpretivism with induction or theory building. The qualitative research approach comprised elements of ethnographic study, in-depth interviews, analytical trend and pattern modelling, participative action research, co-operative inquiry and a quantitative survey. The ethnographic methods were employed in this study in order to provide an authoritative account of poor governance in South African universities (Bryman & Bell 2015). This means that in this project, a thorough and comprehensive review of a wide range of interrelated issues was undertaken. This dealt with both human and systemic relations and took the form of an ethnographic, anthropological and sociological study in the shape of in-depth interviews and action-based research. The findings can and should be incorporated into systemic theories and models that emphasise the intended and unintended consequences of policies. The qualitative findings were assessed by following trustworthiness and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

The qualitative in-depth interview questions focused on the systems and structures as being key foundations in the prevention of corruption. The questions also highlighted employees' capability in fighting corruption, their experiences of corrupt practices and the decision-making approaches and influences on corruption. Furthermore, there was a dissection of the universities' vulnerability levels *vis-à-vis* corruption, the retention strategies of quality employees, politics, the

enforcement of policies and regulation levels, accountability, consequences for the perpetrators of corruption and SCM officials colluding with service providers.

The non-probability purposive and judgemental sampling principles were applied in this research project. Owing to the fact that this study is phenomenological, grounded theory was used, with approximately 20–30 interviews conducted at a single university. The researchers searched, retrieved, read, managed and analysed transcripts, looking for similarities and differences. They subsequently generated themes and developed categories using NVIVO version 12. NVIVO is a computer software package that assists the researcher to search for and retrieve data and to deal with the analysis and coding of qualitative data (Wong 2008). Document or content analysis was used as a large number of documents were analysed by researchers.

This is a multiple case study design, with 26 universities being intensively analysed; one individual organisation was targeted to be studied in-depth (Stake 1995). The research instruments were replicated to similar organisations (individual universities) to reveal support for theoretically similar results and contrasting results for predictable reasons (Yin 1994).

This study targeted all 26 public universities in South Africa as they are directly affected – and infected – by a myriad of visible and invisible corrupt activities. Different stakeholders were targeted, including employees at different levels (operational, tactical, strategic and executive), trade union officials and different institutional internal and external structure members. In addition, registered students, student leaders in different capacities and student associations were also targeted.

The ethical principles of informed consent were followed, and participants were fully informed about the research process and were not coerced. Respondents were questioned in a language they understand, and the aims and implications of the project were explained (Bryman 2014). As the study partly followed an ethnographic research method, researchers came into contact with a wide spectrum of people. The opportunity for each and every respondent to give their informed consent was ensured (Bryman 2014). The confidentiality of the structured questionnaires and qualitative interviews was maintained to ensure that the research participants are not identifiable. The electronic online platform SurveyMonkey was used, which treats personal information confidentially. Owing to the fact that the researchers are currently affiliated or have worked in some of the universities, a bracketing processes were followed. In some instances, independent fieldworkers' services were sourced for data collection and analysis.

Research findings

The empirical findings of this study shed light on how ineffective administrators and managers are unable to enforce university policies on a continuous basis, a fact that promotes

corrupt activities in these institutions. The security companies, construction cartels and other service providers' intentional bribing strategies have been shared by the informants in this study. Service providers become involved in the internal operations of universities through corrupt means; for example, by offering bribes to influential financial and SCM officials, asking them to overlook quality standards and specifications for work. The best practices and methods to prevent this kind of corruption were dissected in this study and daily realities exposed by well-informed and experienced stakeholders.

Ineffective management and policy transgressions

The widely shared concerns in public sector institutions – that middle and senior managers are mainly responsible for the lack of enforcement of laws, rules and regulations – have been raised consistently by almost all the informants in different PDUs in South Africa. At UNIZULU, for instance, all the senior managers (both academic and non-academic) who were interviewed concurred with the latter shortcomings in their institution, which they encounter daily in their operations. This was confirmed by one of the senior academics who stated: '[*A*] major part of the problem, but not the heart of it, and yes, in most occasions, if not all'.

A senior member of staff who has worked for more than 15 years at University B raised serious issues regarding ineffective middle and senior managers who are not enforcing the rules. This informant cited the corrupt relationship between these officials and syndicates, which can make whistle-blowers vulnerable if they report such malpractices. This is what was said by this official:

'They are part of the whole situation because if they are honest, they will become whistle-blowers, but if they do that they will be fired, or even worse things will happen to them. There can be no enforcement of laws and regulations when there are agreements amongst various individuals, groups and syndicates. These are big connections, sometimes easy, sometimes complicated.' (A male, between the ages of 55 and 60)

The previous finding concurs with the views of numerous researchers (Costantino 2019; Gray & Carroll 2018) that the types of corruption in universities include the abuse of power, and influence and collusion among interested corrupt groups. This has led to the resisters of corruption being dismissed (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2013).

At the same university (MUT), a trade unionist of the majority trade union supported the views shared by the senior manager mentioned above and continued by saying:

'This is an important key leading to corruption and very near to corrupt relations inside and outside the university and the relationships inside and outside the University. If there are honest and capable managers or administrators, things [*would*] be bad for the corrupt.' (A male between the ages of 40 and 45)

The corrupt relationship between internal employees and external forces has been confirmed by a host of authors (Gray & Carroll 2018; KPMG South Africa 2016). They explain how SCM officials collude with funders, service providers and suppliers in driving the corruption agenda in universities.

Service providers' irregular involvement in the supply chain management processes

A host of diverse solutions have been raised by middle and senior managers and trade union leaders on the best solutions to curb the corrupt activities of suppliers and service providers. A retired UNIZULU senior academic had this to say: 'Restructure the police, intelligence, Hawks, SIU, Public Protector, a lot of things'.

Another senior manager at UNIZULU, with more than 30 years of experience at the university, suggested that the university should:

'[C]reate an anti-corruption, well-skilled and small group of honest staff members, preferably from internal audit or risk management, and enable them through serious training in the research of local and other potential tenderers at all levels, even those below R500 000 and provide findings in respect of the existing situation related to their present performances in their field.' (A female between the ages of 60 and 65)

Numerous reports (DHET 2014; KPMG South Africa 2016) have echoed the views of these informants regarding the fact that universities in South Africa lack capacity and skills, which is a hindrance to fighting corruption.

Another senior administrator at UNIZULU suggested that the university should:

'Do appropriate intelligence on employees and ensure that the university leadership and their groups, including independent groups, are not their allies, connection[*s*] or co-conspirators'. (A male between the ages of 50 and 55)

At MUT, a senior manager came up with an interesting solution:

'Investigate properly … there must be activities on the part of the unions, the students, the SRC, the Alumni … [*they should*] come together and take the cases to the anti-corruption agencies. And these agencies must do their job.' (A female between ages of 45 and 50)

The provision of inappropriate incentives and the influence of the tender processes: Kickbacks

Almost all the informants from different universities shared unbecoming experiences of suppliers' corrupt tendencies to influence university staff. This they did by proposing inappropriate incentives such as gifts or financial kickbacks. There is a clear mandate to influence the bidding processes that favours a particular business. The major service providers mentioned by the informants mostly included security companies and construction cartels that were behind this practice.

A senior member of the finance department at WSU experienced the following:

'I had one incident when the tender was advertised; you will get these calls from the tenderers and they would like to bribe you and I would tell them that I am not interested. If you have staff members who are ethical and firm, there would not have [*been*] cases where staff members collude with the service providers.' (A male between the ages of 40 and 45)

At the same university (WSU), a senior academic and faculty leader confirmed this reality as an official from the finance department:

'Yes, one of the suppliers tried to bribe me. It was a direct attempt to be bribed and that person ended up not getting [*the*] job as he was not the best candidate. This is how you present yourself, [*and*] if people believe that you are keen to be bribed, people will bribe you because bribing happens throughout the world. As soon as it happened to me, I told people … I told people because the reason [*is that*] you don't only [*want*] to be accountable to yourself. I believe in transparency; as soon as you tell other people, if ever your conscience may, I must consider this, just transparency, I have managed to manage it, I have nipped it in the bud.' (A male between the ages of 40 and 45)

The previous findings coincide with the findings of Burger (2016), that the university's SCM officials are being bribed by potential service providers, suppliers and funders.

It is common practice for officials to be promised bribes at WSU, as was experienced by one of the leaders of special projects. This is what he stated:

'In my case someone offered me the suppliers. I did not comply as I am the one who is audited, the external auditors audit me. They audit me [*and*] because I am the one audited, I have no choice. I have refused a gift from a supplier and I have refused because I am not that kind of a person. I would laugh it off and I will never respond. Remember these days, because there are paper trails, you can't afford to expose these days apart from the paper trails.' (A male between ages of 30 and 35)

At UNIZULU, the situation was different: a host of informants confirmed the unethical conduct of service providers, associating it with the ruling party (the ANC) because of the modus operandi they use in winning tenders at the university. A senior and seasoned academic shared this reality by saying:

'I cannot really be definite, but from what I know it happens at a large scale, because you have the big companies, the middle-of-the-road [*companies*] and the hustlers who try their best. Then you have those companies which are attached to the ANC – different factions [*trying*] to make money. When there is competition, bribes and gifts are doing the rounds, big time.' (A female between the ages of 45 and 50)

The political interference on the side of the ruling party, motivated by personal gain, has increased the corrupt relationship between university officials and external actors (Mohamedbhai 2015; Woods & Mantzaris 2012).

A senior administrator at UNIZULU concurred with the above claims and further stated the following:

'Yes, at all levels and for many years, from [*the*] former VC, CFO, her CFO to today's VC and her connections. Stop them? University of Zululand staff and students still expect the

outcomes of the Hawks and Public Protector reports and findings.' (A female between the ages of 55 and 60)

The corrupt actions and interference by service providers were confirmed by a senior member with more than 20 years of experience. This respondent confirmed that people in different structures and management levels have been bribed:

'The situation is much more complicated than this one because everyone is trying to make extra money, but there are bribes to senior people in these departments, while the various people in the University leadership and management are also involved, together with the people in the council. All these things have been recorded in the University's reports and commissions of inquiry.' (MUT, a male between the ages of 35 and 40)

At the same university, a senior trade unionist agreed with what was shared by informants from the university. The informant provided some suggested solutions, with some hesitation:

'We know it [*corruption*] is happening because we have direct and reliable information from our members in every department … it happens very regularly and those who are involved are known to many people. The question is who will have the courage to really spill the beans to the relevant people and departments. The only way to stop these things [*from happening*] is to have the University [*come*] under administration and have forensic reports produced. But even when these things take place, there are no actions against the corrupt people. It can be stopped when all these corrupt people go to jail. They resign and get new top jobs in the same province.' (UNIZULU-a male and between the ages of 50 and 55)

Bribes and non-compliance with quality standards and specifications

There were serious allegations from a number of informants from different higher education institutions levelled against university suppliers, funders and providers, claiming they offer bribes to the finance, SCM and procurement departments. These bribes are given so that the officials overlook service providers' failure to meet the statutory or contractual obligations or quality standards and specifications. These assertions have been supported by almost all the stakeholders in PDUs. This is what one of the SCM line managers, also a trade unionist, at WSU had to say about this dilemma:

'[*A*] write to know policy is required. Whenever there is corruption, there should be public accountability, the VC must account. The issue of performance of the faculty and programmes should account. Corruption is a disease and the University is not prepared to fight it. The managers are being [*made into*] micro managers by other forces.' (A male between the ages of 35 and 40)

At UNIZULU, a similar situation was raised by a WSU informant a respondent pointed out by a senior academic:

'It is easy to say and debate but difficult to do if you are just a staff member; it is extremely difficult to escape. There are offers made, no doubt, but if they try, it is extremely difficult to survive because their own colleagues will give them away. I suppose very often the middle managers and the staff are in a "starving position," so to say, in comparison with their bosses. I cannot say

how often, but when I see the brand-new cars that some of the middle managers drive, I understand the situation more clearly.' (A male between the ages of 55 and 60)

Various senior (academic and non-academic) managers and trade union officials in numerous universities provided solutions that could combat service providers' corrupt strategies to influence officials in the finance, SCM and procurement departments. These corrupt individuals want the officials to award them with tenders irregularly and by bending the regulations of the university concerned.

One senior academic member at UNIZULU provided strategies on how these malpractices could be curbed, by:

'[R]etraining [and] ethical and professional development of all staff in key positions and immediate actions against those responsible for corruption. Until now, only a trade union activist has been facing a disciplinary hearing.' (A male between the ages of 45 and 50)

An MUT trade unionist, meanwhile, suggested:

'The only way to stop it [corruption] is to wait [for] the minister to appoint an honest and capable head of the University. No one who understands the country and its anti-corruption agencies can believe that corruption will end.' (A male between the ages of 40 and 45)

An MUT senior academic member who is knowledgeable regarding the university operations and has an extensive institutional memory provided this view:

'Despite evidence produced over the years about senior leaders' and managers' corruption, no anti-corruption agencies actions have taken place. It is their job to investigate and follow up with the legal consequences.' (A male between the ages of 50 and 55)

Conclusion

This article aimed to investigate how (in)effective administrators and managers in South African tertiary institutions overlook university policies and systems to promote corrupt practices. It further sought to determine how external service providers have managed to influence university officials through bribes and gifts, so as to be awarded tenders, with university officials overlooking quality standards and specifications. The findings supported the Idealist Theory as the objectives for these corrupt acts in these universities were found to be motivated by selfish deeds by the university officials in cahoots with the service providers, mediators and politicians (Anazodo et al. 2012; Nkom 1982). It was of interest to note in the findings that the enforcement of university policies and rules has been neglected in the selected universities and that no legal action has been taken against the perpetrators of corruption. The corrupt actors of the internal and external stakeholders were in agreement. It was clear from the findings of this empirical study that there is a close corrupt relationship between the internal and external actors, which involves officials being bribed by university funders, service providers and suppliers. Equally, the unprecedented political interference in university operations is believed to be behind the corrupt acts in tertiary institutions, including senior university leaders (including council members) receiving gifts and bribes. In conclusion, the solutions to corruption provided in this study include training and developing the workforce's anti-corruption skills; conducting proper intelligence; collaborating with stakeholders in the fight against corruption and apprehending corrupt officials and external forces.

It is therefore recommended that management at universities devise a leadership and development plan. This is in order to train its workforce in different employment categories/levels on policy implementation and enforcement, with special emphasis on SCM and procurement policies. The services of an external and reputable whistle-blowing company should be sourced to assist the university community with reporting corrupt activities without fear or prejudice. It is also recommended that lifestyle audits for university employees at the operational, tactical and strategic levels be conducted, to determine their sources of income and if they are living beyond their means. An external and reputable law firm should be appointed to deal with cases of corruption and fraud in universities. The decision-makers are frequently implicated in such cases and avoid pursuing those in their political and corrupt groupings.

The limitations of this study were methodological regarding the target population as the researchers were unable to interview student leaders who were frequently mentioned by other informants as being complicit in corruption. Another limitation was the failure to secure ethics clearance from the universities, which negatively influenced this study as it partly aimed at employing a mixed research approach. It is therefore advisable that future researchers approach various methods to ascertain the extent of corruption in universities.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclaimer

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