



The interplay between strategic drivers and neoliberalism in South African higher education



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The VUCA world which refers to 'volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity' forces higher education institutions (HEIs) to be aware and understand strategic drivers. Further knowledge of the interplay between strategic drivers, neoliberalism, and 'public good' can assist HEIs not to seize the notion of furthering the neoliberal agenda at all cost, but to strive for a more balanced outcome. This article attempts to explore how strategic drivers can act as a 'reality check' to ensure that HEIs serve the interests of the communities and that of society in general, and that higher education does not become a mechanism to serve the neoliberal agenda above all else. This is a conceptual article in which a reflective, dialectical approach was employed, extrapolating on a PhD study on strategic drivers for South African HEIs. Strategic drivers are confirmed as key forces the South African HEIs should reckon with and manage in pursuing the socio-economic agenda within the growing popularity of neoliberalism.

Contribution: This study alerts South African HEIs and institutions internationally on using strategic drivers to transform in serving the socio-economic agenda and the 'public good' in the midst of the neoliberal.

Keywords: strategic drivers; higher education institutions; neoliberalism; socio-economics; 'public good'.

Introduction

Universities have undergone significant changes in recent times. These changes have mostly been under the guise of global competitiveness, internationalisation and being entrepreneurial (Potter 2008). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014, 2022a, 2022b) also emphasises among others a focus on quality education, equitable access, gender equality, marginalised groups, global knowledge and skills, sustainable development, flexible life-wide and lifelong learning, multilingualism, biodiversity, and climate change. There is no denying that universities cannot resist change and continue to operate as they have up to this day and age. As the demands and expectations of society change regarding the role and place of higher education, universities thus also have to take cognisance of these changes to remain relevant. Coupled with changes in political economy over the past few decades, where the 'welfare state' has given way to a more neoliberal economic thinking that values private ownership, an entrepreneurial focus, and the protection of business, universities are grappling with how to redefine themselves as government subsidies dwindle and pressure mounts for universities to be managed as profit-seeking concerns.

However, this changing milieu that higher education finds itself in, exhibits distinct characteristics of corporatisation, where decision-making power is taken away from faculties and faculty members and placed in the hands of university administrative 'managers'. This burgeoning managerialism has seen 'strategic thrusts', 'set targets' and 'key performance areas' becoming part of the daily activities at universities. Individual universities are increasingly driven by how many graduates obtain their qualifications, how many staff members have a PhD, how many patents have been registered, and how many research articles have been published in top journals. It would, therefore, seem as though the neoliberal turn in (mostly Western) thinking is creating a situation in universities where the ideology is becoming so pervasive that it could run the danger of ignoring what a university ultimately is, all about.

The dichotomy outlined above has the potential to exacerbate a situation which is currently bubbling under the surface, as it were, many academics see the corporatisation of higher education and the wave of managerialism that has hit universities as flying in the face of academic freedom

and what a university is ultimately about. They increasingly feel that academia is being diluted, that standards are waning, that faculty members are being exploited and are losing their voice through decreased authority, autonomy and decision-making ability in the university system. This is a very precarious situation indeed, as without capable and motivated academics to educate the graduates of tomorrow, higher education is a fruitless exercise. It is therefore imperative that ideology (in the form of neoliberalism, here) must not be pursued at all cost, but rather that the realities of the higher education landscape provide a guiding light for how higher education is to forge ahead. In view hereof, this article attempts to interrogate the role strategic drivers could play to allow universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) to serve the interests of the communities and that of society in general, and that higher education does not become a mechanism to only serve the neoliberal agenda.

By employing a reflective, dialectical approach (to reflect on opposing views with the purpose of finding a new alternative), this conceptual article will commence by taking a look at the role of the university in broader society, and how this has evolved over time. Thereafter, the discussion will introduce the concept of neoliberalism as economic doctrine, and show how neoliberal thought has become part of the higher education agenda. The notion of strategic drivers will then be expounded upon, followed by strategic drivers present within the higher education context. The article will conclude by discussing the realities of drivers as a collection of forces interacting with the neoliberal ideology, but also to allow universities to focus on their immediate communities and society at large. This interplay between drivers and neoliberalism can assist universities to not get usurped by the notion of furthering the neoliberal agenda at all cost, but to transform in having the best of 'both worlds'.

The university and society

The university, as we know it today, can be traced back to scholarly institutions that were founded in Europe in the Middle Ages (Taylor 2017). Established by the elites and nobility of society, they were autonomous and self-regulated centres of standing (Stone 2015). As time passed, universities also developed into the 'critic and conscience' of the state (Harland et al. 2010). In so doing, universities started to assume the educational responsibility of familiarising students with the prevalent norms, rules and conventions of society, thus emphasising the duties and responsibilities of accountable citizenship (Raimondi 2012).

This habituating function of the university extends to what Hall (2007) views as the role of academia, which is to seek 'a certain truth'. This is not absolute Truth, but rather truth relating to a rounded, well-informed view of reality. This truth should be used to speak truth to power, which translates to universities acting as both critics and conscience of the state (Gutmann 1998; Hall 2007). This notion of 'truth to power' attests to the important role universities play in creating well-informed and critical citizens through

dispelling ignorance and empowering their students to acquire agency (Giroux 2010; Gutmann 1998).

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries had far-reaching effects on higher education (Taylor 2017). In the United State of America (US) in particular, rapid industrialisation led to a shift away from a curriculum based purely on 'liberal' arts and 'classic' areas of scholarship, to more 'useful' areas of inquiry, such as engineering, agriculture and business administration (Thelin 2011). This shift was driven by the needs of the markets, as the society of the day demanded new curricula to better equip people for the realities and demands of the changing society they found themselves in. Consequently, those HEIs that could provide these types of curricula attracted students (Taylor 2017; Thelin 2011), and HEIs began to increase their enrolments, and grew in numbers. This expansion, in turn, meant that these institutions had to start hiring more faculty and administrative support staff (Taylor 2017).

The expansion of HEIs outlined above resulted in a total shift in the nature of higher education by the dawn of the 20th century in the US, although the situation seems to be different in Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world. Pedagogically, this ushered in the lecture-method of teaching still prevalent today. Furthermore, universities also started shifting away from providing liberal education to an elite few, and started focussing on developing skilled workers that were in demand. During this period, a definite division started to appear in HEIs, with academic staff members on the one side and a distinct management corps (from support staff) on the other (Goldin & Katz 1999).

The modern university attempts to integrate civic education into professional programmes, while still trying to act as a societal conscience, and developing new knowledge and thinking through research (Raimondi 2012). Universities have increasingly been forced into vessels for national economic development and career success, which has led to even more enrolments and greater state support provided to universities. Despite the objections of faculty members and critics, their voices were never heard. Against this backdrop of the marketisation of public services, driven by neoliberalist economic ideals, universities around the world have been 'reformed' to comply with the demands of an ever shifting market.

Giroux (2010), however, reminds us that in democratic societies, universities should be geared towards being attentive to the burning issues and conflicts of the day. Consequently, universities can assist in imagining a more just world where anti-democratic forces are called out through connecting power, critical agency and knowledge. Giroux (2010) adds that universities should also exhibit a willingness to struggle for ideals through faculty members who support specific ideals and drive these processes. Faculty members themselves are therefore the catalysts in imagining a more just society, and who should urge students to take these struggles 'out there'. Yet, with the dawn of a

more neoliberal oriented society, it would seem as though these processes and spaces to nurture a mind-set of 'public good' focussed on knowledge creation and critical agency are few and far between. This neoliberal turn implies a change regarding the traditional values of a university, and also implies redefining what knowledge creation and teaching and learning are all about in the modern university.

It cannot be denied that the role of the university in society has changed over time. As the university as an institution serves society, it would stand to reason that changes in the fabric of society, or changes in what society demands of its citizens, will filter through to the agenda the university pursues. In recent times, the adoption of neoliberal economic principles across the globe has had a marked impact on institutions of higher learning. Over and above neoliberalism originally making its way into higher education in North America, it is also evident in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Chile only experienced the pressures towards neoliberalism after the turn of the millennium, while a country such as Sweden has accepted only few aspects thereof (Davies & Bansel 2007). According to Pattman and Carolissen (2018), South African universities have also been constantly undergoing a process of transformation since 1994 to transform into institutions of inclusivity and social justice (Rossouw 2022). Irrespective of one's stance *vis-a-vis* neoliberalism, the fact of the matter is that it has gained a foothold worldwide and currently seems to be the prevalent economic doctrine. Therefore, one needs to be aware of what the greater doctrine of neoliberalism purports and, especially relating to higher education, what demands neoliberalism is placing on HEIs in general.

Neoliberalism and the university

As alluded to in the previous section, neoliberal ideals have filtered through into academia. There is a widely held view that this neoliberal turn has led to a commodification of higher education and corporatisation of the university itself (Klocker & Drozdewski 2012; Seal 2018). To understand how this perceived commodification of higher education has impacted academia, it is necessary to unpack the notion of neoliberalism.

In essence, neoliberalism is an economic theory that counters Keynesian economic philosophy and the liberal social economic policies of the 1960s and 1970s (Raimondi 2012). It dispels the idea of markets being interfered with through collective action to provide stability and full employment. Instead, neoliberal economic thought promotes the importance of the individual, the material goods belonging to the individual, and a more limited role of government in the economy (Jones 2012). Neoliberal economic thought advocates that individuals determine, and are in charge of, their own destiny. Individuals also have right of determination over the material goods they own, as the possession of material goods is viewed as an individuals' liberty. Consequently, any attempt by the state to apportion material goods of individuals for the

pursuit of the common good is seen as unjust, as it is a threat to individual freedom.

Therefore, neoliberal economics strives to reshape government for the protection of enterprise. This reshaping of government is achieved in various ways. One of these ways would be through legislation aimed at limiting state protection provided to individuals. Another way is through cutting expenditure in areas that do not support the neoliberal agenda, such as healthcare and education, while funding programmes that do promote the neoliberal agenda, such as the promotion of entrepreneurial activity. Neoliberalism also attempts to reshape government through discourse centring on the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR), globalisation, accountability and enterprise development, as well as developing measures of compliance and control for the enforcement of neoliberal ideals (Olssen & Peters 2005). The government then, in essence, is reshaped and remodelled to the restraints of the free market, by employing private sector management principles.

Therefore, neoliberalism promotes individualism, private ownership of material goods and the importance of the family unit. It discourages the belief in a common good for society, and absolves individuals of any responsibility to contribute towards the common good of society (Giroux 2010). The view that caring for the marginalised and vulnerable in society is a moral good, is not promoted in the neoliberal mindset. Instead, neoliberals promote the notion of being accountable to oneself, where people mind their own self-interest. People are, therefore, reshaped to be 'productive entrepreneurs of their own lives' (Davies & Bansel 2007). Individual actuality is paired to national actuality, and actuality is connected to the market. Many scholars, however, are at loggerheads with this notion (Giroux 2010). They argue that the assumption that only the free market can allocate resources and opportunities fairly, is a delusion, as it ignores the fact that the free market is, per definition, unfair. The argument further posits that power imbalances in, and lack of access to, the free market causes a skewing in the allocation of resources and opportunities. In the neoliberal conception, however, this skewing in allocation is seen as the fault of the individual, as individuals are, ultimately accountable for their own success (Raimondi 2012).

In the neoliberal economy, the university is increasingly accountable to the government and regulatory bodies of the state (Raimondi 2012; Sims 2019). In South Africa, these would be, for example, the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the National Research Foundation (NRF). Universities are expected to produce graduates prepared for the demands of the global (global and the local) market, and who will make the state more globally competitive. Research and knowledge creation, also, is expected to have commercial value (Harland et al. 2010). This expectation has also come

under scrutiny from scholars (Raimondi 2012; Seal 2018). The critique purports that the neoliberal university places a premium on the exchange-value of the outcomes of its labour, rather than the use-value of the outcomes of its labour. Exchange-value seeks a positive rate of return on the work produced, rather than considering the public good and societal impact of the work produced. Use-value, therefore, becomes a secondary consideration, a 'nice to have' if exchange-value has been realised.

Furthermore, state funding is being apportioned to where it can deliver the greatest rate of return and economic benefit. This has drawn the critique that some 'traditional' university departments are waning, especially those that do not contribute to the promotion of enterprise and globalisation such as the liberal arts, while 'popular' and emerging disciplines, especially those that have commercial potential, are rapidly expanding and receiving a lot of funding (Seal 2018). The critique further purports that higher education has become a commodity with commercial potential, and that the University is, increasingly, driven by economic logic which often overrides educational concerns (Klocker & Drozdowski 2012; Seal 2018). In this view, the university exhibits a distinct market orientation, where the notion of 'consumer is king' is granted to students (Smyth 2020), which in turn questions the effectiveness of education provision – as catered for by professional academics – and reduces issues to an accumulation of choices by individual 'consumers' (Barer et al. 1998).

The neoliberal university is criticised for being typified by:

- a 'master and servant' style accountability relationship with government and regulatory bodies;
- a reorientation towards academic programmes that are profitable;
- research that can be translated into commercial value;
- adopting corporate and commercial norms, practices and criteria to structure, govern and evaluate the success of its' endeavours;
- locating the student as a consumer of higher education,
- the intensification of academic work; and
- increased cuts in government funding (which, in turn, places pressure on students to carry a higher portion of the cost of higher education, leading to more student debt) (Klocker & Drozdowski 2012; Ross, Savage & Watson 2019; Smyth 2020).

This has also triggered the phenomenon of huge student cohorts in class rooms and a renewed drive for third stream-income by means of continuous education programmes.

It is widely acknowledged that the modern university today resembles a corporate entity (Klocker & Drozdowski 2012; Seal 2018), with cost centres headed by directors, management committees and strategic targets. In the modern university, staff are monitored according to performance indicators, and academic staff are constantly encouraged to maximise research outputs and student throughput (Smyth 2017). Collegial and democratic administrative structures traditionally encountered

in universities have been given way to less collaborative, more hierarchical, management structures (Klocker & Drozdowski 2012; Ross et al. 2019) where the management corps are mandated to make decisions regarding the business operations of the university. These structures tend to be more accountability driven and time-consuming. The management corps also need not confer with academic and administrative staff concerning the execution of their duties (Sims 2019), as the neoliberal conception views 'management' as good, a specialised skill that cannot be performed by anyone in a university (Shepherd 2017; Smyth 2020), and those who exhibit specific expertise, skills, or techniques will be deemed suitable for the management corps (Doran 2016). This resembles a typical managerialist governance structure, where the governance and day-to-day running of the institution are taken care of by professional managers who are results driven and who focus firmly on outcomes and the assessment of performance (Seal 2018; Sims 2019). In the more 'traditional' conception of the university, the top administrative and management structures of a university were constituted of academics seconded to these positions, and Faculty Boards and the Senate played a far greater role in the governance of the institution (Giroux 2010).

Nowadays, vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, executive deans, heads of school, and heads of department run the university by means of strategic plans, with set targets, and the institution is governed by a multitude of policies (Peters 2013). This leads to a compulsion with efficiency and outputs (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara 2021). These outputs are measured in terms of performance indicators (Lynch 2014). Often, these performance indicators manifest themselves in metrics and rankings compiled by independent bodies. Scholars opine that meeting the administratively scheduled targets thus becomes the priority (Lynch 2014; Seal 2018), as success in meeting targets is the focus of not only public audits, but also of the performance contracts that define the duties and responsibilities of the management corps. This, inevitably, leads to a situation where universities (and even groupings within universities) contend over resources, status and influence (Kidman & Chu 2017).

Neoliberal economic thought, accompanied by a more managerialist approach to running the university, implies a cultural shift in the governance ethos of universities, a shift towards managerial control over individual academics (Giroux 2010). Along with this shift, many academics feel that there is an innate distrust in the abilities of the individual academic to assess their own activities and to improve (Hodgins & Mannix-McMamara 2021; Lorenz 2012). In a sense, neoliberalism and managerialism represent a shift in focus from universities as a 'public good', towards universities as an economic investment for an educated community (Kidman & Chu 2017). Critics of the modern, neoliberal university pronounce that decision-making is no longer left up to faculty level units with a degree of intellectual and subject-related autonomy; it is now the domain of distanced, corporatised decision-making bodies (Kidman & Chu 2017). This 'managerialist turn' is seen as flying in the face of the concept of academic freedom (Poutanen et al.

2020), a freedom academics feel very strongly about. If only to further their own knowledge by doing research.

Yet, at the end of the day, the stark reality is that the university is not an ivory tower that has the luxury to fend off or to turn a blind eye to the challenges that originate in the greater environment within which it functions. In recent times, issues such as changes in global economic thought and policy, ever-decreasing government subsidies, increased competition for enrolments, globalisation, pressure for greater accessibility to higher education, and pressure for greater market relevance of qualifications have necessitated a rethink of the role of the university in contemporary society, as well as a rethink of how the university should be administrated. In reaction to these issues, it is apparent that HEIs across the globe have adopted neoliberal standards. However, this neoliberal turn has been met with much critique and resistance from the academic community, as the sentiment is that the neoliberal agenda is usurping many of the 'traditional' university values and principles. Yet, this is the position that higher education and other public institutions, such as hospitals, schools and governments (Davies & Bansel 2007), find themselves in, and this leads one to deduce that a midway between the neoliberal agenda, and pedagogical values and principles – refined through centuries of academic endeavour – needs to be found.

The concept of strategic drivers

In view of the aforementioned neoliberal agenda, contemporary organisations globally face many challenges and changes as the environment they operate in becomes ever more demanding (Bateman, Snell & Konopaske 2019). These challenges and changes directly influence and impact the strategic direction of organisations. However, some challenges stand out, and are more prominent than others. The most prominent of these challenges or issues are likely to have a marked influence on the strategic landscape of an industry, and are termed strategic or driving forces, change drivers, or drivers of industry development and evolutionary processes, depending on the literature one consults (De Wit 2020; Paul & Leese 2009; Porter 1980; Thompson et al. 2020).

Bender, Partlow and Roth (2008) refer to the concept of strategic drivers in developing strategies in response to environmental uncertainty, changing technology and global competition, while Johnson, Scholes and Whittington (2008) expounded upon these challenges and issues as environmental factors that directly influence strategy. Nolte (2004) refers to catalysts of change and De Wit (2020) ascribes the label 'change drivers' to these factors, recognising that these factors are very likely to influence the way an industry (or sector) develops over time and seems to be an extension of Porter's (1980) conception of drivers as evolutionary processes that create incentives or pressures for industries to change. Thompson et al. (2020) suggest that these driving forces may even have a stronger impact on the strategic landscape than industry life-cycles,

and highlight the presence of such driving forces as the most powerful agents of change present in an industry. It seems that no definitive label exists for referring to these factors. However, for the purposes of this article, the term 'strategic drivers' is used, as the influence of these factors on strategy is a prominent aspect of this study.

De Wit (2020) contends that organisational strategy and strategic management are concerned with the alignment of the organisation to its environment. Therefore, to have a comprehensive understanding of the business environment is vitally important. Although the totality of the business environment needs to be taken into account when considering strategy, the factors, or variables, that constitute the industry environment as sub-section of the greater business environment, seem to be of paramount importance for crafting and implementing successful strategies. These industry variables reflect unique realities pertaining to a specific industry, and are therefore not as generic as the macro environmental variables that constitute the external business environment.

Furthermore, it is not enough to merely take cognisance of variables that can potentially have an influence on the organisation. For optimal management of strategy, one needs to know the direction the industry is moving towards, and why the industry is moving in that specific direction to ensure and maintain a healthy fit between the organisation and its industry (Bender et al. 2008). The manner in which industry development takes place can be determined by asking questions such as 'What are the drivers propelling industry development?' and 'What patterns of development does the industry exhibit?' (De Wit 2020). Similarly, Paul and Leese (2009), in an attempt to position HEIs in Australia, refer to strategic questions such as 'What strategic forces are at work in the sector?' and 'What choices have to be made on how and where to compete?'

Strategic drivers, therefore, are indicative of current and future developments as most prominent change agents present in the external environment – and in particular, an industry or sector. It is therefore of utmost importance that these strategic drivers are properly understood, and that different scenarios are provided for when assessing the potential impact of these strategic drivers. One can say that strategic drivers should arguably be the most important element in determining the future direction and strategy of any organisation, and that the realities brought about by these agents of change should supersede the agendas of different interest groups, both internal and external.

Strategic drivers in the South African higher education context

From the work of Rossouw (Rossouw & De Bruyn 2010; Rossouw & Goldman 2014, 2017), it is evident that strategic drivers most evident in South African higher education are described as catalysts or key forces impacting institutional strategy. Important to note, that not all strategic drivers

relevant to the South African higher education context originate from the external environment, as several drivers also stem from within HEIs. All these strategic drivers are likely to have a marked effect on the strategies HEIs will pursue and also the way strategies are managed.

According to Rossouw (2022), strategic drivers are mainly divided into external and internal drivers. As external strategic drivers, 'government and governance' generally refers to the impact of government structures, legislation, policies and regulatory bodies on HEIs, while 'students' as driver alludes to the needs and challenges of students. 'Technology and 4IR' emphasises the online environment, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality and technology integrated teaching and learning. The strategic drivers, 'globalisation and internationalisation' include geopolitics and associated risks, as well as staff and student movement across borders. 'Social dynamics' refer to issues around crime, corruption, community challenges and security, and 'market forces and change' to competition, entrepreneurship, innovation, market opportunities and risks, reputation, rankings, positioning, agility and change. Interesting to note, the latter is the only strategic driver that specifically highlights the influence of marketisation or neoliberalism on HEIs. However, should coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) be singled out, it would probably be labelled the most powerful catalyst of change in the recent past.

The following are internal strategic drivers: 'Finances, people and resources' comprises the funding, subsidy, third stream income, but also the human resources and infrastructure. 'Teaching, learning and research' encapsulates matters of access, retention, success, programmes, curricula, quality of teaching and learning, continuous education, flexible delivery modes, own research and postgraduate studies. 'Transformation' includes diversity, Africanisation, decolonisation, inclusivity and the organisational culture of institutions, whereas 'collaborations' includes workplace readiness, partnerships and stakeholders relations. 'Leadership and ethics' as internal driver refers to the forward thinking of academic leadership, leadership development, ethics and integrity within HEIs and 'environmental sustainability' to the general 'green' awareness, carbon footprint and recycling. 'Energy security' emphasises the importance of sustainable power supply during ongoing and heightened load-shedding schedules in South Africa (Rossouw 2022).

These strategic drivers for HEIs seem most appropriate when considering the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) world (Mack & Khare 2015) and also in pursuing their socio-economic agenda. Organisations of all types are confronted with the VUCA environment and the impact it has on decision-making (Persis et al. 2021; Stein 2021), and higher education is no exception (Council on Higher Education 2016; García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno & Martín-Rojas 2021; National Planning Commission 2012). Higher education institutions have to rethink strategy to remain relevant in the present and for the future. Institutions

should avoid inertia since the future is already upon us. New business models that reflect the realities of the marketplace stakeholder groupings need to be considered. Higher education institutions should also collaborate as a collective to build and enhance the higher education sector and develop individual institutions.

Realities around strategic drivers and neoliberalism

As mentioned, the neoliberal wave of commodification and marketisation of education has been apparent since the 1980s, and has become more pervasive (Brown 2015; Chen 2021). This neoliberal turn has changed the activities, structure and stakeholders of the higher education landscape (Mandviwalla et al. 2021; Velayutham 2021). Among others, HEIs in South Africa are now required to focus on third-stream income, while prestigious institutions increase student enrolments and want to climb the ladder of global rankings (Chen 2021), students are viewed as customers, and there is constant lobbying to secure resources which are increasing becoming increasingly difficult to secure. Effective and parsimonious utilisation of resources is stressed by management at South African HEIs nowadays, while having to balance the supply and demand of teaching, learning, research and other institutional services through the price mechanism.

García-Morales et al. (2021) allude to the impact of innovative technology to digitalise higher education. Higher education institutions could share best online modules and/or programmes to benefit both students and institution by using expertise, enhancing their reputation, apply best cost strategies, and utilising resources effectively. Technology needs to be integrated into teaching and learning, and technology-integrated teaching and learning strategies need to be pursued by HEIs. However, South African governmental structures such as CHE, DHET, and SAQA should be receptive to and appreciative of such inventions. For this reason, it may be best for government and HEIs to collaborate as equal partners in strategising for a better future state of higher education. Furthermore, where research is concerned, South African HEIs with a more established research culture and tradition could assist institutions viewed as 'emergent' or 'growing' in terms of research to improve their research acumen and track record. With the aforementioned interventions, HEIs could collectively act to the advantage of all stakeholders and be an example for others (Rossouw & Goldman 2016).

Clark, Chapleo and Suomi (2020) state that because of the marketisation of higher education, branding as strategy has increasingly become an important differentiation tool. Especially when alluding to Musselin's (2018) view of competition in higher education as inter-institutional whereby HEIs are one another's competitor. In addition, Steynberg et al. (2020) recognise the complexity around balancing global competitiveness with local responsiveness. Aula and Mantere (2008) purport that HEIs should manage reputation and have strategies in place to build and maintain

their reputations and to communicate this 'doing good' to others. According to Rossouw (2022), an institution with a well-perceived good reputation will be in a better position to attract good students, academics and administrators. To this end, Peretomode (2021) confirms the importance of not only reputation but also quality and performance for world rankings.

Part of the contemporary world is the driver of environmental sustainability that has to be prioritised and included in the strategic plans of South African institutions. Checks and balances should also be in place to measure progress and corrective action is to be taken when required. Furthermore, energy security is something all HEIs are facing since load-shedding is a common phenomenon in South Africa, and institutions will have to investigate alternative sustainable and green sources of energy. In an attempt to combat the high levels of crime and corruption, leadership in HEIs should be an example to students who will be the future leaders of society and industry. Also in support of the neoliberal thinking, higher education leadership has to be developed on forward thinking, scenario planning and strategy, but also to develop upcoming leaders (Rossouw 2022).

From the above, it is evident that pressure is mounting for South African HEIs to be relevant, accessible and resource-effective. The impact of technology and globalisation is forcing HEIs to re-assess their purpose in society, not only as a provider of education, and as centres of knowledge creation, but also as developing well-rounded citizens on the one hand, and being cost effective entities on the other. This has resulted in HEIs having to balance diverging interests. As the majority of the higher education sector in South Africa are recipients of state funding, governmental pressure to manage HEIs along more neoliberal lines is more pervasive than ever, and HEIs have seemingly undergone a neoliberal turn in recent times.

While one has to recognise the fact that neoliberal economic thought is currently the order of the day, one also cannot ignore the plethora of criticism that has accompanied this neoliberal shift in higher education. Commodification of education and corporatisation of the university are leading the large-scale dissatisfaction among academics, who feel overworked, with far too much administration standing in the way of academic progress. According to Rossouw (2022), academics warn that overregulation is stifling creativity in South African HEIs, while a focus on throughput is lowering standards. Furthermore, pressures to increase publication output are resulting in ethically questionable practices to reach set targets as predatory journals and publishers are seemingly riding the wave of academic paranoia. Global competitiveness among HEIs has resulted in some institutions avidly pursuing ranking points, often at the cost of effectiveness.

Based on the viewpoints presented in this article thus far, one can deduce that there are instances where South African HEIs and from other nations are pursuing agendas that

promote the neoliberal agenda at all cost. When HEIs set ever harder to reach research output targets, one has to question whether these institutions are merely promoting numbers, or are they promoting quality of content? When HEIs set throughput targets for modules and qualifications, one wonders whether this is a strategy to pursue government subsidy above producing skilled and well-rounded graduates? When HEIs insist that academic departments appoint a set number of visiting scholars annually, one wonders whether this is a strategy to attract expertise and to promote collaborative partnerships, or is an effort to pursue ranking points, as some rankings also take into consideration the number of visiting scholars affiliated to the institution? This may also be to attract more students, ultimately changing the purpose of HEIs' from being knowledge-driven to knowledge-processing.

Pursuing the neoliberal agenda above more 'traditional' scholarly pursuits can be seen as a dangerous route to follow, as it will have dire consequences in terms of the quality of graduates, and thus also of the educated workforce in general. There, therefore, needs to be a balance. Yet, such balance can only be achieved if the realities and demands of higher education are confronted. The danger with a fixation on neoliberal pursuits is that, at the end of the day, what the HEIs achieve is very much artificial. In such a scenario, it becomes more important to 'meet the target', and to 'tick the box', than to develop well-rounded citizens, and knowledge that will transform society.

In our opinion, knowledge of the mentioned strategic drivers impacting on individual HEIs and the higher education sector as a whole have a potentially vital role in achieving the balance alluded to above. Identifying and understanding the challenges and potential impact of these drivers puts HEI management in a position to fully comprehend the realities of their individual environments and of the higher education sector as a whole. Therefore, South African HEIs (and from other countries) should base their strategies upon the realities of their environment for maximum effectiveness and potential success of developed strategies. However, this would imply that a mechanism exists at senior executive management level to ensure that developed strategies do indeed address the realities laid bare by strategic drivers, and do not veer towards the advancement of neoliberalist ideals alone. Only if such a balance can be created can HEIs transform into institutions to attain their purpose in a neoliberal world.

Conclusion

Against this marketisation drive, Velayutham (2021:384–385) argues that not all are positive since inequality, social immobility, high student debt, stratification, and customer-friendly assessments may derail HEIs from their initial purpose. Despite customer needs being at the forefront, education cannot be a commodity and should be made affordable in collaborating with other HEIs, industry, government, and other stakeholders in a transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary way. Anglicisation of higher education

is also a reality, but HEIs should not oversee the richness in protecting and maintaining regional and national languages (Rossouw 2022).

Considering literature such as De Wit (2020); Fumasoli and Huisman (2013); Paul and Leese (2009); Porter (1980); Thompson et al. (2020), and the study conducted by Rossouw (2022), the reality of strategic drivers is confirmed. Higher education institutions have no choice other than to ensure sustainability and competitiveness in a demanding world of global rankings, reputation, positioning, competition, quality, customer centeredness, strategy and the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the midst of all, whether one agrees or not, neoliberalism seems unavoidable and its popularity among HEIs is growing. South African HEIs and institutions internationally would thus have no option than to recognise this new thinking, but to find creative ways to transform such as relooking their 'business models' in serving the socio-economic agenda and to be institutions of 'public good'. This would mean to use their knowledge around strategic drivers to balance neoliberalism with their socio-economic conscious. In closing and for further research, the position argued, could possibly serve as platform for further deliberations and debate on this topic.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

D.R. and G.A.G., as co-authors, contributed equally to this article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained at University of Johannesburg, College of Business and Economics Research Ethics Committee (No. CBEREC20S OM01), and was received on 03 February 2020. In addition, ethics clearance and written informed consent was also obtained from the institutions and research participants who constituted the sample for this study. Proof hereof is available on request from D.R., the author.

Further to this, since humans were involved, all procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the College Research Ethics Committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments, or comparable ethical standards.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, D.R. The data are not publicly available as it could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors, and the publisher.

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