Volume 11, 2025, 179-185 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17849954

APPLYING MICHEL FOUCAULT'S POWER THEORY IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

Mmalefikane Sylvia Sepeng
Victor J. Pitsoe

* Department of Leadership and Management, College of Education, University of South Africa

Abstract

Michel Foucault's ideas about power have profoundly influenced numerous academic disciplines, including educational leadership. Within higher education, traditional conceptions of power as something possessed or exercised hierarchically are routinely challenged and reconfigured through Foucauldian frameworks. This article examines six core themes—disciplinary power, surveillance, governmentality, knowledge and discourse, resistance, and subjectification—and interrogates their relevance in the context of higher education leadership. Drawing from a rich palette of global case studies and empirical reflections, the analysis unpacks how power relations saturate institutional structures, policy-making, and daily practices, shaping agency and constraints for leaders, faculty, and students alike. Throughout, the article foregrounds the dynamic and relational nature of power in universities, advocating for a more reflexive and ethically attuned leadership paradigm that resists simplistic binaries and promotes emancipatory possibilities.

Keywords: Foucault, power, higher education leadership, disciplinary power, governmentality.

1. Introduction

The landscape of higher education leadership is subject to complex and nuanced negotiations of power that extend far beyond formal administrative hierarchies. Over the past several decades, scholarships have increasingly recognized that leadership in universities cannot be reduced merely to chains of command, resource management, or external policy compliance (Ball, 2012; Blackmore, 2013). Rather, power in higher education is diffuse, productive, and relational web of practices, discourses, and institutionalized norms that shape subjectivities and organizational realities (Foucault, 1977; Dean, 2010).

Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power represents a radical departure from classical "sovereign" models, emphasizing that power is not something that certain individuals or groups "hold," but is omnipresent, operating through various technologies, discourses, and institutions (Foucault, 1980, 1991). This insight has profound implications for understanding how authority and influence materialize in academia, from the structuring of curricula to the shaping of academic identities and the governance of student populations (Leask, Rennie, & Watanabe, 2020).

Higher education institutions are marked by ever-evolving regulatory environments, demands for accountability, and corporatizing tendencies, which together mobilize new forms of power and governance (Marginson, 2006; Rhoads & Torres, 2006). Foucault's analyses—especially those concerning disciplinary power, surveillance, and governmentality—offer sophisticated conceptual tools for unraveling how universities manage bodies and knowledge, create compliant subjects, and reproduce or contest social inequalities (Besley & Peters, 2007; Olssen, 2016).

This article advances a critical analysis of higher education leadership through the theoretical lens of Foucault's power theory. It is structured around six interlinked themes: (1) Disciplinary Power in Academic Institutions; (2) Surveillance and the Panopticon: Mechanisms of Control; (3) Governmentality and University Governance; (4) Knowledge, Discourse, and the Construction of Truth; (5) Resistance and the Possibilities for Subversion; and (6) Subjectification: Shaping Academic Identities. Employing a rigorous, evidence-based approach and drawing on a breadth of empirical and theoretical sources, each theme engages deeply with the intricacies and contradictions inherent in contemporary academic leadership. The article concludes by considering ethical and practical implications for more equitable, inclusive, and reflexive forms of leadership in the sector.

2. Theme 1: Disciplinary Power in Academic Institutions.

Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, especially as articulated in "Discipline and Punish" (1977), is foundational for understanding how universities operate as spaces of regulation and normalization. In the context of higher education, disciplinary power functions through intricate networks of assessment, surveillance, and institutionalized routines, producing "docile bodies" that conform to prevailing norms of academic performance and conduct (Foucault, 1977; Power, 1997). This process is evident in the pervasive use of standardized assessments, performance evaluations, and quality assurance mechanisms, all of which structure daily academic life while shaping both faculty and students' subjectivities (Shore & Wright, 2015).

University leadership, under the shadow of disciplinary power, is tasked with enforcing standards, maintaining order, and mitigating deviance through regulatory regimes. For example, codes of ethical conduct, plagiarism detection technologies, and workload allocation models all exemplify how disciplinary power is operationalized to produce compliant, efficient academic actors (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012). Leadership, in this sense, becomes inseparable from the apparatuses of surveillance and discipline, rendering invisible the more subtle forms of social control that extend well beyond overt policy directives (Gillies & O'Connor, 2010).

Disciplinary power does not merely constrain but also produces: it generates norms, enables certain forms of agency, and demarcates the boundaries of what is valued in academic excellence (Hoskin, 2007). The emphasis on research productivity, teaching evaluations, and "impact" metrics illustrates how academics are constituted as subjects through ongoing processes of self-monitoring and self-discipline (Ball, 2015; Davies & Bansel, 2007). Through these mechanisms, higher education leadership enforces specific subjectivities, channeling professional practices and ambitions towards alignment with institutional priorities (Kandiko, 2010).

Critics argue that the proliferation of disciplinary power has contributed to growing managerialism within universities, potentially stifling intellectual autonomy and creativity (Lorenz, 2012; Deem et al., 2007). Yet, a Foucauldian perspective insists that power is not merely repressive but productive, capable of engendering resistance and innovation within the cracks of institutional constraint (Simons & Masschelein, 2008). Understanding disciplinary power thus requires a nuanced appreciation of its ambivalent role in both sustaining academic governance and offering sites for contestation and transformation.

3. Theme 2: Surveillance and the Panopticon: Mechanisms of Control.

One of Foucault's signature contributions to social theory is his conceptualization of the Panopticon—a metaphor that elucidates the workings of surveillance in modern institutions, including universities (Foucault, 1977). The panoptic model of control does not rely solely on overt monitoring by authorities, but on the internalization of surveillance by subjects themselves, cultivating self-discipline and regulation (Hope, 2015). In higher education, this logic manifests through both physical architectures (such as open-plan offices and CCTV) and digital tools (for example, learning management systems, plagiarism detection software, and remote proctoring technologies) (Selwyn, 2020; Knox, 2017).

Academic leaders are increasingly compelled to deploy surveillance technologies, not only to manage student conduct but also to monitor the performance of academic staff (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). The quantification of academic work—measuring teaching quality, research output, and even online activity—exemplifies how panoptic mechanisms have permeated every layer of academic life (Williamson, 2017). Faculty and students internalize these norms, engaging in continuous self-surveillance and comparison with institutional metrics and benchmarks (Morrison et al., 2019).

While surveillance may be justified by appeals to transparency, quality assurance, and accountability, Foucauldian critics highlight its corrosive effects on trust, academic freedom, and well-being (Ball, 2015; Komljenovic, 2021). Leadership must negotiate the tensions between ensuring institutional integrity and maintaining an environment conducive to creativity and risk-taking. Moreover, surveillance regimes often disproportionately impact marginalized or vulnerable groups, reinforcing existing inequalities within the academy (Ahmed, 2012; Hearn, 2019).

Nonetheless, panoptic surveillance is not wholly deterministic; it can provoke critical reflexivity, enabling actors to recognize, contest, and transform the operations of power (Allen & Anderson, 2016). Leaders can foster alternative forms of collective accountability, rooted in collegiality and dialogue rather than mere compliance (Smyth, 2017). Thus, understanding surveillance as both a constraint and a catalyst for agency is vital for ethical and effective higher education leadership.

4. Theme 3: Governmentality and University Governance.

In the later phase of his work, Foucault introduced the concept of governmentality—essentially, the "art of government"—to capture the myriad ways in which individuals and populations are managed, not simply through coercion, but via policies, rationalities, and self-regulation (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality provides a powerful framework for analyzing how contemporary universities are governed through assemblages of policy, audit, and self-management practices (Rose, 1999; Dean, 2010).

Higher education leaders are increasingly situated within a regime of governance that privileges managerial rationality, performance indicators, and financial accountability (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Clarke & Newman, 2012). The rise of New Public Management in universities introduces market logics that frame students as consumers and knowledge as a commodity, compelling leaders to act as entrepreneurial managers (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Marginson, 2011). Through strategies such as strategic planning, benchmarking, and quality assurance, university governance becomes oriented to risk management, competition, and branding (Lynch, 2015; Dill & Beerkens, 2010).

Foucauldian governmentality also highlights the construction of academic subjectivity through regimes of responsibilization, wherein faculty and students are encouraged to self-govern in alignment with institutional objectives (Shamir, 2008). Instead of relying on external discipline, governance technologies instill in individuals the imperative to become "autonomous" yet productive subjects, intent on maximizing their potential under prescribed norms (Enroth, 2014). This mode of leadership, while ostensibly emancipatory, can intensify pressures to conform and conceal the limits of autonomy under neoliberal regimes (Connell, 2019).

Yet, governmentality is not monolithic; it is always open to contestation and negotiation. University leaders can, and do, experiment with alternative forms of participatory, democratic governance, challenging the hegemony of market-driven rationalities (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). Engaging critically with governmentality enables leaders to create spaces for agency and dissent, resisting the reduction of higher education to technocratic management and fostering more humane, dialogic futures for the sector (Lopes & Dewan, 2015).

5. Theme 4: Knowledge, Discourse, and the Construction of Truth.

For Foucault, power and knowledge are inextricably linked; knowledge is never neutral but is produced and circulated through relations of power (Foucault, 1980). Discourses—the systems of statements and practices that structure what can be said, thought, or imagined—play a central role in constructing truth within academic settings (Ball, 2013). In higher education, discursive formations determine legitimacy, inclusion, and exclusion, shaping the epistemic contours of the university itself (Luke, 1997).

Academic leaders participate in the production, authorization, and dissemination of knowledge regimes, mediating what is valued, recognized, or dismissed as "truth" (Blackmore, 2013; Furedi, 2017). Curricular developments, research agendas, and institutional policies all reflect and reinforce broader struggles over the authority to define and categorize knowledge (Readings, 1996; Cooper, 2019). Through processes such as accreditation, peer review, and grant allocation, leadership exercises significant power over academic destinies, shaping whose voices and perspectives are legitimated (Hardy & Lingard, 2011).

A Foucauldian approach unmasks the contingent, constructed nature of academic norms and categories—such as "quality," "excellence," and "impact"—which are often presented as objective but are deeply implicated in the politics of funding, ranking, and inclusion (Harvey, 2008; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Leadership decisions about programs, resource distribution, and appointments thus participate in discursive struggles with real material effects, particularly for those on the margins (Morley, 2016; Ahmed, 2012).

Challenging dominant discourses can be a strategic way for leaders to disrupt hegemonic structures and create openings for alternative knowledges and perspectives (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). However, such efforts require critical reflexivity and an acute awareness of the power effects of even well-intentioned interventions (O'Connor, 2018). By attending to the micro-politics of discourse, higher education leadership can foster greater epistemic justice, in academic contexts.

6. Theme 5: Resistance and the Possibilities for Subversion.

Although Foucault is often read as a theorist of domination, he insistently argued that where there is power, there is also resistance (Foucault, 1982). In the context of higher education leadership, resistance emerges in multiple forms: from overt protests and strikes to more covert acts of noncompliance, withdrawal, or subversion (Morley, 2016; Ivancheva et al., 2019). Academic leaders both encounter and participate in such dynamics, navigating (and sometimes provoking) forms of dissent that simultaneously threaten and renew institutional life (Casey, 2020).

Leadership strategies often aim to channel, contain, or co-opt resistance, but Foucauldian theory urges an appreciation of resistance as a constitutive feature of institutional life—necessary for democratic vitality and ethical growth (Ball, 2012; Blackmore & Sachs, 2012). Examples range from critical pedagogy and curriculum transformation to faculty unions contesting managerialism, or students mobilizing against exclusionary policies (Giroux, 2014; Brown & Carasso, 2013). These acts disrupt taken-for-granted hierarchies and expose the constructed nature of institutional "truths" (Apple, 2013).

Foucauldian-informed leadership recognizes that resistance can also reinforce power, producing new forms of discipline or normalizing alternative practices that become subject to fresh regimes of control (Allen, 2011). Thus, the dialectic between power and resistance is fluid and complex, requiring leaders to remain vigilant and responsive to the shifting terrains of contestation (Spicer & Böhm, 2007). Moreover, episodic or isolated acts of resistance are less likely to effect transformational change unless linked to sustained collective agency and reflexive practices (Niesche & Gowlett, 2019).

Mobilizing Foucault's theory invites higher education leaders to critically engage with dissent, not simply as an obstacle but as a generative force that can animate institutional self-renewal. By cultivating cultures of critical reflection and open dialogue, leadership can institutionalize resistance in ways that promote pluralism, risk-taking, and inclusive transformation (Weber & Deetz, 2008). This reflexive posture also challenges leaders themselves to examine their complicity in reproducing inequitable power relations, fostering more just and transparent universities.

7. Theme 6: Subjectification: Shaping Academic Identities.

Foucault's notion of subjectification refers to the production of selves through discursive and institutional practices, emphasizing that identity is always situated within regimes of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1982; Tamboukou, 2012). In higher education, leaders are both subjects and agents of subjectification—positioned by, and capable of reconfiguring, the norms and expectations that structure academic identities (Ball, 2015; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2018).

Universities are saturated with practices that "make up" academics, administrators, and students—constructing identities around ideals of the "excellent scholar," "efficient manager," or "entrepreneurial student" (Morley, 2016; Kuntz, 2012). Leadership participates in these processes through policy articulations, performance reviews, and professional development initiatives, often valorizing particular styles of behaviour or ways of being (Lynch, 2015; O'Connor, 2018).

At the same time, academic identities are far from fixed. They are traversed by ambiguities, contradictions, and resistances, as individuals negotiate institutional demands, disciplinary allegiances, and personal aspirations (Niesche, 2017). Foucauldian analyses reveal the work involved in "self-formation"—the active processes by which subjects internalize or contest discursive norms, often through practices of self-writing, confession, or critique (Petersen, 2007). Leadership, from this perspective, becomes an ethical task: supporting conditions for the flourishing of diverse subjectivities, rather than imposing a single normative script (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Taylor, 2011).

By comparing the complexities of subjectification, higher education leaders can cultivate more inclusive and responsive institutions. This entails not only reflexivity about their own positionality, but a deep commitment to fostering spaces where multiple ways of knowing and being can coexist and thrive (Ahmed, 2012; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2018). Such an approach resists the violence of normalization, advancing instead a vision of leadership grounded in care, pluralism, and justice.

8. Concluding

The application of Michel Foucault's power theory to higher education leadership reveals the multifaceted and dynamic character of power within academic institutions. Rather than a static possession or hierarchical structure, power in universities is diffused across networks of disciplinary routines, surveillance architectures, governance strategies, discursive formations, practices of resistance, and processes of subjectification. This Foucauldian lens challenges both the allure and the limitations of traditional leadership models, urging higher education leaders to critically navigate the ethical complexities and possibilities that arise from operating within—and against—such networks.

By understanding and engaging with the productive and repressive dimensions of power, academic leaders are better equipped to foster environments of genuine inquiry, inclusivity, and creative resistance. This reflexive orientation not only advances the quality and integrity of academic life, but also supports the ongoing project of democratizing higher education for diverse and evolving publics. The task, then, is not simply to manage, but to

reimagine leadership in ways that foreground relationality, plurality, and justice, as demanded by both the spirit and the rigor of Foucauldian critique.

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