

EXPERT OPINION

FROM STUDENT ENRAGEMENT TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

What is your theory of change?



Since 2015, a series of student protests known mostly by Twitter hashtags such as #FeesMustFall, #StopOutsourcing, and #RhodesMustFall have shaken the core of South Africa’s universities, and some TVET colleges, disrupting the academic project and administrative functions. Students have forcefully voiced legitimate demands related to the trauma of runaway costs of studying, irrelevant curricula, institutional racism, and other academic and social ills. In some institutions,

such as the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), there is talk of a student protest culture, which perpetually threatens the stability of the university, and its academic project.

Against this, TUT themed its institutional student affairs conference of May 2017 “Repositioning Student Affairs and Extracurricular Development to effectively contribute towards advancing stability at TUT”. This is an edited version of an

address given by Dr Luescher at the conference as a contribution to shifting the narrative from a preoccupation with crisis, to critical self-reflection and practical response.

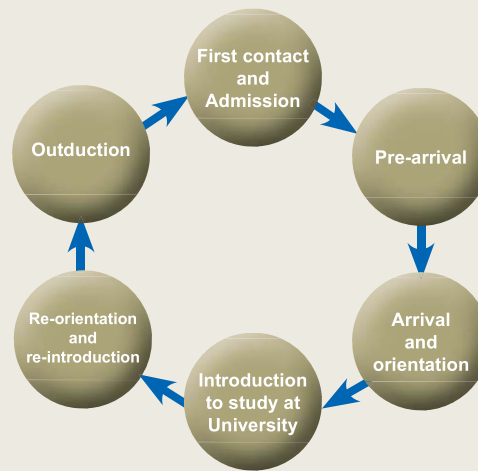
Student life cycle models

Student cultures have unique characteristics, which distinguish them from youth culture in general, the institutional culture of a university overall and the political culture in the country.

To understand student culture in general and student political culture (including protest culture) in particular, it is important to first have an understanding of student life, the student experience, and eventually the role that the university, curricular and extra-curricular life play therein.

There are typical life stages in the student experience that involve various transitions. One way of conceptualizing this is by means of student life cycle models, which conceptualise the student experience in terms of various transitions into higher education, through higher education, and into the world of work. Simple student life cycle models, such as those by Michelle Morgan and Alf Lizzio, map the student experience to ask what student affairs can, or should do in terms of providing various services, programmes, and interventions. More complex models, such as the ones being developed in the Higher Education and Development in Africa unit within the Education and Skills Development programme of the HSRC, go far beyond this 'student affairs perspective' into the micro, meso and macro factors that impact on the student experience. Life cycle models have an important heuristic function; they also have immediate practical application. For instance, it is possible to ask quite deep and refined questions of what students from different backgrounds expect at different stages in the student life cycle, and how the higher education system, institutions, and academic and student affairs can respond to those expectations: to anticipate them and meet students at their point of need; to exceed their expectations; or to manage expectations by either creating them or moderating them in line with the available resources.

Fig 1 Morgan's six-stage "Student Experience Transitions Practitioner Model"



Source: Morgan, M. (2016) *Improving the Student Experience in Higher Education*. Available at: <http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com>

The student life cycle models alert us that student life starts at the aspirational stage; that is before a student actually is a student. Different students move through the first year experience quite differently, encountering different kinds of trauma and excitement and having different capabilities for navigating academic, social and personal struggles. Complex life cycle models conceptualise different stages and transitions in ways that allow for theoretically sound, evidence-based policy making and intervention, at all levels, with reference to dimensions or themes such as finance, teaching and learning, support, and employment. There are so many moments when things can go terribly wrong, and so little of the knowledge of the processes that students undergo to the point that it is systematically worked through. Meanwhile, millions are spent on transformation offices, institutional culture surveys, and all manners of 'traditional' and ad-hoc services and programmes. If the system, its institutions, and the

various role-players involved fail students' (and non-students' and drop-outs') expectations again and again: what then is your theory of change?

A culture of student political engagement

If there is an emerging culture of student protests, at what point is it emerging? At which stage of the student life cycle has the engagement of students that we have witnessed over the last two years started developing? In relation to what experiences? Are students coming to campus with that anger? If so, what can be done to empower and support them to process their prior experiences, and reading of their present and future in a way that these experiences become a catalyst for engagement, rather than fertile soil for further disillusionment and engagement?

It is here where student life cycle models provide a theoretical framework for understanding and for guiding change: to move from

student enagement to student engagement. Engagement with disciplinary knowledge, teaching, learning, and research; engagement with politics and becoming an active academic citizen who develops those graduate attributes required to live a meaningful life; engagement with community, society, and the world of work, to be fully rounded and have that sought-after experience.

There is a wealth of theory on student protest culture and activism: Philip Altbach wrote about it internationally for half a decade; Mokubung Nkomo analysed and theorized it in relation to the student culture of resistance in historically black universities in the 1970s; and Saleem Badat studied in depth the black student political organisations under apartheid. A student protest culture is context-bound and has specific characteristics. It relates to national political culture: the political 'regime' and its legitimacy; the university type: location, history and institutional culture, what it offers, what staff it employs; the academic core functions and ways in which learning is facilitated and responsive to students; the extent and quality of student affairs programmes and services; and, crucially, the composition of the student body, for student politics cannot be abstracted from the student body as Mzukisi Qobo reminded me a few years ago. What students from what backgrounds, their student experience, their expectations and the extent to which these expectations are congruent with what they encounter in higher education.

Moreover, protest involves agency, and this agency is sparked into action. In student protest

literature, the spark is provided by the trigger event: Chumani Maxwele's performance at the CJ Rhodes statue at UCT in March 2015 sparking #RhodesMustFall; the announcement of the Wits Council on fee increments triggering #FeesMustFall in September 2015; the racist confrontation at the Intervarsity rugby game at UFS sparking the removal of the CR Swart statue, and #JansenMustFall in February 2016; and so forth.

Towards a culture of student engagement

What would we prefer to a student political culture of protests? One of student apathy? The most critical in terms of the emergence of a culture of student protest are not so much structural factors, student agency, and trigger events. Student political culture develops dialectically from the response that student activists receive, and eventually expect to receive, from the authorities: foremost university managements, but frequently also national authorities. The response must be measured in order for a culture of student engagement to emerge, rather than one of enagement to fester. The immediate response is important: violence breeds violence, and can indeed establish a pattern of violent confrontation. We have seen too much of that across the country. Rather, other responses are preferred: negotiation, measured concessions, and change. In the medium term, understanding student life cycles, including the life cycle of student politics, is important; addressing at the level of the student experience what can be addressed there. Eventually, the long term response must be to re-think student life beyond life cycle models, thinking beyond student life indeed, to think through the

bigger picture, learning pathways through schooling, post-school education, and into the world of work in elaborate ways whereby empirically grounded, relevant theory and theory-based models inform policy so that no student, indeed no youth, is left behind.

Author: Dr Thierry M Luescher is Research Director: Higher Education and Development in Africa, in the Education and Skills Development Programme of the Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town. He recently published the open access book *Student Politics in Africa: Representation and Activism*, with M. Klemencic and J. Otieno Jowi (2016, African Minds).

tluscher@hsrc.ac.za;
021 466 7994 / 8093; 083 350 5959

