

Kagisano No. 12

# STUDENT GOVERNANCE AND ENGAGEMENT FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

May 2020



COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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The CHE is an independent statutory body established in terms of the provisions of the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended. It advises the Minister responsible for higher education and training and is the national authority for external quality assurance and promotion in higher education. In terms of the National Qualifications Framework Act No. 67 of 2008, as amended, the CHE is the Quality Council for higher education responsible for, among others, the development, further development and management of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF).

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Each article in this publication has been reviewed by two peer reviewers, one internal to the CHE and the other one external.

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# Contents

Foreword <i>Narend Baijnath</i>	ii
Student governance and engagement for academic success: an overview <i>Amani Saidi &amp; Sibusiso Chalufu</i>	1
Has co-operative governance failed students? a perspective based on students' experiences <i>Thierry M. Luescher, Denyse Webbstock &amp; Ntokozo Bhengu</i>	15
Towards understanding the #FeesMustFall as a 'leaderless' student movement in South Africa <i>Lebogang T. Legodi</i>	46
The South African Surveys of Student Engagement: Using students' voices to impact decision-making, governance and design <i>Francois Strydom &amp; Sonja Loots</i>	60
Rethinking student engagement for decision-making and governance in an Open and Distance Learning higher education institution in South Africa <i>Gezani Baloyi</i>	82
Revisiting student engagement in a comprehensive public university in South Africa from an Afrocentric point of view <i>Makhura B. Rapanyane</i>	93
Push-pull dynamics in student engagement for decision-making: the case of Academic Administration at a public university in South Africa <i>Rose K. Masha</i>	102
Student-staff relationships that compromise academic integrity <i>Ntokozo Bhengu &amp; Selina M.T. Mokatsane</i>	112
Contributing Authors	125

## Foreword

The word 'Kagisano' is derived from one of the indigenous languages of South Africa -SeTswana – and it means to support each other or to collaborate on some initiatives. *Kagisano*, the Research Journal of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), serves as a medium for promoting collaboration between the CHE and external researchers. It is aimed at building, reviewing and applying knowledge on contemporary, thematic higher education issues. Normally, papers published in *Kagisano* would have had been presented and discussed at research colloquia or similar events organised by the CHE, or by the CHE in association with other sectoral organisations.

The first *Kagisano* was published in 2001 and its cover title was *Re-inserting the 'public good' into higher education transformation*. Since then ten other issues of *Kagisano* have been published, including the last issue which was published in 2017 and whose cover title was *Constituting Higher Education*. The current issue, *Kagisano number 12*, contains eight papers which focus on student governance and student engagement, arguably the two most influential factors in the context of creating stability and a climate that is conducive to teaching and learning, research and engaged scholarship in higher education institutions. Arguably, these are critical factors for student success.

All post-apartheid policy documents on higher education, including the *Policy Framework for Transformation* (National Commission on Higher Education,1996), the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education, 1997), the *National Plan on Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2001), the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET)* (Department of Higher Education and Training (2013), and the *National Plan for Post-School Education and Training* (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020) identify the issues of widening student access to higher education, increasing participation rates of previously marginalised groups, and increasing student success, as critical objectives to be pursued boldly and vigorously in the post-apartheid higher education system in South Africa.

Just like other important role players in the higher education system in South Africa, the CHE is concerned about the less than impressive academic success of students within the system, and it is therefore committed to contributing towards finding strategies for improving student success. Among the initiatives of the CHE in this regard was convening of two colloquia on student governance and engagement in 2019. These colloquia provided useful platforms for

researchers within and outside of the CHE, including student leaders, and those pursuing postgraduate studies, to critically engage with the two concepts (student governance and student engagement) and to interrogate how they impact on academic success. Except for the 'Overview', the other seven articles published in this issue of *Kagisano* were among the papers that were presented and discussed at the two colloquia. Thus, they benefitted from the deliberations and critical dialogue on their presentations at the colloquia.

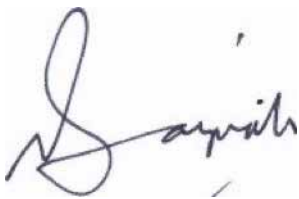
The authors of the papers in this issue of *Kagisano* are a mixture of experienced researchers in universities and science councils, as well as postgraduate students who are in the process of establishing themselves as emerging researchers. I take this opportunity to thank each most sincerely for voluntarily taking the initiative to share their ideas and the findings of their various research work, in the interest of advancing knowledge in collaboration with the CHE. I also convey my appreciation to the reviewers of the articles – both internal and external – for dedicating their valuable time and effort to assist the authors to fine-tune their papers and thereby ensure that they are readable, and the arguments cogent and persuasive. I have been made aware of the fact that the external reviewer completed the second review of the revised articles when he was in quarantine after having just returned from a trip overseas at the end of February 2020. The CHE highly appreciates such commitment from the external reviewer.

Readers are urged to approach the papers with the understanding that their publication in the *Kagisano* serves only the purpose of stimulating debate and reflection on the issues. There might be contradictions in the lines of thought presented in the different papers, but this is expected as the papers present the original ideas and/or raw findings of the research work of the authors. They also represent different contexts and purposes of study: some are from research undertaken by students towards their postgraduate degrees, while others are from research undertaken by established researchers for the purposes of enriching existing knowledge and growing praxis.

Readers may also be interested to know that earlier this year, the CHE completed a research project, in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), on student leadership, focusing on the reflection of those who served in student leadership positions in various universities during the period 1994 to 2017. The findings of the research are presented in a book, *Reflections of South African Student Leaders: 1994 – 2017*, published in March 2020 by African Minds. The paper by Luescher, Webbstock and Bhengu in this issue of *Kagisano* has drawn much from the research conducted for this book project.

Readers are urged to provide feedback on this issue of *Kagisano* and/or on the specific articles in it, to the CHE itself, or to the individual author directly. They are also encouraged to suggest possible themes for future issues of *Kagisano*. The feedback on this issue and the suggestions of themes for future issues of *Kagisano* should be addressed to [Mayepu.N@che.ac.za](mailto:Mayepu.N@che.ac.za).

Finally I take this opportunity to thank the Research, Monitoring and Advice Directorate, under the leadership of Dr Amani Saidi as the Acting Director, for professionally managing the project to a high standard, which started with organising the colloquia in March and July 2019, and culminated in the publication of *Kagisano* number 12 in May 2020.



**Prof Narend Baijnath**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

20 May 2020

# Student governance and engagement for academic success: an overview

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## Abstract

The goal of an effective and efficient post-apartheid education system would be attained only when there is substantial improvement in academic success. The main measure of the latter is student success which refers to the successful completion, by students, of the learning programmes leading to the higher education qualifications that they enrol for, as well as their attainment of the learning objectives, the desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and acceptable post-qualification performance in the work environment. Globally, student governance and engagement are identified as key factors that influence academic success. The paper which, in essence, is the 'Introduction' to the *Kagisano*, distils and presents the key thrusts of the discourses at the two colloquia on student governance and engagement which the Council on Higher Education (CHE) convened in 2019. It provides a high-level overview of student governance and student engagement, as two related concepts which contribute to academic success in higher education. It sets the scene for the seven ensuing papers in this issue of *Kagisano*, which were among those presented and discussed at the two colloquia.

**Keywords:** Academic success, #FeesMustFall, higher education institutions, student governance, student engagement, student representation, public universities

## Introduction

The CHE is an independent statutory body established under the provisions of the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended, (Republic of South Africa, 1997) from which it derives its principal mandate. This mandate includes advising the Minister responsible for Higher Education and Training on matters pertaining to higher education; arranging and coordinating conferences; promoting quality assurance in higher education; auditing the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education institutions; accrediting programmes of higher education; publishing information regarding developments in higher education, including reports on the state of higher education, on a regular basis; and promoting the access of students to higher education institutions.



Higher education is, in the main, about students, and it is important to note that the principal mandate of the CHE as summarised above include promoting the access of students to higher education institutions.

The National Qualifications Framework Act No. 67 of 2008, as amended, (Republic of South Africa, 2008) proclaimed the CHE as the Quality Council for higher education, and assigned to it the responsibility of developing and managing the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), as sub-framework of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Section 5(2) of the NQF Act states that the NQF (and by extension its sub-frameworks including the HEQSF) is designed to contribute to the full personal development of each student, and to the social and economic development of the nation at large.

The emphasis on students is therefore very clear in the two Acts that govern the CHE. The CHE is required to promote student access to higher education institutions, and also to contribute to the production of graduates who demonstrate personal and professional maturity, as well as the ability to actively participate in serving the socio-economic and development needs of the nation.

South Africa as a nation legitimately expects that most, if not all, students who gain access to higher education institutions are successful in their studies. Therefore, over the years the emphasis has shifted from student access only, to student access and success. Access to higher education without student success is an anathema that the country wishes to do away with. All post-apartheid policy documents on higher education, including the *Policy Framework for Transformation* (NCHE, 1996), the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education, 1997), the *National Plan on Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2001), the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET)* (Department of Higher Education and Training (2013), and the *National Plan for Post-School Education and Training* (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020) place premium priority on issues regarding student access, participation and success, in higher education; and the need for quality higher education that is responsive to national needs and aspirations.

The goal of an effective and efficient post-apartheid education system would be attained only when there is substantial improvement in academic success. The term 'academic success' is used in this paper to refer to the successful completion, by students, of the learning programmes leading to the higher education qualifications that they enrol for, as well as their 'attainment of the learning objectives, the desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and acceptable post-qualification performance in the work environment' (York, Gibson & Rankin, 2015). Globally, the literature on academic success identifies student governance and engagement among key factors that influence academic success; and in

2019, the CHE convened two colloquia to engage on these two concepts and understand how critical they are to students' academic success.

The theme of the first colloquium, held in March 2019, was on changes in patterns of student governance in higher education institutions in the post-apartheid era. It provided a platform for insightful engagement on the challenges, opportunities and solutions relating to student governance in higher education institutions. The second colloquium was held in July 2019, and its theme was on enhancing student engagement for good decision-making, governance and student success. Among other things, the colloquium took stock of current research on student engagement; explored the ideological underpinnings of student engagement; and assessed the success factors of student engagement.

The articles published in this issue of *Kagisano* were among those presented and discussed at the two colloquia. This paper which, in essence, is the 'Introduction' to the *Kagisano*, distils and presents the key thrusts of the discourses at the two colloquia. It provides a high level, and therefore a generalised, overview of these two concepts (student governance and student engagement), how they relate to each other and how they contribute to or limit academic success in higher education. It sets the scene for the seven ensuing papers in this issue of *Kagisano* and prepares the reader to engage the contents of those papers more effectively.

### **Student governance versus student engagement**

Luescher (2005) avers that the term 'student governance' is derived from 'higher education governance' and has come to be used quite commonly as a shorthand to refer to the participation of students in the governance of higher education. This is based on the understanding that students have the right to codetermine and/or cocreate the conditions that would be conducive to optimal provision of higher education through teaching and learning, research and engaged scholarship. Since this understanding of student governance is premised on rights, frameworks are developed and implemented at national and institutional levels, to give effects to the students' right to codetermine and/or cocreate the conditions that would be conducive to them receiving good higher education.

In South Africa, the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended, (Republic of South Africa), provides the regulatory framework for student governance at a national level. Section 26(2) of the Act enjoins every public university in the country to establish several governance structures, one of which is the students' representative council (SRC). Furthermore, section 27(3) stipulates that a council of a public university must, after consulting with the SRC, provide for and establish a suitable structure to advise on the policy for student support services within the institution. Thus, the SRC is a statutory student governance structure that council, the highest decision-making body in a university, is obliged to consult in the process of determining

institutional policies on student governance and services. Indeed, at the level of institutions, student governance includes developing and implementing such policies and frameworks, chief among which is the constitution of the institutional SRC. As part of the process of developing and/or reviewing the constitution of the institutional SRC, the institution is required to consult with its student masses and other stakeholders (Chalufu, 2019). Another important student governance function of institutions is to ensure that students are represented in relevant decision-making structures.

Klemenčič, Luescher & Mugume (2016) correctly contend that in South Africa, as elsewhere, the statutory student governance structures such as the SRC, and the mandatory representation of students in governance and decision-making structures in higher education institutions, are premised on the principles of representative democracy. The adoption of this system of student governance was informed by the need to ensure that the interests of students are represented and defended in council, senate and other key decision structures within public universities. Indeed, in all higher education institutions, student governance is understood as synonymous with student representation in council, senate and other key decision structures. However, the important question to be asked in this regard is about the extent to which such student participation in institutional governance and decision-making structures is qualitative and/or substantive. It is important to distinguish between superficial 'ticking the boxes' representation and participation, on the one hand, and meaningful and impactful involvement in decision-making, on the other. Trowler (2010) refers to the former as 'tokenistic student membership of committees'. Needless to say, 'tokenistic student membership of committees' does not advance the interests of students effectively.

All things considered, the limitation of the 'student governance' concept is that, over time, it has been reduced to mean student representation on governance and other decision-making structures in an institution. The focus of the discussion in the preceding two paragraphs confirms this. Most of the papers published in this issue of *Kagisano* are critical of this reductionist approach to student governance and consider it as one of the factors responsible for the failures of student governance in higher education in South Africa. In turn, such failures have contributed to the instability within the higher education sector over the years since the enactment of the Higher Education Act in 1997.

Complementing the reductionist perspective has been the neoliberal perspective on student governance which is premised on the view that students are essentially 'consumers' of the educational 'services' that institutions offer in a supposedly free market setting. The students, as consumers, view and regard academics and management staff in institutions as people who work for them and whose jobs are dependent on their continued satisfaction with the educational 'services' they receive. In this regard, the students are expected to make

demands of the academic and management staff of a university in order to meet their educational needs and wants (Naidoo, Shanker & Veer, 2011). In turn, the academics and management staff in institutions have to listen to the consumers and work accordingly to ensure that they offer the students the services and/or products that they desire, believing in the maxim that the 'consumer or customer is King or Queen, and is therefore always right' (Bruce, Baird & Jones, 2017). Student governance in this context would translate into students calling the shots, and the higher education institutions pandering to the students' desires. However, the higher education institutions in South Africa do not operate in a neo-liberal free market setting where the students behave in the mode of economically rational 'consumers'. In addition, this perspective does not take into consideration the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy which further limit the possibility that students would make demands on the institutions wantonly for the sheer reason that they pay for the educational 'services' that the institutions offer. The same principles would also not allow the higher education institutions to operate in the mode of factories that produce consumer goods.

The system of student governance in higher education institutions in South Africa is further complicated by the highly politicised environments that have for many years characterised public universities, in particular. In most universities, the SRC elections are contested along national and/or regional party-political lines, and the overbearing influence of the political parties on the student formations has, at times, had disastrous consequences for university governance. The situation is made worse by inter and intra-organisational conflicts which at times lead to internal SRC squabbles which, in turn, often result in either total collapse of the SRC, or in extremely ineffectual SRC operations. Complaints by the broader student masses that SRCs do not serve their interests are public knowledge. The SRCs serve many interests, except the interests of the broader student masses (Chalufu, 2019).

All the factors discussed above have made analysts to start questioning the contribution of 'student governance' to the academic success of students. Consequently, the 'student governance' concept is increasingly becoming less popular in student success discourses, while the appeal of the complementary and all-encompassing 'student engagement' concept is on the rise. It is important at the outset to note that 'student engagement' is a very broad concept with many meanings (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). However, the common denominator of the various meanings attached to the term is the understanding that it is about the involvement of students in decision-making processes in relation to teaching and learning, governance and management and quality assurance in higher education institutions (Working Group on Student Engagement in Ireland, 2016). Its goal is to optimise the experience of students, enhance their learning outcomes as well as the overall performance and reputation of their respective institutions, and foster their development towards becoming active and responsible citizens (Towler & Trowler, 2011).

Student engagement focuses on inclusivity, and it is about creating a conducive environment where academics, management staff, and students can exchange ideas on, and engage in discourses about academic, academic support and student welfare issues. The process of student engagement recognises students as active and equal participants who, like other stakeholders such as academics and support service staff of institutions, have an important role to play in finding solutions to challenges facing higher education. Unlike student governance as it has come to be increasingly understood and interpreted, student engagement is more than mere involvement and participation in committees, but rather more about students seizing the initiative, taking ownership of processes and fulfilling the promise of student agency (Harper & Quaye, 2009; McVitty, 2014). Importantly, there is mounting body of evidence which highlights the benefits of effective student engagement for the enhancement of quality and standards in higher education institutions, and for the personal development and employability of students (Department of Education and Training, 2018).

Ideologically student engagement positions the students as 'partners' in higher education, working alongside academics, support staff and management to understand and develop the curricula, learning and teaching methods, and the mission and purpose of higher education institutions (Cook Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). It also acknowledges that students have rights and responsibilities as 'higher education citizens', and they strive to contribute to the success of their respective institutions as 'cocreators' of knowledge and 'cofacilitators' of their own learning. It is more about providing students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions, and to bring about the required changes in the institutions (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014).

The Working Group on Student Engagement of Higher Education Authority of Ireland (2016) identifies different levels of student engagement along a continuum or 'ladder' of participation from, for example, informing (non-participation), consultation (tokenism) to delegated power and learner-control (student empowerment). The desirable level of student engagement is one that empowers the students to take charge of their learning, and to develop as professions and as good citizens.

In the wake of the widespread student protests at university campuses in South Africa during the period 2014 to 2019, researchers and other stakeholders have called for the higher education institutions to enhance student engagement as a mechanism for enabling students to play a purposeful role in the development and governance of their respective institutions, in the creation of knowledge, in facilitating their own learning experiences, and ultimately in their development as good citizens of the country (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017). It has further been emphasised that the engagement should be meaningful and should include authentic inclusion of student views in the operations of the

higher education institutions, through both formal and informal mechanisms, including representative structures (South African Survey of Student Engagement (2016)).

### **Student engagement and academic success**

Trowler (2010) cites studies conducted within the last two decades which have concluded that there is a strong correlation between student engagement, on one hand, and positive student outcomes related to academic achievement, persistence, satisfaction and social engagement, on the other. These studies emphasise that student engagement should be all-encompassing and should not focus on teaching and learning only, but that it should also include co-curricular activities (commonly referred to as out-of-classroom learning experiences) which authors such as Blake (2007) highlight as equally important for academic success, good student learning experience and student retention. Miller and Nadler (2009) cogently outline various benefits that students can derive from comprehensive student engagement programmes. These include greater personal self-discipline, more acceptance of diversity and divergent thinking, better understanding of complex organisations, and democratic ideals. Miller and Nadler (2009) further posit that student engagement serves as a highly effective learning laboratory for students to experience democratic processes. Kahu (2013) similarly concurs that there is a strong positive relationship between student engagement, on one hand, and student and achievement, on the other. Ashwin & McVitty (2015) are among the authors who also confirm the importance of student engagement in curriculum development, quality assurance and institutional governance. Coates (2005) discusses a long list of ways in which students benefit from engagement, and these include the development of important behavioural traits and attributes such as critical thinking, cognitive development, self-esteem and psychosocial development, moral and ethical development, satisfaction, social capital and persistence.

Coates (2015) further emphasises the critical role student engagement plays in creating and maintaining a culture of quality in higher education. The involvement of students in quality matters is of paramount importance because students are at the receiving end of the teaching and learning experience. Students need to have a good understanding of issues of quality and the processes involved because such understanding enables them to make informed decisions on how they can be part of the quality assurance and promotion initiatives. Naidoo (2004) avers that challenges facing quality improvement in higher education institutions clearly suggest that it is increasingly becoming important 'that all stakeholders in the higher education sector, including students, are familiar and able to effectively deal with information on quality'. Cele (2007) supports the meaningful engagement of students as co-constructors of quality because he believes that such engagement would contribute to the enhancement of quality in higher education institutions in various ways. Firstly, it would provide space for

students to voice their experiences and judgements about quality in programmes and institutional arrangements. Secondly, it would assist in bringing to the attention of institutional decision-makers a direct form of feedback on the quality of the total learning experience accorded to and received by students. Thirdly, it would enable students to provide feedback on areas that warrant immediate response and those that assist the institution to conduct long-term planning. Fourthly, it would encourage dialogue between students, academics and institutional decision-makers on strategies and mechanisms that can be adopted to improve quality. Fifthly, it would assist students to understand the basic language of the quality discourse and the nomenclature of quality assurance, which enables them to assess the accuracy of the course information they receive during registration into programmes. Lastly, it would enable students to make judgements about the quality of the total learning experience provided through learning programmes and other institutional mechanisms and systems.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that student engagement is essential in order to bring about academic success in students. The causal relationship between student engagement and academic success is supported by experiences from different fields which indicate that the active involvement of the intended beneficiaries in the design and implementation processes of intervention programmes, often yields better results and outcomes. This is premised on the stakeholder theory developed by Freeman (1984).

### **The impact of the #FeesMustFall campaign events**

A paper that discusses student governance and engagement in South Africa would not be considered to have done justice to the topic without making any reference to the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) campaigns of 2015 and 2016. This is because the #FMF campaigns revealed the fault lines in the system of student governance to the extent that many analysts believe that it was the failures in the system of student governance that gave rise to the #FMF campaign events (Costandius, Nell, Alexander, Blackie, Malgas, Setati & McKay, 2018). However, perhaps the more pertinent reason for not avoiding to make reference to the #FMF campaigns of 2015 and 2016 in this paper is that the campaigns had far reaching implications on the future of student governance and engagement in this country. They were watershed events that would change the conceptions and praxis of student governance and engagement in South Africa in very significant, if not dramatic, ways.

One of the major impacts of the #FeesMustFall campaign events was that they forced all role players to critically reflect on student governance and engagement, identify the weaknesses and other fault lines in the system, and commit to modifying the practices or adopt new practices of student governance and engagement, going forward. Through the #FMF campaigns, students lifted the lid on epistemic and systemic issues bedevilling higher education

in the country. These include the epistemic question of the Eurocentric colonial and the systemic matter of poor funding of students and institutions (Jansen, 2017; Costandius, Nell, Alexander, Blackie, Malgas, Setati & McKay, 2018). These were not necessarily new issues, but the #FMF campaigns brought them into a higher level of focus and demonstrated the need for giving urgent attention towards finding lasting solutions to these, hitherto, chronic issues. As Habib (2016) would concede, through #FMF campaigns, the student achieved in a matter of weeks what the Vice Chancellors of the public universities had been strategizing and working on to achieve in more than a decade.

Another equally important impact of the #FMF campaigns is that they forced professional, support and administrative university staff – particularly those who work in student affairs and services – to question, re-think, re-learn and unlearn some of the aspects that had become part of the *modus operandi* in student governance and engagement. They also exposed capacity and capability limitations of the offices of student affairs and services in universities. Most universities had in effect marginalised such offices and did not consider them as priority for continued investment. In several universities, these offices had been downsized to the point of insignificance within the institutional structures or organograms (Moloi, Makgoba & Miruka (2017). However, the #FMF campaigns made institutions to realise that there is an important role that the offices of student affairs and services can play in steering student engagement initiatives with a view towards creating institutional stability and fostering an institutional climate that would be conducive to teaching and learning, research and community engagement. It is hoped that this realisation would lead to total rethink on the institutional student affairs portfolio including, perhaps, considering making it one of the portfolios in executive management. This would also probably lead to increasing the human capacity in the offices of student affairs and services (Chalufu, 2019).

The #FMF campaigns questioned and tested the legitimacy of formal statutory student governance structures such as SRCs. In some institutions, the SRCs went to ground, and in others, they came late to the fore and found that the horses had already bolted. What followed was a litany of discordant interventions by the SRCs which could not succeed to arrest the situation and bring back order and stability in the institutions. The SRCs simply lost the plot and the #FMF events were completely out of their control. Considering these events, the notion that the #FMF movement was 'leaderless' gained traction (Booyesen, 2016). There continues to be much debate about this, and the paper by Legodi in this issue of Kagisano, provides a good contribution to this discourse.

The decision taken by government in response to the #FMF campaigns has also had major impacts on the higher education landscape. The provision of tuition fee free higher education to qualifying needy students has increased access and reduced financial exclusions.



Enrolments increased substantially in 2017 and 2018 as a result of the implementation of the of the directive scraping off the requirement of tuition fees for needy students. According to the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) data, between 2015 and 2016, enrolments number in public universities dropped by 9375 (1%). However, following the increased student funding which was the outcome of the #FMF, the enrolment numbers shot again by 61147 or 6% in 2017. From 2017 to 2018, there has been a 5% growth in enrolments in higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2018). As the country pursues the ideal of academic success of students with vigour, these tremendous increases in enrolments mean that institutions would have to raise up their game in the field of student governance and engagement to ensure that there is a concomitant increase in student success.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The CHE understands the critical importance of students in the higher education system, and it therefore takes the issue of students seriously. Just like other key role players in the system, the CHE is concerned with the academic success of students and seeks to contribute towards finding an effective formula for improving student success. To this end it has instituted research work on students, and in 2019 it convened colloquia on student governance and engagement as part of the research focus on students.

This paper has provided a high-level overview of student governance and engagement, the two related concepts, that are at the centre of the discourses on student success. Based on an analysis of the main thrusts of thinking that were evident at the two colloquia that the CHE organised in 2019, the paper has attempted to set the scene for the seven ensuing papers in this issue of Kagisano, and to prepare the reader to engage the contents of those papers more effectively.

As the country reimagines the future of student governance and engagement in the aftermath of the #FMF, it is vitally important to review the statutory student governance framework as provided for in the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended. This statutory student governance framework was developed soon after the dawn of democracy in 1994 and was more concerned about entrenching representation democracy. The dynamics of making such student representation democracy work were taken for granted and not considered in the legislation. With ample evidence that having students to sit in committees has not advanced their causes nor made democracy work well, it is high time that the statutory student governance framework was reviewed with a view towards amending them, taking cognisance of the nuanced reality of student politics and the need to move away from token representation.

It is also important to re-think the way that institutions empower student leaders. Notwithstanding the critical role played by statutory structures such as SRCs, the conception of student leadership, and invariably of student leadership development and empowerment, require fundamental change. Student training and development programmes need to be all-encompassing to include various layers of student leadership to prepare them for their roles in institutional governance engagements.

There is empirical evidence in many institutions that, while the institutional SRCs are ridden with discord, feuds, and bitter student politics that make them ineffectual, the student structures at school and faculty levels have had some successes in influencing the direction of important initiatives such the review of curricula, assessment methods and pedagogy (Chalufu, 2019). It is therefore recommended that more effort should be exerted towards strengthening and supporting the student structures at school and/or faculty levels.

Several articles in this issue of Kagisano point out the need for student leaders to be trained and provided with other forms of leadership support. In concurrence with this position, it is recommended that the student leaders are supported through structures such as a Student Leadership Advisory Forum, comprising of senior undergraduate and postgraduate students. Even the most experienced leaders need advisers, particularly from the affected groups. In this case, having senior students as advisers to student leaders is important because these senior students have vast lived experiences of the issues that ordinary students grapple with routinely.

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# Has co-operative governance failed students? a perspective based on students' experiences

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## Abstract

Against the background of the recent student protests in universities across South Africa, this paper analyses the reflections of twelve former student leaders from 1994 to 2017 by asking the following questions: *Has the post-apartheid regulatory framework for higher education governance failed? Have the provisions for student representation failed? Is there a need for a new re-imagining of higher education governance and student leadership therein?* To focus on these questions, the paper revisits the regulatory framework for student representation and then analyses the reflections of twelve former South African student leaders on higher education governance and student representation in detail. The analysis finds that after initial reservations towards the post-apartheid 'co-operative governance' framework, student leaders in very different institutional contexts have tried various ways of working with the system – with mixed results. Too often frustration abounds, and alternatives to the formal route frequently yield better, faster results. Can co-operative governance be saved and made to work? The former student leaders make various suggestions when reflecting on the foundations of good and bad governance practices and recommendations for a way forward.

**Keywords:** Higher education governance, student politics, student protests, student representation, #FeesMustFall

## Introduction

As part of South Africa's transition to democracy and the creation of a single higher education system from a medley of technikons, black township and Bantustan universities, Afrikaner volksuniversiteite, and English universities with a distinct white colonial imprint (Bunting, 2002), the nature and extent of student representation in higher education governance was re-imagined for a post-apartheid era, reinforced through legislation. The impetus for change was expressed early in the report of Mandela's National Commission on Higher Education of 1996. Student representation within formal governance structures was expected to provide students with avenues to express and negotiate their concerns and demands, and to contribute to

shaping the fabric of university life. The principles of 'democratisation' and 'academic freedom' were to underpin a new philosophy of 'co-operative governance' in which students' voices were to be included in major decision-making processes (Hall, Symes & Luescher, 2002). This impetus was articulated in *Education White Paper 3* of 1997 and formalised in the *Higher Education Act* No. 101 of 1997, which mandated formal student representation in governance throughout the system and institutions of public higher education. The Students' Representative Council (SRC) became a legislated governance structure in all South African universities (while previously it had only been formally recognised in certain University Private Acts and statutes and the Technikon Act No.125 of 1993). Henceforth student representation was mandatory in the two highest decision-making bodies of universities, the University Council and the Senate, as well as in the Institutional Forum and the Student Services Council, and by extension on many of their committees.

The *Higher Education Act* further provided for the nomination by students of representatives to the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the statutory advisory council providing advice to the minister responsible for higher education. In addition, by means of the *National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) Act* No. 56 of 1999, the NSFAS Board was composed in such a way that students' voices would also be represented in matters of student financial aid. Student representation thus became statutory in national higher education governance, planning, funding, and quality assurance, as well as at institutional level in all matters concerning students and the institution at large.

And yet, throughout the past twenty-five years, and quite contrary to the expectation of the policy makers of those years, student protests have continued across much of the sector in relation to recurring grievances. The key issues have persistently been academic and financial exclusions, student funding, accommodation, institutional transformation and institutional culture, as well as matters of governance itself. Despite the formal means provided by the *HE Act* and *NSFAS Act* for students to represent their interests in the 'boardrooms' of formal decision-making bodies, student protests 'in the streets' remain a recurrent, if not normalised, and frequently violent part of university life on many campuses. Why? Examining this phenomenon has become ever more pressing in the wake of the intense student protest wave of 2015/16, starting with the #RhodesMustFall campaign at the University of Cape Town, and its reverberations across many campuses of historically white universities, the original #FeesMustFall campaign of late 2015 with its long history reaching into the early days of black student politics after 1994, and eventually the culmination of the protests, in late 2016, in the #FeesMustFallReloaded campaign, which shut down academic work on many campuses for weeks and required a collective effort by university leaders, academics and student leaders for the 2016 academic year to be rescued.

The successes of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns arguably demonstrate the lack of efficacy and responsiveness of higher education authorities – at institutional and system levels respectively – to pressing student concerns, unless a crisis is created. Ironically, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand at the time, Adam Habib, claimed that with the #FeesMustFall campaign, students achieved in ten days the policy change that vice-chancellors had requested for ten years! (Desai, 2018). Similarly, for over two decades, students at historically white universities in South Africa – underpinned by surveys and in-depth studies – called for a 'deep transformation' of their institutional cultures and curricula. What does it all mean? Has the post-apartheid regulatory framework for higher education governance failed? Have the provisions for student representation failed? Is there a need to re-imagine higher education governance and student leadership therein?

A growing body of research from across the African continent shows that the relationship between student representation and student activism is not contradictory; rather, protesting is often an extension of politics in the formal governance structures, sometimes complementary to, or in place of what student leaders fail to achieve by working through formal structures (Byaruhanga, 2006; Cele, 2015; Jansen, 2004; Luescher, Klemenčič & Jowi, 2016; Munene, 2003). This body of research on the dynamics of student politics in Africa tells many kinds of stories, typically told from a removed, academic perspective and confined within specific case studies and timeframes.

## Methodology

The approach adopted to understanding the merits and pitfalls of the co-operative governance model in higher education, the dynamics of student representation and activism, and the roles of SRCs therein, is to analyse the reflections of those who have been intimately involved. In providing a platform for former student leaders to relate their recollections in their own voices and from their standpoints, a book by the authors of this article entitled *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017*, published under the auspices of the Human Sciences Research Council and the Council on Higher Education (CHE), provides the material for a critical consideration of the questions above (Luescher, Webbstock & Bhengu, 2020). As suggested in that book, this paper re-analyses the original material published in the book to consider: (1) the role of the SRC and student leadership; (2) the internal organisation of SRC politics, SRC electoral systems, and training and support to student leadership; (3) reflections on the challenges of student representation in co-operative governance, and the strategies and tactics used to represent the student voice and influence change; and (4) the use of different forms of interest intermediation including protesting, and the former student leaders' understandings of the emergence of a nation-wide student movement in 2015/16 centred around #FeesMustFall.



The narratives of student leaders presented in *Reflections* are lengthy edited verbatim extracts from transcripts of interviews that were conducted between 2018 and 2019 with a group of twelve former student leaders (typically former SRC presidents). While the book provides some analysis of its own, the narratives are presented with the declared aim to provide material for further interrogation and analysis. This is precisely what the authors do in this paper.

The details of the design and methods used in generating the original material, and the ethical commitments made by the *Reflections* authors to their interviewees, can be gleaned from the methodology section of the book. Table 1 below presents particulars of the twelve former student leaders on whose reflections the authors draw.

**Table 1: Former student leaders**

Student leader	SRC-level involvement: institution and office terms	
Muzi Sikhakhane	University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)	1994/95
Prishani Naidoo	University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)	1995/96
Jerome September	University of Cape Town (UCT)	1997/98, 1998/99
Mlungisi Kenny Bafo	University of the Western Cape (UWC)	2002/03
David Maimela	University of Pretoria (UP)	2003
Xolani Zuma	University of Zululand (UZ)	2005/06
Zukiswa Mqolomba	University of Cape Town (UCT)	2006/07
Kwenzokuhle Madlala	Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT)	2009/10, 2012/13
Lorne Hallendorff	University of Cape Town (UCT)	2011/12, 2012/13
Hlomela Bucwa	Nelson Mandela University (NMU)	2013/14, 2014/15
Vuyani Sokhaba	University of the Western Cape (UWC)	2013/14, 2014/15
Mpho Khathi	University of the Free State (UFS)	2014/15, 2015/16

A detailed discussion of the selection criteria is also included in the *Reflections* book. Special attention has been paid to ensure a good spread across the three main higher education governance periods in the democratic era (cf. Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016), as well as the former student leaders' institutional contexts (by type and location of the institutions), and the former leaders' socio-economic backgrounds and student political affiliations.

Thus, in this article the authors provide an analysis across the twelve student leaders' narratives to consider the questions: *Has the post-apartheid regulatory framework for higher education governance failed? Have the provisions for student representation failed? Is there need for a new re-imagining of higher education governance and student leadership therein?* These questions are considered as pertinent given the current 'normalised' context of student protests across so many South African university campuses.

## Structure of the analysis

The analysis starts with a brief review of literature on student representation, revisiting the regulatory framework for student representation in higher education governance and then cross-analysing the student leaders' reflections on their experiences of higher education governance and student representation in detail. Particular attention is paid to students' reflections on the post-apartheid approach to governance transformation and the notion of 'co-operative governance', different approaches by student leaders to making co-operative governance work, their views on how to improve student representation as well as alternative ways of representing student interests effectively. The analysis concludes with some perspectives on the way forward for student representation in co-operative governance grounded in the former student leaders' suggestions.

## Conceptualising student leadership, representation and governance

In this paper, as in the book, the conceptualisation of student leadership, representation and governance fundamentally draws on the work on student representation in African universities published in a special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (Klemenčič, Luescher & Jowi, 2015). According to that work, the collective student voice can become present through the participation of elected or appointed student leaders in formal structures and processes of decision-making in higher education institutions. In this view, student representation is premised on three conditions: (1) democratic procedures which confer collective student powers on student representatives to represent the interests of the collective student body and through which those powers can also be revoked; (2) regular communication procedures with the student body to collect student views and inform about ongoing processes; and (3) the representation of these student leaders on governance structures and other decision-making and consultative bodies at all levels and in all domains of higher education. In this manner, student representation forms part of the formal governance and administration of higher education institutions and systems with students being recognised as a group of highly invested actors in decision-making concerning their own education and life (also see, Klemenčič, 2012).

On the one hand, student governance includes in its scope the structures, processes and relationships of student government, how it is organised, governs and is governed, and how student representatives relate to the collective student body and to the authorities which they try to influence. On the other hand, it also refers to the system of formal and informal operative rules that govern all domains of student life and thus to the codified student-university relationship (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). If governance is about rule-making (which provides the institutional framework for policy making and resource allocation), then, if the system were underpinned by democratic ideals, 'the governed' should have a determining voice in

that process.

Where student representation is absent or ineffectual, students have historically resorted to protest action to voice their grievances and express their preferences (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). The latter is what Altbach (2006) defines as student activism: the various, typically oppositional, forms of public expression of student power. Student representation and student activism are both run by the currency of student power. Pabian and Minksová thus propose two categories of student politics: “student activism in ‘extraordinary’ governance processes like student protests and rallies” and “the ‘ordinary’ processes of elections and board negotiations” (2011: 262). However, what is ordinary and what is extraordinary in a particular context may be open to debate – where protesting has become normalised, it would not seem that extraordinary! Whatever the case, the interrelation between student representation and activism is not only conceptual (or normative); it is empirical and historical. The formal representation of students in higher education governance has its roots precisely in student agitation to this end, and it can vacillate forth and back between them at any critical point (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Student representation, if diligently following the principles of democratic governance and embedded within a democratic university, is a powerful example of democracy-at-work, and the efficacy of student representatives in university governance provides an important lesson that democracy works. Can there be a university in a democracy without democratising the university? (Habermas, 1971). Can there be a university in Africa without Africanising the university? (Yesufu, 1973). It may be argued that a university's academic project and its human project should certainly respond to both of these questions in tandem.<sup>1</sup> As much as the academic project should be humanising (rather than de-humanising), so should the human project be knowledge-based in ways that bond the university community and enhance critical student engagement and success (Tinto, 2014). Universities cannot simply be diploma mills; they must be life laboratories for active and collaborative learning, for the development of specialised professional and disciplinary competences as well as critical thinking and transversal skills, for living democratic citizenship and developing the capabilities required to create and sustain decent livelihoods (Luescher-Mamashela, Ssembatya, Brooks et al. 2015).

This potential, of course, also presents challenges. Student representatives who do not know or adhere to the principles of democratic governance, who misuse the powers vested in them for personal gain or partisan interests, or who fail to meet student expectations due to inactivity,

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<sup>1</sup>The notion of a university pursuing at the same time 'an academic project' and 'a human project' is taken from the University of the Free State's transformation plans during Prof. Jonathan Jansen's term as vice-chancellor.

immaturity or incompetence, feed cynicism over the state of democracy and the university and fail their student bodies, universities and their country. Hindsight is instructive. In some of the former student leaders' accounts presented in the Reflections book from which the material for this paper has been sourced, the former student leaders acknowledge failings in some areas and poignantly discuss regrets over missed opportunities.

On the other hand, some of the universities they describe also fail to provide an adequate, responsive and caring context and framework to build the student body and student leadership and nurture students' investment in the development of the institution. They fail to supportively and constructively integrate the student voice into the curriculum, the core governance functions and operations of university life. In this respect, they fail to give effect to academic freedom, co-responsibility for learning and co-construction of knowledge, and thereby miss the opportunities for student engagement and the intentional and systematic cultivation of democratic norms, values and practices on campus and beyond (Klemenčič et al. 2015).

### **Co-operative governance**

The South African regulatory framework for higher education sprang from a historical moment informed by the transition from apartheid to a democratic system of governance in the national political arena. In the face of a crippling apartheid legacy and pressing demands for an in-depth reconstitution of the higher education sector, a new higher education policy set out to transform and democratise, reconstruct and develop the sector profoundly (Hall, Symes, & Luescher, 2002:19). The final report of the National Commission on Higher Education that Mandela had appointed in 1995 provided a succinct analysis of the apartheid legacy in higher education and charted a way forward for the transformation of higher education.

The NCHE (1996) proposed 'co-operative governance' as a model of decision-making for the higher education system as a whole as well as for institutional governance. Co-operative governance was to be understood within the context of the transformation and restructuring of the higher education sector as a set of principles, structures and procedures that could accommodate the different interests of higher education role-players and effect policy compromises.

The proposals of the NCHE were given effect in the *Education White Paper 3* (White Paper) and the *Higher Education Act* of 1997 (HE Act), which enshrined the co-operative governance model for higher education. It provides for specific governance structures at national and institutional level, their composition, delineated functions and relationship to other bodies and it identifies a set of higher education constituencies. It is founded in the principle of democratisation of governance in higher education which implies a spirit of mutual respect

and tolerance in the interaction between different constituent groups that is conducive to a well-ordered and peaceful community life. Concretely, this involves a composition of governing bodies which should be representative of all affected groups and processes of decision-making that are democratic, participatory, transparent, and able to hold the leadership accountable (NCHE, 1996).

### **The lost debate on transforming higher education governance**

Considering the reflections of former student leaders from the early period of post-apartheid university governance, it is noted with scepticism, but also some enthusiasm, regarding the conceptualisation and implementation of co-operative governance and the formalising of student representation in structures and SRC roles. The analysis of their narratives shows that in the early and mid-1990s, there was a robust debate in the student movement as to the place of students in decision-making on higher education. In the later periods, there is considerable variation in the way student leaders approached co-operative governance arrangements, differing between institutions, the personalities and cultures of managements, and the effectiveness of student representation, vacillating between trying to make formal representation work, and engaging in alternative ways of voicing student interests. There are discernible differences in SRCs' approaches, with some being able to use the formal structures more or less effectively, and others finding them cumbersome and inappropriate for addressing student issues with the urgency and sincerity they required.

Prishani Naidoo's account illustrates some aspects of the debate in the student movement in the mid-1990s around student representation. She recalls how in her time in the Wits SRC of 1995/96, "the discussions and debates started happening whether we sit on Council or not". One of the fears of student leaders was that the SRC would become "part of the university management, and we will be making decisions about other students". At the same time, there was also the debate about the actual organisation of university governance, "this idea that the Broad Transformation Forum would replace the Council", and that the ways universities were governed would fundamentally change. However, as Prishani Naidoo correctly argues, "the whole critique that was there from the early 90s about existing structures of governance got lost" (Naidoo).

A legacy of the early debates on the lack of legitimacy of Councils and Senates – not only because they were demographically not representative but also because they did not reflect the aspirations of a transformed, progressive higher education governance culture and structure – is the statutory creation of the Institutional Forum as an internal transformation advisory structure, and the principles underpinning co-operative governance.

Jerome September recalls for instance, that during his two terms in the UCT SRC (1997/98 and 1998/99), there was a serious attempt by the SRC to practice co-operative governance. The UCT SRC accepted the kind of changes proposed in the HE Act of 1997, which meant that the SRC appointed student representatives to participate in Council and Senate. At the same time, the executive committee of the Broad Transformation Forum of UCT then became the statutory Institutional Forum. Accordingly, “what it would mean for us [was] to sit on these committees and be so-called co-governors” (September). Jerome September feels, however, that the new governance system was not really designed to empower students:

*“At times I was feeling that this is a way we are actually being managed, because suddenly all the energy must go to this structure as opposed to previously where you could just march or write a petition or do whatever” (September).*

In Prishani Naidoo’s recollection of her participation as SRC President, she is also quite critical of the new way of ‘managing student leadership’. Her recollection is the feeling of being overwhelmed by having to wade through thick agendas – “these thick documents with pink, green and yellow pages” – and participate in discussions that she “hated”, not being able to impact on the agenda-setting and being told in the course of discussions that, “your voices have been heard and you have been consulted”, as if this would settle a matter. Naidoo remembers how she said to a senior professor who had ‘put her down’ that “consultations do not just legitimise a process”, but that having been heard must mean that “you must have some impact on the process” (Naidoo).

As these examples show, from the earliest days of implementing co-operative governance, student leaders felt that this was not really working in their favour. And it was clear already then, as Naidoo says:

*“We got disillusioned in that time because we were being frustrated by buying into a process and then not having our grievances addressed in ways that we thought were acceptable” (Naidoo).*

The logical conclusion was to go back to protesting when necessary, as “you will never win anything at the table that you cannot win in the streets” (Naidoo). The relatively timid protesting at the time – which included things like overthrowing dustbins – were taken most seriously up to the highest level. As Naidoo recalls:

*“I think it was in 1995 that Nelson Mandela summoned all student leaders to the Union Buildings [...]. He just lectured us for like 45 minutes about the need for us to be more disciplined on campuses in that kind of fatherly reprimanding voice: ‘I will bring my army and police into your campus if you do not stop with this nonsense. Just tell me what you*

*want, I will go to Anglo-American, I will go and get the money for you. [...] Get your Honours, get your Master's, get your PhDs.' That was his line. 'Leave it to us to do the other work" (Naidoo).*

In short, it would appear that a relationship that has become normalised emerged already in the early days of post-apartheid higher education governance and leadership. The manner in which student representation in co-operative governance operates in practice is inadequate for a number of reasons (which will be considered in more detail below); student leadership therefore requires that certain student grievances are taken 'to the streets'; and the response of government is 'leave it to us', along with using the repressive state apparatus to suppress such opposition.

### **Trying to make co-operative governance work**

The 1997 settlement meant that SRCs became an integral part of a university's decision-making structures and with their participation, SRCs co-legitimised the structures, processes and operations, no matter their actual efficacy in terms of addressing student issues. For some incoming SRCs, there was sufficient institutional memory, support and continuity to understand quickly how to organise themselves for representation in the governance structures. Where these were lacking, there was a lot of confusion, as the reflections of Mlungisi Bafo, a former SRC President of UWC, show. In some cases, the SRC constitution may provide guidelines on which SRC portfolio officer is supposed to participate in which committee. In other cases, such guidance is not available, as Kwenza Madlala, former SRC General Secretary and SRC President from Mangosuthu University of Technology recalls:

*"In terms of our constitution, there is nothing enshrined in there about committee allocations. How we used to do it, is that we were identified in terms of the responsibilities of the portfolio. For example, in the academic calendar committee as well as the senate, we would have our faculty officer in there, because the faculty officer deals with academic exclusions and all those kinds of related academic issues."*

*"We would also maybe go a bit beyond just the portfolios of the office and look into each individual's knowledge and expertise. So, if for example, we had me who is in HR and we had an HR committee, then I would be representing there. Each member sat in two committees. And then at council level, we would have the President and the Secretary of the SRC" (Madlala).*

Trying to match individual SRC members' interests, knowledge and expertise with the focus of a committee is one way in which SRCs have tried to live up to the challenge. However, a frequent mention in the accounts is the need for training. How can students be expected to

participate effectively in university governance structures without having been trained and without receiving ongoing support? Kwenza Madlala argues:

*“Council is very critical for the SRC to be involved there. The manner in which it happens, till today, I feel that there is a lot of training and development that needs to take place so that student leaders understand their involvement and participation at that level” (Madlala).*

Madlala's reflections also show that he feels student representation at the highest levels of university governance is important, not only in Council but also in Senate, “where issues of curriculum are dealt with; issues of academic exclusion and inclusion are engaged. So, it is important that the students' voices are heard there” (Madlala). His argument overall recalls a slogan heard across the country in the dying years of apartheid: there should be “nothing about us, without us”. He notes that there are other important committees for students, for example, the academic calendar committee.

*“It's a very important committee as well, because there are sometimes realities that the SRC brings into perspective. For example, it's easy for the institution to say, 'Classes will commence on 23rd January'. But the reality is that registration will not be closed by then because of some financial difficulties and all of those things. You may end up now having people that are attending and some people that are still trying to register, and already they start on the back foot” (Madlala).*

Zuki Mqolomba, former SRC President of UCT, also feels strongly about the importance of student representation in university committees, and about extending it further.

*“Students only had two representatives of students at council level, and a few student leaders were represented at senate level, but mostly we were represented at Institutional Forum level. We had about ten candidates represented in the transformation committee at the institution forum level. So, at least there we were represented, but at Council and Senate there was little representation. So, we struggled to ensure that the student agenda was progressively realised on the campus” (Mqolomba).*

When Hlomela Bucwa became a member of the SRC of Nelson Mandela University and eventually its SRC President, she found that the provisions for the SRC to represent students in several important governance structures and committees gave it much power to influence decision-making at the university.

*“We realized how powerful the SRC is: we sat on the transformation committee, we sat on Senate, Council, the safety committee, the library committee, there was the IF – the Institutional Forum which makes critical decisions -, we even sat on the tender committee.*



*We sat on the committee dealing with screening the applications when we were looking for the new DVC and we sat on the selection panel as well. We sat in most Mancor and we had quarterly Mancor meetings with management”*

*“The university also had a Student Support Services Council, so the SRC executive met once a month with the dean of students, the director of student governance, the officer of student housing and residences as well. So, we did have representation. And then, the faculty reps will sit on faculty boards. What we further advocated for that year was representation in the committees dealing with appeals and exclusion because there were previously no students. And that helped to decrease the exclusion rate, especially in that year” (Bucwa).*

Hlomela Bucwa further argues that the authority of the SRC comes from being able to represent the student experience authentically, justifying student involvement by what Aristotle called “the expertise of the affected” which is encapsulated in the analogy ‘only the wearer of the shoe knows where it pinches’.

The reflections of the former student leaders of later years thus indicate support for formal student representation on existing governance structures in general. At the same time, they raise several important points: one is that having more student representatives on a particular governance structure or committee would make student representation more effective. Another is the (lack of) effectiveness of student representation through the SRC itself and the need for training and support to bridge the gap between the novice student representatives and representatives of other constituencies that have longer terms and more experience. A third point is about the sources of an SRC’s authority, namely its ability to represent students’ views authentically as well as its potential to mobilise students to take a matter ‘to the streets’. In all of this, the rapport between SRC and university leadership is clearly critical. The following sections engage with these points more deeply.

### **How many student representatives should there be in a particular structure?**

The question of how many student representatives should be involved in a particular governance structure and its committees leads into a deep philosophical debate about the nature of representation, which underpins many of the frustrations that student leaders express when talking about the co-operative governance model. The policy-based conception of student representation provides some guidance, however cryptic, from the manner of appointment of student representatives, the composition of the different governance structures, and rules in terms of the roles of representatives, that hint at the different manners by which a constituency’s interests can or ought to be represented. In political theory, two

fundamentally different, classic manners of representation are distinguished as the 'trustee model' and the 'delegate model' of representation.

In the trustee model, it does not really matter how many representatives a particular constituency has in a decision-making structure as the task of the representatives is to serve their constituents by exercising 'mature judgement' and 'enlightened conscience' (as Burke expressed it). Trustee-type representatives have discretionary authority to act in their best judgement on behalf of their constituency. This also means that trustees may be persuaded by the force of another trustee's argument to change their view in the 'enlightened' debate that ought to happen in a decision-making structure. The delegate model, in contrast, does not afford the representative discretionary authority. Rather, the representative acts on a mandate and is meant to serve as a mere conduit to convey this mandate to the forum. If the argument does not win the day and a compromise is required, a new mandate must be sought from the constituency (Thompson 1972, in Luescher, 2009:30).

In university governance structures and committees there is typically the idea that a representative should act as an 'enlightened' trustee. For example, the HE Act stipulates that "the members of a council [...] must participate in the deliberations of the council in the best interests of the public higher education institution concerned" (Republic of South Africa, 1997: Section 27(7)b). It is therefore the institutional interest, rather the interest of a particular constituency that council members represent as 'trustees'. Others also argue that "having a representative merely as a delegate would make fruitful rational deliberation difficult and render representative committees or councils quite useless" (Luescher, 2009: 29-30). The question how many representatives from a particular constituency should be on a committee is therefore less important, but the general argument is that "allocations [of membership] should be determined with the purposes of the university in mind – which implies that groups whose activities are more centrally concerned with those purposes, such as faculty and students, should have greater representation [...]" (Thompson 1972, in Luescher, 2009:30).

Most of the former student leaders have, however, a different view of how student representation and decision-making in university structures should operate. Where they were able to put in place a functioning way of operating during their short terms, they tended to operate on a 'mandate' basis. The reflections of two former SRC Presidents from very different institutions illustrate this. Kwenza Madlala from MUT recalls:

*"I put in place a modus operandi of the way things should be that we caucused committee agendas. But sometimes it becomes impractical with the kind of load, particularly in the kind of university where the SRC becomes too operational".*

*"[...] Ideally at times, we would call in the Progressive Youth Alliance, we would call the chairs and secretaries and say we are going to Council in a week's time. Or maybe even before that, because you need to put in agenda items too, which closes some time before Council: "What are the issues that we need to put in the agenda?" (Madlala).*

Similarly, Lorne Hallendorff from UCT argued:

*"We tried to work on the basis that people who were appointed to committees needed to keep abreast of the major issues and decisions coming to those committees and bring those matters to SRC meetings. The matter would be discussed and the SRC would take a position. The student representative would then attend the next university committee meeting with a mandate from the SRC. SRC members were expected to argue the SRC's position at committee-level rather than a personal view" (Hallendorff).*

The argument that they put forward is that in order to have a higher quality of decisions, it is preferable that agenda matters can be debated at constituency level, that is in the full SRC, or even involving a student assembly, and the student representative would then bring a mandate into a governance structure such as Council or Senate or any of their committees. The trade-off is that it will greatly increase the workload of SRC members and that "the pace of decision-making slows down" (Hallendorff).

The notion of 'caucusing' committee agendas implies that a particular student representative enters a committee with a mandate. However, as Naidoo's earlier reflections aptly illustrate, the student view may easily be without impact. The same sense of a lack of impact is also implied in Hallendorff's comments on the emergence of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in 2015:

*"We tried to tackle issues that were a concern for students at the time. Issues such as admissions policy criteria, fee increases and outsourcing of support services such as cleaning and security. I think we were taking an approach that was more in line with how it was expected to be. We mostly used the regular avenues of writing a proposal, taking it to the relevant meeting, having it escalated based on the governance structure and so on. I was trying to get student leaders at the time to attempt this approach as much as possible, arguing that the best argument in the room will win" (Hallendorff).*

While Lorne Hallendorff argues that "as a first port of call, it is very important to show that the approach of reasoned argument was attempted", he does not exclude "a more radical approach if reasonable argumentation falls on deaf ears". Hence, as far as the UCT student demands related to #RhodesMustFall are concerned, or those of #FeesMustFall, he argues like others, that he was not surprised by the emergence of this wave of protests, precisely because

the same matters had been raised continuously year after year without any success. In other words, it would appear that the argument – however well or badly presented – had fallen on deaf ears for years.

What emerges from the views of the former student leaders is that a fully-fledged way of operating in a 'mandated representative' manner is not accommodated in most university governance structures and committees (except for the Institutional Forum, cf. Hall et al. 2002), and it requires the kind of support for student leadership that only few universities can provide. University management members and many academics tend to prefer a 'managed approach' to keep meetings few and short and to move through the packed agendas of committees expeditiously. This, however, does not always afford student representatives a generous consideration of students' views. If students insist, the result may be that an agenda item is deferred to a task team, sub-committee or later meeting, to afford it more thorough consideration. This then misses the point of the urgency with which students often need their grievances addressed – which September notes as one of the reasons for protests. In either case, considering the workload involved in participating diligently in governance structures and committees (while being a student with academic responsibilities), both trustee and delegate representation require ample support as well as humility and generosity on the part the more senior and 'empowered' other constituency representatives. What alternatives are there for student concerns to be raised if the formal route fails?

### **Marching and handing over memoranda as alternative**

There are discernible differences in SRCs' approaches to representing student interests. Some, like Hallendorff and Madlala used the formal structures more or less effectively, while others had to by-pass them for various reasons (as Maimela relates), and others again found them too long-winded and even obstructionist in addressing student issues. Mpho Khathi, former Vice-President of the SRC of the University of the Free State, tells a story that resonates widely:

*"So, for example, you would submit an issue, like the issue of the shuttle system, or free internet... And then they will say: 'You have to submit it to Council, and Council will present it to the University Senate.' But these bodies, they do not sit every day. Now it is the beginning of your term, and they will say Council will sit in March. And the Central SRC will sit in March. You sit as the Central SRC including the Qwaqwa SRC President and you submit these issues. And then they will say, 'Okay, we acknowledge these issues, we will submit them to Senate in June.' They submit them to Senate, and by the time you get a response it is nearing the end of your term. The new SRC repeats this same process. So, there are these many structures in between that frustrate you as an SRC and make you look like you are not doing work. But they will say, 'It is bureaucracy; things must*

*happen, you cannot just make decisions, it is a university, we are not running a spaza shop" (Khati).*

As the former leader's reflections show, student issues are typically based on a problem that has been identified and needs urgent attention – like accommodation, registration, transport or access to the internet – and once a matter like this comes to the attention of an SRC, it has typically already gathered a fair amount of frustration in the student body as a whole. To address such issues requires leadership and management skills, a sensitivity to student issues, and responsiveness on the part of university leadership. Moreover, given their short terms in office, SRCs need to be seen to deliver effectively and to have a legacy which they and their student organisation can refer back to in the upcoming elections as 'wins'. Looking back, an SRC member needs to be able to say: 'We brought free internet to campus' or 'the shuttle system was improved because of our SRC'. Some accounts indicate that this is often not understood by university leaders who could easily institute interim measures that swiftly respond to a student concern, while the permanency of a new operational policy or service can be considered in detail in the relevant governance structures.

Where student leaders perceive a comment such as "it is a university, we are not running a spaza shop" as patronising and arrogant, they will find alternative ways of voicing student grievances that may well be equally unpleasant. A frequently mentioned alternative to the committee route is to submit memoranda. Mpho Khati reflects on this as follows:

*"Our main tactic was just submitting memoranda. With a memorandum you would get a 48-hour response as opposed to waiting for Senate to sit... students do not understand these frustrating processes. People get agitated – so we will present a memorandum" (Khati).*

Several of the former student leaders talk about the tactic of submitting memoranda as a way of getting the attention of university leadership and having grievances addressed more speedily (for example, Madlala from MUT, Mqolomba from UCT, and Bucwa from NMU). Khati also describes the process of making of a memorandum in detail in her reflections.

Typically, the handing over of a memorandum is the culmination of a protest march to a university leadership's main offices. It may also be, as Bucwa reflects, published in social media and gain the sought-after attention of the authorities in this way:

*"So, we had a march. It looked like a joke to some people because there was like fifty of us. But the impact it had when we posted that thing on social media, when we attached the memorandum, the university responded" (Bucwa).*

The deadline set for a response to a memorandum is often linked to the threat of protest. In this respect, it is a rather brutal way of setting an ultimatum. As Khafi argues (and the experience of her SRC during Prof. Jansen's vice-chancellorship at the UFS showed), it is, however, more effective than the formal route. Nonetheless, the reception of a memorandum (or other kind of student submission) may sometimes be frustrating. As Madlala (MUT) remembers:

*"When I first sat in Council, the very first meeting we sat in Council, we had prepared a memorandum of two, three pages on various issues. Council took about two to three hours correcting grammatical errors on our document. Grammatical errors! The content – they could see what we were trying to say. We tried to write this document in English; we are not English-speaking. But they took about two to three hours, and that is breaking young students who have got a potential to become something in future" (Madlala).*

Madlala's reflection is a telling – if perhaps dramatised – account of yet another way in which student representatives sometimes feel they are being belittled rather than developed and empowered, in conditions of extreme inequalities of authority and seniority. Throughout the student leaders' narratives, one of the recurring themes of reflection is about the constellations of authority where student leaders' agency and subjectivity is under immense stress as they seek to represent the student voice. In a context where there are such porous boundaries between student representation and protesting, some of the reported attitudes and behaviours of senior managers and councillors (as encountered, for instance, in Madlala's account) clearly fall short of the prescribed governance philosophy of 'mutual respect' and 'tolerance'.

### **The SRC's relationship with management**

A university's senior leadership plays a key role in defining the culture of governance and setting the tone for the manner of engaging with student leaders. In this section some of the reflections of the former student leaders about good and bad relations, informal meetings, and the way university leaders can play a leadership role even when it comes to student issues, are highlighted. But what leadership approach is appropriate in a co-operative governance context? Muzi Sikhakhane shares his view:

*"I suppose leadership is never a position of extremes. Leadership by its nature is a centrist position, and it is about managing contradictions better to achieve whatever it is you set yourself to achieve. [...] I think that engagement about real issues rather than just ideological waffling works better. Because all human beings, if you sit with them closely, they do want justice, they do want freedom. What curtails them is their own prejudices and their past that they bring to a discussion about the present" (Sikhakhane).*

In Muzi Sikhakhane's view then, leadership in a university context is about addressing opposing views by way of sitting together closely on equal terms, seeking to find the common ground, and creating a common understanding and compromise. In some cases, a university leadership may need to display more wisdom in engaging with student interests than an SRC itself may display. A prime example thereof is recalled by Maimela when the predominantly white SRC of UP did not adequately represent the specific issues that black students experienced in the mid-2000s at that university.

As Maimela recalls, while his student organisation was not in the majority in the racially and politically divided SRC of the University of Pretoria of the mid-2000s, the university leadership realised that only white representatives were represented in the formal university structures, so they were open to hearing black students' views and clearly listened with intent. Maimela's account illustrates that for the student voice to be heard, somebody must listen. In order for the grievances of a constituency to be addressed, those in authority must be responsive, lead and be accountable. Maimela's reflections also suggest that the wisdom of leadership may require wider consultation – not to undermine an SRC but to ensure that the full diversity of views, even of a minority, is taken into account.

Some university leaders are represented in the narratives to appear quite receptive to students' views – while others seem uninvolved. The examples about the different leadership styles of successive vice-chancellors from the same university are illustrative of the impact of personality on leadership style as perceived by a student leader. When Zuki Mqolomba was SRC President of UCT in 2006/07, the then Vice-Chancellor was Professor Njabulo Ndebele, whom she describes as a gentle and generous intellectual, but not someone who would support her SRC's fervent pursuit of a transformation agenda:

*“To be honest our vice-chancellor at that time was hands off; Ndebele was not a hands on, actively engaged vice-chancellor, pursuing an agenda or a campaign on campus. He was an administrator. He was an intellectual and I respected the fact that he was intelligent. He wrote books and engaged in the public, but he was not a hands-on governor on campus. That was my critique of him – that he did not push the transformation agenda hard enough. He was too gentle, he was kind, and he was generous. But he was not hands-on” (Mqolombo).*

When asked about his 20012/13 SRC's interaction with the senior university leadership, Lorne Hallendorff gives an account of a much more direct, hands-on approach.

*“I met with the Vice-Chancellor at least once a month in his office. Dr Price had an open-door policy towards the SRC and was readily available over email or phone if needed.*

*He was very good about making himself accessible. [...] Overall, I enjoyed a very good relationship with Dr Price. Any disagreement was strictly professional. He was always very willing to consider differing points of view and he genuinely wanted to achieve outcomes that would be best for UCT students" (Hallendorff).*

If good university leadership involves critically constructive, perhaps generous and gentle ways of listening to student voices to seek a common ground, the opposite is also evident in the variety of student leaders' experiences. As the narratives show, leadership approaches and attitudes towards student leadership within universities can differ widely. Xolani Zuma, former SRC President of the University of Zululand, added his views with respect to senior student affairs professionals:

*"It depends on who is dean at the time. You will find some dean of students who is receptive and willing to listen, and some who would be very dismissive. And they will tell you: Look, there is nothing you can change here. These things have been like this for many years. You cannot just come here and change things overnight. Your purpose is to go and study. So, stop causing havoc unnecessarily" (Zuma).*

Zuma also recalls the abuse of power he perceived was being committed by university authorities, threatening his expulsion for organising students and for taking the university to task over core issues of teaching and learning quality.

*"I remember that at some point there was a gentleman who was heading security at the time who called me into his office and said: 'Mr Zuma, look, I have your transcript here. I have your academic results. First year, you are doing so well, you are getting 80% and 70%, and since you joined the student activism, with your politics and your faculty councils, they have dropped. We are warning you, stop these things, or otherwise you are going to leave this university without a degree. And you are likely to be expelled'. These are things that were said. And I said, 'I know that it is not you that is saying these things. Who has sent you to tell me these things?' And he said, 'Management is not happy, both at the faculty level, but also at the senior management level, with the manner in which you are conducting yourself" (Zuma).*

While this account may be interpreted as a friendly warning not to neglect his studies, for Zuma the fact that the message was brought to him by the head of security, and the add-on that "management is not happy... with the manner you are conducting yourself" clearly did not feel like the former, but rather like a threat.

Madlala also reflects on the attitude of university leaders, as well as the management of student affairs, towards student leadership:



*"It is not only in Mangosuthu University of Technology. When I speak about attention to detail, I mean first of all the attitude of management in most cases towards student leaders is not a positive attitude. So, whatever they raise, is normally met with resistance – uncalculated resistance – because student activists, if they are properly orientated, they create work for management. A lot of work. [...] And if you are a lazy person, you are not going to want to do that. So, the easiest way out is to say, it cannot be done" (Madlala).*

If a negative and dismissive attitude provides one kind of example, Madlala's further reflections illustrate cases where management members deliberately misinform a Council, or take credit for a student initiative. As Madlala argues: "I'm telling you, most Student Affairs Departments survive on ideas of students who unfortunately cannot copyright their ideas".

Another counterpoint to the more positive experiences recalled by some is Sokhaba's reflection of the UWC SRC's role in 'the battle of the two Brians'. At the time, Sokhaba was serving his first term in the UWC SRC and found himself at the margins of a bruising and widely publicised battle between the then chair of Council, Brian Williams, and UWC's long-serving vice-chancellor, Brian O'Connell and his deputy. Why did the SRC Executive stand so staunchly behind Williams? Sokhaba reflects:

*"[...] where the turning point came consciously to me was when I started understanding that I do not realise the struggle we are in now. Probably because I did not understand the background workings; what actually motivates us here to even go to an extent of wanting to have the Rector leave. [...] Now this is one of the issues that were raised to me by the comrades from the YCL saying: 'We are pretty much sure that you do not know that one of the motivations out there which is being said is that these comrades are taking bribes and you are getting nothing" (Sokhaba).*

While this is the only example in Reflections narratives of speculation by a former student leader that others in the SRC had been bribed (by senior members of the university community) to take certain positions – in this case, to the extreme of trying to force a vice-chancellor and his deputy out – it is not the first such accusation to appear. More commonly heard are accusations of bribery involving other role players.

The relationship between university managements and student leaders is clearly often a very fraught one and begs the question of what constitutes a healthy relationship between university leadership (and by extension the senior student affairs professionals) on the one hand, and student leaders on the other hand. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that there is a healthy relationship characterised by mutual respect and tolerance, year after year, with

successive generations of student leaders? Certainly, this is a hard task; but it cannot be acceptable for a university leadership to abrogate responsibility for protests and argue that the reality of perennial student protests is 'students' culture on this campus'.

As September argues – and he has since his years as SRC President become a senior professional in Student Affairs – the threat of student protests, and actual protesting, are mostly the outcomes of a lack of timely and appropriate leadership responses to student grievances. Certainly, it depends on the issue involved, but his view is that it was “often the combination of advocating in structures and protests that was more impactful”. While some students may experience a good march as fun (as Khati's account shows), and while there may be reasons for protests that are not quite as genuine as others (as shown by Bafo and others), responsive leadership will assist in providing alternative forms of 'entertainment' and can channel partisan competition into less divisive forms.

Despite some of the former student leaders' reflections that provide negative views of university managements, there are others that portray a different and more mutually respectful and constructive relationship between student leaders and senior university leaders in general, and vice-chancellors in particular. As Sikhakhane's reflections from the early 1990s show, when the potential for adversarial relationships were at their height, there was also a certain humility and understanding that mutual respect was essential for the powder keg not to ignite. Sikhakhane recalls:

*“We were able to engage management meaningfully, and the entire student leadership. There would always be people who did not see eye to eye with the management, and there were those who did not agree with us, but they treated us with respect. I still remember Judge Carol Lewis [...]. We differed sharply, but one thing we did was engage with each other, and that was important. [...] There were others we never had a relationship with; those who humiliated students in those engagements. [...] But the Vice-Chancellor, Bob Charlton, I found that engaging with him as a human being was more meaningful than my engagement with some of the people who boasted they have been liberals before. [...] There is always a contradiction between what students want and what management wants – it is never going to be smooth – but I think we were able to manage that relationship” (Sikhakhane).*

If it is possible then to “bridge the gaps” and “manage that relationship”, how may the higher education sector be able to move forward today with the governance of higher education almost a quarter of a century later and having amassed a wealth of experience and knowledge on what works and what does not to guide us?

## How to move forward with co-operative governance?

When the *Education White Paper 3* and the *HE Act of 1997* came into force and co-operative governance began to be 'implemented' in the universities across the country, a saying made the rounds among student leaders: co-operative governance means, "we govern, you co-operate". The 'we' referred to senior university leaders and the 'you' to student leaders. As Naidoo's reflections illustrated, there was already scepticism towards the co-operative governance model in the student movement when it was first proposed; and the attitudes of senior academics and university leadership that she encountered towards student leadership were mixed at best. The reflections of others, such as September, Bafo, Mqolomba, Zuma and Maimela also showed that student leaders had vastly different institutional experiences when trying to carry out their roles and to make student representation work. Unequal institutional conditions have persisted throughout the decades, and the process of mergers and incorporations in the late 1990s and early 2000s in some cases even exacerbated governance problems along with a marginalisation of student voices in some institutions.

The CHE's review of higher education in 20 years of democracy, published in 2016, included an analysis of higher education governance conducted by a Task Team led by the former chair of the NCHE, Prof. Jairam Reddy. The Task Team's review provides a periodisation of higher education governance under democracy and a sustained account of how the initial hope for a democratisation of institutional level governance (1994 to 2000) gave way to a rise of managerialism (2001 to 2009) and eventually to ever-more widespread institutional crises of various kinds (2009 to 2014) (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016: 112). While the historically advantaged and metropolitan universities had had various problems to contend with, it was in the historically disadvantaged universities, especially the rural and peri-urban ones, and in some cases in components of the mergers, that governance failures were of such a nature that assessors and/or administrators had to be appointed, the latter taking over the functions of Council and/or vice-chancellor (p.128). Among the key causes of governance failure at council level and beyond identified in that review were factionalism and the 'stakeholderisation' of governance. It argued:

*"Unions, students, and in some institution's convocations, sitting in Council seem to be unable to understand that their role is not that of stakeholder representatives. This trend, together with institutional circumstances, means that councils can be and, in effect are, often unable to fulfil their fiduciary role" (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016: 129).*

Among the reasons it advanced for the 'stakeholderisation' in councils were dysfunctional and ineffective Institutional Forums – which had precisely been designed as forums

for stakeholder delegates to negotiate compromises – as well as various forms of factionalism, partisanship, and low-level corruption affecting governance (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016:129). A related point was the finding that academics and students were the “two fundamental casualties” of managerialism. With respect to students in particular, it argued:

*“Students, despite noises about student-centredness, have in the managerialist conception typically been reduced to being clients of the university, thus often replacing pedagogy with edutainment, the normative nature of education with marketing and communication campaigns, and their role in university governance to acting as sounding boards on user committees” (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016: 133-134).*

The CHE Task Team then proposed “a post-managerialist system of decision-making and accountability” which it characterised as a form of knowledge-based management of, and for, transformation. Among the features of such post-managerialist governance, leadership and management system, it proposed that:

*“Re-centring academics and students as the heart of the academic enterprise will not only increase the knowledge available at the centre and re-insert fundamentally critical voices into the management discourse, it might also help to give effect to a ‘thick’ notion of academic freedom in which students’ rights to quality education is included” (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016: 134).*

The CHE Task Team sought to translate these arguments into practice by proposing a form of transformative and distributed leadership within a context where a resuscitated Senate would return to the heart of institutional governance, in keeping with academic rule as a practice of academic freedom. Furthermore, it argued:

*“[...] it is important to reflect on the role of student leadership as custodian of the student interest and how statutory representation of students in Council, Senate, Institutional Forum, Student Services Council and, last but not least, the SRC itself, can give effect to a conception of students not as clients, but as members of the academic community, partners in their education and co-producers of knowledge” (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016: 134).*

The reflections of the former student leaders in the book provide some material to elaborate on the points raised by the CHE Task Team, which resonate well with some of the experiences described by them. Thus, to conclude, some of the recommendations that the twelve former student leaders put forward in the Reflections book are presented next, as a way to move forward with co-operative governance.

## Living the principles of co-operative governance

The new model of co-operative governance proposed by the NCHE and adopted with some modifications by means of the Education White Paper 3 and the HE Act, envisioned the democratisation of existing structures and the establishment of new structures of governance at national and institutional levels, as well as the inclusion of previously excluded groups in the governing bodies of higher education. 'Democratisation' was to be the principle applicable to a transformed governance system:

*"The principle of democratisation requires that governance of the system of higher education and of individual institutions should be democratic, representative and participatory and characterised by mutual respect, tolerance and the maintenance of a well-ordered and peaceful community life. Structures and procedures should ensure that those affected by decisions have a say in making them, either directly or through elected representatives. It requires that decision-making processes at the systemic, institutional and departmental levels are transparent, and that those taking and implementing decisions are accountable for the manner in which they perform their duties and use resources" (Department of Education, 1997: Section 1.19).*

The starting point for the revival of "a well-ordered and peaceful" university community is a renewed commitment to a democratisation of governance. Integral to this is the idea of equality – everyone's vote counts equally; everyone's voice deserves to be heard. Hence the need for mutual respect and tolerance in the interaction between different constituent groups, and the requirement that "those affected by decisions have a say in making them". Living the principle of democratisation in higher education governance would require moving a step on from the prevailing managerialism diagnosed by the CHE Task Team, towards a re-centring on academics and students and the less hierarchical system of governance desired by Naidoo and others. As Naidoo noted:

*"From the #October6 group came the slogan, 'Towards a public African decolonized university' and the discussions around decolonization included structures of governance and the need to imagine a very different system of working together that does not reproduce hierarchies" (Naidoo).*

## Recommendations on making student governance work at all levels

With respect to student leadership and representation, a multi-dimensional approach towards levelling the governance arena and creating a governance system that is "democratic, representative and participatory" could start by helping students to develop a comprehensive system of student governance. Madlala's reflections are particularly insightful in this respect,

given the breadth and recent nature of his student leadership experience and his later role as chair of convocation at MUT.

*"When I came in as President of the SRC I already knew what I would like to change. The first project I wanted to have was to launch structures of the SRC to properly constitute student governance. Student governance is not the SRC; it is all the structures that are involved in the governance of that particular university. So, I wanted to get residence subcommittees in place; I wanted to get the faculty reps which would then be responsible for ensuring that the class reps are functioning accordingly; get everyone in place and then hold a workshop.*

*[...] We wanted to form a booklet and workshop with these people on their responsibilities. Train the class reps so that they know what their role is" (Madlala).*

A comprehensive system of student governance thus involves well-functioning structures across all sectors of student life, but particularly with respect to academic life in and out of classrooms, departments and faculties, and life in and out of residences, on and off campus. Similarly, Xolani Zuma speaks of the importance of having class representative systems and faculty councils in place for students to play a meaningful role in the governance, delivery and quality of teaching and learning.

Yet it is not sufficient to get the structures established and functional; the university community in general, and students in particular, must also understand the roles of the different structures, and who plays those roles.

*"If you go to a faculty, there must be a picture of a faculty representative there. Students must know, if you go to residence whatever, there must a picture of a student who is a representative with their contact details. The student population must know who their first point of contact is, so that it is not only the SRC that has got calendars in the entire university. But you expect students to go to a class rep; some do not even know who their class rep is. [...] Your Dean must know, here is the faculty rep, here is the person you will be liaising with. [...] You then are able as the SRC to focus on certain things and monitor the functionality of this governance to ensure that it really performs" (Madlala).*

### **The need for training**

Putting in place a functioning student governance system cannot be done by student leadership alone. Student leadership development and student governance support are typical functions of Student Affairs departments. When Madlala is asked if such support had been available to him, he intimates: "No, they are not doing it. And unfortunately, sometimes these deans of students, these people, they interfere with SRC things". Moreover, in his view,

training an SRC, or residence committees, faculty councils and class representatives, involves much more than what is typically offered. He comments:

*“As an SRC, you go for an inauguration training; they call it SRC Induction. What it does is that you just get different heads of departments coming to communicate to you what they do. Someone will first tell you the vision of the institution and all those big plans, and then you get someone who will come and tell you about what Student Affairs and these departments do.*

*But I do not feel that this is a training. Because in a training on what it is to be an SRC, you should be getting a two or a three day training, where you get an expert in the area of leadership or whatever the case is, coming to make presentations to you, coming to tell you about time management, how you juggle your studies and this; emotional intelligence; how to deal with problems of people here, students who have been raped, have got AIDS, come to the SRC office... how do you deal with that? [...] Negotiation skills; basic skills. They expect us to sit with management and their departments and everyone there and negotiate on fees or whatever the case is. But no one ever comes there and says: ‘Here are negotiations skills’ (Madlala).*

If Madlala is talking about a few days of training, ideally student leadership development and training courses should be conducted across the term and target not only incumbent student leaders at various levels, but also aspiring ones, in order to nurture a new stream of student leadership. After all, universities are amongst the most complex social institutions in existence, and the capability to participate effectively in their decision-making mechanisms requires a lot of learning.

### **Providing administrative support**

Several former student leaders also comment on the pivotal role played by SRC administrators. For instance, Bafo, a former SRC President of UWC recalls:

*“And there was a lady there by the name Nondumiso. She worked for Student Affairs. [...] She was working as an admin person and she had all the institutional knowledge. After we were elected into the SRC, we did not have the official handover. [...] We inherited a structure where there were no inventories, nothing. The computers were wiped; everything was cleaned, nothing. And the only person who was there to guide us was [...] Nondumiso from Student Affairs” (Bafo).*

Madlala also reflects on the importance of Student Affairs' support for an SRC in helping with administrative processes and logistical matters. He argues that, in addition, good support also impacts positively on student leaders' academic progress.

*"I think administrative support is very important because it feeds into the success rate of SRC members in terms of their academic work. Because if they have not got sufficient support structures, they do all these things and then they end up lacking on their academic work" (Madlala).*

## **Structural interrelations, student representation in institutional governance**

In her reflections, Khati proposes a number of matters that would improve student representation. Top on her agenda is speeding up the decision-making processes in university governance and making them more accessible to students: "Definitely I would want the decision processes to be fast-tracked. I do not have a formula now, but it must be fast-tracked." Khati also thinks that making student parliament a statutory student governance structure, and having management representation on it, would be an improvement.

*"I think one thing that could help is if the Rector could also have a seat in Student Parliament and maybe come once a term to account to students. And maybe for the Higher Education Act to also recognise student parliament as a legit body where students can raise issues" (Khati).*

In other words, a student parliament should be taken seriously enough for the vice-chancellor of the university (who is also the chair of the senate, which is the 'parliament' of the senior academics) to "have a seat" on it and account to it. While this may sound like an outlandish proposition, it resonates well with the CHE's Governance Task Team of its twenty-year review of higher education, which stressed the importance of high-level linkages between governance structures. With respect to the Institutional Forum that study had found:

*"There are few cases in which IFs have performed their role effectively and, in some of these, it seems that the fact that the chair (or co-chair) of the IF was occupied by a senior member of the university ensured the existence of a productive link with council" (Lange & Luescher-Mamashela, 2016:124).*

## **Conclusion**

While there are many examples of ways in which student representation can be improved and effect be given to a more meaningful and constructive role of student leadership in higher education governance, an insight that can be derived from the reflections of the former student leaders is that institutional conditions vary greatly, and relevant solutions are best co-operatively found at that level. To move forward will require new partnerships, imagination, courage and humility. Can students be trusted to lead such a process? Sikhakhane and Naidoo argue that one of the most important contributions of #RhodesMustFall and



#FeesMustFall is intellectual: that they opened up a new discursive space to chart new ways of thinking and doing, with notions like decoloniality and the call for free, decolonised higher education. In Sikhakhane's words:

*"I think the essence of student activism – what makes it – is its honesty and independence. [...] And I think students [should] truly, every day – as they did with the #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall – continue to help us, because that is their road: to intellectually lead us into areas we fear thinking about. [...] To ignite us to think courageously about things we have become lethargic about, and things we have learnt to accept – even if they are wrong. [...] Only students can do that for us, because they have the courage to defy the accepted narratives in society. Only students tend to force society to think critically, even about those idols we have created" (Sikhakhane).*

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# Towards understanding the #FeesMustFall as a 'leaderless' student movement in South Africa

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## Abstract

Over the last decade, the world has witnessed a new pattern of campaigns waged by civil society against various social, economic and human rights ills. Notable among these are the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa in 2009/2010, the #OccupyMovement and #BlackLivesMatter in the United States of America (USA) in 2010/2011, and the #FeesMustFall in South Africa during the period 2015 to 2016. By all measures, these campaigns achieved their goals such as dethroning ruthless dictators in the Middle East and North Africa, and the cancellation of university tuition fees for the needy students in South Africa. Of particular significance to note is that these campaigns were almost clinical in their execution and thus achieved their goals within relatively short space of time. Another intriguing factor is that these movements are believed to have been 'leaderless'. The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement in South Africa had students from the public universities mobilised and rallied together as a united front, to demand the scrapping off of higher education tuition fees for the needy students, reform and transformation of the curricula, and insourcing of workers who had been hired through private companies. It was alleged that the private companies exploited and underpaid the workers who provided essential support services to the universities. For the full duration of the movement, students marched in unison and put behind their differences in terms gender, race, class, religion, political ideologies and affiliation to different political parties. The paper seeks to provide answers to three key questions: (a) Was the #FMF really leaderless or it just had a different form of leadership? (b) If the #FMF was indeed 'leaderless' how did it manage to mobilise students nationwide so effectively, transcending the deeply entrenched polarising effects of race, gender, class, religion, politics? (c) If the #FMF, the Arab Spring, the #OccupyMovement and #BlackLivesMatter were indeed 'leaderless' movements, and yet they achieved their goals effectively and efficiently, particularly in terms of time frames, what does it say about the canon belief that leadership is an essential requirement for teams, communities, organisations, institutions and nations to succeed? The paper also seeks to examine the attempts by the media to identify and project to the world 'leaders' of the #FMF when the movement itself was believed to be 'leaderless'. What was the agenda of the media in doing so, and to what extent did the agenda achieve its goal?

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, #BlackLivesMatter, #FeesMustFall, leaderless, #OccupyMovement, media, social media

## Introduction and background

Over the last decade, new patterns of civil society campaigns and political participation through conventional and non-conventional platforms have emerged and have become forces to reckon with in different parts of the world. The common denominator of all these new patterns is the use of social media as a tool for propaganda, canvassing support, mobilising people and rallying them around a cause or causes. People across the world are predominantly suspicious of information they are fed by the mainstream media channels which are often controlled by governments and/or their hegemonic forces. There is a complete trust deficit as regards these mainstream media channels. This is the situation that social media has capitalised and is steadily entrenching itself not only as a better alternative to the mainstream media channels, but also as the people's media. Society look up to Facebook and Twitter as the new or unconventional forms of communication and for creating networks among citizens and gaining international attention and support (Kim, 2015).

The effects of the use of social media on politics, civil liberty campaigns, and campaigns against other social ill, have been massive. It has been responsible for the emergence of a new form of political participation that unites people across the globe. The social media-based sudden online activism became prominent during the 2009/2010 Arab Spring which sprang in Tunisia in North Africa and spread to other Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East (Muhammed & Hasan, 2014). It was an abrupt and sudden revolt of mainly young people disenchanted with deteriorating socio-economic and socio-political conditions in their countries, which made them hopeless for their future.

Being social media-based, the Arab Spring movement did not have a centralised locus of leadership. Communities mobilised spontaneously in their localities because they identified themselves with the cause. It did not mind to them that there was no central leadership command, as the messages and the cause were sufficient to spur them into action. It was the message and the cause, and not a leader or leaders, that provided direction. The majority of people in South African, and indeed many others the world over, were united behind them and rendered support to them by ensuring that, through social media activism, the messages reached as many people out there as possible. The outcomes, and in particular, the success of the campaigns surprised everyone, including those that were part of the campaign events.

The Arab Spring inspired the 2010/2011 #OccupyMovement and #BlackLivesMatter in the United States of America (Carney 2016; Gamson & Sifry, 2013). Like the Arab Spring, the two leaderless movements that broke out online by young people against the ills in the USA,

experienced casualties as well as successes. The use of social media had created a new form of access that engages many who otherwise would not be able to participate in the public sphere (Carney, 2016). This new form of political activism through the use of hashtags on social media became the new order of the day.

Much like how the #OccupyMovement and #BlackLivesMatter were inspired by the Arab Spring, the #FeesMustFall movement which started in South Africa in 2015 sprang from one university and quickly spread to other universities across the country. The first "Must Fall" movement of students emerged from the University of Cape Town (UCT), a Historically White University (HWU) (Shai & Molapo 2017). Most black students and lecturers at the institution called for the dismantling of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes because it symbolised institutional racism, the Eurocentric values and other anti-African ethos of the university. They argued that these were deliberate obstacles placed in the path towards the total transformation of the institution which should include the decolonisation of the curricula and the entire education system (Legodi & Shai, 2018). The #RhodesMustFall movement was successful as the statue of Cecil Rhodes was removed from the premises of the university, an outcome that reflected what Mbembe (2017) referred to as a decolonisation of buildings and public spaces. This movement united students, especially black people, against the legacy of colonialism and the lived experiences of the unjust apartheid system.

As already alluded to above, #RhodesMustFall movement was like testing the waters, and once it became successful in achieving its goal, it gave rise and way to a larger movement, the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement, which however, used the same organising principles. Much has been written about the #FMF movement, but this focuses on the lived experiences of students, lecturers, student leaders, and university management during the two-year campaign. There is also a growing literature on the responses of universities and the government to the movement, as well as the eventual outcomes of the campaign. Similarly, there is increasing literature on the implementation of the outcomes of the campaign.

However, the matter of the #FMF campaign being a 'leaderless' movement, and the implications of this, has not been interrogated. It is for this reason that the study which this paper reports about was conceptualised. The aim was to interrogate whether indeed the #FMF was a 'leaderless' movement; and if it was, to examine how it managed to mobilise students nationwide so effectively, transcending the deeply entrenched polarising effects of race, gender, class, religion, politics, without some form of leadership to provide direction, to plan and to coordinate the operations of the campaign. Furthermore, if indeed #FMF and the other campaigns mentioned earlier were leaderless, and they achieved so much in a very efficient way, the paper then questions whether the need of leadership in teams, communities, organisations, and nations, is often exaggerated; and whether, the notion of leadership is

archaic and outdated. The literature only covers the occurrence of the movements as well as the outcomes thereof.

### **Conceptual and theoretical framework**

The study on which this paper was based was guided by the theory of Afrocentricity, formally postulated by Molefe Kete Asante (1990 and 2003) and developed further by scholars such as Karenga (1988), Riviere (2001), Modupe (2003) and Mazama (2003). The theory and paradigm of Afrocentricity is about putting Africa at the centre as well as understanding the ideas and events from an African perspective. According to this conceptual and theoretical framework, the #FEMF movement and the other 'fallist' movements based on one or a few institutions, which preceded the #FEMF, were a manifestation of the reawakening of the African 'child' who, as a result of globalisation, has come to understand that outside of the Western world, countries and regions that have used education effectively as a tool for achieving remarkable social, technological and economic development, are those that have anchored their education systems on their respective national or societal philosophies (Msila, 2009). In this regard, it is believed that the Africanisation of the higher education system, for instance, would lead to graduates who understand their cultural and historical backgrounds, the aspirations of the communities they hail from, and the challenges that their communities and nations face. It is further believed that an Africanised higher education system would empower the African students with the necessary sets of knowledge, skills and competences for developing appropriate technologies, as well as other solutions to the challenges that their communities face. Not least is the expectation that an Africanised higher education system would engender a greater sense of African identity, and pride in such identity (Letseka, 2012; Msila, 2009; Letsekha, 2013).

The philosophical principle of 'relativism' reminds us that there is nothing universally valid, interesting or controversial; and that these labels and the resultant emotions that people attach to them, are all determined by societal contexts. It follows therefore that knowledge is appropriate and useful only as relative to the context in which it originated and or was acquired from. Along these lines of reasoning, it is therefore envisaged that the Africanisation of higher education would ensure that the knowledge and skills imparted to students are more practical, relevant, appropriate, and fit for purpose (Metz, 2015).

Africanisation of education is also a means for achieving redress, which is to compensate the past epistemic injustice imposed by the colonialists. As Mbembe (2001) observes, the epistemological bases of what is taught in South African and other African universities remain sheltered in a western discourse that stubbornly refuses to open up space for new and much needed Afrocentric epistemes. It is therefore of critical significance in terms of redress to



reclaim Afrocentric epistemologies as a means to safeguard Africans from the acts of racism and other forms of oppressions (Metz, 2015). African theories and practices must be extracted with the intention of revitalising African civilisation and thereby making a contribution to humanity's progress. Africanisation offers a platform for originality and uniqueness that can contribute meaningfully to global knowledge and civilisation. It should facilitate the African universities' meaningful contribution to the world's mass of knowledge in the same manner as Harvard, Oxford and St Andrews do, whilst remaining unmistakably American, English and Scottish universities respectively (Makgoba and Seepe, 2004).

Furthermore, redress of past injustices means removing obstacles to access to higher education for the previously disadvantaged people. One such obstacle, and perhaps a major one, is the tuition fees that universities demand from all those who enrol with them. The #FMM movement was a campaign to eliminate this massive obstacle to access to, and progression and success in higher education.

Metz (2017) aptly sums up the rationale for Africanisation of higher education by stating that, publicly funded universities in particular, have the moral obligation to prevent racism; help make up for the 'epistemicide' caused by colonialism and apartheid; mine (South) African cultural heritage with an eye to revitalising African civilisation; and provide the conditions that would enable people living in (South) Africa to adopt an African identity.

While employing the Afrocentric theory to acquire understanding of the #FMM movement, the irony on leadership could not be lost. African leadership is a critical component of Afrocentricity and Africanisation. African leadership galvanises people and is essential for the success of the initiatives of communities (Ngambi, 2004). A 'leaderless' movement would therefore not be consistent with the ethos of Africanisation and Afrocentricity. The researcher employed this theory to trace how the leaderless "Must Fall" movements later produced leaders by the media (BusinessTech, 2016; Relph, 2016) as well as university management and government's failure to respond to a decentralised governance. It should be noted that the already existing literature that has been produced using theories such as constructivism and social movement theory are influenced by Euro-American value systems. Therefore, the theory of Afrocentricity brings about an alternative voice to this discourse. Three tenets of Afrocentricity, namely grounding, orientation and perspective by Modupe (2003) will be used as analytical categories.

## **Study methodology**

The study on which this paper is based was qualitative. It was principally based on the review of existing literature in the form of books, articles in journals, official reports and popular publications including media pieces and Internet articles and opinion pieces. A significant

proportion of information for the study was also acquired through participant observation, a research method in which the researcher immerses herself or himself as thoroughly as possible in the target groups of people for extended periods of time, observing behaviour and other phenomena, listening what is being said in conversations among the key role players, and asking questions where necessary (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, dos Santos, du Toit, Masenge, & Aardt & Wagner, 2015). This is an effective research method to study events such as wars and revolutions, and it was precisely because the #FMF movement was a revolution of some form, and the researcher was part of the student masses, that this method recommended. The information acquired from the study was analysed thematically and interpreted with heavy doses of conceptualism.

## Findings and discussion

The #FeesMustFall movement was a spinoff of the #RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Cape Town. The #FMF protests started in earnest in mid-October 2015 following announcements, by various public universities, of the fee increases for the 2016 academic year. The tempo of the protests was heightened because the announcement in 2016, by the then Minister of Higher Education and Training, that there would be fee increases for 2017, although these would be capped at 8% (Kgatle, 2018). The intended national fee increments in South African universities resulted in students mobilising online through the hashtag #FeesMustFall and made calls for a zero fee increment for the academic year 2016 (Shai & Molapo, 2017).

While the fee increases were the main trigger, another equally important matter that galvanised students around the #FMF movement was the need to decolonise and Africanise curricula and the entire educational system (Langa, 2017). The decolonisation of curricula involves the transformation of the learning programmes to ensure that the learning programme leading to any higher education qualification contains African perspectives and approaches. For example, a curriculum in Music should include indigenous genres and so-called folklore music; a curriculum on Philosophy should include the work of prominent African philosophers; and a curriculum on Sociology should address issues relating to African societies (Metz, 2017). Similarly, African perspectives in Agriculture, Life and Physical Sciences, Engineering and Technology should be part of the curricula of the respective subjects. Aspects of herbalism and the use of medicinal plants should also be incorporated in the curricula of the health sciences (Msila & Gumbo, 2016). One student leader was quoted (Langa, 2017) as making specific reference to hospitality studies and questioned the practice of teaching and learning about European and Asian food, while the curriculum could do well to teach African cuisine in Africa.

Overall, therefore, the #FMF movement was a campaign to speed up transformation in the universities. Barely two years after the dawn of democracy, the government published its blueprint of the transformation of higher education in the country (Department of Education, 1996). According to this policy document, the transformation of higher education should have entailed promoting equity of access and fair chances of success to all seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequities; meeting national development needs, including the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment, through well-planned and coordinated teaching, learning and research programmes; supporting a democratic ethos and culture of human rights by educational programmes and practices conducive to critical discourse and creative thinking, cultural tolerance, and a common commitment to humane, non-racists and non-sexist social order; and contributing to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular addressing the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, southern African contexts and upholding rigorous standards of academic quality.

Twenty-five years into democracy, there are indications that there has been progress in some areas as regards transformation. However, much still remains to be done to realise a fully transformed higher education system. The dimension of transformation that relates to addressing the demographic imbalances of the past, remains a major challenge. There has not been full redress on the issues of race, class and gender and racial segregation remains entrenched in some higher education institutions. The formerly white universities continue to attract predominantly white students, and students from the rich and middle-class black population. The same demographic composition is reflected among the academic and research staff of those institutions. Financial exclusion continued and the institutional cultures, the spaces within the institutions, the curricula, the ideologies and power relations remain untransformed (Davids, 2019). As Mbembe (2001) observed, the 'epistemological bases of what is taught in South African institutions remain sheltered in a western discourse that stubbornly refuses to open up space for new and much needed Afrocentric epistemes'.

The #FMF indeed managed to speed up transformation of higher education on several fronts. It eliminated financial exclusivity as the government announced that needy students would be fully funded and relieving them the burden of paying tuition fees. It also placed the transformation of curricula and the epistemes up on the agenda of universities and the government, and for the first-time significant movements could be observed on that front. In addition, the fight for good labour practices for those people who were employed by companies that universities had outsourced certain support functions to, yielded some success as institutions began to insource those services and thus making the employees become directly employed by the universities on better conditions of services and benefits.

The Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended, (Republic of South Africa, 1997) recognise the Student Representative Council (SRC) as the legitimate student leadership structure in universities. During #FMF, the SRCs in universities were not the centre of activities. Some were even caught off guard and watched things unfolding on their own. Others tried to join the bandwagon, but the speed at which the campaign was rolling meant that many of the SRCs failed to catch up, let alone wrestle the steering wheel and start becoming drivers. Things were just happening when SRCs were locked in meetings with management. The resolutions of those meetings were flagrantly ignored. Some members of the SRCs were even labelled as sell outs that would not be listened to.

Therefore, in as far as the SRCs as legitimate student leadership structures in universities had no full control over events in most universities during the #FMF, then indeed it is in order to see the #FMF as a 'leaderless' movement. However, this does not necessarily mean that there were no students who were planning and coordinating events. There were such indeed, only that they were not part of the recognised student leadership structures. Mostly these were localised in residences and in schools or faculties. They did not make use of the formal structures set up by universities, or the formal communication channels approved by the universities. They went for everything 'alternative': informal structures as alternative to the formal leadership structures, the social media as the alternative to channels of communication, and direct engagement with Universities South Africa (USAf), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and other national civil society organisations as alternative to engaging directly with the management in universities.

It is the use of the 'alternative' approaches which was the main tool that won other students over. Furthermore, those who were planning and coordinating the events made every effort to portray themselves not as career student leaders like those in the SRCs who were painted as people who were motivated by personal gains, and were also in cahoots with the management of universities in denying students their rights. In fact, they portrayed themselves not as leaders but as servants of other students. All these resonated well with the masses of students, and facilitated the mobilisation of students, and the planning and coordination of campaign events. They made them able to transcend the deeply entrenched polarising effects of race, gender, class, religion, politics; and were therefore able to rally the broader student masses around one common cause. They displayed incredible unity of purpose.

Given, as discussed above, that the #FMF movement did not have recognised leadership, the default position of management of universities was to resort to engaging the 'legitimate' student leadership structures: the SRCs. However, the student masses demanded to be engaged directly and forced a number of Vice Chancellors to address them directly. This was not 'procedural', but then it was the time of the 'alternatives', and the managers of universities

who swallowed their pride and realised that the rules of the game had changed, came out of this campaign less bruised than those who opted to stick to 'formal' and 'procedural' modus operandi. In the same way, the SRCs that were quick to realise that this was a revolution and not peacetime politicking strategically climbed down their high horses and joined the mass movement, not as leaders but as 'mediators' between the students and the management of universities. They even 'recognised' the de facto coordinators of events and provided them with logistical support as well as intelligence.

During the protest, the university management called in security companies to keep students out of campus or to 'stabilise' the protest as well as safeguard university property and students who wanted to continue attending lecture sessions instead of participating in the protests. Private companies that were deployed by university management received critiques by the students, political leaders and the media for 'militarising' campuses that were meant to be safe spaces for young people, although on the contrary a space where students are afforded the right to protest and participate in a just cause.

The coverage of the #FMF campaign by the media was also interesting. Often, journalists covering the protests randomly focused on media savvy students who were part of the protests as well as those who had been injured in the battles with the police and security guards. The media elevated such to 'leaders' of the movement. In other words, the 'leaders' of the movement as reported by the mainstream media were mainly the imaginative creation of the media. However, as this was not a time where mainstream media had much influence, the 'creation' of 'leaders' of the movement by the mainstream media did not dampen the spirit of those who were planning and coordinating events on the ground. The mainstream media misreported and misinformed the public about the movement.

The #FMF achieved most of its intended goals. The then President announced late 2017 that as from January 2018 higher education would be free for students from poor and middle-class families. Curricula have also been and continue to be revisited by scholars in their respective disciplines to respond to the calls to decolonise the content and also to include the works of black scholars and hire black academic and support service staff in the universities. Due to shortage of qualified black scholars, platforms and necessary scholarships are made available for such to fill in the gap. Insourcing of workers has been implemented in respective in a number of universities. The university buildings, which were burnt down, are being rebuilt, and processes have been instituted by the new Minister of Justice, himself a former student leader, to provide amnesty to students who were arrested during the protests. Other such as Bonginkosi Khanyile serving house arrest. All in all, it appears the #FMF movement was a worthy cause that achieved so much within a short space of time. A number of those who were planning and coordinating events during the campaigns have been recognised by the wider society and

they have been sent to provincial and national legislatures as elected representative of the public.

Returning to the question of leadership, although the #FMF movement registered significant success without formal 'leadership', it does not seem that there are sufficient grounds to pronounce unequivocally that leadership is not necessary to get things done. In fact, as indicated above, the movement did not have the formal recognised leaders, but it had 'alternative leaders'. These were not selected through the Eurocentric election systems that universities employ during the SRC elections. Rather, they emerged spontaneously when a need arose. In this regard, one can state that it is the structured bureaucratic leadership that the #FMF movement did not have. Perhaps the downside of not having such leadership was that as the movement progressed, disputes started to arise among those who were coordinating events, some of these grew into open conflicts. Similarly, it was easy for those with evil intentions to piggyback on the #FMF movement and use it for their nefarious intentions such as committing sexual harassment and gender-based violence (Madonsela, 2018). Furthermore, without financial management and general administration capability, the #FMF was exposed badly because of not being able to account for the financial and other form of assistance that it had received (Dlamini, 2018).

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This paper has confirmed that the #FMF movement was a 'leaderless' movement in as far as it was not very much led by the student leadership structures that are recognised by the universities in terms of the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended. The entire movement was based on the alternatives: informal structures as alternative to the formal leadership structures, the social media as the alternative to channels of communication, and direct engagement with Universities South Africa (USAf), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and other national civil society organisations as alternative to engaging directly with the management in universities.

The movement was able to mobilise and galvanise the student masses irrespective of gender, race, religion, class and political affiliation because it was issue-centred. Furthermore, those who were planning and coordinating the events made every effort to portray themselves not as career student leaders like those in the SRCs who were painted as people who were motivated by personal gains, and were also in cahoots with the management of universities in denying students their rights. In fact, they portrayed themselves not as leaders but as servants of other students. These resonated very well with the student masses.

The study also revealed that bureaucratic structures, processes and procedures can serve as obstacles to developing and implementing timeous responses to revolution-like responses. It

took a President who side-stepped much of the formal bureaucratic processes and procedures to make an announcement that effectively ended the #FMF campaign. Even his senior staff in his administration were taken by surprise by the announcement. Similarly, the leadership that ran the #FMF campaigns were not the formally structured SRC. It was a leadership that emerged spontaneously and made up of people who were not driven by personal gains.

The main recommendation is that universities and the government should fast-track the process of transformation in higher education in all its facets. They should do so to avoid a possible recurrence of a campaign similar to the #FMF movement, and the consequent destabilisation to the sector.

It is also recommended that universities should take student engagement seriously. They should not allow students to sit on decision-making and governance structures for the sake of tokenism. They need to afford them the chance to present their cases, and they should be listened to as they do so. Failure to do that will compel the students to go for the 'alternative' approaches which challenge the status quo, the formal structures of engagement and channels of communication, and the usual modus operandi. When such happens, the stability of the institutions is threatened, as was the case during the #FMF campaigns.

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# The South African Surveys of Student Engagement: Using students' voices to impact decision-making, governance and design

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## Abstract

Students have been involved in institutional governance through a variety of models identified over time. In South Africa in particular, the recent student protests forced the sector to recognise that students' voices and experiences are largely absent from the way institutions are run. While current emerging models in South African higher education, such as inviting students to participate in committees and governing bodies seem to be increasing, we aim to share a complementary model in which a broader representation of students contribute their opinions about their experiences. This, in turn, results in institutional action, and ultimately enhances students' experiences and engagement. At the centre of this model is the South African Surveys of Student Engagement (SASSE). Here, student engagement is defined as the interplay between the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities, and the extent to which institutions create environments that enable students' engagement in such effective educational practices. Thus, this understanding of student engagement demands consideration of how institutions are governed and designed. This paper will focus on how SASSE data could be used to inform institutional decisions, governance and design. This is done to support the argument that including students' voices in institutional matters takes on different forms, and as with any successful approach, it requires a combination of different models for optimal impact. As one such approach, student engagement has proven to benefit students and institutions alike.

**Keywords:** Student engagement, student voice, student success, high-impact practices, evidence-based decision-making

## Introduction

For the past three decades, the post-school sector has been hard at work to realign its mission and values towards the ideals of a democratic South Africa. During this time, significant efforts from a variety of role players have resulted in structural and legislative changes, several policy contributions, and a substantial increase in student participation. However, the protests in 2015 and 2016 sent a clear message that students feel excluded from decisions that impact directly

on them. At the core of the protests were students' need to feel like they belong, to be included in institutional culture, to engage with decolonised curricula, for higher education institutions to address a persistent patriarchal culture, for institutions to appoint outsourced workers, and an outcry to do away with unaffordable tuition fees. In essence, the sector has not adequately adapted to meet the needs of a radically different student population than a few decades ago.

The need to be more responsive to students' experiences has also shed new light on existing conversations on students' engagement with institutions, and the extent to which their voices are heard in institutional governance, decision-making and design. As a contribution to these conversations, we introduce the work that has flowed from a decade of SASSE data and how students' voices, as depicted through these surveys, are shaping how we think about our institutions.

### **What is student engagement and why focus on it?**

Conceptually, student engagement provides an enriched version of the student experience, since it incorporates both a focus on the behaviours of students, as well as the practices of staff inside and outside the classroom. Student engagement spans the fields of psychology, sociology, cognitive development and learning theory, and is linked with a long tradition of impact research (McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013). The concept of student engagement is broad, and its definition varies.

The work of George Kuh and his colleagues on student engagement started in the 1990s with the realisation that there is a lack of information on the nature and degree of impact of college on students. This led to a definition of student engagement that includes two key components: first, the extent to which students take part in educationally purposeful activities, and second, the extent to which institutions provide environments that enable students' participation in such effective educational practices (Kuh, 2001).

Educationally purposeful activities refer to behaviours that have been identified through research as valuable contributors to learning, and ultimately student success. Examples of such behaviours include the amount of time spent on learning tasks (Carroll, 1963), the quality of students' effort (Pace, 1980, 1984), and Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. Other contributors to identifying behaviours that matter include Astin's (1977) seminal work on how colleges impact students, with particular relevance to the importance of students' active participation in their academics, co-curricular activities, and interactions with peers and staff; as well as Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) meta-analyses of factors contributing to student success. These behaviours were integrated into the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a measuring instrument still

administered today in the United States that has also been adapted for use in several other contexts, including Ireland, South Africa, Australasia, China, South Korea, and Indonesia.

Over the years, other scholars have built on definitions of student engagement. These include that of Trowler (2010, p. 3), who sees student engagement as:

*“concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution”.*

Further expanding on Trowler's definition, Leach (2014, as cited in Zepke 2017, p. 8) sees student engagement as:

*“the time and effort students invest in educational activities. The consequences of their engagement – their success in their study, their personal growth and the contribution they make to society through active citizenship – are affected by personal and contextual antecedents as well as the actions taken by teachers, institutions, families and friends to facilitate their engagement in an active partnership”.*

Definitions of engagement have also been contextualised. For example, moving more towards what student engagement means in the classroom context, Barkley (2010, p. 8) defines engagement as “a process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning.”

While these definitions might differ in which facets should be foregrounded when conceptualising student engagement, they have two important things in common. First, it seems that researchers agree on the multidimensional nature of student engagement. Second, and more importantly, there seems to be consensus that student engagement is grounded in an inseparable interplay between students and institutions.

A global interest in student engagement research has contributed to an ever-growing body of knowledge on how institutions are enabling student success. For example, several decades of evidence have identified elements of student engagement, such as student-staff interaction, participation in first year seminars, receiving adequate support, engaging in peer learning, and other engaging behaviours as significant predictors of student satisfaction and success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016). Student engagement has also been proven to benefit underprepared students, thereby enhancing their chances of success (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008).

Student engagement measures, such as the NSSE and the contextualised SASSE, provide institutions with actionable data points that prompt reflection and evaluation of the institutional

environment and the quality of student learning. This, in turn, can be used to address accountability pressures and assess educational quality at institutional level, as well as to address concerns about student success while contributing to the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning (McCormick et al., 2013).

### **Using student engagement data to impact decision-making, governance and institutional design**

Institutional governance could be viewed as an overarching term that directly feeds into institutional decision-making, and in turn, how we design physical infrastructure, support structures, and academic pedagogy. Hénard & Mitterle (2010) provide a helpful conceptualisation of how institutional governance theories and typologies have evolved from a modest focus on the interplay between state authority, market forces and academic oligarchy, to a much more nuanced approach. An example of the latter is Trakman's (2008) work, which models institutional governance into five typologies: governance by academics through entrusting power to a senate or maximising academic staff representation on governing boards; corporate governance, where institutions follow a business model focusing on fiscal and managerial responsibilities; trustee governance, where trustee boards have the responsibility to look after the interests of the beneficiaries of the trust; stakeholder governance, where governance resides with various stakeholders who share in the responsibility of decision-making; and amalgam models of governance, which include some combination of the four listed. All of these models have advantages and disadvantages, and all are context and situation dependent.

In South Africa, the socio-political transformation of the country, including the higher education sector, have primarily steered institutional governance conversations. In the mid-2000s, Hall, Symes & Luescher (2004) commented on how deeply engrained institutional governance cultures could be resistant to sectoral restructuring, and that the effects of institutional exclusion and inequality could linger for some time. In later years, authors have used different lenses to explore institutional governance in the South African higher education sector, for example, Craus (2017), who developed a framework to align institutions with international corporate governance standards, or Sebola (2017), who argues for a more inclusive stakeholder approach to governance. In her analyses of institutional governance in a transitioning South African higher education sector, Fourie (2009) concludes that good governance entails the following key aspects: i) recognition of the often opposing interests of role players, which implies recognition and tolerance of competing interests; ii) a shared vision for the institution by all role players; iii) a shared sense of trust among role players; and iv) unambiguous and transparent communication. Confirming these claims, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has had to deal with several institutions' governance woes, placing some

under administration for certain timeframes. At a National Assembly committee meeting (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2019) the DHET highlighted factors contributing to poor governance, including the inability of councils to provide strategic leadership and direction; role confusion between governance and management; fraught council and vice-chancellor relationships; failure by members to distinguish between the interests of the institution and the interests of other role players; non-adherence to governance procedures; and corruption.

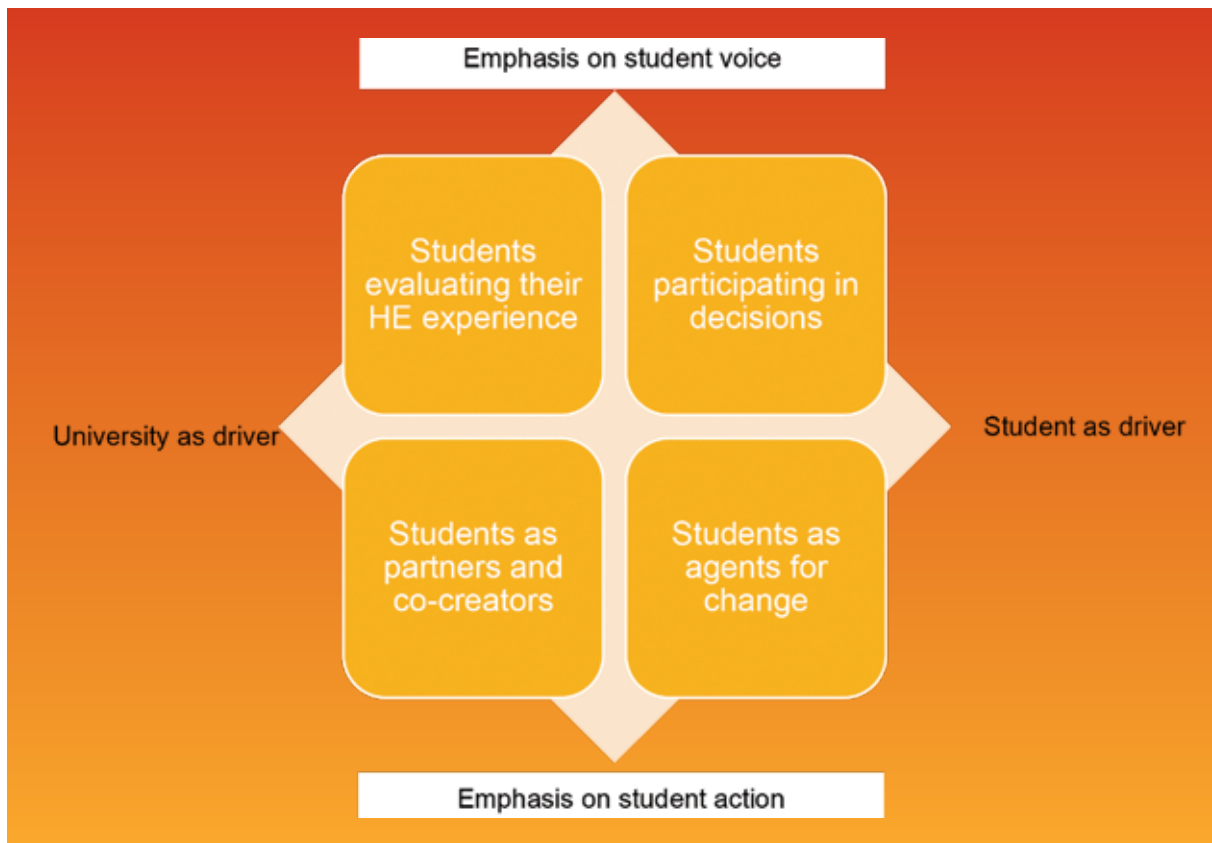
While contributions to governance conversations seem to have become more nuanced over time, there is not a lot of clarity on students' active participation in the processes outlined here. One study lists the need for more students, beyond the Student Representative Council, to take part in institutional governance activities as a key finding in exploring student involvement in institutional governance at four South African institutions. This is particularly the case where decisions directly affecting students are concerned (Khan, 2011).

This call for broader representation of the student voice in institutional governance is where the link between student engagement and institutional governance becomes clear. An important function of measuring student engagement is providing a platform for the student voice. As Zepke (2018) states, student engagement research offers ways to reinforce success frameworks, primarily through the premises that successful students are invested in their own learning, and that supportive institutions support successful engagement. These propositions, he argues,

*“focus on student voice, where students are not merely allowed to speak but where their views are acted on; learning partnerships, where students are partners in learning and teaching; and active citizenship, where students are empowered to act confidently in a democratic culture and so make a difference in their communities” (p. 62).*

In general, student survey data is increasingly becoming part of institutional accountability measures. It contributes towards the global evidence-based movement in higher education, where feedback from students about their educational experiences is monitored and included in quality discussions (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015). Some scholars who argue for a more inclusive 'student as partner' model, such as Dunne & Zanstra (2011), have objected to a sole focus on the student's voice through survey research. In turn, Dunne & Zanstra (2011, p. 17) provide a helpful framework to conceptualise students' involvement in institutional governance (Figure 1). The framework is founded on two dimensions: the extent to which activities are student-led or institution-led (horizontal axis), and the extent to which students are actively involved as agents of change versus more passive representatives. The framework further distinguishes between four roles students play in institutional decision-making processes, ranging from providing feedback as basis for enhancement or change, to being collaborative partners in driving institutional change. Importantly, there is space for different approaches to

include students in institutional governance. The current article uses data from the SASSE surveys to propose using the student voice to understand our student populations and enact change in how we design our institutions accordingly, as one of many complementary models to enhance student engagement.



**Figure 1: Students' involvement in institutional governance framework. Adapted from Dunne & Zanstra (2011)**

As with surveys in general, the student engagement surveys have also been critiqued regarding their validity. For example, Porter, Rumann & Pontius (2011) have questioned the ability of students to comprehend what the surveys are asking, to recall their behaviours over time, to make judgements on relevant memories or behaviours, and to select appropriate responses (that is, distinguishing between 'often' or 'very often'). In addition, Hagel, Carr & Devlin (2012) have cautioned that a 'copy and paste' approach between contexts cannot work. Their critique is aimed at the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), which, like the SASSE, was adapted from the NSSE. While critiques such as these are valid, they were considered and addressed when the SASSE was contextualised (Strydom & Mentz, 2013). The SASSE items were further scrutinised by a panel of stakeholders from various institutions, particularly to identify the potential high-impact practices that should be measured in the South African context, as well as conducting cognitive interviews with around 140 students to assess students' understanding of the items.



## What we know about the student voice through the SASSE surveys

To explore what we know from the student voice from the SASSE surveys, we draw from selected results from a three-part series of publications commissioned by Universities South Africa (USAf) and co-published with the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of the Free State (UFS) in 2018. The titles of the reports were:

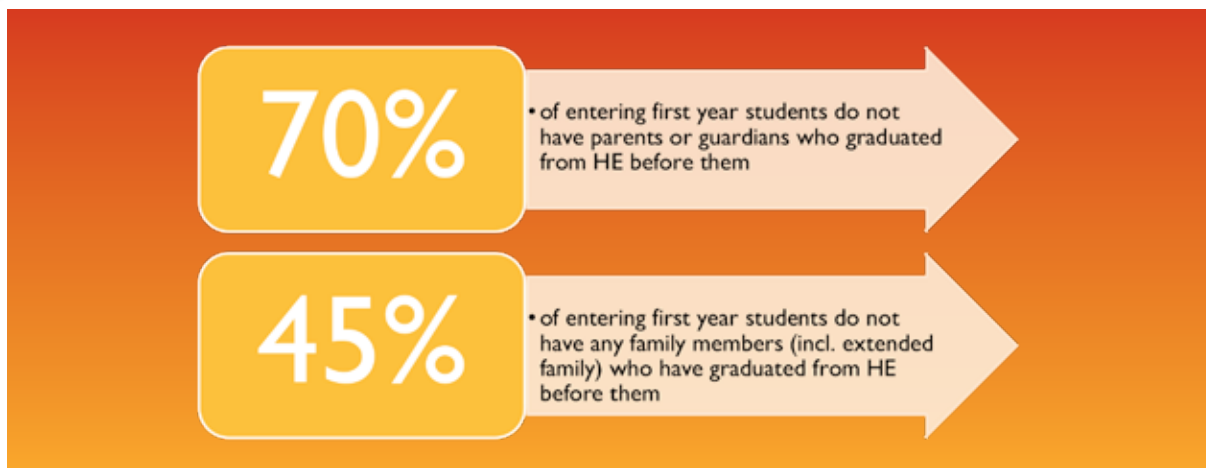
- **Understanding Students:** A Key to Systemic Success;
- **Understanding Students:** Putting Students at the Centre of Institutional Design; and
- **Understanding Students:** Enabling Quality Learning (USAf & CTL, 2018 a, b, c).

The aim of the series was to improve institutions' understanding of who the students in higher education are, and to determine what they bring to the institutions. This was built on the premise that a better understanding of students and their experiences in higher education, allow us to redesign our institutional environments.

For the USAf collaboration, data from three surveys were used. The Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE) survey targets first year students and is administered annually from February to March. Data used for the reports stem from the 2015-2017 administrations and include 14,872 students from nine institutions (three traditional universities, two comprehensive universities, and four universities of technology). The South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE), administered annually from August to September, measures all undergraduate students' engagement. The SASSE data used for the USAf reports are from the 2015-2017 administrations and include 20,120 students from 12 institutions (one comprehensive university, six universities of technology, and five traditional universities). Finally, data from the Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement (LSSE) is also included. The LSSE is administered with the SASSE. The sample presented in the USAf reports consists of 1 363 lecturer responses from 10 institutions (four traditional universities, one comprehensive university and five universities of technology) over three years (2015-2017). In 2017, a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning scale was added. Data from that scale presented here includes responses from 322 lecturers from three traditional universities.

### First time entering students: Generational status

In this section we share results from the BUSSE to provide a picture of the students entering higher education for the first time. As Figure 2 shows, 70% of first time entering first year students are first generation, while almost half do not have any family members who have graduated from higher education institutions before them.

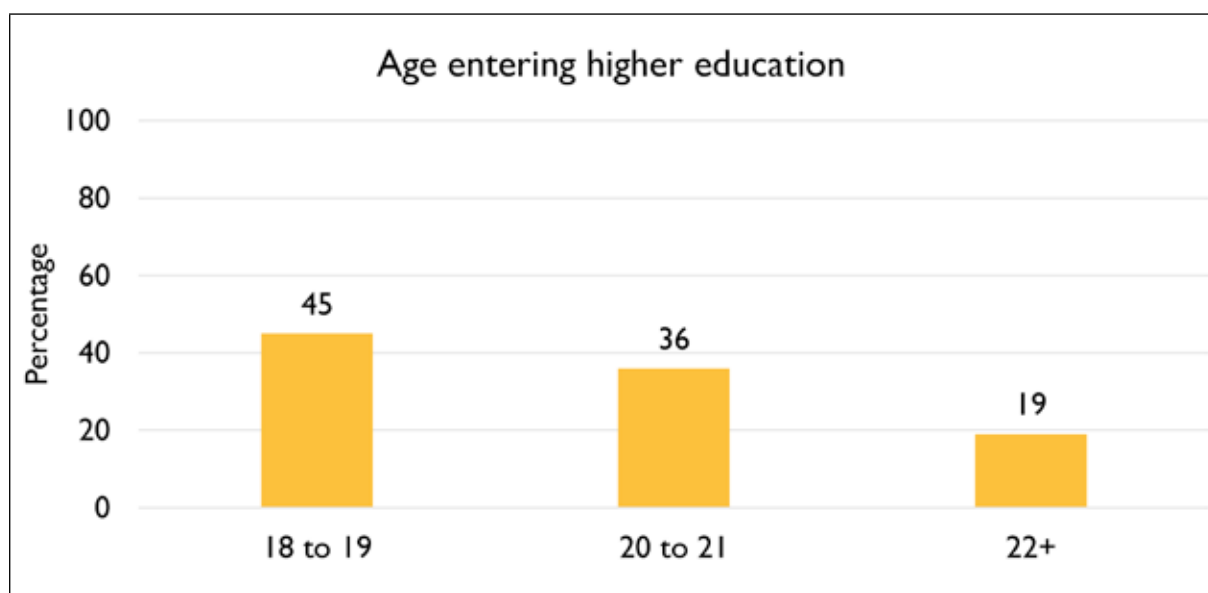


**Figure 2: Generational status of first-time entering students (USAf & CTL, 2018a)**

Research shows that first-generation students are at far greater risk of failure (Pike & Kuh, 2005) and often have more unrealistic expectations about their first year of study (Henn, Hen-Boisen & Posthumus, 2017).

### First time entering students: Age

Over half of the students entering higher education are 20 years and older. In fact, almost 20% indicate that they are 22 years or older. This implies that they might have responsibilities that go beyond their own individual success (for example, parenting, caring for siblings). It also implies that they have more life and/or work experience than students entering higher education institutions directly from school (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Age distribution of first-time entering students (USAf & CTL, 2018a)**

**Students come to university with some academic and critical thinking skills**

The discourse on students' under-preparedness has been criticised by some as promoting deficit thinking (Smit, 2012). Others have called for the need to reflect on how our institutions are underprepared for the students they take in (Dhunpath & Vithal, 2014). Students come to university with some academic skills that can be used as a foundation (Figure 4), but a large proportion are aware that they need to develop summarisation, self-awareness and the ability to see someone else's point of view. Awareness of where students are academically as they enter higher education is a crucial first step in order to scaffold their learning and to create learning pathways to adapt to students' differing levels of academic preparedness.

<p><b>83%</b></p> <p>Of students in their final year at school wrote at least one assignment of between 6-10 pages</p>	<p><b>81%</b></p> <p>Say they have often or very often identified important information from reading assignments</p>	<p><b>66%</b></p> <p>Say they often or very often summarised what they learned in class</p>
<p><b>88%</b></p> <p>Say they have included diverse perspectives in their schoolwork to some extent</p>	<p><b>57%</b></p> <p>Often or very often examined the strengths and weaknesses of their own views</p>	<p><b>66%</b></p> <p>Often or very often tried to understand someone else's views</p>

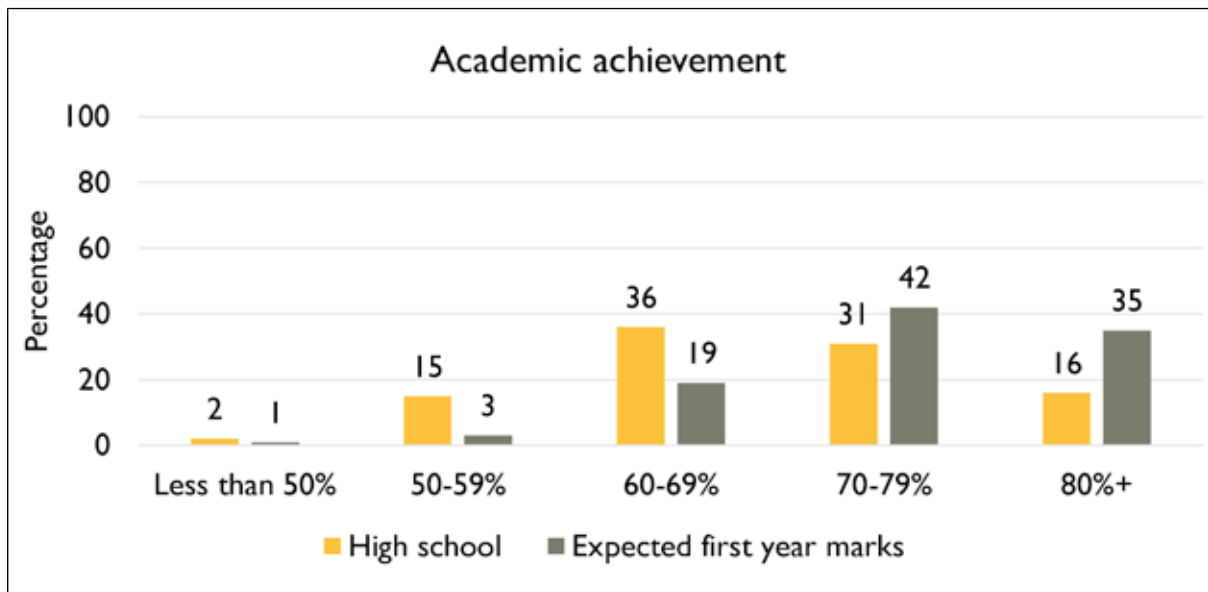
*Figure 4: Students' high school engagement with reflective and integrative learning (USAf and CTL, 2018a)*

**Financial stress**

Data from the SASSE Financial Stress Scale show that 70% of students, at some point during the academic year, cannot afford to buy food; 68% are unable to afford study materials; and 62% feel they cannot afford to pay to participate in campus-based social and academic activities (USAf & CTL, 2018b). All of these findings have obvious implications for the wellbeing and academic performance of students; and, in the case of the latter, they raise concerns about inclusivity and equity in our universities.

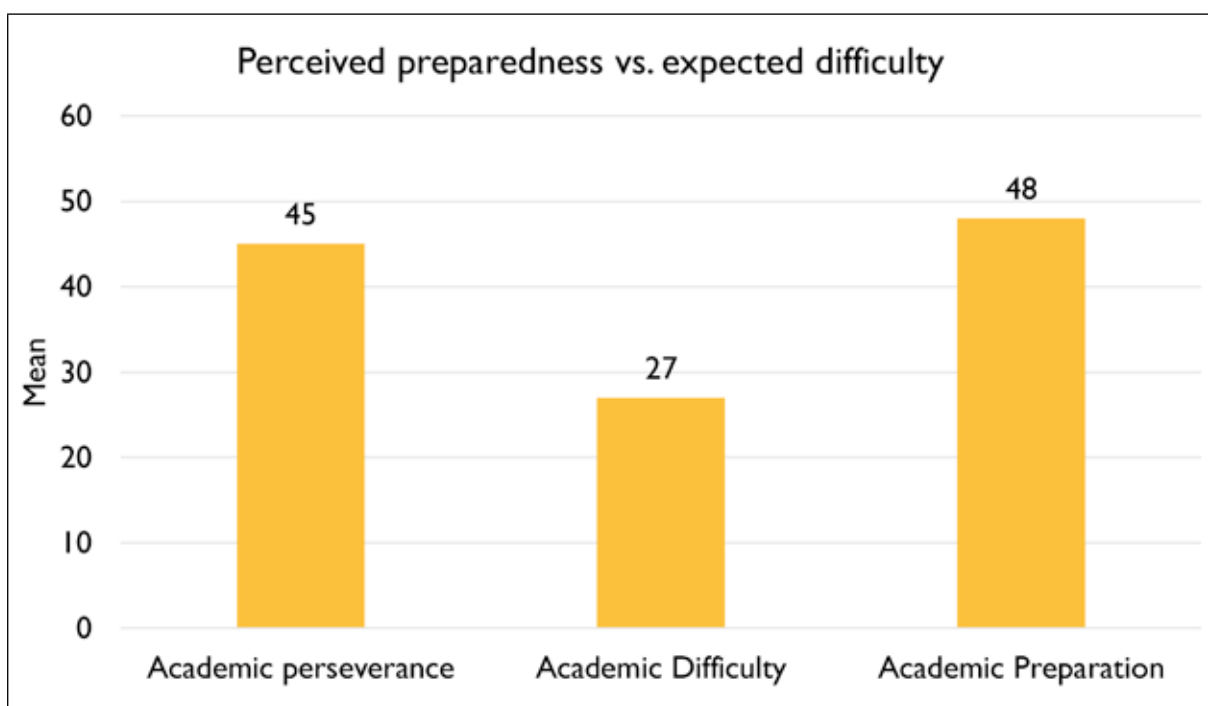
**Transition – grappling with the 'Freshman Myth'**

Figure 5 shows that even though the majority of students entering higher education report that they achieved less than 70% on average in high school, 77% think that they will achieve 70% or more on average during their first year of study (USAf & CTL, 2018b).



**Figure 5: Expected vs. actual self-reported marks**

The disjuncture between student expectations and reality is not unique to South Africa and is captured by the term 'the freshman myth', coined in the United States in the 1960s to refer to the phenomenon of students overestimating their own abilities and underestimating the difficulties faced at college.



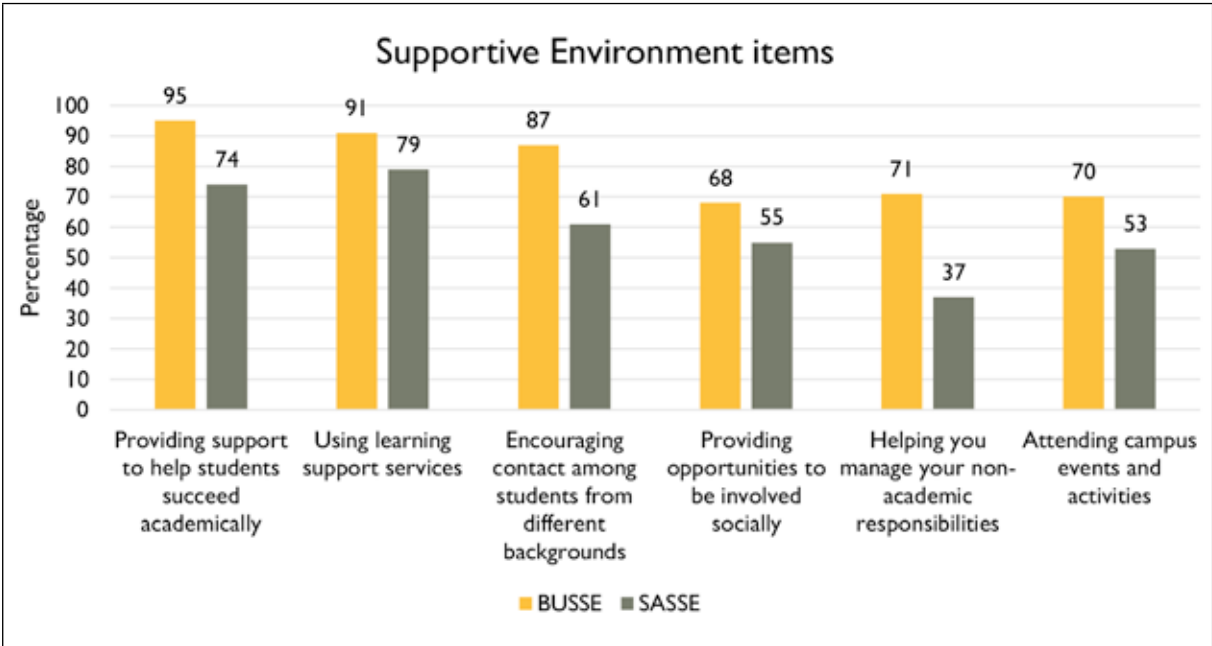
**Figure 6: Perceived preparedness vs. expected difficulty**

Figure 6 above shows a significant gap in students' perceptions of their academic preparation and sense of perseverance when compared to the difficulties they expect to encounter in their first year of study (USAf & CTL, 2018b).

### Students' perceptions of institutional support

An unmet expectation on the part of students relates to institutional support. BUSSE and SASSE data show that there are large gaps between the academic and non-academic support that students expect to receive from their institutions and what they actually feel the institution emphasises.

While more than 90% of students entering university feel it is important that their institutions provide academic support and encourage them to make use of learning support services, only 74% and 79% respectively feel that their institutions emphasise academic support in these areas



**Figure 7: Comparison between students' expectations & the reality or the supportive environment**

Figure 7 shows the perceived gap between expectation and reality regarding the management of students' academic and non-academic responsibilities. For example, the biggest gaps between students' expectations and reality relate to whether institutions are helping students manage their non-academic responsibilities (34%) and are encouraging contact between diverse students (26% gap). Also possibly concerning, is the 21% gap between the academic support entering first year students expect to receive and the emphasis the institution places on academic support, as experienced by undergraduate students.

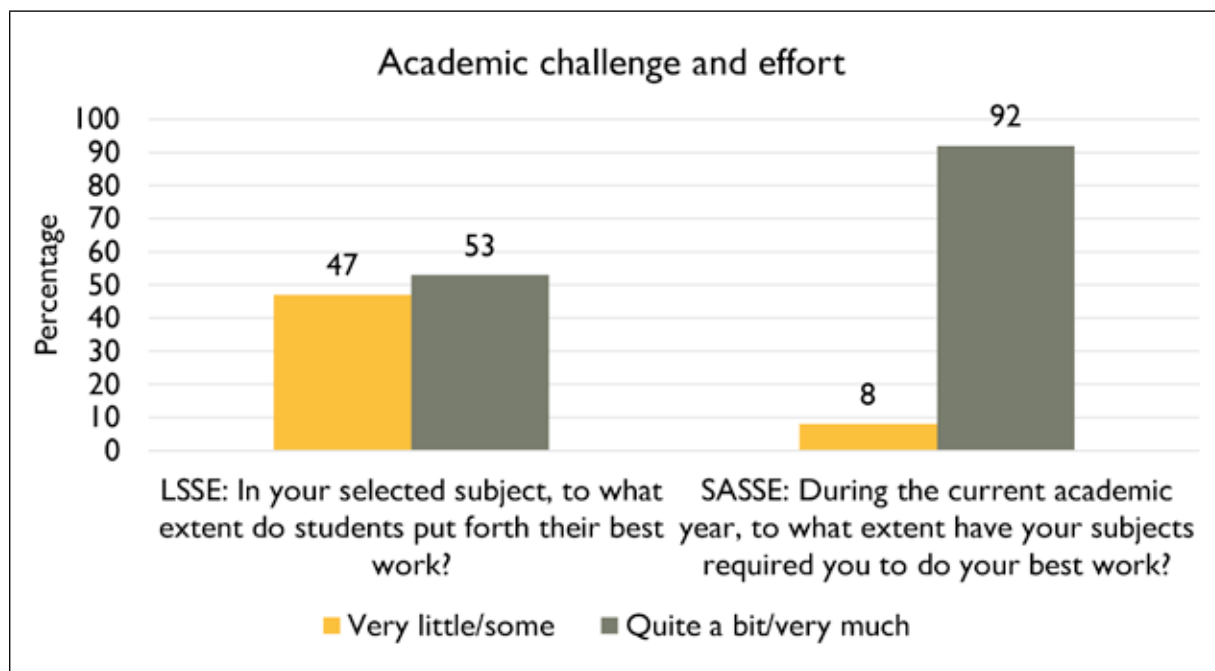
### Enabling quality learning

The concept of a pedagogical relationship, in which the 'becoming' or potential of the student is a priority, has been developed by a range of theorists, among these Canadian scholar Max van Manen (2016, p. 73), who writes:

*"For the young person, the pedagogical relation with the educator is more than a means to an end... [W]hat we received from a great teacher is less a particular body of knowledge or set of skills than the way in which this subject matter was presented or embodied in the person of this teacher and his or her enthusiasm, self-discipline, dedication, personal power, commitment, and so forth".*

Students and lecturers are not always aligned in their perceptions of each other's efforts. By understanding where misalignment takes place in the classroom, universities can put themselves in better positions to support, develop and empower lecturers. This is important not only for their own professional development, but as a means of supporting the development and success of their students.

By comparing the data produced by the SASSE and LSSE surveys, the analyses show specific areas of divergence in perceptions between staff and students. In an attempt to measure perceptions of academic challenge and effort, the SASSE asks undergraduate students the extent to which they feel their subjects have required them to do their best work. In turn, the LSSE asks lecturers to estimate the extent to which their students put forward their best work in a particular module (USAf & CTL, 2018c).



**Figure 8: Students' perception of academic challenge vs lecturers' perception of students' effort**

As seen in Figure 8, the vast majority of students feel that they are doing their best, while only around half of lecturers believe this to be true for their particular modules. It is important to emphasise that the point of these comparisons is to focus on what conversations are needed to effect greater alignment between lecturers and students in order to improve the overall

teaching and learning experience. If lecturers are too negative about students' effort it can create an atmosphere of distrust and disrespect which damages the pedagogical relationship.

**Scaled interventions to create enabling environments**

A key element in the concept of student engagement is the extent to which institutions are creating enabling environments for students to engage in educationally effective behaviours. In other words, how are we designing our institutions for optimal learning and development?

Mounting evidence shows that particular educational practices are positively associated with the development of valued skills and correlate with important educational outcomes, including deep learning and student success (Finley and McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Loots, Kinzie & Oosthuysen, 2017). Increasing opportunities for students to be involved in educational practices that make a significant impact on learning and success – dubbed ‘high-impact’ because they result in desirable outcomes – are vital to help students get the most out of higher education.

SASSE data show that students who have participated in certain high-impact practices (HIPs) show significantly higher mean scores on almost all the engagement indicators. Although this does not indicate a causal relationship, it does imply that students taking part in HIPs are more engaged in other educational experiences (CTL, 2018; 2019a).

As an example, we share the data from four high impact practices at the University of the Free State (UFS). These HIPs include Academic Advising, the Academic Student Tutorial Excellence Programme (A\_STEP), academic literacy courses and UFS101, a first-year seminar course intended to facilitate transition into higher education. Table 1 below shows the number of students that have participated in these scaled HIPs at UFS in 2018.

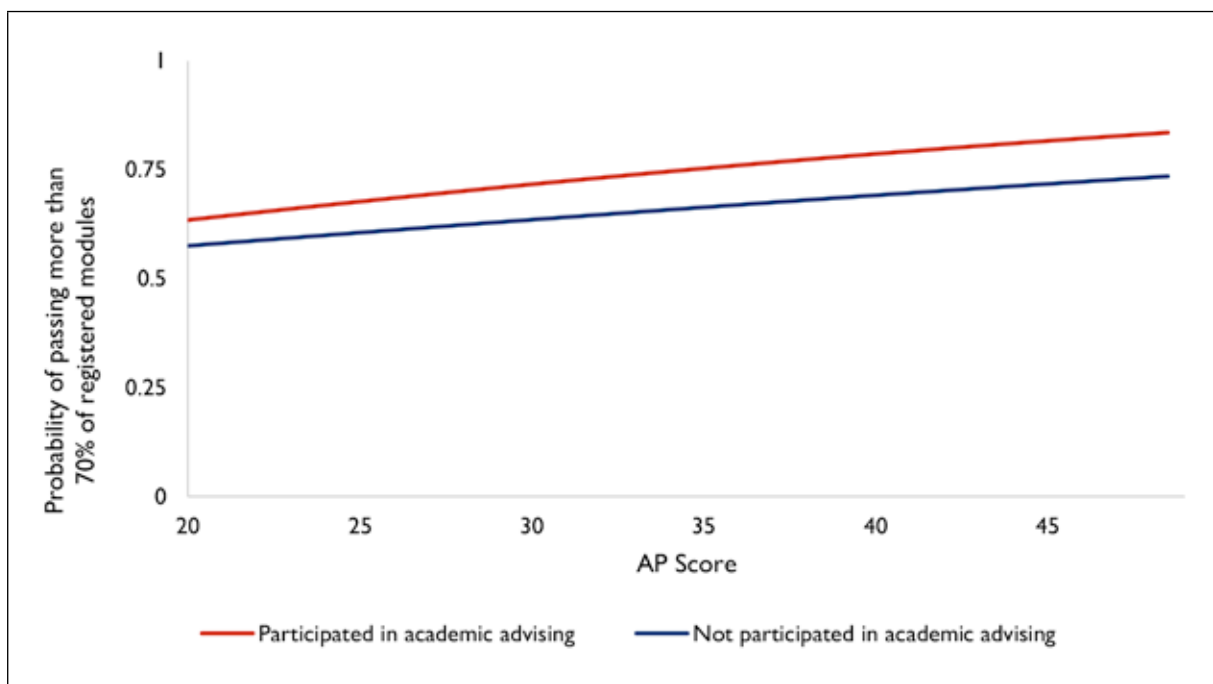
**Table 2: UFS Scaled High Impact Practices in 2018**

High Impact Practice (HIP)	Number of students 2018
UFS101	9,200
A_STEP	10,230
Academic Advising (Face-to-face, group advising and digital platforms)	16,639
Language Development	10,717

## Academic Advising

Academic advising is an ongoing and intentional teaching and learning practice that empowers students in their learning and development process in order for them to explore and align their personal, academic and career goals. As a shared responsibility between the advisor and advisee, advising aims to maximise students' potential by facilitating a conceptual understanding, sharing relevant information, and developing a relationship focused on promoting academic success. The envisaged result is that students have a meaningful academic experience while in higher education and feel a sense of belonging to the institution (Siyaphumelela Advising Work Stream, 2017).

Academic advisors are facilitators of students' success, and as a result, help to retain students. Students who feel connected to an institution, feel cared about, understand their purpose, and have clear academic and career goals, are propelled to persist in their academic endeavours. Academic advisors can thus assist students in the areas of engagement, academic planning, decision-making, and problem resolution.



**Figure 9: Impact of advising on module success rate probability**

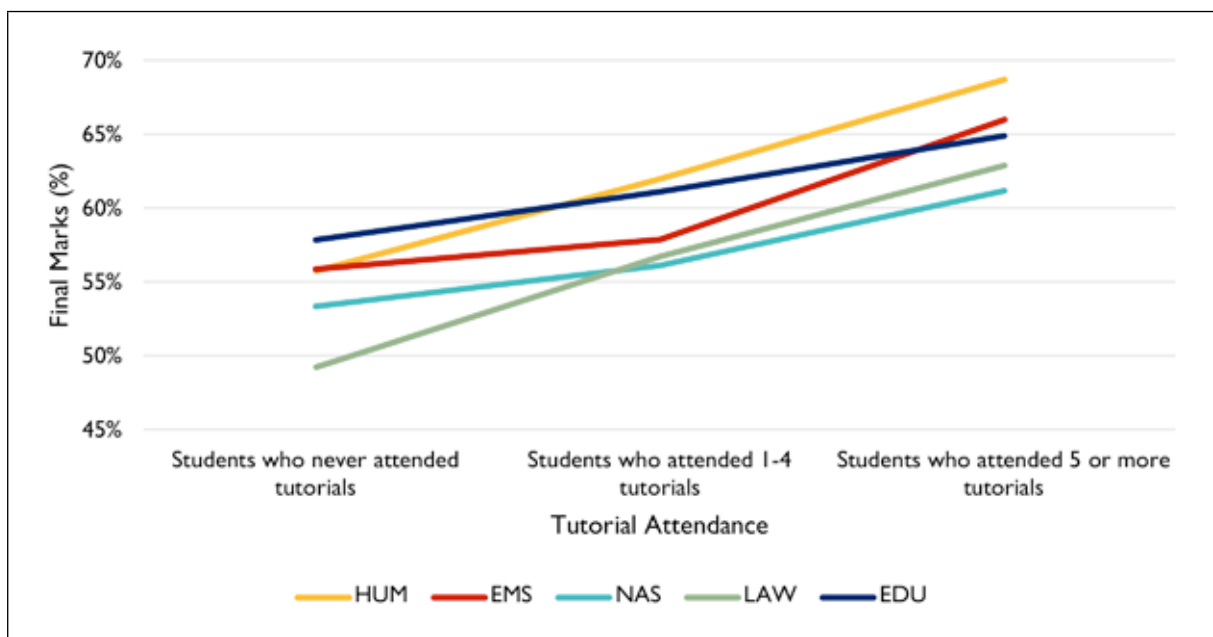
Evidence of the impact of academic advising can be seen in Figure 9, which shows UFS students who receive advising, regardless of their academic potential as expressed through their Admission Point (AP) scores, have a higher pass rate probability than those not engaging in advising. This is the impact of just one advising session (CTL, 2018).



## A\_STEP programme

The A\_STEP programme at UFS is a learning support activity that facilitates student development and academic success through the use of peer-led, small group tutorials. The programme was established in 2007 with 55 tutors in two faculties and has grown to 348 tutors in seven faculties across the Bloemfontein and QwaQwa campuses. A\_STEP is characterised by centralised training, based on internationally benchmarked Supplemental Instruction principles, but is contextualised to meet the unique needs of the UFS and can therefore be considered a hybrid model incorporating small group tutorials. The A\_STEP team has invested in sophisticated analytics to track attendance and performance, a recent report also shows a positive relationship between student engagement and tutorial attendance (CTL, 2019a).

Figure 10 below shows that the more students attend tutorials, the better they do academically. In order to control for bias that it might only be the top students engaging in tutorials, Figure 11 shows that the majority of students who attend tutorials have AP scores between 26 and 31 (CTL, 2019a).



**Figure 10: Means of students' final marks against tutorial attendance**

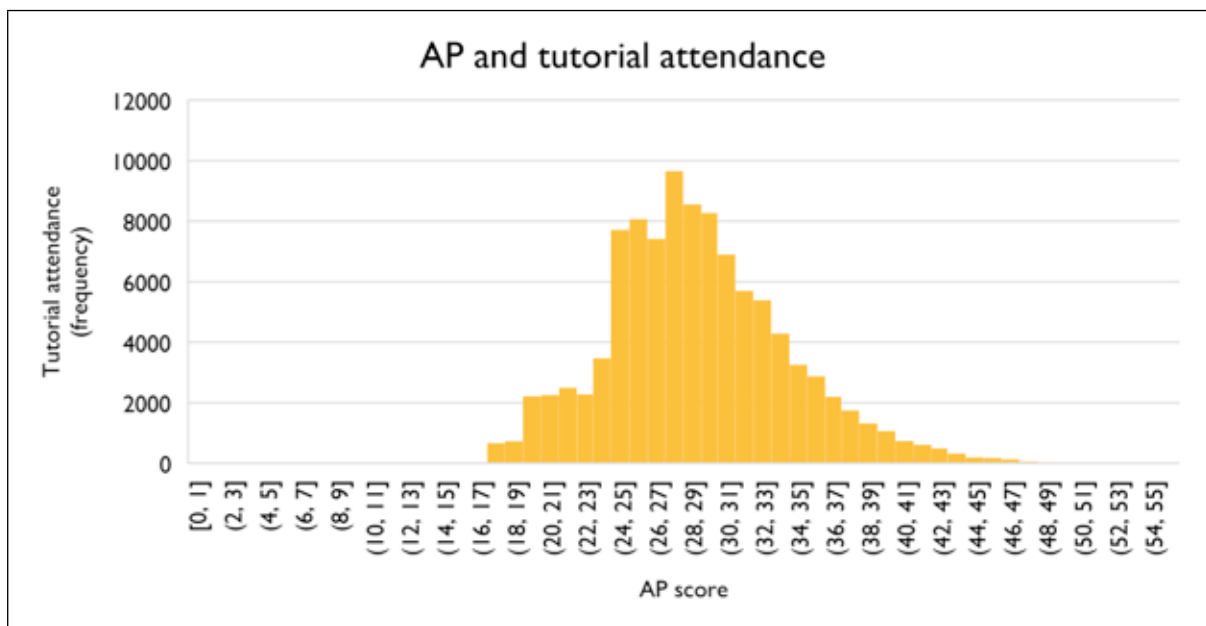


Figure 11: AP scores and frequency of tutorial attendance

### UFS101

UFS101 is a compulsory module aimed at providing support and strategies to assist students to successfully transition into higher education. The focus of the first semester is academic success skills (for example, study reading, time management, goal setting, referencing and plagiarism), while the focus of the second semester is on how students can make the most of their undergraduate studies to prepare for the world of work.

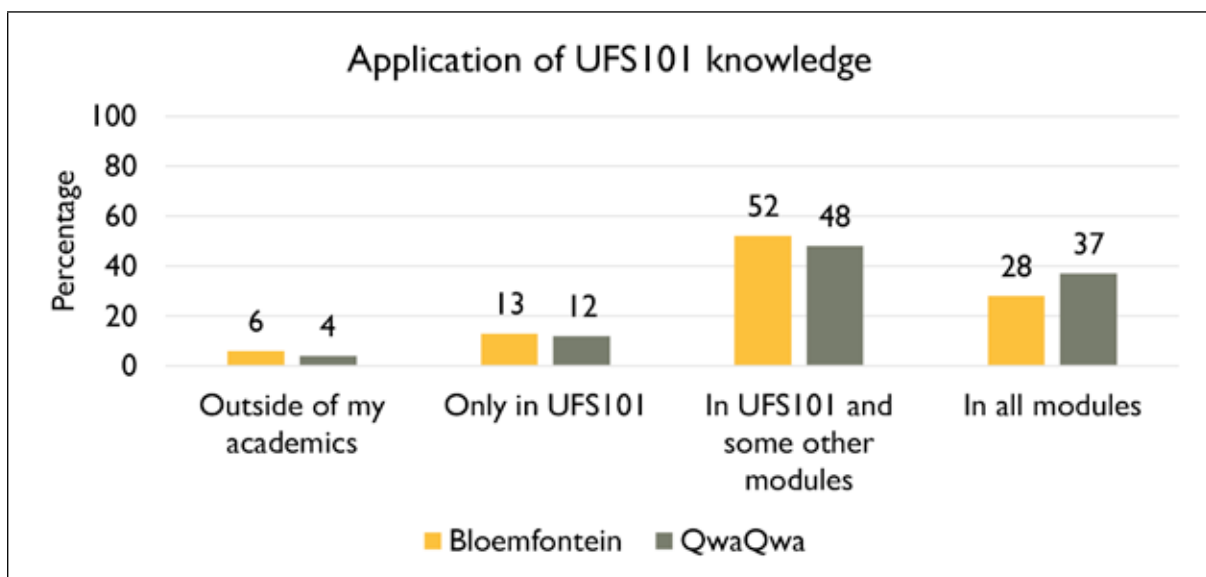


Figure 12: Application of UFS101 outside the module: Campus comparison

Figure 12 shows that almost 90% of students on both QwaQwa and Bloemfontein campuses of the UFS indicated that they apply what they have learnt in- and outside of the UFS101 module

(CTL, 2019b). Approximately half of the students apply the academic success skills they learned to some of their other modules, whilst a further third were able to apply what they learned in all their other modules. The topics that students reported as most valuable are time management, goal setting, referencing and plagiarism, and how university works (CTL, 2019b).

### **Academic literacy development**

Beyond literacy courses, academic development includes the Write Site, which provides students with individual consultation sessions for assignments, and works lecturers to develop customised digital and face-to-face workshops based on specific assignments in courses. These workshops are typically followed by individual consultations at the Write Site, where students receive further support based on their individual writing needs (CTL, 2019b).

At the end of 2018, the Unit for Language Development (ULD) finalised an 18 month-long impact study, which sought to measure the effectiveness of its academic language and literacy provision. The findings of the study showed that the ULD's support provision does indeed have a positive impact on the academic language and literacy abilities of students. One of the assessments, for example, considered the scaffolded writing interventions of the literacy courses in the first and second semester. On average, students' performance on the literacy courses improved by 9% and 10% in the first and second semester respectively. The Write Site's intervention with 291 Law students also yielded significant results. Students who fully participated in the intervention (students submitted an assignment and then completed both an online writing workshop and followed-up with a face-to-face consultation), saw a 32% improvement on average from pre- to post-submission (CTL, 2019b).

### **Conclusion**

In the process of transformation, the South African higher education sector might have neglected the voice of an important role player – the student. This paper attempted to shed some light on one way of including student voices in institutional governance, decisions, and design through presenting data from different student engagement surveys. Taken together, the data sets shared in this paper point to a student population comprising individuals who are the first in their generation to enter into higher education, most of whom are in their early twenties, and struggle financially. We also see that students' expectations are sometimes unrealistic in that the majority expect to perform better academically in their first year at university than they did in high school, and that their perceived well-preparedness would overcome the difficulties they expect to encounter. That said, institutions need to reflect why they are not living up to the expectations of students regarding institutional support.

In a world where data is becoming the new currency, it has never been as important to ensure the responsible use of data. This includes addressing conceptual concerns about what is being measured, as well as responding appropriately to knowledge acquired through data. Regarding the latter, this paper shared examples of how engagement data have influenced the development of HIPs at the UFS, thereby guiding decisions and design according to students' needs. Using student voices through surveys such as the SASSE allow us to identify where interventions could make a significant impact. However, to completely appreciate students' voices in higher education, institutions need to make use of a variety of approaches.

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# Rethinking student engagement for decision-making and governance in an Open and Distance Learning higher education institution in South Africa

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## Abstract

Student engagement is a topical issue of discourse in higher education globally. The relationship between staff and students in higher education institutions has evolved over time from that of masters and their disciples, to that of partnership. In the contemporary world, students in higher education institutions can question, criticise and participate in curriculum development, pedagogy and institutional governance. Literature on this subject overwhelmingly support the notion that student engagement promotes good decision-making and governance in institutions, which, in turn, creates conducive institutional climate for effective teaching and learning, research and community engagement as the core functions of higher education institutions. The paper interrogates this general understanding of the role of student engagement in promoting good institutional decision-making and governance within the context of an open and distance learning higher education institution in South Africa. It is based on a qualitative research conducted at the institution, and which was guided by theories and models, such as the Community of Inquiry (Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2000).

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning, cognitive presence, decision-making, governance, student engagement

## Introduction and background

Globally, there is an understanding that student engagement promotes good decision-making and governance in higher education institutions. Good decision-making and governance creates institutional stability which is a prerequisite for effective teaching and learning. The question that this paper seeks to answer is whether this applies to both contact mode and open and distance learning institutions. It therefore seeks to interrogate these notions with particular reference to an open and distance learning higher education institution in South Africa. Based on a qualitative research study conducted within the institution, the paper contests that these notions are over-generalisations. It presents the findings of the study that

reveal that student engagement is not emphasised at the open and distance higher education institutions and students are not considered important stakeholders, particularly with respect to decision-making and governance. However, the paper also reveals that the demographic profile of students at the institution is changing with increasing cohorts of younger students who demand more interaction with staff in much the same way as it happens in contact mode institutions. This has triggered concomitant changes on how students are perceived. There are already signs that students are increasingly regarded as important stakeholders and clients of the institution. Their voices are starting to be heard at the institution. This is encouraging as the central thesis of the paper is that student engagement promotes creativity in teaching, learning, research, community engagement, and academic citizenship.

### **Conceptual and theoretical framework**

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory (Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2000) provided the guiding framework for the paper and the study on which the paper is based. The CoI is a concept first introduced by early pragmatist philosophers C.S. Peirce & John Dewey, concerning the nature of knowledge formation and the process of scientific inquiry. The community of inquiry is broadly defined as any group of individuals involved in a process of empirical or conceptual inquiry into problematic situations. This concept was novel in its emphasis on the social quality and contingency of knowledge formation in the sciences, contrary to the Cartesian model of science, which assumes a fixed, unchanging reality that is objectively knowable by rational observers. The community of inquiry emphasises that knowledge is necessarily embedded within a social context and, thus, requires intersubjective agreement among those involved in the process of inquiry for legitimacy (Shields, 2003).

When applied to empirical or conceptual inquiry in the fields of education, the CoI is divided into three presences, namely, teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence. With respect to the first one, it is important to note that teaching at the open and distance learning higher education is predominantly on-contact and is supported by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Learning at a distance require committed learners who take the initiative learning independently on their own.

In terms of cognitive presence students are supposed to be mentally prepared to learn at a distance. And as for social presence, students form a community of learning. The social presence reduces the transactional distance. There are student-to-student interaction and student-to-teacher interaction through the distance learning platforms provided.

## The study methodology

This was a descriptive study that employed qualitative research methodology. MacMillan & Schumacher (2014) assert that qualitative research is an accepted methodology for many important questions, with significant contribution to both theory and practice. They further observe that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring about the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in natural settings, sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflectivity of the researcher, and complex description and interpretation of the problem (Creswell, 2007:37).

The specific method employed was that of interviewing participants who were selected using purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is precisely what the name suggests. Members of a sample are chosen with a "purpose" to represent a phenomenon, group, incident, location or type concerning a key criterion (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A key aspect of purposive sampling lies with the criteria used as the basis for sampling (De Vos, 2000). In this regard, those that were selected were those who were believed to be knowledgeable in the subject of inquiry. In total there were ten lecturers, students and administrative support staff selected to participate in the study. The participants were interviewed individually using face-to-face interviews.

Nieuwenhuis (in Kobus et al. 2016:92) defines an interview as a two-way conversation in which the interviewer asks the participant questions to collect data and to learn about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions, and behaviours of the participant. Qualitative interviews aim to see the world through the eyes of the participant, and they can be a valuable source of information, provided they are used correctly. Therefore, the researcher used structured interview questions developed in advance in an interviews guide. The questions controlled the pace of the interview by treating the interview questions in a standardised and straightforward manner (Nieuwenhuis in Kobus et al., 2016:93). The interviews were held in the participant's offices or homes.

As a qualitative study, the collection of data was not guided by the need to have a hypothesis to prove. Instead the data sets were gathered first and then synthesised inductively to generate generalisations. The emphasis was on inductive reasoning. This was a typical case study as case study-research refers to an empirical enquiry about a phenomenon, set within its real-world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are

not clearly evident (Yin, 2009:18). The case, as defined by Miles and Huberman (1994), is a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context.

## **Findings and discussion**

The study found that the open and distance learning higher education institution, that was the focus of the research, occupies an important niche within the higher education landscape in South Africa. Its mission has been to widen access to higher education to those who were not able to access higher education directly from the school system. Currently, it caters for almost a third of higher education student population in South Africa, and thus, the quality of its education has far-reaching implication for the larger society, in particular the economic system. It caters for diverse needs of people in different sectors of the economy, as well as different racial, gender and age cohorts who participate in higher education (Badat, 2005; Rees & Rose-Adams, 2014).

The study revealed that while the institution had widened access, there were challenges regarding engagement of students in the actual teaching and learning process, let alone in decision-making and governance. In the context of distance education, lecturers and students are often located at a distance from each other. Consequently, many students feel isolated owing to their separation from their institution, lecturers and fellow students (Rumble, 2000). There are many students who feel left on their own as the platforms for engagement that the institution has put in place are not accessible to all, or they do not function effectively at all times. Just like elsewhere on the African continent (Basaza, Milman, Wright, 2010; Nyerere, Gavenir & Mse, 2012), South Africa has poor Internet infrastructure and problematic postal services, and these challenges create many difficulties for open and distance learning institutions to engage with their students. Accordingly, Butcher and Rose-Adams (2015) argue that the potential for open distance e-learning (ODeL) remains only partially fulfilled in terms of enabling access to higher education for disadvantaged or excluded groups and that the prevailing focus on technological infrastructures (and the current sector hysteria accompanying 'massive open online courses' is too narrow to meet learner needs.

The study found that, while all along the institution had been enrolling mature students who could not leave their work to study on a full-time basis; there are now some signs that the student demographics are changing, and the institution now enrolls younger students who need to be supported on a full-time basis. This is putting extreme pressure on the institution. On one hand, it is investing huge amounts of capital into developing ICT infrastructure to improve engagement with the tradition open and distance learning students in teaching and learning. On the other hand, the burgeoning youthful full-time student population puts pressure on institutions to engage them not only on improving ICT infrastructure to enhance the distance

learning experience, but on increasing face-to-face contact and support, student funding, accommodation, library services, and other issues that are associated with contact mode universities. Just like their counterparts in contact mode universities, this 'new' group of students at this open and distance learning higher education institution frequently engage in student protests at the various campuses and tuition support centres of the institution. There are increasing concerns about the interruption of university operation by the students at the beginning of every semester. However, a major problem with this kind of interruption is that the students seem to be dissatisfied with the way the institution is governed on a day-to-day basis. To date, there has been little engagement with students to avert the interruption of the institution's operations even though the student body spends more time in the academic year engaging management on the problems pertaining to teaching and learning. The problems that students raise are about fees, free education, student registration processes, due dates for assignments, quality and delivery of study materials, exclusion of students who owe the institution in unpaid fees, student discipline, and student bursary forms, just to mention the recurring issues.

The assignments that are delivered late are sometimes rejected by the assignment section. Postal delays are owing to strikes in the South African Post Office. The students sometimes post and send wrong assignments which are returned to the students unmarked. There are challenges in accessing teaching and learning that students who are in rural areas face. The institution's learning management system is frequently overloaded. The students who are in rural areas do not have Internet connectivity. It is in this regard that students struggle to submit assignments through the learning management system. Students have challenges of converting assignments from Microsoft Word to Pdf to be marked by the Jrouter marking tools. All these issues have a negative impact on teaching and learning if they are left unattended to.

The study found that at the beginning of a term, the Directorate: Regional Services within the institution arranges video conference meetings between module lecturers and tutors in the various tuition support centres. During such meetings the academic lecturers present on academic issues, including the tutorial letter, assignments and preparation for examinations. The aim is to empower the tutors with the requisite knowledge and understanding of issues so that they, in turn, should be able to engage and support students effectively. The lecturers and tutors engage the students and reduce the transactional distance in support of them.

On the concept of student engagement, the study found that the participants understood it differently. Participant 1 defined the concept as follows:

*“Student engagement is a democratic endeavour which seeks to invite students to own higher education institutions and its processes including decision-making rather than being seen only as its clients. However, in the South African context, the popularity of*

*student engagement coincided with protest favour that erupted in universities; thus, student engagement was used as a political tool to win angry students over. The rise of student protests came to be known as #Rhodesmustfall #feesmustfall. Politicians wanted to use some of the student leaders as patrons of the state that will help to normalise the situation on the ground, as it were to quell the revolutionary fires, including acts of arson that became popular at the time. Nonetheless, in and of itself student engagement strikes me as an endeavour to incorporate students' aspirations and imaginations into the day-to-day running of the universities. To do away with the culture of alienations (in which student as disjointed) and disengagement (apathetic). It does this in cultural spaces occupied by students within the institution as well as in learning spaces."*

It is clear that the participant quoted viewed student engagement as more in the realm of governance and politics. This is not an unjustified bias because, as argued in the introduction, globally, the nature of the discourse on student engagement is that it is essential for the creation and maintenance of an institutional climate conducive for effective teaching and learning, research and community engagement. The definition provided by the participants points out the area of student engagement which is lacking or is not adequate at the institution.

The definition of student engagement as provided by participant 2 encompassed teaching and all other activities that aim to create a conducive environment for the core functions of higher education. The participant defined the concept of student engagement as follows:

*"It is the involvement of students and lecturers to create a positive environment for all stakeholders. It involves the active participation of students in learning and teaching and all activities of higher education."*

On the question of the significance of good decision-making and governance to the institution, there was consensus among all participants that these are important in creating an enabling institutional environment where university structures, systems and cultures are objectively aligned, where the necessary practice is informed and attuned to the prevailing policies. This is the environment that promotes excellence in teaching and learning, research and community engagement. They averred that there will always be omissions, oversights, and blind spots in practice, what makes the situation to be normal are decision actions which are guided by a set of principles that promotes a particular necessary cause of action. Higher education must strive to create such functional environments wherein the preceding context to good decision-making is created.

On the follow up question regarding the possible role of students in promoting good decision-making and governance at the institution, the participants made the observation that good

decision-making and governance are, by their nature, consultative and not unilateral processes. Therefore, students as a key constituency within the institution, need to be involved. This means that it is necessary for the institution to engage the students in institutional decision-making and governance. Participant 2 stated as follows:

*"To allow students voices to be heard".*

The student's voices should be heard to allow good decision-making in governance. The students participate in university's structures, namely, departmental, college, senate, council and other structures, but the argument is that this is just for tokenism as the students are not engaged meaningfully in these structures as equal partners. The vision of the institution is about being an African University that shapes futures in service for humanity. It would therefore be expected that African ethos of humanness or ubuntu, equality, inclusiveness and respect for all, young and olds, male or female, student or staff, are not conformed to in the institution. If they were, the students who serve on the governance structures would be listened to just like any other member of those structures, and their submissions would be given equal status as the submissions of other constituencies in the university.

The study found that the challenge of student engagement in the institution related to the age-long traditions of academia which presume that student are blank slates that go to the higher education institutions to fill those blank slates with knowledge and wisdom that are to be acquired from the academic staff. Thus, there is an assumption that students have nothing constructive to contribute to the institutional decision-making processes. This assumption is a major obstacle to meaningful and constructive engagement with students, and explains why when pushed to a corner, institutions resort to tokenism by allowing students to sit in decision-making structures but with no level of influence. Participant 4 thus aptly put is as follows: The question was asked to identify challenges that the student face in engagement with the institutions. Participant 4 said:

*"... In this light, student engagement is perceived as equating the 'aspirant knower' with 'established knower'. Yet the idea is not to dethrone established knowers, but to match an object to be known with the subjective experiences of the 'aspirant knower' (AK). So that, AK would not be disengaged and feel as alienated..."*

The participant raised the importance of consultation between the diverse stakeholders including students. The students are not always consulted in decision-making and this impedes creativity in teaching and learning.

Flowing from the above, some participants expressed the view that the students did not have the ability and capability to engage constructively and meaningfully. They did not understand and were not mature enough to process the complicated matters discussed in the decision-

making structures. As a result, they tended to misrepresent the student body in the governance structures. The training provided to students on effective strategies and rules of engagement is clearly not sufficient. Participant 3 made the following observation:

*“Student leaders may not always be well-equipped to deal with complex matters of governance, even though they may be trained their primary role is to study and adequately equip themselves for labour-markets. It is the interest of the university to ensure that, its students especially those that will become leaders and therefore represent the image of the university are succeeding academically.”*

Student politics was also identified as another challenge. The student leaders and representatives are elected on the tickets of their respective student political formations. When elected into the leadership positions their allegiance is first and foremost to their respective student political formations. Their priority is to advance the political agenda of their respective political formations, and where these are at variance with the interests of the student masses, they are more than willing to sacrifice the latter at the altar of the former. Participant 7 put this challenge more aptly as follows:

*“Student may be opposed to the important milestone the university envisages to attain – politically grandstanding. Often imaginations of the student leadership ‘vary’ with that of the university leadership. Student leadership are driven by populism, they are appointed into the SRC office on the basis of their flaunted radicalism. Such kind adversarial roles may challenge dignified and desirable engagements.”*

The participants' comments promote student engagement as a totality. Even though the participants have diverse views, they understand the value of student engagement in ODL. The participants' views have an element of the ethos of care. Student engagement is seen as a moral concept.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The open and distance learning higher education institution that was the subject to the study reported in this paper plays an important role in widening access to higher education to those that did not have opportunity to pursue higher education directly from the school system. The university has invested huge sums of funds in developing and improving platforms for engaging with students remotely in their educational programmes. There are still challenges in that a significant students are not able to engage the lecturers and tutors using those platforms because of a range of factors which included problems of Internet connectivity and the digital divide, more generally, and the institution's inability to ensure that the platforms are functional at optimum levels at all times.



As the institution is preoccupied with enhancing and improving engagement of students on teaching and learning through the digital platforms, the changing demographic profile of students at the institution poses other challenges of student engagement. The growing youthful cohorts of students demand full-time study with increased contact tuition support, campus accommodation, and all other student services that are normally provided to students at contact mode residential universities. Extending student engagement beyond teaching and learning to also cover these other issues have been fraught with problems. Often the engagements with students have failed to yield expected outcomes, and the students have resorted to protests just like those that the country have witnessed at most contact mode residential public universities over the last five years. These protests have been disruptive to the operations of the institution, including teaching and learning operations. This confirms the notion that failure to engage students in decision-making and governance, can result in the destabilisation of the teaching and learning, and other core function programmes at the universities. It affirms that effective engagement in decision-making and governance contributes to creating a conducive institutional environment for effective teaching and learning, research, community engagement and academic citizenship.

It is recommended that the institution pays special attention to enhancing and improving student engagement more broadly, both in teaching and learning, as well as in decision-making and governance. Token representation of students on decision-making and governance should be avoided at all cost. Instead, students should be afforded opportunity just like other stakeholders, to present their views and be heard without prejudice. The leadership of the university should acknowledge and appreciate that nobody has monopoly over any form of wisdom, and that, if the students are properly trained to understand the complex systems, policies, processes and procedures of the university, they may prove to be valuable in assisting the university to develop decisions that would allow it to respond more effectively to the challenges that it faces.

It is further recommended that students, on their part, should embrace the opportunities provided to them, like sitting on the decision-making and governance structures of the university. These are privileges that should not be bartered for political populism and jostling for positions of influences. The interests of the student masses, not of their respective student political formations, should occupy polar positions in their psyches and consciences. They should guide them in making rational decisions on how to make constructive and meaningful contribution to deliberations in institutional decision-making and governance structures.

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# Revisiting student engagement in a comprehensive public university in South Africa from an Afrocentric point of view

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## Abstract

The paper examines the dynamics of student engagement in a comprehensive public university in South Africa from an Afrocentric point of view. The motivation for doing so is that the bulk of literature on student engagement is based on Eurocentric perspectives; and yet it is common cause that Africa has cultural and value systems that are unique and different from those of Europe. Furthermore, the comprehensive public university that the paper focuses on prides itself as an African university and its mantra is 'Finding Solutions for Africa'. The paper argues that part of finding solutions for Africa should include re-looking at how engagement with students had been undertaken, the successes and failures thereof, and assessing whether the infusion of Afrocentric rules of engagement in the processes cannot lead to better outcomes. The paper also presents an Afrocentric model of student engagement which it recommends to the university to adopt going forward.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, decision-making processes, Eurocentric perspectives, governance, student engagement

## Introduction

The paper is based on an analysis of student engagement processes at the specific comprehensive public university from 2014 to 2019 and the outcomes thereof. The five years between 2014 and 2019 were marked by large scale student protests at the university. The issue at the centre of these protests varied from alleged mismanagement and governance challenges, to quality of teaching and learning at the institution. Commentators have laid into the university, accusing it for not engaging enough with students, and arguing that if there had been student engagement, the protests and their debilitating impact on the institution would have been averted. They have gone further to provide unsolicited advice to the institution to promote student engagement as a way for ensuring that students play a crucial role in the governance of institutions, in knowledge construction, and in clearing the way for their own learning experiences (South African Survey of Student Engagement, 2016), and consequentially, in their development as responsible citizens of South Africa. It is also believed that student

engagement is an effective mechanism for addressing the feelings of 'alienation, marginalization and inequality' (Ejoke, Enwereji & Chukwuere, 2019, p. 68) that students suffer in higher education institutions.

In all fairness to the university, the student protests were not the result of lack of student engagement. The truth is that the protests were a result of failures in the processes of student engagement. The fault was in the process of engagement, and not in the lack of student engagement. Clearly then, the student engagement model adopted by the university had fault lines which limited its success in being the vehicle for bringing university management and students together to resolve disputes before they escalate into conflicts.

The paper argues that the model that the university management used for student management has the hallmarks of Eurocentrism, and therefore the limited success of the student engagement between 2014 and 2019 is centred on the fact the a Eurocentric model could not work effectively in a university that prides itself as an African institution, and whose mission is to find African solutions to African challenges. The university has invested huge sums of money in creating an African learning and teaching, and research environment. Its student body is overwhelmingly African from rural backgrounds, and its staff compliment is also predominantly African, including a sizeable proportion from other African countries. A Eurocentric perspective on anything in the university goes against the traditions and values of the university, and that includes a Eurocentric model of student engagement.

### **Afrocentricity**

In advocating an Afrocentric approach to student engagement, it is vitally important to unpack the term 'Afrocentricity'. Asante (1998) is acknowledged to have coined the term and defined it as 'placing African ideas at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour' (Asante, 1998, p. 2). In his book titled 'The Afrocentric Idea', he argued that 'Eurocentric perspectives, seldom considered the possibilities of other realities or indeed, shared realities of other cultures' (Asante, 1998, p. 2). In simple terms, Afrocentricity and its other derivatives such as Afrocentrism and Afrocentric approach or perspective, mean analysing phenomena from the viewpoint of African value and cultural systems. It is about using the African lenses to examine issues and develop solutions to challenges (Asante, 2003).

Reviere (2001) argues that Afrocentricity theory possesses the capacity to furnish a brand new epistemological and theoretical viewpoint. Afrocentricity can bestow epistemic justice about student engagement, as it is more about unmuting the genuine voices of Africans who have been silenced and marginalised previously (Legodi & Shai, 2019). Afrocentrism recognizes that Africans have their own histories and examples of what it means to be engaged as students in

the academic space. According to Strydom, Basson & Mentz (2012, p.3) student engagement can be described first as 'what students do (the time and energy they devote to educationally purposive activities) and second, what institutions do (the extent to which they employ effective educational practices to induce students to do the right things)'

It is important to note that, even the Eurocentric literature on student engagement concedes that student engagement changes when the object of engagement changes (Ashwin, 2015, p. 344). The common objects of student's engagement, as discussed in the Eurocentric literature include teaching and learning processes, scholarship of teaching and learning, quality enhancement processes, decision-making processes and in learning communities (Healey et al., 2014; The Student Engagement Partnership, 2014; Trowler, 2010). The Eurocentric model of student engagement is designed to find solutions to such issues. However, in Africa, and in South Africa, in particular, in addition to the issues above, there are others that include financial exclusion, gender-based violence, shortage of accommodation, hunger on campuses, poor student administration, corruption, and so on. This latter list of issues that are predominantly unique to Africa cannot be addressed fully and effectively with a model of engagement that is not based on such. Coates & McCormick (2014); Kuh (2009), Trowler (2010) who have contributed significantly to the Eurocentric literature on student engagement acknowledge that the bulk of knowledge on student engagement is confined to student engagement in learning activities, in the development of curricula, in quality assurance processes, and in institutional governance. It is not about engaging students to address shortage of student accommodation on campuses, or to find solutions to financial exclusions or student hunger on campuses.

Surprisingly, the Eurocentric literature on student engagement claims that the goal of student engagement should be understood at all costs to improve students' experiences in supplementing their learning net results as well as the all-inclusive reputation and performance of their appropriate institutions of higher learning and also stimulate them maturing towards active citizens (Trowler & Trowler, 2011). The contradiction is simply glaring as the goal of student engagement as articulated above is extremely wide, and yet the advocated approach is narrow. The university itself has bought into this approach, without realising its narrow focus in relation to the wide scope of expected outcomes. In explaining its principles on student engagement, the institution said it placed emphasis on inclusivity and the creation of a conducive environment where management, staff, academics and students could engage in discourse, on issues of academia, welfare-related problems and student governance.

An Afrocentric model to student engagement would broaden the scope beyond teaching and learning processes, scholarship of teaching and learning, quality enhancement processes, decision-making processes and in learning communities; to include financial exclusion,

gender-based violence, shortage of accommodation, hunger on campuses, poor student administration and corruption.

### **Study methodology**

The bulk of the study on which this paper is based was conceptual in nature and therefore depended on literature survey. The information obtained through literature survey was supplemented and complimented by information obtained through interviews of 8 individuals within the comprehensive public university. Of the 8 individuals, 2 were postgraduate students, 1 was a lecturer, 2 were current members of the institutional SRC, 1 was a former member of the institutional SRC, 1 undergraduate class representative, and 1 ordinary undergraduate student at the same institution. These were selected using convenience sampling decision rules. They were interviewed separately focusing on their understanding of what it means to be engaged, what the university can do to enhance their engagement, successes and failures of the model of engagement employed by the university, and understanding of an Afrocentric model of students engagement, including the strengths and weaknesses of the model. The interviews also sought information on the respondents' understanding student realities within their socio-historical context, and how this could contribute towards ensuring that students were fully engaged in institutional practices and processes. The information was obtained through the interviews and was analysed qualitatively using methods such as those described in detail by Scott & Morrison (2006).

### **Findings and discussion**

The study found that at this particular comprehensive public university, students play a critical role in the renewal and transformation of curriculum. Schools have student councils comprising student representatives whose responsibility is to represent the interests of students in curricula renewal and transformation, as well as in other academic-related matters. As regards academic matters, indeed students 'voice' their opinions to some extent (UL QEP Phase 2 Report, 2017, p.16). This implies that students do interact with the designers and the developers of the curricula. Similarly, members of the institutional SRC serve on the Senate Academic Planning Committee where academic matters are decided, and changes to the curricula are approved. SRC members also formed part of the approval processes of curricula in teaching and learning programmes (UL QEP Phase 2 Report, 2017). This demonstrates that student engagement, as far as the curricula and other purely academic matters are concerned, is routinely undertaken at the university. However, it is important to note that students are not represented at the Boards of Faculties, the Executive Committee of Convocation, Committees of Council, Committees of the Senate, and Committees of the Institutional Forum. Yet it is in these committees that issues that concern students are discussed, and recommendations

made to Management, Senate and Council. Procedurally, recommendations that emanate from the committees are hardly rejected by Management, Senate or Council, and thus, even though some members of the institutional SRC sit in Senate and Council, their contributions hardly sway decisions away from the recommendations of the committees which function without student representation.

Student engagement at the comprehensive public university is not about issues beyond the classroom. The assumption is that students are students just in the classroom, and when they are out of the classroom, they are no more students. Thus, in issues about student health, accommodation, food and nutrition, safety and security, gender-based violence, finance and other socio-economic conditions, are rarely part of the student engagement agenda at the university. At best, students are just informed of decisions that have been made, even though those decisions affect them. The alternative model that this paper advocates requires that students are recognised as active stakeholders within university governance structures. Informed advice of students advances the quality, transparency, and accountability of decision-making processes, and leads to the development of a broad set of skills for students in leadership positions. The formal Afrocentric student engagement approach should go beyond consulting students on decisions which have already been made. Instead, it calls for the entire decision-making process to be extensively participatory. Students should be part and parcel of the processes of developing the university's vision, mission, policies, and values, and students should be invited to contribute to the development of the strategic direction of the university (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Carey, 2013).

The Afrocentric student engagement requires formalised processes for the fair and transparent appointment and/or election of students to institutional committees and clear policies on their roles and responsibilities (Kahu, 2013). Student representatives, with full voting rights, should serve on strategy-setting management boards, on policy-making, and operational curriculum committees. Through such platforms, students are involved actively in decisions pertaining to teaching, learning, assessment, faculty appointments, or fiscal planning, student welfare, campus security issues, and community engagement activities.

The study revealed that the approach to student engagement adopted by the university management is along the lines of a corporate that seeks opinions of its clientele but with no obligation to make use of the feedback; and calls its employees to inform decisions that were taken without their involvement. The situation is a clear manifestation of the managerialism in public universities. Their accountability is to the funders but not to the students or the surrounding communities. On the other hand, an Afrocentric mode of student engagement requires that the students are recognised as a key constituency of the university, and that no decision is taken without their involvement. It also needs that the university understands the socio-



economic context of the students, and this means understanding and appreciating the communities around. The university becomes accountable to the students and the communities. Thus, an Afrocentric approach to student engagement would require that community leaders who the students respect and look up to, become part of the process either as advisors or as facilitators.

A university that adopts the Afrocentric mode of student engagement would embrace the notion of community engagement as the 'third mission', at par with teaching and learning, and research. Community engagement engenders mutual and collaborative processes of knowledge exchange between the universities and communities, with a strong emphasis on establishing partnerships around such processes (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). The university needs to develop an understanding of the potential that community engagement holds for transforming higher education in relation to societal needs, and for producing graduates with a sense of civic responsibility and an ability to apply the theory of their disciplines to local development issues' (Bender, 2008). Some of the knowledge that a university can gain from community engagement is about the cultural values that are upheld by everyone in those communities. Building any engagement with students on the foundation of those cultural values can always lead to good rapport between management and students, leading to consensus and less divergence on issues. Unfortunately, at this specific comprehensive public university, the community engagement programme is not that active.

The Afrocentric mode of engagement requires that the management of the university adopts the key African leadership characteristics that create a special bond between themselves and their subjects. It is argued that if there were such special bond between university management and students, their engagement would be constructive and mutually beneficial. Ngambi (2004) discusses the characteristics of African leadership which include the need to inspire a shared vision. African leaders have dreams or visions, that all members find resonance with and relate to. African leaders acknowledge that leadership is a dialogue, and not a monologue, and engagement with the subjects is *sine qua non*.

African leaders also create disciples, not followers, through trust, integrity and dependability. They lead by example while sharing responsibility and accountability by encouraging participation in decision-making as well as in the implementation of those decisions. African leaders are also excellent listeners and take the cue on issues from the communities they lead. They also creatively handle challenges and disappointments, and thus maintain peace and stability even in times of adversity. If university leaders adopted the African leadership principles, they would be engaging students in more meaningful and constructive ways, and violent student protests would have no place in the institutions because there would be no triggers for them.

## Conclusion and recommendation

Several universities in South Africa state in their vision or mission statements either that they are African universities or that they aim to contribute to providing solutions to developmental and other socio-economic development challenges facing the African continent. However, a closer look at their learning and research programmes reveals that these are still heavily Eurocentric. Even in the realm of student engagement, they employ Eurocentric approaches which fail to understand the underlying causes of the issue's students bring to the table for engagement with management. Not surprising therefore, student engagement across public universities in South Africa have not yielded positive outcomes. At the comprehensive public university that was the focus of this paper, student engagement initiatives between 2014 and 2019 have had very limited success resulting in students making themselves heard through violent student protests that caused much destruction of the facilities and infrastructure at the university.

Incorporating the Afrocentricity theory in teaching and learning is a means through which students are recognised as co-creators of knowledge as they enrich the learning experience through their histories and local knowledge. And with reference to management and governance, students do recognise the power relations that exist in these spaces; however, students have a role to play as the stakeholders of higher education and therefore should be included in the deliberative processes at all levels.

The recommendation is that universities in South Africa which have predominantly African students and staff should adopt an Afrocentric mode of student engagement to increase chances of success in resolving issues amicably without pushing students to the point where they feel the only way to be listened to is to engage in violent protests. University leaders should take lessons from traditional leaders and adopt African leadership characteristics and use them in the engagement with students. Doing so would require them to be close to the communities where the students hail from. One important way of ensuring that closeness is by reinvigorating the community engagement programme of the universities. South African universities have, with no exception, embraced the three 'mission' structure of their core functions, with community engagement as the 'third mission'. The majority of them have couched community engagement within the context of transformation, and they take it as a core medium for the advancement of social responsibility and redress. However, not many of them are pursuing community engagement with the same level of intensity as the other two core 'missions' of the universities, namely teaching and learning, and research. It is high time universities reconsidered their stance on community engagement.

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# Push-pull dynamics in student engagement for decision-making: the case of Academic Administration at a public university in South Africa

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## Abstract

Globally, there are ongoing discourses on engagement with student leadership in higher education institutions regarding good governance. This paper reports about the engagements between the Academic Administration (AA) Unit of a public university and the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the institution. The report is based on a study whose purpose was to reflect on past engagements with the SRC to assess if these indeed led to good governance at the institution. A qualitative method was employed which focused on gaining in-depth direct input from six participants, over three study periods, on how they experienced AA-SRC Academic Administration engagements. The findings of the study revealed that the student leaders found the AA-SRC engagements very fruitful as these lent a voice to them and their constituency. However, as such engagements were only between the AA-SRC and did not include other critical support functions such as Finance, their contribution towards good governance within the broader institution was limited. The paper therefore recommends such engagements to be extended across all support functions within the university.

**Keywords:** Academic administration, decision-making, governance, higher education, engagement

## Introduction

In the South African context, the Student Representative Councils (SRCs) are statutory structures, as their existence is provided for by section 35 of the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997, as amended (Department of Education, 1997). SRCs have jurisdiction over students' matters; and represent students on institutional structures such as School Boards, Faculty Boards, Senate and University Councils. Ntsala & Mahlatji (2018) explain the SRC play significant role in the governance of a university. These roles include serving as a link between the student body and the university management; ensuring success of student affairs on campuses; understanding the needs and challenges facing students they represent; and coordinating

the formation and operations of students' organisations, societies and clubs in order to enhance the university environment for students.

Ntsala & Mahlantji (2018) cite Klemenčič (2014), Klemenčič, Luescher & Mugume (2016), & Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume (2014), stating that members of the SRC have to execute their duties in accordance with the provisions of the SRC constitution, a written enactment of the will of the student body. Such a constitution also provides for a less chaotic and non-confrontational manner of addressing disagreements, by development of policy and practice within students' governance (Bonakele, Mxenge, Thabakgale, & Tabane, 2003: 7 in Ntsala & Mahlantji, 2018).

According to Kahu & Nelson (2017) student engagement in higher education refers to the degree of involvement, attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show, to learn and progress in their education. The level of such engagement in higher education is seen as crucial towards collaborative decision-making at the level of an institution. However, key considerations are about who makes the decisions, for what purpose, and the criteria to determine if the decision is good for the institution, or if it is consistent with the relevant national regulatory frameworks. This paper seeks to focus on these considerations using the findings of a study conducted to reflect on past engagements between the Academic Administration (AA) Unit and the SRC in a public university. The overall aim was to assess if these engagements led to good governance at the institution. It is important at this stage to appreciate that good governance is viewed from a myriad of perspectives, depending on the lens of the viewer. Irrespective of how it is viewed, good governance of an institution should result in the creation of a stable institutional environment that is conducive to the undertaking of the core functions of teaching and learning, research and engaged scholarship.

Recent student movements and campaigns such as the #FeesMustFall; #fromNSFAS to my pocket and #mybodyismybody, have drawn attention to the need to revisit institutions' understanding and practices of student engagement towards good governance. Key support institutional functions that are the coal face of engagement with students include the AA, Finance, Student Residences, Sports and Recreation and the Library Service. However, the AA, which include Applications, Admissions and Registration, Examinations and Graduations, is clearly the gateway to the university, and therefore it is always at the frontline. It is for this reason that the AA Unit in the institution where the study was undertaken took a decision to be more proactive and consultative in the engagement with students through the SRC.

The key contention in the paper is that engagement with student leaders continues to be a learning curve, with push-pull factors that determine the direction in which further engagements is likely to go. In the process the AA staff learn more about what the student body needs and respond accordingly, and the student leaders get to learn how the AA system operates.

## Conceptual and theoretical framework

The study reported in this paper, and the interpretation of its findings, were guided by Representative Democracy Model (Perkin 2006; Bukaliya & Rupande, 2012; Ntsala & Malatji, 2018). This is a model that calls for democracy based on elected representatives of the masses. In universities, the model frames the formation of its SRCs. This involves elections in which students vote for the individuals or student formations that they would like to see represent them on the SRC (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2012). The build-up to the election is characterized by canvassing among the student masses. At the public university where this study was undertaken, parent political organizations sometimes visit the institution to assist in canvassing for votes for their respective student formations. The main student formations at the institution are the Economic Freedom Fighters Students Command (EFFSCO), the Pan Africans Student Movement of Azania (PASMA), the South African Student Congress Organisation (SASCO) and the Democratic Alliance Student Organisation (DASO).

The actual engagement with the student leadership was based on the direct engagement theory espoused by Jonker (2013). This theory suggests that parties should engage in a manner that involves information-sharing. The premise of this theory is that for successful engagement, all stakeholders need to approach the engagement to establish a common understanding of processes in order to reach an amicable solution. The lesson learnt from this theory was the AA and the SRC to approach their weekly or daily engagements with open minds to influence each other, rather than to outdo each other. It was often realised that at the beginning of tenure or term of each SRC that the academic officers approached engagements with a limited scope of understanding of the university rules, processes and procedures. Similarly, in some situations the AA approached the engagements with a limited understanding of the concerns and frustrations of the students. It was thus vital that both parties had to educate of their standpoints giving rise to van Jonker (2013) refers to as a give and take modus of engagement. The Direct Engagement theory suggests that power dynamics are worst enemies of good governance engagement, and if either party approaches an engagement with an "I should win" attitude, there are likely to be resentments, mistrust and no hope for fruitful engagement in the future.

## The study methodology

The aim of the study on which this paper is based was to gain an understanding of the extent to which the engagement between AA and SRC Academic Officers contributed to good institutional decision-making, and ultimately good institutional governance.

The study conducted in a public university South Africa focusing on six SRC Academic Officers from 2016 to 2018, two from each year. A case study research design was used to source the

opinions of the participants on their engagement with the AA within their expected roles of serving their constituency. The case study allowed the phenomena under study to be described, explored and narrated to get quality embedded in processes, meanings, experiences, words and expressions of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2010).

The convenience sampling strategy was employed to select the six participants because the AA only interacts with two SRC Academic officers each year, so they became the obvious sample in each of the three years of study. Data was collected through in-depth, open-ended, unstructured interviews over a thirty-six months period. Each interview took about half an hour and was conducted in both isiXhosa language (the home language of the participants) and English, depending on the preference. This study adopted qualitative data analysis in the form of content thematic analysis (Creswell, 2018).

### **Study findings and discussions**

Following transcriptions of the interview responses, the information was coded and analysed using Denzin & Lincoln's (2010) list of five steps of analysing qualitative data. From the analysis, the findings were discussed in a reflective manner. The following paragraphs present the discussion of the key findings.

It is vitally important to engage with student leaders for the purpose of good decision governance leading to good institutional governance. The study established that student leaders were well-positioned to ensure that the student body understood the policies, strategies and operations of the AA. Once they got to understand the systems, policies, processes and procedures, they were better able to communicate to the rest of the student body what was permissible and what was not permissible. The study found that the SRC leaders were great influencers, particularly to their party followers, thus they were very effective in communicating consistently to the rest of the student body. Engaging with them promoted managerialism for a 'representative democracy' (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010), and good governance decision-making in university operations and strategy towards institutional growth (Smith, 2018).

The study further revealed that the AA-SRC engagements were very helpful in keeping students informed about developments in the AA Unit (Bonakele et al, 2003); fostering good relationships between students and Academic Administration staff (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014); and keeping the AA staff informed about challenges that the university students faced (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014).

The study found that the SRC at the institution operated according to the dictates of the political radicalist perspective (Severino, 2011). This is the most popular perspective adopted



by most universities in South Africa, particularly in response to the needs of transformation. According to this perspective, all students are considered an internal politically significant constituency of the university (Gqeba 2018; Boland, 2013; SRC Manifestos, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). It calls for formal structures for communication and negotiation with student leaders to reduce disruptive student political activism on campus (Nkomo et al, 2013). At the same time, it is important to balance such peacekeeping with a positive student engagement and participation towards positive decision-making.

The political radicalism perspective is a good perspective to govern engagement with students, particularly with respect to AA. As much as AA policies, rules, processes and procedures are in place at the institution, the nature of AA support services demands constant engagement with students because individual students or groups of students have different expectations of, and experience with the AA services (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). For example, when asked about AA issues that students mostly need assistance with, interviewed students provided a long list that included exclusions, refusal of registration due to study permits and finance, congested teaching and examination time tables, clashes on teaching and examination time tables, tight registration and application deadlines, errors in recording of marks on ITS, limited accessibility of facilities to disabled students, and due performance (DP) requirements not generated by Faculties to allow students to sit for final examinations.

While the political radicalism perspective has been used to good effect at the university where the study was conducted, it is not without its critics. For instance, Kahu & Nelson (2017), argue that co-optation of students onto university committees is viewed with misgiving by some, especially given the history of South Africa whose higher education landscape was exclusionist (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). It is still a challenge for academics to listen to and engage with students on matters viewed as "adult or senior". Similarly, when asked about their experiences in various university committees, the respondents in this study complained that they were normally given very limited time to talk; their reports were discussed towards the end of meetings, or not read at all when the time for the meetings runs out; the contributions to discussions were usually cut short; and their opinions were sometimes trivialized and referred to the Faculties.

Another shortcoming of radical political perspective and the Representative Democracy Model (RDM) is that the students who serve on SRCs do so at the behest of their respective student political formations. They are not directly answerable to the student masses, but perhaps only to those who belong to their respective student formations. Where the SRCs comprise members of different student political formations, they engage in internal competitive behaviour and do not pull together into one direction. In such situations, no individual SRC representative engages and negotiates as mandated by the SRC, but rather as mandated by their respective student political formations. Such situations are very tricky to institutions

particularly when the different student political formations have different agendas, or different positions on the same issues. The student leaders who took part in the study confirmed these tendencies as they reported that there is competition among the members of the SRC from different student political formations. Some engage in bad faith to discredit others and make them appear weak or as 'sell-outs' so that they lose votes at the next SRC elections.

The AA Unit, in its engagement with the Academic Officers of the SRC took the power dynamics alluded to above into serious consideration. It took a principled stand to be consistent and not to be biased in favour of any student political formation or formations as this goes against the grain of good governance.

The study also found that it was not useful to be rigidly tied up to radical political perspective. It rather discovered that some circumstances dictate that other perspectives are brought into consideration, particularly the consumerist perspective as formulated by Luescher-Mamashela (2010), and the communitarian perspective advanced by Boland (2013). The consumerist perspective maintains that as consumers of university services, students have a right to participate in making institutional decision-making and governance (Menon in Meyer, 2011). This is, to some degree, consistent with the political radicalist perspective discussed above, but its approach is service-based and does not employ radical approaches to bring about desired changes. The main point of reference of this perspective is that students have rights that are enshrined in and protected by the Constitution. While it is acknowledged that students should engage with the view to ensure that their rights to university support services are respected and protected, it is important to remember that rights and responsibilities go together. In this study, it was found that sometimes students overemphasized and overstretched their rights while being oblivious to their responsibilities to the university. For instance, they have a right to demonstrated and protest while upholding their responsibility not to damage university facilities. Similarly, students have rights to education, but this right goes with the responsibility to abide by the etiquettes and other rules of the institution, including the rule to ban walk-in applications for admission and registration.

A shocking finding from the study was that while striving for their rights, the students also trample on rights of other students and/or staff. It was found, for instance, that the right to dignity for female students and staff, was often trampled on by male students and SRC leadership. The expectation was that female officers in AA Unit would be soft to engage with and be prepared to relax the rules particularly as it pertained to male students. The respondents confirmed that students have more confidence in male student leaders and staff as compared to female student leaders and staff.

The communitarian perspective advanced by Boland (2013) emphasises that there is always a connection between the individual and the community. In the case of the study reported in

his paper, the belief would be that there is a great connection between university students and the communities surrounding the campuses of the institution. This philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely moulded by community relationships, with less development being placed on individualism (Nongxa, 2015). It is for this reason that community engagement is an integral part of the core functions of universities. Unfortunately, the importance of community engagement seems to be lost to most students, including those in the SRCs. This was clear in the answers provided by the student leaders some of which emphasized that they were there to serve students not the wider communities, that participation in community engagement would take them away from 'academic work', and that there was no time to get involved in community issues. Thus, the AA Unit's engagement with the SRC to be involved in voluntary career teaching support activities in the surrounding schools, and in student recruitment drives in surrounding communities, did not yield positive results. Based on these type responses, it became clear that the communal perspective was not suitable as a framework for engagement with the SRC at the university.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Engagement with the SRC is very vital because it has the potential to develop socially constructive critical citizens (Mashiya, 2016). For such noble outcome to be realised, there should be constant engagement, resources and accountability on all sides. The political radicalism perspective coupled with the Representative Democracy Model, provide good guidance on how these could be undertaken. It is important to adopt a broader sense of engagement and not operate on assumptions. That way, it possible to ensure that students' rights are recognized as far as service provision is concerned as called for by the consumerist perspective, which maintains that as consumers of university services, students have a right to participate in making institutional decision-making and governance (Menon in Meyer, 2018).

One key lesson learn from the findings of the study is that most of the grievances of students are genuine and their frustrations cannot just be dismissed as those of spoiled youth. Universities need to use engagements with students to learn about these grievances and frustrations; and be responsive to them by improving their service offerings. The AA at the university where the study was conducted, for instance, used feedback from the engagements with the SRC to streamline processes as much as possible.

The findings also underscore the importance of accountability on the sides of both the student leaders and their engagement partners from the university administration. In fact, for student engagement to be effective, there should be accountability on all sides.

The AA Unit at the university where the study was conducted has gained so much from engagement with the student leaders. Unfortunately, this not happening across all support functions in the university. Thus, its contribution to ensuring stability and good governance across the institution is very limited. Chances to influence the other support functions to also engage with students in a similar fashion are also minimal because all these functions operate in silos with limited interactions, cross pollination of ideas and sharing of practices.

The main recommendation emerging from this paper is that support functions in universities need to open up more collegial and structured engagements with the SRC leaders. Such engagements should be based on structured institutional governance guidelines. It is also important to ensure that support function policies, processes and procedures are updated as to eliminate confusions when engaging with students on them.

Another recommendation is that, while it is vital to be firm when engaging with the students, a give and take approach would assist in such engagements. This is supported by the direct engagement theory espoused by van Jonker (2013), which suggests that power dynamics are worst enemies of good governance engagement, and if either party approaches an engagement with an "I should win" attitude, there are likely to be resentments, mistrust and no hope for fruitful engagement in the future.

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# Student-staff relationships that compromise academic integrity

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## Abstract

Interaction between students and academic staff at universities is an essential component of the learning environment in higher education. However, this interaction is often governed by rules and etiquettes so that it is both professional and transparent. Although the rules and etiquette of this relationship may be clearly defined in the codes of conduct and policies of higher education institutions, these are sometimes flouted. The aim of this paper is to explore the threats to academic integrity posed by the flouting of the rules and etiquette that govern this relationship, which is what is implied by illicit student-staff relationships. The paper will highlight what characterises illicit student-staff relationships and how these kinds of relationships affect, and subsequently threaten, academic integrity.

The most prevalent student-staff relationships are characterised by a student benefitting from a relationship that goes beyond the perceived healthy student-lecturer relationship. Other instances entail the lecturer abusing power to solicit sexual favours from students by imposing fear of failure of a module or course. Such practices lead to students graduating without justly meeting the necessary minimum academic requirements and standards of a qualification, and the quality of the qualification is compromised in this way. Illicit relationships within a higher education institution are not confined to student and lecturer but may extend to other staff within the institution. In a study conducted to determine the nature of relationships between students and lectures and their implication on academic integrity, it was found that most of the public universities in question have guidelines and rule books in place that talk to student-staff relationships within the university, but it is evident that these do not always achieve the desired outcome. The prevailing challenge is that the policy interventions are not enough to restrict illicit student-staff relationships that have become rife in a competitive academic world.

**Keywords:** Academic integrity, illicit student-staff relationships, rules and etiquette, standards, qualification, higher education institutions

## Introduction

Teaching, learning and research are, by their nature interactive, cooperative and participatory activities. Therefore, interaction between students and staff is an integral part of the core business of higher education. However, constructive interaction between students and staff should take place within the parameters of the core values of academic integrity. These core values are honesty, respect, trust, fairness, responsibility and courage (ICAI, c2014). These six core values, as well as the courage to act on them even in the face of adversity, are truly foundational to academic integrity. Regrettably, these values have been ruptured in a number of public universities in South Africa through illicit student-staff relationships, which pose a greater threat to academic integrity.

The purpose of this paper is to advocate and promote academic integrity within higher education institutions. It calls for setting up systems and processes within higher education institution to internally deal with matters of illicit student-staff relationships with sensitivity and confidentiality. These would include clearly stipulated rules or codes of conduct to govern good working relationships between students and staff. In other words, higher education institutions should develop etiquette to govern interactions between students and staff.

Etiquette broadly refers to the customary code of polite behaviour in a society (Oxford South African Concise Dictionary, 2010). In the workplace, etiquette refers to a way of being that respects other people's physical space; the way of communication, both verbally and written; and the way people interact and engage in interpersonal relations.

## Academic integrity versus academic dishonesty

Integrity is crucial in the scholarly world as it pertains to the quality of having strong moral principles (The Dictionary Unit for South African English, 2010) and honesty (Macfarlane, Zhang & Pun, 2014). Academic integrity is thus fundamental in higher education since education itself is a public good (Denisova-Schmidt, 2018) that has benefits for the individual and society at large (Vila, 2000). It is essential that higher education institutions should set, as one of their goals, the promotion of academic integrity through teaching and learning, research and community engagement or engaged scholarship. However, much as they would strive to do so, it is sometimes the case that corruption infiltrates these institutions to undermine academic integrity. Transparency International (c2018) defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain". Denisova-Schmidt (2018) explicitly equates breach of academic integrity in the higher education to corruption, and further explains that corruption manifest itself in different ways, one of which is bribery. He defines bribery as:



*"The offering, promising, giving, accepting, or soliciting of an advantage as an inducement for an action that is illegal, unethical, or a breach of trust. Inducements can take the form of gifts, loans, fees, rewards, or other advantages (taxes, services, donations, etc.)" (Denisova-Schmidt 2018: 63).*

This paper contends that illicit student-staff relationships in higher education institutions is bribery as it fits the definition of the word provided by Denisova-Schmidt (2018). This is because the illicit student-staff relationships are based on the flouting of the rules and etiquette of decency, fairness and positive power relations. It is a form of corruption or bribery, instigated by either one of the parties and then perpetuated by the other when they consent to the offer. The common manifestation of it is a staff member promising, offering and awarding good grades to an underserving student in exchange for a sexual favour. On the other hand, a student may also, initiate the corruption or bribery by making suggestive advances or gesturing to the staff member that she or he is willing to provide some favours in exchange for good grades or advancement in the academic programme. In both instances, the individual who assents to the unethical behaviour is as liable as the instigator, and both are responsible for compromising the cause of academic integrity.

The opposite of academic integrity is academic dishonesty and occurs when there is an infringement of the policies, codes or statutes relating to academic integrity (Dyer, 2010). Besides bribery or corruption, other common forms of academic dishonesty include plagiarism, cheating and inappropriate collaboration (Kisamore, Stone & Jawahar, 2007). Illicit student-staff relationships entail all these forms of academic dishonesty. It is a form of corruption or bribery, as discussed above. In addition, an academic staff member who is in an illicit relationship with a student is likely to overlook plagiarism and other forms of academic cheating committed by the student. In such instances, both the academic staff and the student do not uphold the honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage that are fundamental for promoting academic integrity.

The paper argues that exposing academic dishonesty is, in itself, an act of academic integrity. As Kisamore, Stone & Jawahar (2007) observe, reporting cheating by others is a measure of academic honesty. The paper therefore calls for students and staff in higher education institutions to become foot soldiers of academic integrity and strive to expose and report illicit student-staff relationships, because they are a major cause of academic dishonesty in the institutions.

## Theoretical framework

The rational choice theory as described by Sato (2013) provided the theoretical framework for the study reported in this paper. According to this theory the parties involved in the illicit student-staff relationships are actors. According to Sato (2013) the purpose of the rational choice theory is to explain social phenomena by assuming those involved in the phenomenon do so after making a rational choice. This means that when actors are presented with a series of options or choices, based on their own perceptions of the world, they will select the choices which they deem the most feasible for maximum outcomes. Sato (2013:1) asserts that 'an actor chooses an alternative that he/she believes brings about a social outcome that maximises his/her utility (payoff) under subjectively conceived constraints.' Sato (2013) further elaborates that two mechanisms or processes are analysed to explain how the purpose of rational choice theory is realised: choice by actors and the macro-micro-macro transition.

The concept of choice by actors is based on the premise that individuals have at their disposal a set of alternatives which, when chosen under the influence of the individual's subjective constraints, yield a social outcome. Social resources at the disposal of the influence their rationality and hence the rational choices they make within any give context. Thus, Sato (2013:1) states:

*"Social resources such as money, assets, prestige, privilege, authority and power affect the formation of subjective constraints with the help of frames through which the actor views them. In addition to such social resources, if the actor interacts with other actors, the others' choices become subjective constraints on him/her, and his/her choices become constraints on the others" (Sato, 2013:1).*

Within the context of the paper, it is argued that the authority, power and money of academic staff influence their choices to be involved in the illicit student-staff relationships; while prestige and a sense of privilege have similar influence on students to be involved. Changes in the state of these social resources would result in the concomitant adjustment of the choices that the actors make. As Sato (2013) observes, the actor can update his/her beliefs as he/she acquires new information about the world. It is therefore possible for those involved in illicit student-staff relationships to change decisions about their involvement as their situations change. This links to the second mechanism of macro-micro-macro transition or macro-sociological explanation which, basically underscores the importance of learning from one's behaviour. It 'explains the occurrence of social phenomenon Y by pointing out a precedent social phenomenon X that is thought to induce Y' (Sato, 2013:2). When actors make a choice based on future predictions of what the possible social outcome will be, it is referred to as forward-looking rationality. On the other hand, backward-looking rationality is reflective and entails learning from the past

(ibid.). More pertinently, backward-looking rationality is parallel to the positive (and negative) reinforcement in B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory of learning (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 2008). Positive reinforcement posits that if the environment encourages certain behaviour, individuals are likely to repeat and increase the frequency of this behaviour (ibid.). The opposite is true of negative reinforcement. Likewise, the assumption of backward-looking rationality within the rational choice theory explains that if an actor had previously chosen an alternative the outcome of which was a positive reward, the actor's inclination to choose the same alternative again becomes higher (Sato, 2013).

The paper recognises the influence of both positive and negative reinforcement in explaining the prevalence of illicit student-staff relationship in higher education institutions. Had there been more of negative reinforcement, this social phenomenon would not be that prevalent within higher education institutions. The fact that it is increasingly becoming an issue in higher education institution speak to the positive reinforcement experienced by the actors. Therefore, negative reinforcement can be targeted for use in designing interventions to combat illicit student-staff relationships.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used in the study involving semi-structured face-to-face interviews with SRC members of Student Representative Councils (SRCs), Deans of Students and student governance officers, from universities seven public in South Africa, selected by means of a stratified random sampling strategy. The bases for stratification were institutional types (comprehensive universities, traditional universities and universities of technology), geographic location (rural versus urban), historical legacy (historically white or historically black), and whether merged or not merged during the merger processes of 1990s. In the end, there were comprehensive universities, three traditional universities, and two universities of technology, selected for the study as reflected in Table 1 below.

In total, 27 individuals were interviewed, 17 of whom were SRC members, and 10 interviewees comprised of Deans of Students and student governance officers. Among the SRC members interviewed were SRC Presidents and the SRC Secretary Generals. They were purposefully selected to be interviewed because they serve on various institutional committees such as Council, Senate, Institutional Forum and sit in various forums within the university. This provides them with a wider understanding of and exposure to a variety of institutional issues. Deans of Students were selected as they are the direct custodians of student affairs within the institutions and engage with the SRC and Student Governance Officers (SGOs) on a regular basis.

**Figure 13: Distribution of institutions and categories**

Categories			Participants		Merger/ Non
			Dean/ Student Governance officer	SRC	
<b>Comprehensive university 1</b>	HDI	Rural	✓	✓	Non
<b>Comprehensive university 2</b>	HWI	Urban	✓	✓	Merger
<b>Comprehensive university 3</b>	HDI	Urban	✓	✓	Non
<b>Traditional university 1</b>	HWI	Urban	✓	✓	Merger
<b>Traditional university 2</b>	HWI	Urban	✓	✓	Non
<b>Traditional university 3</b>	HWI	Urban/ Rural	✓	✓	Merger
<b>University of Technology 1</b>	HWI	Urban	✓	✓	Merger
<b>University of Technology 2</b>	HDI	Urban	✓	✓	Merger

Consent was obtained from the offices of the Vice Chancellors in the institutions to conduct the interviews, and the participants were interviewed individually to ensure that the participants spoke their minds independently without being influenced by the views of other participants, as would possibly happen in focus group discussions.

As semi structured interviews, there were both close-ended and open-ended questions posed to the interviewees. The advantage of this blend of questions is that it allowed for a wide scope of focus, while at the same time making it possible for going for follow-ups to be made after answers to specific questions. This meant that both wide scope and depth on specific issues could be attained. The flexibility of this approach, particularly as compared to structured interviews, also allowed for elaborate information where detailed insights were required from individual participants. The approach was also particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics, where participants may not necessarily be comfortable discussing such issues in a public forum (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). Furthermore, it afforded a setup that allowed both the researcher and the interviewees the scope to talk about their opinions and experiences concerning illicit student-staff relationships. This technique allowed for a certain degree of flexibility to probe further in the responses given by the interviewees (Babbie & Mouton, 2010).

The semi-structured interviews were guided by interview schedules comprising some set questions. Two interview schedules were developed – one for SRC members and/or governance officers, and the other for the deans of students. The key themes focused on the threats to academic integrity posed by illicit student-staff relationships.

A standardized procedure was followed at all institutions. Each interview commenced with the interviewer explaining: (i) the purpose of the interview, (ii) confidentiality issues, and (iii) the need to audio-record the interview to capture participants' views accurately. All participants were interviewed in their offices, or at an alternative venue chosen by the respondent. Once participants were ready to begin, and all preliminary questions and issues raised by the participants had been adequately addressed, the interview schedule questions were asked. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked and debriefed.

## **Findings and discussion**

Information obtained from the interviewed individuals at the selected public institutions indicate that the majority acknowledged the existence of illicit student-staff relationships. They also believe that the scale of these relationships in the institution is increasing significantly. Quite interesting, however, was that these illicit relationships never been formally reported to the authorities following the established channels within the institutions. This notwithstanding, with no exception, all people interviewed viewed the relationships as unprofessional, unethical and seriously compromising academic integrity.

The majority of those interviewed were of the view that the reason why these relationships were not reported was because of fear of victimisation. The reporting channels that institutions had in place did not grant confidentiality or protection of those who would wish to use them to report illicit student-staff relationships. Therefore, those who gather the courage to report are likely to suffer more, and therefore opt to just let things go. The institutional cultures therefore pose serious constraints to 'victims' and potential whistle-blowers.

Some interviewees stated that in their respective institutions, reported cases are either simply swept under the carpet, or handled quietly, often resulting in slaps on wrists of academics who are found to have been involved. The cases are not handled openly, and those who are found to have been involved, are not named and shamed to discourage others from getting involved too. Institutions feel that if they handle such cases openly, they might taint their reputations. In other words, they are more concerned by public reputation than addressing a menacing social ill and actions that seriously compromise the integrity of their teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Without consequences, academic that have been found to be involved in such, do not have negative reinforcement experiences that dissuade them from engaging in similar escapades in the future.

The result is that, on one hand, there are students who, because they are involved in the illicit student-staff relationships, are awarded grades and qualifications that they do not deserve. This has a ripple effect on the wider society because unqualified students are unleashed on the job market. Those who succeed in finding employment disappoint their employers

miserably, and those who do not secure employment because they are simply unemployable, end up increasing the unemployment rate in the country.

On the other hand, the hard working but strong students who resist the advances of their lecturers are failed courses deliberately. Some change courses and even institutions to run away from the predator lecturers, and thus increasing costs of their education significantly. Those who cannot change courses or institutions are destined to drop out with nothing to show for the years they would have spent at a university. The gross unfairness that they suffer cannot be lost on the fair and just people of the world.

A few interviewees, from the so-called liberal institutions, mostly formerly English-medium public universities, gave a different view. They said that in their universities, there was zero tolerance of illicit student-staff relationships and students who wish to report such are provided with the necessary support. In particular, they are protected from victimisation. Once reported, the cases are handled openly and transparently, and the suspected lecturers would be charged and subjected to disciplinary codes of the institutions. In the same institution, there were two cases of staff members who were charged for sexual relations with students. Some cases had resulted in the expulsion of the lecturers after being found guilty through the due disciplinary processes. The issue, however, is that the majority of public universities have a culture that makes reporting difficult, and even when reported, the disciplinary processes are biased in favour of the lecturers because they are afraid of bringing the institutions into disrepute if they openly castigate their own academic staff.

Information from the interviews also indicate that it was not only academic staff members who get involved in illicit relationships with students. Staff from support functions such as residences, finance, library and student administration, are also involved. Students who rebuff their advances are victimised by denying them the university support services that they are entitled to. They are often sent from pillar to post when they require services from those staff members.

The extent of unreported cases is unknown as both the SRC and the student governance office have greater access and interaction to students who stay in university residences. In one of the institutions interviewed, the house parents have established a platform for student to raise issues concerning their well-being, yet the institution is still discontented because this initiative only covers a small portion of the student body and a lot of issues go unnoticed as a result.

Of great concern is that the majority of the interviewees indicated that illicit student-staff relationships are becoming a norm rather than an exception in many institutions. The university communities know about them, but the challenge is that the students and staff members are regarded as consenting adults. Furthermore, while the university community may know about

students being awarded grades or qualifications they do not deserve, it is extremely difficult to prove any wrongdoing on the part of either the staff or the students because they make use of the normal processes of assessments and certification to achieve their nefarious goals. But in the process, academic integrity is breached, and the quality of education is compromised.

Of even greater concern is that almost all the 7 public universities that the interviewees are affiliated flag student-staff relations and provide guidelines on how they can be conducted without compromising the ethical conduct of both students and staff, and the integrity of the academic project. One such common guideline is that the staff members should not be in a position of exerting direct influence on the students they are involved in, either in academic functions or in support functions such as residences, finance, library, sports and recreation and so on. However, it is common cause that this guideline is not adhered to, and without any consequences in most cases. This raises the question of the effectiveness of university rules and policies. One of the student governance officers stated that the question is whether policy interventions in themselves are effective. He further stated that they were attempting to have a series of interventions designed to prevent the occurrence of illicit student-staff relationships in a form of 'sex for marks' or 'sex for accommodation' or 'sex to raise funds'. The goal is preventative, aiming to intervene before these things happen, as opposed to having policies that are designed to look for the wrongdoers.

While staff members in universities should shoulder much of the blame for perpetuating the scourge of illicit student-staff relationships because of their predator tendencies, recent studies including that of Ncube (2019) suggest that some students may not simply be innocent victims as it is often portrayed. Instead, there are clear indications that some students are willing actors or participants in these illicit relationships with university staff. The reasons for this are varied but they range from interest in getting things on a silver platter without working for them; unethical competitive behaviour which drive them to seek to gain undue advantage over hard-working students; and fear of failure when students are in desperate situations because they do not have financial and/or social support systems. Similarly, another reason could be a social problem of a society that is deeply entrenched in patriarchy, where staff members see female students as objects that they can use at will. It could also be that there are no direct custodians of the policies within public institutions to oversee the implementation of the policies. Another possible explanation could be that institutions have good policies but there is no visible advocacy and promotion of academic integrity, or that the ethical rules and etiquette expected between staff and students are not explicitly stated.

## **Threats to academic integrity posed by illicit student-staff relationships**

The fundamental tenet of respect between student and staff is breached. The student and those who become aware of the unethical practices cannot take the staff seriously, which compromises the student's ability to learn from the staff member in question.

Learning, teaching and research work, which require honesty, become governed by dishonesty. Everything that is undertaken with dishonesty has no solid foundation. This has a great potential of compromising knowledge production within a learning environment.

The trust between staff members who are involved in illicit relationships and students who are not involved breaks down. These students cannot learn effectively from such staff member.

These relationships create unfairness to students who are not involved and work hard in their studies because those involved get marks on a silver platter and receive favourable treatment at the expense of others.

Illicit relationships reflect irresponsibility on the part of both the student as well as the staff. Both sides fail to assume accountability for their actions and for breaching the agreed rules of engagement. The responsible and courageous thing to do is to act against behaviour that compromises the academic integrity in an institution, particularly through illicit relationships between staff and students.

Courage is about the ability to do the right thing even when circumstances put you under pressure to break the rules. The illicit student-staff relationships are a manifestation of lack of courage on the side of both the student and staff. Courage demands that students commit to the quality of their education by holding themselves to the highest academic standards, even when doing so might lead to the consequences such as failing or repeating courses. Courage also demands that staff adhere to their professional codes of conduct even when under-pressure to do otherwise.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Illicit student-staff relationships flout each of the six-core value of academic integrity. Academic integrity is the foundation for quality and credible higher education. Illicit student-staff relationships shatter or break down that foundation. The result is that higher education becomes less credible, the qualifications lose their currency, the reputations of institutions is compromised, and people graduate without having acquired the required skills and competencies.



It is essential to create an environment within institutions where students can formally report cases without any fear of victimisation. Rules and policies on paper alone cannot solve the problem, only their full enforcement would assist in addressing it. All that are part of university communities need to take this matter seriously. They need to be made aware of the unfair and unjust nature of these relationships. Furthermore, institutions should take a continuous proactive approach in creating awareness for the students and all university employees. There should be measures which will encourage the highest level of professionalism aimed at safeguarding student to university staff relations in turn promoting academic integrity simultaneously promoting the university as a knowledge production hub.

Although there is no quick fix for the challenges associated with illicit student-staff relationships in universities, it is recommended that institutions put in place and implement the following measures in an effort to combat the scourge:

- Universities should have a firm stance in promoting the core values of academic integrity.
- Institutions should establish platforms for student to raise issues concerning their well-being in residences and lecture rooms.
- Universities should develop and implement preventative measures.
- Enhance the integrity of reporting procedures, including the protection of those who report from victimisation.
- Impel staff and students to declare conflict of interest.

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