

Exploring Student Leadership Participation in Institutional Policy Making and Governance

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Abstract: Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa, the government, through various policies, has sought to democratise most of its sectors, including higher education. The Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) mandates higher education institutions to open the broader involvement and participation of student representative councils (SRCs) in university governance by contributing to policy making through memoranda of understanding between the university and the student populace. While students and student leaders are not deemed policy experts in university governance platforms and are not expected to possess the necessary professional training and skills to deliberate and make meaningful contributions at the executive management level, SRC members are required, by legislation, to be the collective voice of the larger student population, and thus their views are embedded in institutional policies. Not only does this stretch their limited professional understanding but it also poses impossible demands on them to meet a certain standard. This situation is, to a large extent, endorsed by mandatory government regulation which must be complied with by institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Yet these regulations and institutional statutes are silent on the ways in which the capacity and training of student leaders should be facilitated, raising the question of how their knowledge will be developed and how their contributions during the term of SRC will be measured. This paper seeks to address two important aspects relating to the institutionalisation of SRCs' involvement in policy decision-making. First, to delve into the regulatory framework which outlines student governance, and, secondly, to scrutinise the participation of student leaders in governance structures at institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Governance, Institutions of higher learning, Student Representative Council, Policy making, Student leadership

1. Introduction

Student leadership participation in higher education and, particularly, university governance is a reality throughout the South African education context and is in line with national policy as contained in the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997). This Act accords with the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) which underscores the equal rights of participants in various public platforms. Act 101 ensures that equal representation of all stakeholders in higher education is promoted and implemented without discrimination. This suggests that both professionals in the education fraternity and students must be granted equal rights of participation in this sector concerning all educational matters including policy-making and the amendment of such policies. The presence of students ensures the full representation of students' voices and to have these voices heard (Antonelli, 2008). This goes beyond the mantra that says nothing for us (students) without us, and thereby affirms the importance of their inclusion as students in matters which relate to and affect them.

Despite the increased attention placed on student participation in the governance of universities, there is a gap in practices and programmes which seek to support student leaders' meaningful contribution in committees as part of various governance structures at universities (Shattock, 2006). In support of this opinion, Barnard (1938) postulates that the formulation of formal and informal networks of communication with stakeholders to attract, develop, and retain talent is paramount. Sparks and Wait (2011) urge that universities should collaborate with external constituents to stay relevant and effective, much like a public relations strategy to build goodwill with stakeholders, instead of fighting or ignoring government's policies. Universities ought to engage with students for funding and directions that help to develop graduates with employable skill sets. In terms of the South African regulations mentioned above student leaders do sit on various governance groups and/or committees such as university councils, institutional forums and other governance structures which involve student affairs. Perrow (1970) issues a clarion call for the university

to stay relevant amidst changes in the environment. Academic institutions ought to conduct regular self-assessments to enhance their strengths, exploit opportunities, and overcome their weaknesses in order to manage threats. For instance, the management bodies of academic institutions need to set goals and formulate strategies, informed by university governing authorities, to help prepare student leaders develop a set of skills to ensure their meaningful participation in university governance.

Student leaders are, first and foremost, just students, and do not possess the prerequisite policy knowledge and experience as compared to their counterparts (management), with whom they must interact on strategic policy issues, and who are grounded professionals with years of professional experience. On a national level, the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) encourages South African universities to adopt democratic principles of equity and shared decision-making. The Council on Higher Education (CHE), established through the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997), promotes quality assurance through committee audits. This implies an understanding that all stakeholders have made equal contributions to the resultant work. Furthermore, the CHE enhances collaboration and cooperation with universities as the main stakeholders. In addition, CHE evaluates universities on the scale and scope of student representation (National Commission on Higher Education [NCHE], 1996; CHE, 2019).

Student activism through student representative councils (SRCs) is prevalent in all South African universities (Koen, Cele & Libhaber, 2006). However, there is a growing concern that the roles of the SRCs, including the widespread practices and governance mechanisms which involve students across the national universities, are merely tokenist and superficial (Sebola, 2019). For example, while the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) advocates for student representation, there is little or no clarity on what the role of the SRC is. It is also not clear how student representation can and should be measured in terms of its corresponding roles and responsibilities.

The aim of this paper is to speak to the significance of SRCs at higher education institutions with specific reference to the University of South Africa (UNISA) as a mega institution with campuses in almost all the South African provinces. The argument in this

article is informed by the existing literature, documents and reports regarding student leadership and governance at higher education institutions. Aspects to be covered in the discussion include the background which sets the scene and provides a context for issues of governance and student representative councils. The discussion then illustrates issues concerning the application and scrutiny on principles of governance and the importance of student leadership. This is followed by a narrative on issues of policies and what regulates student representative councils. Concluding remarks are then supplied in summary to wrap up the discussion.

2. Background and the Context on Governance and Student Representative Councils

Students are invariably responsible for some of the effort involved at all levels of higher education, since the requirement for some action on the part of the learner is inherent in the process of learning. So, at the individual level co-production is already happening because new skills, knowledge and understanding are produced through a combination of student effort, pedagogy, and the learning environment. A model of co-production also implies student involvement at the collective level. This suggests that institutions should include students in decision-making processes, underscoring the role of student representation in influencing institutional policy by adding a student viewpoint in various contexts.

Streeting (2009:3) is of the opinion that a model of co-production could bring numerous benefits including increased student satisfaction, reduced student anxiety, and a greater understanding of students' needs, which improves educational outcomes. This, however, can present difficulties because at its heart is the intent to place more responsibility in the hands of students who are not, by definition, experts, nor trained in the theory and practice of management. This new expectation that they should now share responsibility for the management of services could be too challenging. Indeed, for institutions to convince such students that they must now want to be co-producers might be the greatest challenge facing management. Coffield (2008:7) argues that an alternative approach should be explored through what may be termed a 'community of practice' in learning. The concept of the community of practice approach involves a process of induction which is

a journey for students on their way to becoming active participants and practitioners in a trade, profession, discipline, or discourse (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin, 2006). With this approach, the emphasis is on building relationships, and calls for cross-disciplinary interaction that involves students at every level, including debates about the direction of policy and strategy to which all members can participate and contribute. Further, the approach takes a collectivist, flexible and organic view and asks us to think critically about how such an approach might be supported and stimulated. It then becomes incumbent on institutions to take the concept a little further with a relatively practical indication of what this approach means for policymakers and practitioners in higher education (Trowler, 1998).

University governance is a powerful concept that reflects the way a university is governed in each political, social, and economic context (Antonelli, 2007:5). Governance refers to broad-based structures and processes that are used to ensure a level playing field in an institution or organisation. The main objective of governance is to ensure accountability, transparency, responsiveness, the rule of law, stability, equity inclusiveness, empowerment, and broad-based participation based on the precepts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2017). This can positively impact student leadership and other stakeholders when making decisions that improve the relationship between students and the university administration. Governance also provides the rules, norms, and values of the game through which student affairs are managed in a transparent, responsive, participatory, and inclusive manner (Washington, 2017:16).

Governance interacts with internal and external stakeholders in striving for a dynamic equilibrium. From a larger perspective, governance encompasses the structures, relationships and processes through which, at both national and institutional levels, policies for testing education are developed, implemented and reviewed. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008), governance comprises a complex web including the legislative framework, the characteristics of the institutions and how they relate to the whole system, how money is allocated to institutions and how they are accountable for the way it is spent, as well as less formal structures and relationships which steer and influence behaviour.

Carnegie (2010:431) asserts that governance means decision, power, and authority considering that governance is the way power and authority are exercised in organisations in the allocation and management of resources. While management is focused on the effective and efficient use of resources, governance is focused on the dynamics of internal and external stakeholders.

University governance can be defined as the constitutional forms and processes through which universities govern their affairs (Shattock, 2006:1). From the process point of view, university governance devolves through the institution from a governing body, down through senates and academic boards, to faculty boards and departmental meetings. Governance has an important role not just in ensuring accountability for funds received from the government, but in opening the university toward the wider needs of society. The university governance model in South Africa is similar in many aspects to corporate governance, which creates an effective strategic driving force. However, in the African continent, and South Africa specifically, university governance has primarily a responsive function and is far from being a strategic driving force. Bratianu and Pinzaru (2015) argue that for governance to become a strategic driving force of the university and a powerful integrator able to transform potential capital into operational intellectual capital, universities should switch from creating adaptation knowledge to producing generative knowledge. It seems timely then for universities to adopt a new perspective on university governance, as Bratianu & Pinzaru (2015:1) maintain.

Little, Locke, Scesa and Williams (2009:32) are of the view that the involvement of student representatives in institutional governance committees should be viewed as a positive route for student voices to be heard by those responsible for the overall governance of the institution. This opinion is held by Magolda (2005:2) who suggests that student leaders can contribute much to the quality of the learning environment, the experiences of their peers, and the larger campus community. It is unfortunate, then, that too often these potential effects are not fully realised in most universities. This is because student governance gets side-tracked on trivial issues, and established institutional governance structures ignore or limit active, meaningful involvement by students. It is important to take seriously the essential perspectives student leadership brings

for creating a success-orientated learning environment, in line with Lizzio and Wilson (2009) who suggest that the value of actively involving students in university governance is generally described from one of three perspectives: functional (how does it benefit the university), developmental (how does it benefit the students), and social (how does it benefit society). Based on the views of the aforementioned research, it is safe to say that the role and contribution of student leaders in the governance of university committees is a relatively neglected area of enquiry.

Student leadership, in this study, refers to the work of student representative councils, through which universities have a perceived role of instilling leadership knowledge and practice in students (Barsi, Hand & Kress, 1985). Student leaders are students who occupy positions of responsibility in coordinating the activities of other students in the institution of learning. In so far as students are concerned, poor preparation at school level for university admission, and the lack of student financial aid and accommodation remain their principal concerns. SRCs often see government and management of universities as being insensitive to their plight and needs. Hay and Dempster (2004) argue that having quality leadership experiences during university years allows students to easily transition into the community and the world of work and adult responsibility. Higher education stakeholders have emphasised the need for effective higher education practices and the creation of a culture composed of values and behaviours that are supportive and sensitive to the ideals of inclusivity. Student leaders are considered a vital link between institutional administration and fellow students; this ideal permeates the vision and mission statements of all universities in South Africa. The role of engaged and innovative student leadership, amongst other roles, is to effect inclusivity by translating student struggles and interrogating policies and practices.

The Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) establishes governance structures in higher education, which includes students as stakeholders participating in institutional activities. Embedded in this is leadership development which includes the empowerment and preparation of individuals to be agents of social change by developing their understanding of others and self-awareness of their roles and responsibilities as leaders in different contexts. The SRCs in the South African context

are an important mechanism that ensures that students receive quality higher education in a safe and healthy environment, and this is underpinned by the principles of access, success, and equity which are critical areas of focus in the transformation process (Mthethwa, 2018). The SRC as a well-organised body with the necessary skills can channel its capability and commitment towards improving university life for students. SRCs form a major part of student governance, hence it is important to scrutinise some principles of governance.

3. Scrutiny on Principles of Governance and the Importance of Student Leadership

A framework for transformation laid the foundation for the governance structure of the post-apartheid public higher education system. It calls for 'established forums that would be advisory bodies where representatives of all stakeholders could meet, identify problems, mediate interests, and advise relevant structures such as the SRC, senate and council' (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2017:21). In line with the framework on transformation (DHET, 2017:21) one of the statutory structures is the students' representative council (SRC) which is the highest decision-making structure of student governance. In line with the definition of governance, the roles and responsibilities of the SRC include:

- Participating in institutional decision-making structures.
- Advising and supporting the delivery of effective and efficient student support services; managing and administering student representation at different levels.
- Advising on the development of academic programmes and student learning experiences.
- Participating in the development and implementation of institutional and national policies on higher education.

The legislation also outlines matters which council can perform after consulting with the SRC. This includes the establishment of a student support services council which is to advise on the policy for student support services; as well as disciplinary measures and procedures relating to students.

Effective student leadership is considered one of the major elements that guarantee sustainable development and success for student bodies. Good governance principles are significant ingredients for aspiring student leadership (Okeyo, 2018). Whereas the overall objective of this study is to determine the contribution of student leadership in university governance, the principles of governance on effective student leadership cannot be overlooked. This is because student leadership is mostly associated with unrest. Ojo (1995) refers to unrest as a student crisis and defines it as the effects caused by students as they demand their rights from university authorities. This definition is qualified by Adeyemi (2009) who portrays student unrest as demonstrations by students arising from their protest to pressurise the university administration for their demands leading to the destruction of lives (loss of academic time) and property. Falua (2004) explains student unrest as protests undertaken by the student community in the process of confronting university authority over their dissatisfaction with the way their issues are handled. These authors seem to endorse effective student leadership and the importance of governance principles as inseparable areas of consideration in university governance structures.

According to Hufty (2011), corporate governance relates to 'the processes of interaction and decision-making among the actors involved in a collective problem that led to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions. Further, governance includes the mechanisms required to balance the powers of the members (with associated accountability) and their primary duty of enhancing the prosperity and viability of the organisation (OECD, 2004). Student governance is seen as a purposeful and important element in higher education, particularly as a conduit to reach, teach, and serve the students enrolled in higher education institutions (Bambenek & Shifton, 2003).

The available literature, according to authors Planas, Soler, Fullana & Vila (2013) has noted that awareness about student participation through student bodies in governance is low and that this extends across universities. Zuckweiler (2016) supports this view and states that the concept of leadership and the educational goals of leadership development have been given very little attention by most institutions of higher learning. These authors further postulate that there is scant research to address these concerns. The absence of a pilot project or a

collaboration between the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and higher education institutions to explore practices that can support students' engagement in institutional decision-making seems to exacerbate the existing challenges faced by student bodies and the SRCs. Hendrickson (1999) explains that the governing structure and functions of the institution are central to decision-making. Further, Hendrickson suggests that governance structures should be guided by what he calls 'critical parts' of institutional governance.

First among these critical parts is the reasonable expectation for the university to stay relevant amidst changes in the environment. Academic institutions ought to conduct regular self-assessments to enhance their strengths, exploit opportunities, and overcome their weaknesses in order to better manage threats. For instance, they need to set goals and formulate strategies (Perrow, 1970), and build formal and informal networks of communication with stakeholders, with students and student leadership in mind (Barnard, 1938; Simon, 1967). Secondly, Hendrickson urges universities to collaborate with external constituents to stay relevant and effective, much like a public relations strategy to build goodwill with stakeholders. Further, instead of fighting or ignoring efforts of inclusion, universities ought to engage with leadership in public government institutions, for instance the governance of Higher Education, and, as laws/policy evolve, university governance leaders must keep abreast of legal developments to manage potential crises with student leadership (Hendrickson, 1999). University governance leadership needs to overcome the ivory tower stereotype (Jacoby, 2009). Thirdly, the role of governing structures should be examined and boundary spanners identified, including how they work towards meeting the institutional mission while responding to changes in the environment. Most important are the critical qualities necessary to lead members of governance towards a culture of evidence and enduring change. These are creativity, commitment, collaboration, delegation, and courage (Ikenberry, 2010).

The Higher education Act (Act 101 of 1997) section 35, as amended, obligates all institutions of public higher education in South Africa to establish the existence of student representative councils (the SRCs) as significant role players in institutional governance. Hereby, students enrolled in line with the enrolment policies of various institutions should

and must be mandated to serve in different university governance structures. The Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) further obligates universities to affirm this step through the institutional statutes which must be approved or endorsed by a designated higher education minister. Thus, compliance with this instruction by the higher education Act is compulsory (DHET, 2017:21).

The institutional statute of the University of South Africa (UNISA) (No. 108, 3 February 2006) recognises the SRC as part of governing structures of the university, which then fulfils the institution's obligation as imposed by the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997). UNISA, through a unit called Student Development and Student Affairs, developed a constitution of the SRC (Student Representative Council Constitution, 28 July 2006, revised 9 October 2013). This constitution governs and regulates SRC activities and all other student organisations recognised through a policy on the recognition of student structures at UNISA (Directive: recognition of student organisations and structures). The King IV report on corporate governance for South Africa, part 5, makes reference to the fact that organisations have to abide by certain standards. For the purposes of this study, four principles of governance are noted (King IV, 2016:15):

- Competence.
- Responsibility.
- Accountability.
- Fairness and effectiveness.

Succinctly, the discourse of these four principles of governance could be summarised as follows:

- **Competence**

On 'competence' the King IV report urges that members of the governing body should take steps to ensure that they have a sufficient working knowledge of the organisation, its industry, the triple context in which it operates, and the key laws, rules, codes, and standards applicable to the organisation: to act with due care, skill, and diligence, and take reasonably diligent steps to become informed about matters for decision and develop their competence to lead effectively (King IV, 2016:20). The King IV report correctly suggests that the professionals in governance structures should take steps to equip student representatives with enough knowledge to enable them to partake in or contribute meaningfully to strategic

and operational decision-making in the institution. This could be done through programmes and workshops. According to Oketch (2004), student leaders champion, defend, articulate, and represent the interests of students in the university. In this regard, student leaders should be examples of discipline, diligence, academic performance, and humane moral values and be a bridge of dialogue between students and university administration OECD (2014). Student governance is seen as a purposeful and important element in higher education, particularly as a conduit to reach, teach, and serve students.

- **Responsibility**

Governance includes the mechanisms required to balance the powers of the members and their primary duty to enhance the prosperity and viability of the organisation. Therefore, Graham, Amos and Plumptre (2003) note that the nature of governance – both the means and the end – needs to be understood; only then does it make sense to elaborate the principles in order to create a meaningful analytical tool. In terms of 'responsibility', the governing body members should assume collective responsibility for steering and setting the direction of the organisation. They should also be responsible for approving policy, and planning, overseeing, and monitoring instances of implementation and execution by management.

- **Accountability**

A crucial responsibility is ensuring accountability for organisational performance: anticipating, preventing, or otherwise ameliorating the negative outcomes of the organisation's activities and outputs in the triple context in which it operates (King IV, 2016). It is necessary to attend meetings of the governing body and its committees and devote enough time and effort to prepare for those meetings. This executive function cuts across and overflows the expected active contribution of SRC. In most cases, SRCs are found wanting in meetings due to their lack of executive knowledge. Here again, the King IV report advises institutional management serving in governance committees to extend a helping hand to the less knowledgeable for optimum participation. However, in practice, this level of responsibility seems lacking on the executive side.

Langford & DeJong (2008) argue that student leadership participation in institutional training programmes

helps students maximise their university experience by staying focused on their educational purpose and being constructively engaged in student life. In this context, students are also achieving their educational and career goals. Collaboration with the student affairs department is necessary for effective student leadership involvement and to ensure that student roles are well defined and support the overall initiative's mission and goals. Student leaders could be recruited and selected with attention to students' interest in and skills for the role they will play during their term of office in the SRC. They would in turn receive initial and ongoing training and supervision appropriate to the role, to ensure that their work effectively serves programme needs. This university programme or educational training will attend to students' personal and professional development and their goals for participating. Accountability also entails that governing bodies demonstrate a will to answer for the execution of their responsibilities, even when these are delegated (King IV, 2016). However, it is frequently the case that executive members of universities view accountability to mean being accountable for organisational strategic objectives only. It is therefore strongly argued that accountability should not be limited to the execution of organisational goals but should also involve the necessary equipping/mentoring of the less experienced. This is especially important when a greater degree of responsibility is expected in terms of mandates.

- **Fairness and Effectiveness**

Fairness is an expectation that members of the governing body will direct the organisation in such a way that it does not adversely affect the natural environment, society, or future generations (King IV, 2016). Ezekwem (2009) believes that students' participation in university governance is necessary for effective university administration. Further, the author argues that students' participation in the higher education decision-making process would enhance a high level of institutional effectiveness.

According to Akomolafe and Ibijola (2014), when students participate in university governance, leadership skills, policy formulation and character development are built up, and the student body representation in university governance makes the process of democratic representation and participation in the universities' decision-making bodies easier. The authors (Akomolafe & Ibijola, 2014;

Ezekwem, 2009) postulate that representation in university governance could also serve as a training ground for leadership in civil society because the skills acquired in the university could immediately be transferred to organised civil society. This is given credence by Enu (2012) who believes that preparing today's students for success and eventual leadership in the new global market is the most important responsibility in higher education today.

Ezekwem (2009) supports the view that student representative councils are very effective as they offer some ideas for the good administration of universities in South Africa in the 21st century. According to him, students as critical stakeholders in university governance cannot be ignored. This is because they can initiate moves that can be a source of hope for addressing the problems of university governance in the country. Maseko (1994) affirms this argument and asserts that the limited understanding and knowledge of student representatives in relation to strategic decision-making in institutional committees carries a burden wherein actions from the student body may, in many cases, impact negatively on the operations of the very same institutions they are expected to help rebuild. This, in turn, may hamper future generations due to the destruction and replacement of scarce and expensive infrastructure, for instance, in the case of mass strike action outcomes. 4As noted, the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) ensures that SRCs exist in all institutions of higher education in South Africa. The SRC at UNISA, however, has a unique context considering the university's footprint which covers all nine provinces in South Africa (Moja & Hayward, 2000).

4. A Narrative on Issues of Policies and What Regulates Student Representative Councils

Astin (1984) proposes that student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the university experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. According to the author, the greater the student's involvement in the university, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. According to Hamre & Brackett (2013), the effectiveness of any governance policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy

or practice to increase student involvement, for example, student time and energy as institutional resources, albeit finite resources. Thus, university governance policies and practices should be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement. Similarly, student leaders can assess their own activities in terms of their success in encouraging students to become more involved in the university experience.

In the African continent and across the world UNISA enrolls over 373 000 students annually (UNISA Integrated Report, 2018). All other universities in the country have a defined limited scope which allows them to enrol between 25 000 and at most 70 000 students annually as deemed mandatory by the DHET (DHET Annual Report 2019/20). In order for UNISA to be fully compliant with the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997), the institution's approach has been to decentralise SRC structures across the provinces where UNISA has footprints or campuses, and retain one national structure based in Pretoria closer to its headquarters. In terms of the SRC's constitution, all student structures that successfully contest elections must be represented in the SRC (UNISA SRC Elections Announcement Report, 2021). This representation is voluntary and done through organisational internal deployment rules (Recognition of Student Organisations and Structures, 2011).

The UNISA Students Charter (Student Charter of Rights and Responsibilities, 2007) raises the importance of students' voices and elaborates that in order to enhance student support and service, and to ensure the provision of a student's voice, an establishment of a duly elected student representative council in line with a world-class African university value is primarily important (Student Charter of Rights and Responsibilities, 2007). Furthermore, the creation of a nurturing environment is necessary for the promotion of student well-being and having their voice heard by university management.

While the prominence of students' voice has increased in the post-democratic dispensation in South Africa, audits addressing the engagements of the diverse groups of students to identify areas of good practice and areas needing improvement are non-existent. This limits not only the engagements but also the assessment of student's voices in improving the quality of their experience. Obiero (2012) submits that the establishment of a

framework focusing on maximising student leadership participation is a necessity in higher education institutions, as this will assist institutions of learning to shift from being compliance regimes that pay attention only to regulating student participation to fully inclusive organisations that genuinely engage students' leadership involvement. The rationale that students and student leadership are key stakeholders is fundamental in improving all facets of institutional governance. This approach is supported by Langford and DeJong (2010) who strongly assert that it is critical that students-like any other employees-receive training on the mission, goals, and underlying rationale of the projects they will be working on so that they can make informed contributions to the work and also receive the greatest benefit. Such training should include information about evidence-based strategies and best practices in institutional governance. The professional staff should teach students basic principles allowing students to work creatively within those parameters. For example, programmes involving students strategically and effectively reconceptualise student leadership relationships with other students as an opportunity to mentor the next generation of leaders.

A well-planned programme of leadership development puts more demands on the professional staff, but also means that students can maximise their contribution while gaining useful experience, learning new skills, and perhaps developing a long-term professional interest in broader institutional governance work. It is then a requirement that student leaders read institutional governance policies and familiarise themselves with the organisation's philosophy and approach. Further, DHET (2017) displays that the advantage of student groups (i.e. the student representative council, student leaders leading student organisations) is that they can utilise the strength of the student's voice to take on controversial issues or promote policy changes that the professional staff cannot undertake. The staff's role in this case, according to DHET (2017), is to help the students develop their voice and use it as an instrument of change. DHET (2017) further indicate that the inclusion of planned intermittent additional training and the use of a survey to assess their experience in three ways. Firstly, whether being involved has helped them make better decisions or benefited their social relationships. Second, whether and how they had a positive effect on other students, and lastly, whether the work has improved their

leadership skills, prepared them for future jobs, or led them to rethink their career choice.

In practice, institutions of higher learning operate through sophisticated governance systems which have proved over a long period to be effectively unfair to student leadership participation. The objective of this article was to evaluate the current governance systems in institutions of higher learning and provide a strategic direction for the future that addresses the prevalent gaps and strengthens these structures by expanding governance models through transparency. Along these lines, it is important to delineate how decisions are made and who makes them, and to provide pathways for student leadership to weigh in on decisions that are under consideration, or that affect them directly as representatives of broader student populace, as seen in studies such as Student Participation in University Governance (Acharya, 2015). Additionally, with the inclusion of a new governance training framework for student representatives, it is hoped that governance in higher education institutions may close the gaps in the system through these proposed formal training initiatives.

Moja and Hayward (2000) observe that the process of higher education policy development in post-election South Africa during the period 1994-98 should, amongst other things, focus on and examine aspects of the policy development process that speak to eliminating the legacies of apartheid and those that are typical of quality higher education. Additionally, it is important to investigate those aspects of higher education policy development that pose challenges and provide insights into the political realities of the transformation process, for example, the involvement of students' voices through their elected student representative councils and the perceived challenges this may represent. Pasarella & Terenzini (2005) argue that the amount of time and energy expended on student engagement can be linked positively with the desired outcomes of a process of policy development in higher education. Kuh (2009) supports this idea and states that student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to the desired outcomes of a university. He further elaborates on what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities. Further, the author argues, student involvement in university processes should not just be considered as a theoretical historical antecedent, but rather attention is drawn

to the quality of effort, and positive associations of a range of desired outcomes of the university. Additionally, the inclusion of students in institutional processes for purposeful activities also helps to level the playing field and promote institutional democracy.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the literature on the experiences or factors which student representatives perceive to help or hinder their effectiveness as student members of governance committees. Role ambiguity appears at the top of their list of challenges, and the overall effectiveness of their role is perceived to be reliant on the willingness and ability of academic managers and staff to engage in constructive dialogue with students. It is argued that universities need to adopt a more proactive approach to the development and support of student leaders and representatives. This article suggests that the lack of institutionalised formal student leadership training undermines and/or contradicts various regulatory initiatives by the government and compromises vast student interests advocated by student leadership in governance structures.

It must be emphasised that widening the training of student representatives on decision-making is a necessary enabler as opposed to consulting students on decisions already made. This will hopefully eliminate possible tokenist gestures and promote the authoritative student voice essential for genuine participation. Crucially, this will lead to the recognition of student leadership as an equal partner in institutional governance rather than just a regulated meaningless available body of bystanders. A specified governance and leadership training curriculum should be designed and offered to students who already hold student representative council positions, as well as those who may be interested in occupying similar leadership roles in the future.

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