

## EDITORIAL

# Student Power in Africa

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This issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* brings together parts of the work of a group of young African scholars who have investigated student politics in Africa and its relation to university governance, national politics, citizenship and democracy in Africa. It is part of the African Minds project Student Representation in Higher Education Governance in Africa sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (see Preface by Claudia Frittelli in this issue). Following an open call for proposals in December 2013, we received over 20 abstracts and eventually draft papers which we thoroughly reviewed and individually engaged the authors on. We gave them extensive comments and access to local and international literature, and advised them on conceptual, analytical and methodological approaches to guide the development of their papers.

In August 2014, the group of authors and editors met for a three-day symposium and workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, during which they shared their experiences, reviewed and commented on one another's contributions, and discussed cross-cutting issues emanating from the papers. The participants were also treated to workshops aimed at developing academic writing, presentation and publishing skills, and presentations on contemporary trends and practices in academic publishing.

The final product of the project is presented in two publications: The dedicated issue 'Student Power in Africa' of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* and its companion publication, the book *Student Politics in Africa: Representation and Activism*, published as Vol. 2 in the African Higher Education Dynamics Series of African Minds (cf. Luescher, Klemenčič & Jowi, *forthcoming*).

In our work as project leaders and editors, we have been cognisant of recent empirical and theoretical work conducted for various other projects, including the Council for the

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Development of Social Science Research in Africa's (CODESRIA's) investigations into higher education governance in Africa, the studies done by the Higher Education and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) on higher education and democracy, and the Centre for Higher Education Transformation's (CHET) project on student leadership, student engagement and citizenship competences in Africa. We have also been inspired by the publication of special issues on student representation of the journals *Tertiary Education and Management* (2011), *European Journal of Higher Education* (2012) and *Studies in Higher Education* (2014). In keeping with this genealogy, the Student Representation project has been first and foremost an opportunity to produce new knowledge on the politics of students in African universities, focusing on empirical investigations into student representation and activism in the African context. The aim has been to explore and describe contemporary manifestations of student power, particularly student representation in African higher education governance and student activism, in order to develop new and existing key concepts, analytical approaches and theoretical frameworks.

### *What is 'student representation'?*

'Student representation' refers to the formal structures and processes of elected or appointed student representatives speaking or acting on behalf of the collective student body in higher education governance within a higher education institution or a higher education system. It means making the collective student voice 'present' in decision processes within higher education institutions or public-policy processes led by political authorities responsible for higher education. Student representation is premised on three conditions. Firstly, there must be democratic procedures in place 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. Secondly, student representatives must create procedures through which they regularly communicate with the student body to collect student views and inform about their activities (for more on authorisation and accountability, see Mugume & Luescher, in this issue). Thirdly, there must be representational structures through which student representatives can intermediate student interests into the decision-making processes. In other words, student representatives have to have seats on governing and other bodies involved at all levels and stages of the decision-making processes (Klemenčič, 2014).

### *Why study student representation?*

Student representation is a widespread phenomenon, worldwide and across all African higher education institutions, at the level of institutional governing bodies. Indeed, it is a vital ingredient in higher education governance at the institutional level, that is, the decision-making processes, structures and relationships through which higher education institutions choose their goals and guide and restrain collective activities. Contrary to the institutional level, student representation in national-level higher education governance is much less widespread across the systems, and often dependent on informal relationships rather than stipulated in formal rules and procedures (Klemenčič, Mugume & Luescher in

Luescher, Klemenčič & Jowi, *forthcoming*). The relations between governments and student groups are more frequently explored through the lens of activism and student movements rather than representation. In any case, investigations into student power and students' collective political behaviour contribute to a broader research theme of how human agency – individual and collective – shapes higher education policies, a theme which is still fairly underexplored within the field of higher education studies.

### *Student representation and student affairs*

Student representation lies at the intersection of several key research areas in higher education studies. For one, it lies at the heart of student affairs as a field that focuses on institutional practices with respect to co-curricular learning and services to, and support for, students at institutions of higher education. Institutional relations to student representative associations – student councils, unions, governments, guilds, parliaments, etc. – fall directly into the domain of responsibilities of student affairs departments within institutions of higher education. What exactly these relations entail varies from one institution to another. In some institutions, student affairs practitioners are the ones who have direct contact with student organisations and student representatives, manage the institutional support granted to these organisations, oversee their activities, and help with advising and training student representatives. It is very common that student affairs professionals involve student representatives in planning and implementing various programmes, services and events under their responsibility related to student advising, arts and culture, counselling, diversity, disability, leadership development, orientation, residence life, sports and recreation, and student on- and off-campus life more broadly. Student associations frequently supplement services that are offered by the institutions of higher education (see examples from Kenya by Macharia in this issue; also see Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014). The cooperation between student affairs professionals and student representatives comes naturally from the shared responsibility to organise student life either on the basis of the concept that universities stand in loco parentis or out of awareness that student life outside the classroom is important for student self-formation, well-being, and student engagement, and should therefore be pursued intentionally and systematically and be consciously structured and coordinated (Tinto, 2014).

### *Student representation and higher education governance*

Student representation is also part of the studies of governance and administration of higher education institutions and of higher education system governance. The former investigate the structures, processes and relationships which steer organisational behaviour within individual institutions. The latter focus on structures, processes and relationships between public authorities, higher education institutions and other higher education stakeholders, such as students, which coordinate, steer and influence organisational behaviour across a higher education system. Both types of studies elucidate the questions of authority, power and influence, responsibilities and preferences of various actors within the decision-making processes of higher education institutions or within a higher education polity. Students –

individually or collectively – are one, often highly invested, actor in these decision-making processes (Klemenčič, 2012; 2014). By focusing specially on the agency and subjectivity of students we can investigate student governance as the constellations of authority and accountability that manifest the ‘cultures of governance’ (Hall, Symes & Luescher, 2004) that operate and are experienced in student life. 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 (Klemenčič, 2012; 2014; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014).

### *Student representation and student activism*

Where student representation is absent or ineffectual, students have historically resorted to protest action to voice their grievances and express their preferences. Student activism refers to various, typically oppositional, forms of public expression of student power (Altbach, 2006; for an overview of Altbach’s work on student activism, see Luescher-Mamashela, 2015). Student activism is not confined to higher education-related issues; it extends the articulation of student preferences well beyond university politics and policy to involve students as a political force in social movements locally and around the world (Altbach & Klemenčič, 2014, p. 2). Student representation and student activism are two sides of a coin, the currency of which is student power. In this respect, Pabian and Minksová (2011, p. 262) argue that there are two categories of studies of student politics: ‘the first deals with student activism in “extraordinary” governance processes like student protests and rallies while the latter focusses on the “ordinary” processes of elections and board negotiations.’ Yet, the interrelation between student representation and activism is not only conceptual; it is also historical. The formal representation of students in higher education governance has its roots precisely in student agitation to this end (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Pabian & Minksová, 2011).

### *Student representation and student engagement*

Finally, student representation falls into the research on student engagement, especially on research into teaching and learning for critical and active democratic citizenship (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Conceiving universities as sites of citizenship and civic involvement harnesses the university potential to consciously cultivate democratic norms, values and practices on campus (Bergan, 2004). A strong student representation is at the centre of such an objective. As the article by Kgosithebe and Luescher (in this issue) shows, universities stimulate students’ cognitive engagement with politics, as well as their interest in and discussion about politics, and increases knowledge of basic facts about the political system, government, and political incumbents. Student representation, if diligently following the principles of democratic governance, is a powerful example of democracy at work, and efficacy of student representatives in university governance can be an important lesson that democracy indeed works. The activities organised by student representatives – as well as by other student groups – present the ‘social glue’ that bonds the university community and enhances student engagement, in particular the sense of student belonging to a university

community, all of which are essential for student integration, motivation, retention and student success (Tinto, 2014; also see: Kuh, 2009; Astin 1999; Tinto 1998). They lend themselves to life laboratories for active and collaborative learning for the development of competences and critical understanding related to democratic citizenship (Luescher-Mamashela, Ssembatya, Brooks et al., 2015). This potential, of course, also presents challenges. Student representatives who do not adhere to the principles of democratic governance of student associations, who misuse the powers vested in them for personal or party-political interests, or who fail to meet student expectations due to inactivity, feed student cynicism over the state of democracy within their student association, university and their country. Similarly, universities that do not provide for student representation deny their students opportunities to be socialised into enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens. A well-designed institutional framework of student representation is a necessary, but not sufficient, part of such socialisation. To nurture students' commitment to active and critical citizenship of the university and beyond, other measures need to be integrated into the curriculum and in all functions and operations of university life so as to consciously cultivate democratic norms, values and practices on campus (Klemenčič, Bergan & Primožič, 2015; Luescher-Mamashela, Ssembatya, Brooks et al., 2015).

### *Student power in Africa: In this issue*

This issue of the *JSAA* comprises five articles from the Student Representation project and covers a diversity of topics. The article by Taabo Mugume and Thierry Luescher addresses the critical shortage in student housing on public university campuses in South Africa and the student politics surrounding attempts at addressing this by means of public-private partnerships. With regard to the 'Kovacs crisis' of 2012 at the University of the Western Cape, the authors show how the Students' Representative Council put the user-price of the new residence onto the agenda of the university management, and analyse the effectiveness of student representation in the process.

Mwangi Macharia explores contemporary student representation and participation in university governance in Kenya. He outlines the structure of students' unions in Kenyan universities and students' involvement in university decision-making, and this is followed by a discussion of the changing manifestation of 'comrades' power' in universities.

Blessing Makunike outlines in his article the relationship between the Zimbabwean student movement and government in broad strokes: from the pre-independence period through the first and second decades of independence. He illustrates his argument about the love-hate relationship between the student movement and government with special reference to two moments in the country's student political history: the 1973 student protests against racial discrimination at the University of Rhodesia and post-1990 developments in national and university politics in Zimbabwe.

Lucky Kgosithebe and Thierry Luescher analyse data on students' political attitudes to democracy collected as part of the HERANA student surveys at four African flagship universities. Comparing the student data with national public opinion data from the Afrobarometer, they find that, in most cases, students are better informed, more active

and more critical citizens than youths without higher education and citizens in general in their respective countries. They also find that the students at the four universities, that is, the University of Botswana, University of Cape Town, University of Dar es Salaam, and University of Nairobi, are not necessarily more democratically inclined than non-students. In this way, their analysis confirms earlier studies that suggest ‘political hothouse’ conditions in African flagship universities; they offer solutions as to the way these conditions may be employed to transform the African university into a training ground for democracy.

Finally, Adesoji Oni and Jeremiah Adetoro present the results of a survey conducted among academics, university leaders and students in the 12 public and private universities of South-West Nigeria. In a country where formal student representation is limited and the expression of student interests frequently results in large-scale protests, the results of their analysis are leading the way. They conclude that, ‘for [university] leadership and teaching effectiveness to be guaranteed in Nigerian universities, provision must be made for adequate involvement of students in decision-making on important matters relating to university administration’ (Oni & Adetoro, in this issue). They arrive at this conclusion by focusing their analysis, firstly, on the relationship between student involvement in decision-making and leadership effectiveness, where they find a significant difference in decision-making with student involvement as against decision-making without student involvement. Secondly, when analysing the impact of the student–management relationship on teaching effectiveness, they again find that a cordial relationship significantly affects teaching effectiveness.

The guest-edited research articles are complemented by a critical reflection on the role of student affairs in the internationalisation of higher education and, particularly, in the transition of international students to campus life at New York University (NYU). Allen McFarlane presents 15 salient lessons learnt from the International Student Engagement Meeting Initiative at the NYU New York campus.

In the *JSAA* organisational news section ‘Campus dialogue’, Annsilla Nyar reports on the inaugural conference of the South African National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, which took place from 19 to 21 May 2015 at the University of Johannesburg. In addition, Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo and Birgit Schreiber present a report on the 2nd Global Summit on Student Affairs which took place in Rome in 2014. The summit was hosted by the European University College Association in collaboration with the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) and the US Association for Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education (NASPA).

This issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* concludes with a critical review of the acclaimed new book *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education*, edited by Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and Tracy Bailey, and reviewed by Birgit Schreiber. For the editing of the latter contributions, the guest editors would like to thank the *JSAA* Editorial Executive for its support.

The issue of 'Student Power in Africa' has been guest-edited by:  
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