

Inquest into Existing Structures that Strengthens Democracy in South African Universities

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ABSTRACT Student participation in universities continues to be hampered by several factors. Thus, this paper examines the existing structures that serve to strengthen democracy in South African universities. Underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative approach and a case study design. Data were collected from six lecturers and 75 students across three universities. The research findings revealed that although there are several structures that promote democracy in universities, student representative councils, which are overarching structures, are characterised by numerous shortcomings, which include the abuse of power among many others. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that existing structures in higher education institutions pursue democratic objectives as a matter of course, and seek to promote students' cognitive engagement with politics as well as their curiosity regarding political debate, since such awareness can improve the latter's knowledge of basic facts about the political system.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to leadership in associational life, there are correlations of varying strengths between participation in formal student leadership and leadership of voluntary organisations (Luescher-Mamashela 2011; Rosch et al. 2017; Benevene et al. 2021). In the model of representative democracy, students are defined as "legitimate or even as principal stakeholders in higher education", who have the "fundamental right to participate in higher education processes at all levels and in all areas of decision-making on equal terms with other academic citizens and external stakeholders" (Pabian and Minksová 2011: 270). This obtains because, if the position of students is clearly understood, they can act as active collaborators in helping to achieve set goals by negotiating with other actors who are represented in the governance process (Luescher 2005; Pabian and Minksová 2011; Rosch et al. 2017). In most democratic societies, there are thousands of local and national organisations which aim to serve as mediators between citizens and the many complex governmental and social institutions in any society (Strum 2007; Gerodimos 2012; Rosch and Stephens 2017). As mediators, these structures offer citizens an opportunity to form part of society,

without being in government (Strum 2007). As such, leadership and participation in formal settings such as student representative councils (SRCs) on campus, as well as in voluntary organisations on or off campus, are among the typical indicators of active citizenship in a democracy.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to examine the existing structures that promotes democratic practices in South African universities.

Literature Review

An Overview of Student Representative Council in South African Universities

In South Africa, SRCs came into being as a result of a denunciation of the 'prefect system' in schools. According to Hyslop (1999), black learners disliked the system at the mission schools of the 1940s, amongst others for the privileges afforded to prefects, and their inability to alert school management to learners' concerns and grievances. Amongst other privileges, the prefects enjoyed cordial relations with staff and the freedom of not being checked during inspections of school uniforms (Mathebula 2009). Additional privileges included "being allowed 'out' more often than non-prefects; [having] their own rooms; being allowed to go to bed later than

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non-prefects; wearing ordinary clothes instead of [the] school uniform to town and being allocated special seats at school functions” (Blumberg 1963: 48–49). Those benefits led to prefects being seen as agents of the school authority, who used bribery, threats and punishments in an oppressive system. According to Mathebula (2009), the prefect system has existed for decades, and served to inculcate autocratic rule in apartheid South African schools.

Today, the prefect system continues to allow some learners to oppress others through forceful punishment, bullying and other bad behaviour. This has resulted in learners attempting to defend their rights and those of their schoolmates. According to Blumberg (1963: 48), “those who disagreed with the ‘prefect system’, attested that prefects were responsible directly or indirectly for much of the bullying which took place in school, and that they were the cause of great unhappiness and resentment among the senior pupils who were not elected prefects”. In 1946, complaints about domineering rule by the prefects, along with teachers’ favouritism, led to a riot at the Lovedale Mission School in the Cape (Blumberg 1963).

Blumberg (1963: 49) notes that the “lack of representative participatory democracy expressed by students in [the] Lovedale and Healdtown schools depicted the conditions that existed [across] South African schools, which eventually led to the Soweto Student Representative Council (SSRC) [being] established on 13 June 1976, to give voice to students’ feelings and opinions”. In promoting the idea of democratic SRCs, the SSRC formed a ‘student government’ and was empowered to bring to the attention of the school governing bodies (SGBs) the thoughts and views of all learners (Mathebula 2009).

The SSRC represented a shift from authoritarian rule to a more democratic dispensation. As a result, those elected were able to reach out to their fellow learners on issues affecting their lives, and therefore truly represented their views. Just four months into its existence, learners requested a democratic election which would allow them to select their representatives in South African schools, with “the right to elect student representative councils ... for the expression of student grievances” (Davenport 1991: 422). The SSRC’s perception of participation was to make sure that learners were granted responsibility for controlling their own lives. Thus, starting with the struggle to resist the prefect system, “the fight to achieve democratic

representation in school governance was connected to demands for the complete overhaul of the apartheid machinery” (Mathebula 2009: 44).

Even though the apartheid government banned SRCs and later, in 1986, outlawed ‘People’s Education’, learners’ struggle for the recognition of democratic SRCs continued, until the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) (RSA 1996a) made way for the Representative Council of Learners (RCLs). SASA was regarded as playing a significant part in regulating democratic RCLs. According to Nzimande (1996: 13), “the Education White Paper 2’s provision for the establishment of an RCL represented the realisation of the long struggle by students for representative SRCs [...] All reference to the prefect system has been taken out of the Act”. This legislation helped to eliminate the prefect system and advanced learners’ struggle in South African schools (Nzimande 1996).

SASA (RSA 1996a) made provision for a new, uniform system of governance and funding in schools. The idea of democratic authority in South African schools is spelt out clearly in Education White Paper 2 (Mathebula 2009; RSA 1996b). The structures responsible for promoting democratic practices in school management were not intended to replace governing bodies, but to support them. Thereafter, SRCs were mandated in schools (Department of Education [DoE] 1996: 10). To date, learner participation in democratic school governance has continued to serve as a basis for South African education policy. Put differently, learner representative structures (as outlined in Education White Paper 2) are deemed to advance participatory democracy and representation, by involving learners, teachers and parents in school governance.

It is therefore worth noting that SRCs have the fundamental duty of educating learners for democratic citizenship in their immediate communities. This is because, by encouraging learners’ active participation, these entities will be creating a free and safe space capable of developing and producing informed, critical and active citizens who are sufficiently skilled to influence government decisions, in their mission to achieve an equitable and democratic school system.

Role of SRC in Promoting Democratic Citizenship in South African Universities

School councils have become a common feature in South Africa and elsewhere, with most entities

accommodating representative bodies that include leaders from the learner cohort. Increasingly, schools have begun involving learners effectively in important aspects of school life, in so doing inculcating a sense of democracy in them (Wanjiku 2016). Student representation, which is already accepted as a key component of higher education governance across the globe, is essential for arriving at a full understanding of higher education politics and policies. Student representative councils (SRCs), associations, guilds, unions or governments, have the primary aim of representing and defending the interests of the student body (Klemenčič et al. 2016). All these organisations are similar in that they organise, aggregate, articulate and intermediate students' interests, while providing various services and organising student activities (Klemenčič 2012).

Klemenčič et al. (2015a: 2) posit that

student councils are formal structures and processes involving elected or appointed representatives speaking or acting on behalf of the collective student body in a higher education institution or system. Their presence and actions represent the shared student voices, making them 'present' in decision-making processes at tertiary institutions or in public-policy processes led by political authorities responsible for higher education.

As Klemenčič (2014) notes, student representation is based on three fundamental conditions: 1) a suitable democratic procedure, which confers collective student powers on representatives to advance the interests of a collective student body (importantly, those powers can also be withdrawn), 2) student representatives must create procedures through which they regularly communicate with the student body, to garner their views and remain informed about their activities, and 3) the existence of realistic structures, through which such representatives can act as mediators of students' interests in the decision-making process. This explains the need to promote an effective SRC, because where student representation is vague or weak, students tend to resort to protests (Pabian and Minksová 2011; Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Klemenčič et al. 2015a).

Student representation often comes under the spotlight when researching the administration of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the governance of such systems. Student representation falls under research related to student engagement in teaching and learning for the development of active and critical citizenship (Trowler and Trowler

2010). Bearing in mind that universities are places which develop active citizens, this strengthens the view that such institutions promote democratic values and practices on campus. An SRC can help to promote related objectives (Bergan 2004). As Kgositthebe and Luescher (2015) posit, universities should stimulate students' cognitive engagement with politics, as well as their curiosity about, and debates regarding, matters political. Institutions should also stimulate and expand their students' knowledge of basic facts about the political system, government and political appointees, through student representative bodies. If SRCs persistently adhere to the principles of democratic governance, they will become powerful examples of democracy at work (Klemenčič et al. 2015b).

Fongwa and Chifon (2016) state that student participation at universities continues to be hampered by external factors, amongst which are local and/or national political forces, as well as ethno-regional battles. Likewise, there tends to be a lack of engagement between students and administrators. The dynamic relationships that often exist between the SRC and student protestors is linked to dominant practices which seek to undermine or silence students' voices (Cele 2014). Klemenčič et al. (2016) therefore argues that student representation and involvement are two sides of the same coin, the currency of which is student power. To encourage their participation and involvement, activities organised by the SRC (and other organisations within and outside of the university) can create a social bond between the institution and the immediate community (Pabian and Minksová 2011); this is also capable of strengthening students' sense of belonging to the university and their community (Tinto 2014; Klemenčič et al. 2016).

Thus, Klemenčič et al. (2016) warns that student councils which fail to abide by the principles of democratic governance of their association, who abuse their power (for example, for special or party-political gain) or who, through lack of effort fail to meet students' hopes and aspirations, call into question their claims of being democratic, thus tainting the university and the country at large. Klemenčič et al. (2016) add that universities which do not provide for an SRC deny their students an opportunity to be socialised into becoming responsible, active, democratic citizens. As Klemenčič et al. (2016) caution, a well-designed student representative framework which promotes students' commitment to active and

critical citizenship of the university, to consciously cultivate democratic norms, values and practices on campus, is necessary but not sufficient in itself. Other measures and entities which cultivate and promote democratic norms and values should be included in the curriculum, as well as in the institutions respectively (Klemenčič et al. 2015a; Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2015). Hence, the need to examine if SRCs abide by the principles of democratic governance. If not, what other structures exist in strengthening democracy at South African universities?

Problem Statement

In the context of a representative democracy, students are principal stakeholders in any higher education system. Hence, they have the fundamental right to participate in decisions affecting their lives within the institution (Pabian and Minksová 2011). While participation and leadership in formal settings (for example, SRCs on campus and voluntary associations) are typical indicators of active citizenship (Saha 2000), these settings continue to feed students' cynicism about the value of democracy, as few of those entities truly adhere to democratic principles (Olawale 2021). Thus, bearing in mind that HEIs are sites of democratic citizenship and civic involvement which are duty bound to promote democratic values, various organisations within and outside of universities are expected to pursue democratic objectives (Klemenčič et al. 2016). Hence, a need to inquire into existing structures in South African Universities which promotes democracy.

METHODOLOGY

Underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative research approach and a case study design. Interpretivist paradigm was found suitable because it claims that there are no absolute or accurate realities (Irene 2014). As such, three traditional universities in South Africa were purposively selected, with the expectation that they would report unique and interesting data on the phenomenon under investigation. At each of the universities, the sample comprised two lecturers and 25 students, thus making a total of six lecturers. For the purpose of data presentation, the three HEIs visited in the course of the study were differentiated through the use of fictitious names such as University X,

University Y and University Z. Two lecturers each from universities X, Y and Z were coded as L1 and 2 respectively, and the students were coded as ST1–25; followed by University X, Y or Z. Thus, data collected from the interviews are presented here in relation to the interview questions and the raw responses received from the participants affiliated with those universities, in order to arrive at a holistic view of the captured responses.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with lecturers and students alike, and by means of observation and document review, with data trustworthiness being ascertained through the triangulation of these data sources. Thematic data-analysis procedure was employed for the study, as proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2014), and that undertaking comprised six steps:

- **Step One:** Data organisation – data gathered from interviews were transcribed word for word and typed neatly in a Word document. Information obtained from other methods of data collection (field notes during observation and document reviews) were also typed as Word documents, so that the information would be easy to work with and easily retrievable.
- **Step Two:** Generating categories, themes and patterns – after their proper organisation, the data were read meticulously to identify appropriate categories and emerging themes. The researcher(s) created a separate Word document to store the data gathered in the form of a table, which accommodated the different responses of the participants, based on their categories. Thereafter, the research question and participants' responses were thoroughly proof-read in order to come up with a sub-heading that best addressed the responses.
- **Step Three:** Coding the data – once the data had been closely read, codes were assigned to all the participants and the findings respectively. Folders were opened for each category of participant, for example, lecturers and students. Folders were also opened for each participant (for example, L1-University X, ST1-University Z, denoting lecturer 1 at University X; Student 1 at University Z, etc.). The transcribed and typed data were sorted and saved in the appropriate folders, after which the researcher(s) read through the documents created to ensure they had been correctly sorted, without errors.

- **Step Four:** Testing the emergent understandings – at this stage, the researcher(s) used colours to code content based on the sub-headings generated. Code names were written next to the text. According to Marshall and Rossman (2014), the significant task in this part of the process is to evaluate data for their usefulness.
- **Step Five:** Searching for alternative explanations – Leavy (2017) posit that analysis should reflect the participants' perceptions. At this stage, the researcher(s) endeavoured to make sense of the responses through various explanations. The contents were adequately read, quotations were inserted where necessary, and sub-headings were replaced with statements indicating differences and similarities.
- **Step Six:** Report writing – here is the final stage where the researcher(s) embarks on writing the report with much attempt to minimise the authorial voice but focuses on creating an objective account of meaning as provided by the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to examine which structures exist to promote democratic citizenship at South African universities. To this end, the results and discussion are presented under the theme: Structures for democratic citizenship in South African universities.

Structures for Democratic Citizenship in South African Universities

The research participants were asked 'What structures exist in your institution that support democracy?' The research findings revealed that several structures are in place at the respective universities to support democratic principles capable of promoting both academic and social learning. This includes the student representative council (SRC), Political parties and Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and Organs of student governance.

i. The Student Representative Council (SRC)

Research findings revealed that the SRC remains the most widely referred-to platform for strengthening democratic citizenship due to its

participatory outlook, this is because the SRC effectively involves students in important aspects of university and social life. A case in point can be drawn from a participant who opined:

An existing structure which promotes democracy in this institution is the [student] representative council. I believe they are responsible [for] assisting students with different issues and complaints, for instance cases of misunderstanding[s] between lecturers and students, where students are afraid to go and see lecturers in the office personally. So I believe [the] SRC serves as a mediator. (ST4; University X)

Another participant corroborated this view by commenting:

I think a structure that encourages democratic practices in this university is the SRC, but not everyone will satisfy you the way you want to be satisfied in terms of making your opinions known. But they are trying by engaging with students through social gatherings, in order to make their grievances known and also by standing in for the students, in making sure they pass our message across to the school authority. (ST2; University Z)

A lecturer also alluded to the SRC as a structure which promotes democracy in the university, stating:

We have SRC for the students, it engages them in several debates in which they can make their views known, and then we also have the module representatives for each module. [...] If [students] have a concern about a certain module, then they can trace [these] via module reps. At least, I have been engaged by a module representative several times and I am sure that they are representing them well, as they ought to. (L1; University X)

The participants generally acknowledged that the SRCs are a significant structure which promotes democratic practices in their respective institutions. This promotion of democracy is achieved through representation and by acting as umpires in making the students' voices heard. The findings also revealed that the SRCs in fact represent and promote students' interests, both academically and socially, by engaging them in debate and dialogue, for the development of critical and active democratic citizens.

The above findings are in line with an observed situation at one of the institutions in which students had to embark on a protest because of a missing student (later found dead), whereby the management

of the concerned institution turned a deaf ear. As a result of the silence from the university management, the students went on strike in which the SRC had to intervene because of student's unruly behaviour. To salvage the situation, the SRC organized a meeting with the management and discuss students' issues at the time. The SRC informed the management as to why students were behaving in a disruptive manner, and what should be done with regards to students' expectation from the management. As such, the SRC organised and led an 'awareness and search' campaign on campus, as well as in the neighbouring town and cities informing the citizens about the institution's predicament. They also encouraged the citizens to contact the nearest law enforcement agencies or the university's investigators should there be any update of the missing student.

Similar contributions to the democratization of universities were also evident at another institution, in which students were found leading a protest as a result of injustice and unaccountability of funds management. At the institution, students complained about issues of excessive charges on transportation fee, delayed allocation of monthly allowances, and unnecessary fees debited in the students' online account which possess threats to majority of the graduating students. As a result of the uprising, the SRC intervened by serving as a mediator between the students and the university management. Thus, from the above findings, one can be compelled to conclude that most participants believed that the SRC is an overarching structure which promote and support democratic practices at their universities, because it gives students the opportunity to participate in the activities of the university community, and be represented. This finding concurs with the views of Klemenčič et al. (2016), who state that the main aim of student representative bodies in such institutions is to represent and protect students' interests. Hence, an SRC that defends students, represents their interests and encourages their participation in decision making, affords them the prospect of being socialised into an enlightened, responsible and constructive, active citizenry (Klemenčič et al. 2016; Sibiyi 2017; Rosch and Stephens 2017). Klemenčič et al. (2015b) further posit that SRCs are formal structures acting on behalf of the student cohort, thereby representing their 'collective' voice. To this end, Mugume and Luescher (2015) advise that student representatives

must strive to create procedures through which they can communicate frequently with their fellow students, to gather their views on, and inform them of, the institution's activities.

ii. Political Parties and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

The research findings also revealed the existence of other structures, such as political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), within universities that support democratic citizenship. For instance, as one participant remarked:

... there are other structures which are political, and I am sure they are very active on this campus. For instance, we have [the] EFF student movement, we have SADESMO [South African Democratic Students Movement], and we also have this one for ANC [African National Congress] what is it called? SASCO, the South African Students Congress All these are political structures inside the campus, and then they are recognised and they are allowed to propose and raise the concerns of students, either to the faculty or to the campus. (L1; University X)

Similarly, a participant at a different university stated:

There are other structures that promote democratic practices and assist us to develop as democratic citizens. For instance, we have Inectas that allows us to participate in community engagement, such as making the campus and the residences clean. They also move from one residence to another to sensitise students on how to handle issues of GBV [gender-based violence], suicide and other issues that traumatise [people]. They organise seminars and provide platforms to debate these issues that constantly affect us as teenagers. (ST8; University Z)

The participants also made reference to other existing structures in the university that afford students an opportunity to discuss and engage in debates on issues affecting them, such as welfare issues, disciplinary matters, access to extra-curricular activities and their relations with one another. As one participant mentioned:

We have the EA-O, it is an office where by you can state your concerns and other issues that are affecting you privately. For instance, I had a family issue that made me miss my test, I went to the psychologist and I was well attended to. Also, they

serve as a link between students and lecturers in case there are any problem[s] or misunderstanding [s] [...]. And yes, we also have the SRC. (ST12; University Y)

As indicated, aside from the SRCs, political parties and NGOs contributed to the development of a democratic citizenry through democratic practices that socialised students towards becoming enlightened and responsible, critical citizens. The participants were also of the opinion that these structures within and outside of the university equip them to become good citizens. Furthermore, findings revealed that these structures are responsible in standing up for basic human right of students at the institutions and assist students in making choices which may have consequences for both their lives and those of others.

Observation at the research sites validate the above findings as students were seen involved in various voluntary activities. Through these voluntary activities to change the university community and assist students, political parties and NGOs offer students practical hands-on experiences, as well as the knowledge and potential to participate fully in the wider society. The research findings obtained from both interviews and observation, revealed that political parties and NGOs within and outside the university are saddled with the responsibilities of ensuring democratic participation and advocating for right-based governance. This also became evident from the documents that were reviewed, for example, the White Paper on the Programme for Transformation in Higher Education (DoE 1997), argues for cooperation and partnerships in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) governance. The document stipulates that “successful policy must reconceptualise the relationship between higher education and the state, civil society, and stakeholders, and among institutions” (DoE 1997: 6). As a result, political parties within the institutions and NGOs as relevant stakeholders must endeavour to create an enabling institutional culture, as well as conducive environment that is sensitive to and affirm diversity. These structures should also seek to promote an atmosphere of respect for student’s life, protect their dignity and reject all forms of gross discrepancies in the participation rates of students from different population groups.

The above findings concur with the views of Luescher-Mamashela (2011), who states that

amongst the distinctive indicators of active citizenship is student participation and leadership in either formal or informal settings, which includes student governance and students’ participation in voluntary organisations on and/or off campus. Strum (2007) remarks that in most democratic societies there are thousands of local and national organisations, whose main purpose is to serve as mediators between citizens and the complex institutions within society (for example, government and social institutions). Such structures, by acting as mediators, offer citizens opportunities to be more active in issues that affects their immediate society, without being politicians, per se (Strum 2007; Van Dijk et al. 2018).

iii. Organs of Student Governance

Similarly, the research findings further revealed that, aside from the SRCs, political parties and NGOs working to educate and shape a democratic citizenry of students, there are other offices and online platforms that do the same, by allowing students to participate actively yet anonymously in the processes of the institution. As one participant observed:

... we’ve got things called ‘module-sites’ [similar to Blackboard, in which modules, tests and other forms of assessments are loaded]. It is used for academic purpose[s] or to make [a] contribution to the decision-making process in the university, and the good thing about it is that it tends to be anonymous, so you just submit your response based on your own perception. You can also read other people’s comment[s] and contribution[s], and it has been helpful because the issues raised on that site are always addressed and shared with the whole university community, through emails and other platforms. So, at least we are given the chance to participate. (ST8; University Y)

A lecturer opined:

In the university there is a structure called Center for the Advancement of Non-racialism and Democracy [Canract]. It deals with democracy; it also engages students in debates on social justice issue[s]. This platform allows students to make [a] contribution, either publicly or in secret. This structure also invites guests who present lectures to sensitise students on issues of racism, being that the institution is a historically

white university. Also, the SRC is [...] an example of such [a] structure; they are members of the senate. They represent the students and are also given the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process. (L1; University Y)

A student also added that:

Here at the university we have what we refer to as the SDAC [student disciplinary advisory committee] which assist in protecting the interest of accused students. They advise us [students] on what to expect and not to expect during any disciplinary hearing.....so I believe that they are here to ensure that the integrity of students is protected, all which promotes democracy within the institution because most times they give listening hears and they are very helpful. (ST13- University X).

These findings suggest that other structures which are operational on campus promote democratic practices, including module-sites, Canract, SDAC, and many others. The main aim of all these structures is to enhance student engagement within universities, offer them a sense of belonging to a university community, and advance their interests in the process of decision making. This finding is in line with that reported by Kgositthebe and Luescher (2015), who found that one of the indicators for measuring students' attitudes towards civil society, is to determine their engagement and active participation in voluntary organisations on and off campus. Pabian and Minksová (2011) posit that various activities can serve as a 'social glue' which bonds university communities, if related activities are properly organised by student representatives and voluntary organisations. This enhances student engagement and fosters a sense of identifying with a university/community, all of which are vital for student integration, motivation, retention and success (Tinto 2014; Klemenčič et al. 2016).

As reported, these structures within universities act as mediators through which students can engage in joint decision making. For Saha (2000), participation and leadership in formal settings (for example, SRCs and voluntary associations) are typical indicators of active citizenship. Pabian and Minksová (2011) add that in HEIs, students should have equal rights with other academic citizens and stakeholders to participate in the process of making decisions at all levels and in all areas. This is because once their position is clearly understood, they will be deemed valuable, active collaborators

in helping to achieve set goals, by negotiating with other actors who are represented in the governance process (Pabian and Minksová 2011; Mugume and Luescher 2015). When students are given the right to participate, are well represented, and their position and role are well defined in the governance process of any institution, they conceive of themselves as a distinct group with a strong sense of ownership of the university, who are willing be governed democratically (Luescher-Mamashela 2010; Bauböck 2018).

iv. Dissenting Voices: Perceptions of Authoritarian SRCs

Notably, this investigation also revealed dissatisfaction amongst the participants about the SRC, which they believe is the major existing structure tasked with the responsibility of promoting democratic practices in the institution. Some felt it had blatantly failed them, as the following comment shows:

Unfortunately, [the] SRC is supposed to be an example of such [a] structure, but it is so disappointing that, as I speak to you, I do not know who the president is, neither do I know any member of the SRC. I believe that the SRC has failed us. For example, Sir, during the last student protest, SRC members were nowhere to be found. Only the EFSC, PASMA and DASO [student organisations representing different parties] were at the forefront of the protest. (ST1; University Y)

Another participant claimed that, in promoting democracy in the institution, the SRC should afford all groups equal access to justice and equal opportunity. He voiced his displeasure thus:

The only structure I can think of now is the SRC and they are very bias[ed], they attend to you based on who you are or the political party you support. At time[s], they will only listen to you based on the type of bursary you are getting, and for people like us who are not funded, they ignore us. (ST4; University Z)

A participant at University X also stated:

You see, [the] SRC is a structure that is expected to engage with the problems of the students, but what I have noticed and experienced is that they do what they feel is right. They only engage with students as a way of making us aware of the decisions they took or they are about to take.

They already know what they want to do before the meeting; and for other structures or organisations, I do not know in terms of democracy. So, for [the] SRC, I can't say if they promote democratic practices or autocratic practices, but I can say that they are less democratic, which has really affected the activities in the school environment. (ST3; University X)

It is evident that some of the study participants were disappointed or dissatisfied with the role and functioning of the SRC – a structure which students have every confidence will support and promote democratic practices at HEIs. The research findings revealed in some instances, SRCs misuse their powers through practices such as favouritism, autocratic decision making and discrimination. This contradicts the purpose of public higher education, and the establishment of student representative council given that they are meant to provide students with broad skills and opportunities capable of enhancing their abilities for deliberative skills and critical thinking, as well as the development and personal growth of students in preparation for democratic citizenship. Therefore, to promote students' commitment to active and critical citizenship in the university and their immediate society, SRCs should constantly organise a variety of activities that are capable of creating a social bond within the university community (Klemenčič et al. 2015a). They should also schedule activities that foster student engagement, while cultivating democratic norms, values and practices in the university (Trowler and Trowler 2010; Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2015; Rosch and Stephens 2017). Hence, a strong SRC should have these goals as its main objective.

The above findings contradict what the researchers observed. During our observations, the SRC was seen to mediate between the students and the university authorities. The researchers observed that during mass meetings, decisions were made by all students after inclusive deliberations on students' views and opinions about a matter at hand and how the concern was to be presented to the institutional authorities. This is in line with the White Paper on the Programme for Transformation in Higher Education (DoE 1997) which stipulates that the principles of democratisation necessitate higher education governance systems which are democratic in nature, thus representation and participation within those structures should be

characterised by respect, tolerance, and the preservation of a well-organised, peaceful environment on campus. Such structures should promote wide engagement in decision-making processes (especially by those who will be affected by the ultimate decisions), either directly or through their designated representatives. It also requires that decision-making processes at all levels be transparent, and that those making the decisions be held accountable for the way in which they execute their responsibilities and use/allocate resources (DoE 1997: 19). Thus, having a voice and making it heard is related to the democratic principles of freedom of speech and the right to be actively involved in defining one's own destiny (Gay 1997). Contrary to the participants' views during the interviews, the researchers acknowledge that through structures which encourage students to voice their views, democracy appears to be taking root at institutions of higher learning.

CONCLUSION

This study made an inquest into existing structures in South African universities that strengthens democracy. Based on the notion that leadership and participation in formal settings, as well as voluntary organisation are typical indicators of active citizenship in a democracy, the researchers presented an overview of student representative council in South African universities and its role in promoting democratic citizenship in South African universities. The study thus examined the existing structures that strengthens democracy at South African universities. Research findings revealed that the SRCs at the participating South African universities remain important, active structures which are – on paper, at least – committed to adhering to democratic principles and practices through representation and deliberation. The findings also revealed that other structures (political parties, NGOs and some organs of governance) support and promote democratic practices within such institutions. Findings further revealed that although the SRCs had been created to promote democracy, there were some instances where it was found guilty of various forms of injustice and disparities in their governance, because their actions were hijacked by some higher authorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, bearing in mind that HEIs are sites of democratic citizenship and civic involvement, tasked with promoting democratic values, the study recommends that SRCs pursue democratic objectives as a matter of course, and appreciate contributions which are indicative of representation in the formation of public opinion and judgement. Also, given that in the democratic principle, individuals are equal (morally and legally), and are equally capable of autonomy with respect to citizenship, SRCs should avoid favouritism, oppressive decision making and discrimination. Lastly, while the concept of representation in democracy is to serve as trustees of the interest of those who elected them rather than serving the delegates, SRCs and other existing structures should not be bound by the preferences of a select few, but rather use their autonomous judgment – within the context of deliberative bodies – to represent the interests of the public (the university community).

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