

ON CAMPUS

## Student Leadership: Challenges and Possibilities\*

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### *Abstract*

*In my attempt to adhere to the request that I provide an interpretation of the theme for the session, 'Critical Engagement, Innovation and Inclusivity', and cognisant of the primary audience, I weave student leadership responsibilities, challenges and possibilities into the address. Events since the plenary address have however necessitated adapting it and it has also been adapted to fit the journal prescripts for a campus report.*

For all South African universities, the period October 2015 to October 2016 was, without a doubt, one of the most volatile periods for Higher Education in the post-apartheid state. Student Affairs practitioners, by virtue of their being the champions of students but also because some of them are members of senior management structures, would themselves navigate this period of uncertainty guided by differing sets of principles. Thank you to Stellenbosch's newly appointed Dean of Students for the warm welcome; I wish her good luck and lots of wisdom. Also, a heartfelt thank you to Student Affairs for the invitation.

I was asked to speak in broad terms about the theme of this plenary, namely *Critical Engagement, Innovation and Inclusivity*, to set the scene for the morning session. From the plenary brief and summary of sub-themes I drew the assumption that *Knowledge* firmly underpins this session. Therefore I will return, more often than not, to knowledge as I unpack the leading concepts in this plenary theme.

As student leaders, you are fully aware that this is a time of great uncertainty in higher education in South Africa. The sector's instability since early 2015 is the result of the two primary demands by students: for decolonisation of the university and for free higher education. Before the announcement on 19 September 2016 by the Minister of Higher Education, universities had their own trepidations about what another zero percent fee increase for 2017 might mean in real financial terms. Most universities were unequivocal; it would mean financial ruin if not accompanied by government coverage of the shortfall in income. The announcement of a zero percent increase in fees for students whose household income falls below R600,000 per year led to widespread student protests (Radio 702, 2016).

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These protests were in line with students' fundamental call for free higher education. The relief on the increase in fees certainly did not appease them.

The conundrum of fee-free higher education is not an abstract concept floating outside of the sphere of student leadership, neither is it only a concern for top managers nor restricted to the realm of protests on the streets of the university. Your *Critical Engagement* around this issue of fees within your scope of leadership will be important to how the student body, in general, deals with the repercussions of the announcement by the Minister of Higher Education.

You can choose to engage with the issue by expressing yourself in many ways. You can choose to listen only to fellow student voices and try to forge your own sense of logic from what you hear. But could it be considered 'critical engagement' if only fellow voices confirming agreement are listened to? Obviously, you can listen to other voices. Mondli Makhanya, editor of *City Press*, put the question to students: What are you offering society in return for all these things you want? (Makhanya, 2016). As expected, in the great South African tradition of debate, Eusebius McKaiser, respected journalist and opinion shaper, challenged Makhanya robustly, even calling his column an example of what flawed argumentation looks like (McKaiser, 2016). This exchange is an example of critical engagement in action, where different views on the same matter are contested.

Student leaders can also choose not to engage with the issue and wait for others to make up their minds on their behalf. Such leaders should feel morally obliged to refund the university for the costs of their attendance of this conference. More seriously, by waiting for others to engage with an issue on your behalf, you run the risk of missing vital details. An example of how important issues get overlooked is the intersectionality of the many struggles that students go through. A persistent regret by many student leaders is that awareness of intersectionality was a big casualty in the early to even late stages of the protest movement since 2015 (Lujabe, 2016). The image accompanying the article by Lujabe (2016) portrays an LGBTIQ activist being restrained by fellow male activists from, apparently, sjambokking them. So, beware: the womanist sjambok is coming to a campus near you, very soon, if student leaders do not engage with the intersectional struggles deeply and critically. Our outgoing SRC President had, not very long ago, to call off the handing over of a memorandum on racism because women and LGBTIQ activists did not allow him to speak because he denied their request for a memorandum of intersectional issues. His interpretive schemes drowned out all other issues but racism. This is an example of how patriarchal tendencies silence the important matters raised by the LGBTIQ community and women. Student leaders will do well to heed the note of caution in this example.

The other two concepts in this plenary theme, *Innovation and Inclusivity*, will be thoroughly dealt with in the breakaway sessions. Hence, I will not say much about them.

It is a standard intuition of incoming leadership to want to do things better and more efficiently than the outgoing team of leaders. Therefore, *innovative* means to achieve the goal of greater efficiency become standard practice, even an obsession. Innovation without regard for an institution's strategic direction can be hollow. Innovation should not simply mean 'redesign' (Jacobs, 2016) of practices which do not fundamentally assist an institution in its transformation trajectory. So, student leaders, in your innovative zeal to do things

better and faster than the outgoing leadership, do not forget that continuous transformation of a complex space such as this university requires more than redesign; it requires strategic focus. It requires of you to read the times and sometimes to leave certain things as they are in favour of dealing decisively with a larger matter at hand. Student leaders should be very aware of institutional shifts and not wait to act until a cause is made fashionable by a well-known figure.

*Inclusivity* is an ideal which permeates through every vision and mission statement of all universities in our country. It would, therefore, be easy for the engaged and innovative student leader to translate mediatised struggles such as the debacle about black girls' hair at a Pretoria school (Timeslive, 2016) into an interrogation of policies and practices within the scope of your leadership. Again, not just to redesign for redesign's sake, but to effect inclusivity.

### *Shifting Gear*

Zygmunt Bauman (2011:100) suggests that there is an increasing “divorce between power and politics”. By that, Bauman (2011) means that the ability to *do* things is no longer really influenced by the ability of formal structures, such as the state, to *decide* on what should be done. This insight holds lessons for current-day student leadership. Your leadership position is firmly entrenched within the system of institutional politics personified by structures such as residence committees or student representative councils (SRCs). Hence, you have a demarcated area of responsibility; a scope of decision-making abilities, if you will. Compare this scope to the unfolding reality of protest leadership playing out during the wave of student protests we are experiencing currently. The student movement has shown numerous times how it organises outside of the formal structures such as SRCs. *Open Stellenbosch* serves as a forceful example of power that was loosened from the official structures of student politics. At the University of the Free State a student leadership collective called the *Free Education Movement* diverted power from the SRC. This movement is not a registered student association but arose because students were dissatisfied with the SRC's shift in position regarding the protest. Students are also familiar with the various leaders of this movement who come from different associations, which explains their authority. This is an important example as it illustrates that popular acknowledgement of leadership can be as strong a force as formal elections. Obviously, this observation does not declare formal structures obsolete. It merely serves as a source of knowledge that might be invisible to some amongst you who thought that the only way of gaining and exercising power is through a formal structure.

The question before you is, probably, not how to regain regulatory authority but rather what the effects are of the divorce of power from politics on your leadership role. An immediate negative effect of the divorce is that communal bonds become more frail and very temporary (Bauman, 2007). A student leader of an immediate collective like a residence has bigger challenges at hand when the divorce between power and politics is complete. This observation rests on my lived knowledge that, simply, communal living depends on physical displays of regard for communal bonds, e.g. by not stealing from a pot cooking in a communal kitchen. For student leaders of larger collectives, such as SRC

members, the frailty of communal bonds holds a different challenge such as that posed by the power of internet-connected lives. The *Free Education Movement* at the University of the Free State, for instance, mobilises entirely through its Facebook page. In that case the combination of cyber-connectedness and a common cause, all linked to the weakened state of the SRC, is much more effective at organising large numbers of people than the SRC. Some people debate issues and negotiate entire struggles only in cyberspace e.g. #HandsOffPravin (2016); hardly a modality for real human contact but effective in raising awareness and serving as an outlet for collective frustration. Elsewhere, a co-author and I (Keet & Nel, 2016) found that student leaders in formal structures experience a deep sense of disappointment upon leaving office. They put so much faith in the ability of their structures to transform a university that this results in semi-depression when they do not succeed.

### *So, What to Do, Then?*

Together with *Critical Engagement* with the challenges presented to your leadership position and *Innovation* for deep *Inclusive* change, it is also probably important to know the limitations that you are up against.

Be aware that “social reality itself has become schooled”, as posed in the seminal work of Ivan Illich (1970:3). This means that, through education, we have become so used to having almost every aspect of our lives regulated that we no longer know what it means to operate outside of such regulation. Formal education as packaged by schools, colleges and universities is not free of the regulatory impulses implicit in many academic disciplines. These impulses are sometimes necessary professional standards that have to be attained so that graduates can comply with the basic measures of responsible practice. However, as acknowledged by critical scholars (Fricker, 2007; Keet, 2014a; Keet, 2014b; Zipin, Fataar & Brennan, 2015), the regulatory impulses of formal education can also serve other purposes such as governmental control over its citizens or re-inscribing of self-produced disciplinary truths – a very dangerous endeavour as illustrated by the initial uptake of scientific racism (Lack & Abramson, 2014). Even as various pathways to knowledge and skills exist in South Africa today, such as Recognition of Prior Learning (SAQA, 2004), we very much rely on formal education offered by schools, colleges and universities. We have been schooled to largely understand that health care different from that provided by a medical doctor is irresponsible, learning on your own is unreliable and community organisation outside of state-subsidisation (or university-subsidisation) is dangerous and subversive (Illich, 1970). You would do well as a student leader to challenge the social control mechanisms so intimately tied to formal education, otherwise you are your own drawback. Take note of the dulling effect of the general middle-class aspiration of just obtaining a degree to achieve good employment. This aspiration, if devoid of critical thought, is detrimental to the emancipatory urge so prevalent today in the student protests. Differently put, the docile student who just wants to obtain a degree and leave university is the perfect example of how certain governments would like their citizens to behave. Some forms of education outside the classroom, such as on the streets of the university whilst calling for free higher education, are terrifying to a state intent on keeping its citizens non-questioning.

Conscious student leaders would allow for extra-structural learning, such as through online courses and attendance of informal talks, so as not to be overly dismissive of potential allies from outside your structure who, for example, did not participate in this formal leadership conference, e.g. *Open Stellenbosch*. Opportunities for co-curricular learning are offered by your university, such as study-abroad, university exchanges, dual-institution degrees and internships. Such opportunities should be taken advantage of by student leaders but be mindful not to become domesticated into an uncritical, overly grateful state of being. Your task as a leader is to grow, not to seek out opportunities just to satisfy your own need for travel or pampering at the university's cost. Remain vigilant about the agendas that sometimes accompany the largesse of sponsors. It will be valuable to keep this argument in mind during discussions on decolonisation because colonisation itself relied strongly on the building of a servile class of educated people who would keep the regime intact.

Be aware that old institutions like universities have strong *habitus*; that invisible social power which directs the behaviour of people within that space without them even being aware of why they behave the way they do (Keet & Nel, 2016). An obvious example is the unquestioned wearing of jackets of office by most SRC members or the obvious absence of open car boots blaring music; all this in a concentrated space of young adults. Who told you to wear those jackets or who told you that it is not acceptable to play music in such a manner? This *habitus* will not change within your one year of office. A more sensible goal could rather be to use the system effectively for the improvement of your constituency's lives. At least you will be able to leave office with a tangible set of achievements and non-achievements, as opposed to a depressed feeling of general failure.

Be wary of identity politics. This is actually really simple: my own identity becomes more strongly defined the more I exclude certain characteristics (Manganyi, 1981). With such strong exclusionary identification comes less appreciation for the value that others might add. In higher education, which is one of the most diverse spatial concentrations of young people, such identity solidifications can only be toxic. A simple explanatory example will suffice: if you are not in the march against racism, you must be a racist (even if poor communication by the SRC did not allow you to change your schedule). In this example the identity of the activist is intimately tied to the ability to participate in all forms of activism such as a march. All those who do not participate in such actions fall outside of the identity marker of activism, and hence can be dismissed as opposed to the aims of the action, irrespective of valid reasons for being absent.

The last point I make is on *Decolonisation* of universities, a concept you will grapple with further in the break-away sessions. Getting stuck on the 1960s type of Africanisation, aptly criticised by Franz Fanon as a ruse for corruption and too much inward-looking, is not helpful (Mbembe, 2016). Unfortunately some of the calls for decolonisation today carry the same meaning. Mbembe (2016:34) traces Ngugi wa Thiong'o's concept of decolonisation as more productive since it defines decolonisation as "seeing ourselves clearly", or re-centering of our continent. However, this understanding does not exclude the rest of the world from the decolonisation project on the continent. In fact, Mbembe (2016) is open to dialogue amongst different systems of knowledge creation and knowledge usage. Narrow ethnocentric and ideological notions cannot serve the decolonisation project

well. Decolonisation must also mean out-of-country and out-of-continent experiences at the same time that intra-continental links are strengthened, especially by South Africa, given our apartheid-imposed isolation and our current-day superiority-complex-imposed tentativeness about intra-continental links.

With these few words I wish you a fruitful conference. Thank you.

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