



Colloquium

Changes in patterns of student governance

12 March 2019

The period 2014 to 2019 has seen a significant shift in patterns of student governance and student engagement at universities and colleges across South Africa. The shift became evident in 2015 and 2016 with a wave of student protests on multiple campuses. These protests were largely focused on issues of 'decolonisation' (e.g. #RhodesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosch) and the cost of studying (#FeesMustFall), together with a number of related issues such as the call for the insourcing of support staff. With respect to #FeesMustFall, ongoing protests, culminating in a march to the Union Buildings in October 2015, led to the decision that there would be a zero per cent increase in university fees for 2016, and a Presidential Commission was established to investigate the feasibility of free higher education. However, student protests continued in early 2016, and re-ignited later in the year when the Minister of Higher Education and Training announced a fee increase of 8% for 2017 (limited to households with an income above R600 000 p.a). In December 2017, then-President Zuma announced free higher education for students from households with an annual income of up to R350 000, to be implemented from the 2018 academic year on an incremental basis. In addition, a number of universities embarked on extensive reviews of their curricula and revisited transformation and language policies.

Despite these developments, problems with the implementation of new policies, slow progress, and challenges with the administration of the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), combined with campus-specific matters, meant that student protests on a number of campuses continued through 2017/18, although not on the same scale as in 2015/16. It appears that the concept of 'co-operative governance' which was intended to characterise university governance has been under strain and may need to be reinvigorated.

This is not to say that there were no student protests prior to 2015. On the contrary, students have protested for years, particularly at rural and historically black universities, (but largely out of sight of mainstream media) about matters of university fees and financial exclusion. However, in the past, issues of this nature would generally have been driven by the respective Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and/or the formal student political organisations. Many matters would have been confined to SRC engagement with university leadership. The 2015/16 protests, however, demonstrated a change in this organisational dimension of student governance and a rise in widespread student activism, together with some dissatisfaction with student leaders. The issues went beyond matters that could be addressed at the level of the SRC and university leadership, and required either national intervention or changes in the inner workings of academia at academic programme and department levels. Moreover, the protests were characterised by heightened levels of violence and vandalism of university property. University leadership was uncertain how to engage constructively with the protestors, who were not readily committing to

negotiated 'deals'. In many cases, the university leaders eventually turned to private security companies to 'manage' student unrest. In 2018, the effects of the violence on both students and staff continue to affect campus life and interactions. Finally, there is also a discernible shift in the pattern of partisan student representation. On many campuses, different student political parties have come to the fore and SRC elections have become more volatile and their outcomes less certain.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is organising the colloquium, which will be held in Pretoria on 12 March 2019, exact venue will be communicated once confirmed. The colloquium will include approximately seven presenters and fifty participants. Presentations and papers will address a range of matters: the changing student political landscape, structural changes in student governance and the effect on university leadership and governance, the meanings of academic freedom, the implications of policy and governance changes for institutional autonomy, and matters of institutional culture and governance culture. The intention is to publish reviewed papers in the CHE's journal, *Kagisano*. Through the colloquium and publication, the CHE intends to stimulate further reflection and debate on the implications of the changing patterns of student governance, to interrogate the change in relationships within the academic community - between students, university managements, academics - and to feed into discussions on the most appropriate forms of student representation.

Those interested in attending the Colloquium can register by clicking on this link ([Registration - Colloquium: Changes in patterns of student governance](#)). For further details you can contact Ntokozo Bhengu (Bhengu.N@che.ac.za), telephone 012 349 3885.

Thank you.