

Chapter 15

Student Governance and the Academic Minefield During COVID–19 Lockdown in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Since 1997, the ordinary students at South African universities have depended on the SRC to be at the forefront of student advocacy in relation to resources to support their academic experiences. The onset of the lockdown on the eve of 26th March 2020 had an unprecedented effect on student life, with a change of student governance from cohesion to isolation. Adopting a snowball sampling methodology, 15 students registered at various South African universities were interviewed via WhatsApp about the support they received from their SRC during the COVID-19 lockdown. The impact of the lockdown on student governance is examined through the lens of ordinary students. Findings suggest that the surge to technology-based modes of interaction and self-regulated learning had a resultant effect of a highly compromised academic experience, even though some were able to adapt to online learning. Adjusted approaches to student governance are inevitable as the coronavirus continues to manifest.

INTRODUCTION

It's almost a quarter century since the promulgation of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 (the Act) which ushered in student participation in university governance structures in South Africa. This milestone was to ensure students are provided the voice in addressing issues that impinge on their academic access, progress and success. The inclusion of students was formalized through university statutes, which aligned directly with the Act. Section 26(2)(e) of the Act, incorporates the Student Representative Council (SRC)

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in the governance structures of public higher education institutions, which must elect the relevant office bearers (section 26(3)) as determined by the institutional statutes.

The motivation to conduct this study was largely influenced by my professional role. At the time of conceptualising the study, I worked as the Executive Director in the office of the Vice Chancellor in one of the universities in South Africa. In this role, I fulfilled an oversight role on the student affairs portfolio, which in turn had the direct interface with the SRC members. I was informed by past student leaders that students who were interested in joining the SRC paid attention to their academic performance in the year preceding their nominations simply to meet the academic threshold necessary to be legible. This information is verified from the stipulations of most if not all SRC constitutions which state students are obliged to achieve on average a 60% pass rate of the courses they enrolled for in the year preceding their nomination to contest for the SRC. The constitutions are silent about further academic obligations by the SRC whilst in office and therefore compromised their commitment as exemplary leaders to the rest of the student population. Du Toit (2000) however, argues that the academic activities of the SRC were compromised the moment they assumed their positions in office. Although this view may have substance, it seems contradictory to the central purpose of these institutions being to provide the academic development opportunities for students. Within the context of existing socio-economic challenges in South Africa, there remains a need to augment the development of student leadership to be active and relevant role-models to the rest of the students. The interest is further amplified by the urge to influence policy-makers to understand the experiences of students Higher Education Institutions (HEI) through their lens.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived student governance value to students' academic experiences. The role of student leaders in enhancing the experience and ultimately the academic success is examined through the lens of the ordinary student. Questions posed in the study were deliberately open-ended to allow participants to share their lived experiences (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003) in online learning and their perceptions about the support they received from the SRC in relation to their academic progress during the lockdown restrictions. Specifically, the primary research questions were:

- Q1: How does the SRC's participation in governance benefit your academic aspirations?
- Q2: How were your studies and general student life affected by the forced relocation from campus to home during Covid-19?
- Q3: How did you cope whilst studying online from home?
- Q4: How did the SRC assist you with the challenges you faced during the lockdown?
- Q5: How would you see the role of the SRC post Covid-19 in assisting your studies?

DELIMITATION OF STUDY

Maree and van der Westhuizen (2009) affirm that the delimitations of a study are deliberately decided upon by the researcher to define the boundaries, parameters and focus areas of the research. Studies that have been conducted on student governance have tended to focus on the institutional reasons for

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