

# Student power in twenty-first century Africa: The character and role of student organising

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## Introduction: #FeesMustFall

In March 2015, a wave of student protests started at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, with the purpose to 'decolonise' the University and rid it of offensive colonial symbols such as the statue to Cecil John Rhodes. Media coverage of the protests both nationally and internationally was extensive, including front-page coverage by all major local media houses, as well as articles in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, reports by BBC, Reuters, MSN online, and last but not least *UniversityWorldNews*. After nearly a month of protests, sit-ins, teach-ins, seminars and relentless meetings, the University's Senate and Council both agreed that the statute would be removed and matters of institutional culture and the Africanisation of academic staff and curriculum receive reinvigorated attention.

Following the removal of the statue from the university campus on 9 April 2015, the #RhodesMustFall movement, known mainly by its Twitter handle, became an inspiration to students in other South African universities, which asked themselves if at UCT it was the Rhodes statue that had to fall, what 'must fall' in their respective contexts? On a number of campuses, discussions between student leaders and university management began on matters of institutional culture and symbols, the 'whiteness' of South African higher education and its transformation to make it more responsive to, inclusive and representative of the black population. In historically Afrikaans-tuition universities, the question of language policy and its impact gained heightened attention, especially at the University of Stellenbosch with the #OpenStellies campaign against the use of Afrikaans as university language, the violent #Luister protests at the Elsenburg Agricultural College, and in a more formalised manner, the far-reaching language review process at the University of the Free State. Acknowledging the need for a national discussion on matters of higher education transformation, the Ministry of Higher Education and Training invited all higher education stakeholders to a summit which issued the *Durban Statement on Transformation in Higher Education* on 17 October 2015. The statement shows that by October, the primary focus had shifted: while matters of institutional culture and curriculum transformation were still on the agenda, the top three resolutions for the immediate term and medium term all related to questions of higher education funding, student fees, and financial aid for students (DHET 2015, 2-3).

Students' demands and responses in relation to the statement were vigorous. Student protests over proposed increases in tuition fees started at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg on a large scale only days before the summit. They escalated nation-wide in what may be seen as a response to the summit statement. Three days after the summit, *Eyewitness News* reported: 'SA

Varsities Brought to a Standstill' (Sesant, Kekana & Gia 2015). The immediate demand of students was to halt tuition fee increases and take up the government on its erstwhile promise to provide free education. The national student activism became known as #FeesMustFall; like its inspiration, #RhodesMustFall it proved extraordinarily successful. In addition to campus shutdowns across the country, students mobilised huge protests at the gates of Parliament in Cape Town during the Minister of Finance's 2015 mini budget speech on October 21, and another demonstration at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the seat of government, two days later. Within a week of the summit and just over ten days since the beginning of protests at Wits, the South African government, in a meeting with vice-chancellors, chairs of councils, members of Students' Representative Councils (SRCs) and national student organisations, agreed to the student demands and committed to a 0% fee increase for 2016 (Presidency, 2015) along with providing additional subsidies to public universities to the order of Rand 3 billion (GBP 142 million). In addition, students on various campuses negotiated additional concessions from university managements such as an end to the outsourcing of support services.

The South African student activism known mainly as hashtag #FeesMustFall had several typical characteristics of internet age social movements (Castells 2015), student protests witnessed across the globe since the start of the global financial crisis in 2009 (Brooks, Byford & Sela 2015), and new characteristics for a student movement in the South African context (Cohen 2015). It represented a diffusion of small but effective and emotively-charged protest movement starting with #RhodesMustFall at UCT into a palette of institutional protest movements with localised student grievances known by campus-specific Twitter hashtags such as #OpenStellies, #WitsFeesWillFall, #UPrising, #UFSShutdown, #SteynMustFall, and so forth, which eventually calvanised nationally around the common opposition to tuition fee increases, student loan debt, and the unaffordability and inaccessibility of higher education to the poor. As indicated by its naming, it used social media, and particularly Twitter, not only as conveyers of information but effectively as decentralised organising platforms, in addition to various Facebook pages and groups, WhatsApp groups and YouTube clips. Moreover, Cohen (2015) argues that within the South African context, #FeesMustFall represented a new kind of activist politics with respect to at least three characteristics: It was non-partisan in that "formal political parties were specifically ejected"; it was a multicultural, multiracial and multiclass movement; and, it was both "national and largely leaderless". However, rather than non-partisan it is more accurate to rather call it multipartisan, in that frequently the full range of political parties or rather, party-aligned national student political organisations were acknowledged; and simultaneously it cannot be said that it was leaderless but rather that as an internet age network movement, its organisational centre was a virtual one, linking highly localised and in most cases formal leadership structures, such as campus SRCs and the branch leadership of national student organisations, into a multinodal virtual network which only rarely issued in a physical meeting beyond campus-level, such as the meeting at the Union Buildings.

Conceptually speaking, activist movements such as the 2015 #FeesMustFall in South Africa must be distinguished from formally constituted representative student organisations. Certainly, both serve as platforms from which student politics is collectively organised. However a first distinction is that formal student organisations are "membership organisations" while activist student movements are "broader entities, typically consisting of several organisations with no formal individual membership" (Badat 1999, 22). In the seminal writing of Philip Altbach, an activist student movement is defined by the sense of common cause that students have in "a combination of

emotional response and intellectual conviction” (1966, 180; cf. Luescher-Mamashela 2015). In addition, Gill and de Fronzo (2009: 207-9) add a social change orientation as a criterion arguing that student movements represent a collective effort of “a large number of students to either bring about or prevent change”.

Conversely, formally constituted student organisations tend to be more enduring organisations, including a distinct membership, and they come in various types. In this chapter, our focus is specifically on *representative* student organisations, while there is of course a rich tapestry of discipline-specific, sports, religious, recreational and cultural student organisations that operate throughout student life. Representative student organisations seek to play a political role and are differentiated in a number of ways: They may be partisan and thus aligned to a political party or non-partisan; they may operate at supranational, national or institutional level of the higher education system (e.g. the All Africa Student Union; the National Association of Nigerian Students; the Makerere University Student Guild); they may be freely created associations or legally established with a statutory role in higher education governance; they may have voluntary memberships or, as is often in the latter case, include the student body of an institution or the national student body statutorily as members. Student organisations with compulsory or statutory affiliation of an entire student body represent therefore a peculiar type. They typically go by the name of student union, student guild or student association; they are officially recognised to represent the student body in consultative and decision-making structures of higher education. At campus level the elected members of union or guild forming a SRC or the like, typically constitute the student government, while the executives of national student associations often form part of policy networks and formal sector bodies. (Klemenčič 2012; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014)

Against the headline capturing quality and impact of effervescent activist movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, the significance of representative student associations lies in their enduring nature and their ongoing political engagement in higher education policy networks to defend student interests. Many African student organisations such as the *Association des Etudiants de Rumuri* in Burundi, the National Union of Ghana Students, and the South African Students Congress, to mention but a few, can trace their histories back decades to student organising in the 1960s (e.g. Badat 1999; Bianchini 2016; Birantamije 2016; Gyampo, Debrah & Aggrey-Darkoh 2016).

In this chapter, our purpose is to provide a systematic overview of the emerging character and role of representative student organisations in national and higher education politics in a selection of African countries: Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. We pursue this task in three ways: historically, conceptually and empirically. We first provide a broad overview of trends in African student politics in the twenty-first century, arguing that broad structuring factors *inter alia* related to the social and economic upswing in Africa in the 2000s, the effects of the political liberalisation and re-institution of multi-party politics of the 1990s, large-scale expansion and restructuring of higher education on the continent, and the ICT revolution, all had a massive impact on student life in general and student political organising in particular. They show that the argument by Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume (2014) regarding the significance of macropolitical factors for understanding student politics in twentieth century Africa needs revisiting and why contemporary African student politics appears “fragmented” (Oanda 2016) and involves new forms of activism and formal representation. At the conceptual level we draw on earlier work by Klemenčič (2012; 2014) to present a classification of national student organisations,

which was first applied to European and later to international student organisations, and analyse the results of a survey among higher education experts regarding the characteristics of African student organisations.

## **African Student Politics in Perspective**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African students occupied in many respects a privileged position in national politics. Given their elite status in society and credentials as spokespersons of the masses, African students' extra-parliamentary oppositional politics enjoyed for the greatest part being a legitimate part of the political order (Altbach 1984; Munene 2003; Byaruhanga 2006). The lack of autonomy and dependence on government of most universities meant that the state of higher education was largely a mirror of the political and economic state of African nations; hence, students' political attention was acutely concentrated on national politics rather than on higher education. As it has been argued,

*Political development and economic fundamentals thus provide more than a mere context for understanding student politics in Africa in the twentieth century; even where there was provision for the representation of students in institutional governance structures, the main political terrain of students' struggles, typically organised in national student unions, was necessarily the political system and policies emanating from that level. (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014, 504-505)*

This situation started to change in the course of the 1990s. Stated as categorically, the argument that macro-political and economic developments provide a sufficient lens for understanding student politics in Africa does not hold for contemporary student politics. The new pattern of African student politics in the twenty-first century must rather be understood in its complexity also taking into account other factors, particularly those related directly to changes in higher education and higher education governance, and new technologies enabling large-scale student organising. Thus, in keeping with other analysts of student politics we argue that the periodisation of African student politics needs to be amended with a new period starting in the early 2000s. We therefore also agree with the argument that contemporary student politics in Africa ought to be seen in its historical perspective given the fast-paced development and expansion of African higher education since the achievement of independence in the 1960s along with the massive socio-political, economic and cultural changes that have been witnessed across the continent in the last half century.

### ***Historical trends in student politics in Africa and beyond***

There have been various attempts at periodising the history of student politics in Africa. Depending on when the periodisations were constructed and what the focus of the analysis was, different authors have organised and labelled a variety of time lines. Most recently, Bianchini (2016) has proposed a periodisation of student politics focused on francophone West Africa. He highlights the important socio-political role that students have played in the anti-colonial struggle from the early 1950s to the early 1960s; an age of student opposition to neo-colonialism in newly independent countries from the late of 1960s to the 1980s; and the anti-Structural Adjustment protests and pro-democratic struggles of the 1990s in his timeline (Bianchini 2016). Oanda's (2016) periodisation of student participation in African higher education governance focuses on anglophone East and West Africa. His timeline starts after independence with an era of university nationalisation and student

radicalisation in the 1970s; an era of protracted conflict focused on struggles against the anti-welfare and austerity policies of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and the structural decay of African higher education during the 1980s and 1990s; and a most recent post-1990s era of fragmentation of student politics (Oanda 2016). Similarly, the periodisation of African student politics proposed by Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume (2014) starts in the post-independence period (1960-1985) where across the continent students were preoccupied with matters of national self-rule and democracy (and, in the case of South Africa, opposition to apartheid). Following the work of Federici, Caffentzis, and Alidou (2000), they argue that the period was dominated by students seeking “[to prevent] the new African governments from capitulating to foreign interests” (Federici et al, 2000, 91 in Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014: 502). At the same time, demands for the Africanisation of staff and curricula and increasingly calls for a formal representation of students in the administration of their universities predominated students’ political agenda in the educational sphere.

There is broad agreement on the impact of neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes on student politics in Africa across all periodisations as signalling the start of a second post-independence period (Federici et al 2000; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014; Bianchini 2016; Oanda 2016). Following the near collapse of many African economies starting in the late 1970s into the 1980s, country after country was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for financial assistance. Such assistance was then tied to conditionalities of economic and political liberalisation, including the imposition of structural adjustment. SAPs introduced a number of new features to African higher education including an end to free higher education and the introduction of cost-sharing policies, the introduction of tuition fees and various other kinds of levies, the reduction or withdrawal of education subsidies, along with the privatisation of various services including student accommodation, catering, and support services (Munene 2003, 120–21; Wangenge-Ouma 2012). The impact of years of economic downturn and SAP-imposed underfunding of higher education was further exacerbated by the pressure to expand enrolments, given the successes of post-independence health and education policies across the continent which meant that student enrolments in higher education grew rapidly. This put yet additional pressure on a university infrastructure that was originally built for a tiny elite, on the quality of the teaching, learning and research environment, and the conditions of service of academics. Overcrowding became pervasive, and the basic physical learning environment including libraries, classrooms and laboratories deteriorated fast (Mazrui 1995; Federici et al 2000; Munene 2003; Byaruhanga 2006).

Thus, in the course of the period from 1985 to 2000, students turned universities into sites of struggle against austerity and political and economic mismanagement, reaching out to and aligning themselves with other formations of civil society, including trade unions and women’s groups in their demands for democratisation (Badat 1999; Federici et al 2000; Munene 2003). Across the continent, African students came to be one of the forces that brought about Africa’s ‘second liberation’ in the 1990s (Mazrui 1995). Hence, fundamental macro-political and macro-economic issues preoccupied student activists who were sparked into action by their own experience of basic ‘bread and butter issues’, articulating their grievances more or less consistently in terms of principled concerns such as the right to education, social justice, democracy and self-determination (Mazrui 1995). Whereas students in anglophone Africa were the first to adopt this pattern in the mid- to late 1980s, they were followed by students in francophone Africa in the early and mid-1990s and Southern Africa in the mid- to late 1990s. By the close of the century, student politics in Africa

therefore came to reflect largely this broad pattern (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014). Against this, the 2000s represent the start of a new period in student politics in Africa.

### ***The global and the local: African student politics in the twenty-first century***

At the beginning of this chapter we have referred to the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa as an internet age social movement with certain unique characteristics. As argued, the movement's medium-term advocacy for free higher education and immediate opposition to fee-increases illustrates a typical characteristic of contemporary student movements globally: the defence of student interests cannot be separated from the broader movement against the neoliberal restructuring of higher education and global capitalism itself (Callinicos 2006; Klemenčič 2014). The rise of student movements struggling against all aspects of the commercialisation, commodification and privatisation of higher education - whereby the most salient issues have included increases in tuition fees, decreasing public funding for education, the increasing influence of business interests on HE, and the casualisation and proletarianisation of academics – has been observed worldwide (Klemenčič 2014). The neo-liberal 'credentials' of these developments are widely acknowledged; meanwhile discourses of student organising in this context allows for ambiguous interpretations (Brooks et al 2015). It may be astonishing to the international observer that the antecedents to the latter-day global student activism against austerity measures imposed in the aftermath of the 2009 financial crisis can be found in student struggles against neo-liberally inspired SAPs in Africa. The policy experiments first carried out in the developing world as laboratories of neoliberal policymakers are producing the same student political effects at home as they did abroad! While contemporary observers of the anti-SAP student protests between 1985 and 2000 argued that the new African student movement was "an integral part of the international movement against the escalating cost of education" (Federici in Federici et al 2000, 89; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014), they missed a number of characteristics that we would argue distinguish them from the more recent activist movements in Africa of the 2000s, such as #FeesMustFall and other internet age oppositional movements against neoliberalism.

Our argument here is that student politics in Africa in the twenty-first century can be understood in terms of at least four broad structuring factors. Firstly, the impact of the political liberalisation and the re-institution of multi-party politics of the 1990s on student politics in Africa can be seen most strikingly in three regards. On the one hand, the democratisation of national politics has deeply eroded the legitimacy of students to act as 'extra-parliamentary opposition' and the activist 'spokespersons of the masses'. This role has now come to be claimed by opposition parties. On the other hand, there has also been an increasing institutionalisation of student representation – however partial and co-opted – in both national and institutional higher education decision-making structures, on the back of less authoritarian and more liberal and pluralist national political cultures overall and a modernisation in the governance and management of universities (see below). Especially at institutional level, governance reforms providing for an inclusion of student leaders in university decision-making have often followed a politically-realist recognition that an inclusion of students in formal decision-making and responsiveness to student demands prevents an escalation of conflicts as well as leading to greater leadership effectiveness (Luescher-Mamashela 2013; cf. Macharia 2015; Oni & Adetoro 2015; Oanda 2016). Implicated in both developments is the rise of multiparty politics in Africa, and the role that political parties have come to play in student politics,

which Mugume (2015) argues has so far had an ambiguous impact on student interest representation (also see, Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014).

The macro-political developments across the continent have been accompanied into the 2000s by a large-scale economic upswing in Africa, due in large parts to rising commodity prices, which have improved overall living conditions and enabled some public re-investment in and a revitalisation of African higher education. Especially noted are the building of many new polytechnics and specialist universities in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria. This expansion is thwarted however, by the much more incisive institutional massification that started with the SAP-induced privatisation of higher education that continued through the 2000s, initially caused by the institution of cost-sharing and admission of private or fee-paying students in public universities and the mushrooming of (mostly low-quality, vocationally focused) private higher education providers. On the one hand, this has led to a bifurcation of the student bodies in public universities into fee-paying and government-sponsored students who often have respectively different priorities and interests. Increased access has also produced a trend towards gradual massification, even if most national higher education systems in Africa may better be called “overcrowded elite systems” of higher education (Cloete & Maassen 2015, 6). All these developments have increased the number of students in technical, vocational and professional programmes and altogether brought students into African higher education that cannot afford to do politics or are simply disinclined.

The broad trend has been to de-legitimise large-scale student protests unless they specifically address etudialist issues like tuition fees and student funding. A protest movement like #FeesMustFall can only mobilise broadly and gain as wide legitimacy as it did by being multipartisan and etudialist. Moreover, where such activism occurs, reference needs to be made to the impact of the rapid spread of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) across the continent in the 2000s (Luescher-Mamashela 2015). In the African context where telephony has been largely the preserve of government departments, urban elites and multinationals, and where public media and broadcasting was tightly controlled by national governments, the development of the internet, the spread of cellular phones at first and now smart phones and tablets has had a much more spectacular impact on access to information and communication than even the word ‘ICT Revolution’ can capture. Its impact on student organising in Africa has been no less dramatic. Hence, it is in middle-income developing countries such as Tunisia and South Africa where the political impact of ICTs is being felt strongest, starting with the first wave of internet age social movements in the Arab Spring (Castells 2015) to the recent #FeesMustFall activism in South Africa.

Conversely, it has been argued that formal student representative organisations have gained ground in twenty-first century higher education politics because the underlying argument is that the state serves the capitalist interest and seeks to ‘co-opt’ student associations into state policymaking organs to make them act ‘as states surrogates’ and exercise social control over their members (Higgins 1985, 352). We will respond to this argument in the African context by examining the emerging character and role of formal national student associations in national and higher education politics using the conceptual framework for classifying national student associations developed by Klemenčič (2012).

## **Student organising on the national level**

National student representative organisations - which usually take the form of a national association or union – are politically significant in the higher education polity and in national politics because of their claim to the representation of all students in a country. They are the umbrella platforms for representative student associations – unions or councils – that operate within higher education institutions. It is these member organisations that give national student associations life and purpose, when they collectively decide to cooperate and to institutionalise this cooperation by means of joint governing structures. Their symbolic power in African politics resides also in the historical legacies of these associations in the social transformation of their countries. As discussed earlier, student representatives have played a role in social movements since pre-Independence times and their leaders frequently became key political figures or elites in other sectors of their respective countries (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014). The ties between national student associations and the political structures run deep and the entanglements between student representatives and various political actors are widespread yet not unproblematic. National student unions are a potent political force. They have strong mobilisation potential, which can play decisively in national elections or as oppositional force to government policies. It then does not come as a surprise that governments and political parties at best try to deal with national student unions with caution and at worst try to subject them to their control (Mugume 2015). Like in many other parts in the world that have undergone democratisation, African national student associations have to cope with the legacies of the past government-controlled student organisations and the norms, values and conventions they left within higher education systems, including system of patronage that have characterised politics in a number of countries on the continent. Associated with these legacies is the challenge for contemporary African student associations to uphold institutional autonomy, which is having free capacity to act and being independent from external interference, be that from public authorities or university leadership in the case of institutional student organisations. Institutional autonomy is crucial for the associations to preserve representational legitimacy in the eyes of the student body, public authorities, and the public at large.

While there are undoubtedly commonalities across countries when it comes to national systems of student representation, there are also significant historical differences between countries and broad regions across the continent, particularly due to the inheritance of francophone, anglophone and lusophone traditions in African higher education. While path dependencies through historical legacies and arrangements of student representation offer some explanation as to the organisational nature of contemporary national student association, they cannot paint the full picture. Following the work of Schmitter and Streek (1999), the argument here is that the emergence and structure of national student association can be much better explained if we are to consider the constellations of their members and their political interests (i.e. the logic of membership) and the conditions of the processes of political influence especially in the areas of higher education and student social welfare (i.e. the logic of influence) (Klemenčič 2012, 2014; Jungblut & Weber 2012). National student associations tend to adapt their organisational structures rationally to enable them to better serve their members and to perform their representative function. Changes in the external circumstances, such as rules on how they recruit members or in the availability of funding or in the structures of public authorities of policy networks in which they operate can all bring about changes in the governance – polity, politics and policies - of national student associations (Klemenčič 2012, 2014).



In ideal terms we can speak of two types of national student associations: as interest groups and as student movement-organisations (ibid.). The former implies that there is an – explicit or implicit - exchange relationship between state and student associations, in which student association can supply important resources (e.g. expertise, legitimatisation of policy outcomes, social control of its members) in exchange for influence. Student associations as interest groups have professionally-organised structures and use lobbying, expert services and political advocacy as their mode of political action. In contrast, the conception of student associations as social movement organisations depicts the tendency of these associations towards contentious politics and protests as a form of claim-making. Also the structures of these associations tend to be more network-like with weak organisational resources, without substantial funding and typically a transversal political agenda.

The two organisational models are related to the differences in student organising at national level which reflect the extent to which the state interferes legislatively in steering the systems of student organising; whether it has granted a monopoly of representation to one or to several associations or to none, and whether the state has created formal structures and processes for students to be represented in national policy making. The likelihood that national student organisations will be more interest group-like is somewhat higher in cases where their existence, purpose and terms are stipulated in higher education legislation. Such provisions make it easier for student associations based at higher education institutions to come together and form a national association. It is most likely for national associations to develop an interest group organisational model, however, in the countries where the state has made formal provision for student representation in national bodies and policy processes. Where such provisions do not exist, student representatives have to negotiate mechanisms for voicing their positions with the government, and the state-student relations tend to be more volatile and prone to contentious politics. If no formal mechanisms for student representation in national policymaking exist, and if in addition government refuses to recognise a national student association, the organisation is likely to adopt more student movement characteristics. However, the story is not as simple. If there are formal provisions for student representation, but the national student association is perceived to be controlled by the government, alternative associations will emerge with characteristics of student movement organisations.

This section aims to investigate the differences and similarities in national systems of student representation in a sample of African countries by exploring two sets of questions: How students as collective body are organised on national level, and how students' interests are intermediated into public policymaking. We proceed with these two questions in turn. Drawing on the results of a survey conducted among experts of African student politics in 2014, we present here an integrated and systematic analysis of the emerging character and role of national student associations in national and higher education politics in a selection of ten African countries. The survey was conducted with the members of the student representation in Africa competency network who participated in the 2014 symposium *Student Representation in Higher Education Governance in Africa* in Cape Town. Responses were received from members in Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Our analysis of student organising in Africa is integrated insofar as we present the data collected as part of the survey and other data along with the detailed discussion of the framework.

### ***National systems of student representation***

The polity of student organising on national level can comprise of one, several or no national representative student association. This distinction defines the various types of national systems of student representation: corporatist or neo-corporatist, pluralist and statist (Klemenčič 2012).

In the corporatist model, there is effectively one national student representative association (or a limited number of student associations), which is recognised as such by the state and granted privileged access to public policy processes. For a corporatist relationship to exist it means that the state recognises a student association and formally or informally involves it in public policy processes. In this model, national student associations effectively enter into an exchange relationship with the government: they seek to influence policy processes and may also seek financial support from the government; in return they offer expertise and information, legitimacy to policy decisions, and a measure of control over their members. The main difference between corporatist and neo-corporatist systems is in the autonomy of the national student association. In corporatist systems, the autonomy of the national student association is visibly curbed: either the association has been created by the government or is controlled by the government, obtains direct financing from the government as its main or only funding source, the student representatives are appointed or approved by government officials and so on. In the neo-corporatist model, the national student association is recognised (formally or as a matter of course) as legitimate representative of the national student body, but the government does not interfere with its functioning. Institutional autonomy of national student associations refers here to positive freedoms of the elected student representatives to take strategic and operational decisions on behalf of the association and govern the association in absence of interference by the government, political parties or others (Klemenčič 2014). The (neo-)corporatist model also applies if there are several national associations, which are recognised by the government as a representative body of students, but these associations are either functionally differentiated (e.g., one representing university students and the other students in the non-university sector, or one representing students in public universities and the other students in private universities), or territorially differentiated (e.g., in federal systems where different associations would represent student associations from different regions). Such arrangement may be based on an agreement achieved between student leaders and the state, or simply be an unquestioned tradition, or formalised in national legislation.

Unlike in traditional corporatist systems, student associations in neo-corporatist arrangements are involved in the policy process in a voluntary way to supplement rather than displace liberal democratic politics. The student associations typically have an exclusive right to nominate student representatives to permanent governmental consultative structures (such as a ministerial advisory body, a quality assurance board or student loan board) and are also invited to participate in ad hoc working committees and commissions. Hence, such organisations not only possess significant legitimacy resources and formal channels of influence, but typically they also have sustained financing and well-established institutional structures. The latter result from the status the association enjoys in the national political arena. If institutional unions feel that they can make a difference in national policymaking through their national association, they are more willing to support it and engage in it. While student organising within higher education institutions tends to be stipulated in higher education legislation or in statutory documents of higher education institutions, student organising on national level often does feature explicitly in higher education legislation

(other than a general reference to 'a student' or 'students' in the membership stipulations of a particular body). The decision to organise a national representation, thus, lies solely in the hands of the constituent university organisations. These are the ones that have to come together and find agreement on the purposes and objectives, structures and means and terms of the national association. Despite the general belief that having a united student voice on national level to speak to the public authority can be beneficial for the defence of student rights and interests, the task at hand is far from easy.

In view of this conceptualisations, at least formally, we do not witness corporatist systems of student representation in the democratised African countries, although these certainly existed in the past. However, the question of institutional autonomy of national student associations especially concerning informal relations between student representatives and government officials is a sensitive question that needs further exploration. Our survey shows that formally there exist several neo-corporatist national systems of student representations: Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. This effectively means that there exist national student associations which are recognised by the state as such and are autonomous – at least formally in terms of legal status, financing, and governing structures and processes - in their operations. The Uganda National Students Association (UNSA) is a registered “establishment of Student Councils in post-primary institutions” in accordance with the *Uganda Education Act* of 2008, Section 30. Most institutional guild leadership structures, which are institutional statutory bodies, affiliate with UNSA, and the association is run by a committee of students who are democratically elected. In Burundi, a national student union has existed since 1964 and it currently goes by the name of *Fraternité des Etudiants de Rumuri* (FER, Brotherhood of Students of Rumuri). As its name indicates, it is based at the University of Bujumbura but has historically seen itself as representing all Burundi students. The National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), albeit registered with the government and enjoying considerable public and government support (including an official secretariat and sponsorship for leaders) and media attention, operates mainly as a student movement organisation. The National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS), which also represents secondary school students, is formally registered with the National Youth Authority. It remains formally an autonomous structure even though it receives indirectly resources from the national government (e.g. a donation of office space). Although there exist several national partisan student organisations, NUGS is the one which is recognised as the representative body of students and has seats in various higher education bodies (Gyampo 2013). In Cameroon, the national-level *Association pour la défense des droits des étudiants du Cameroun* (ADDEC - Association for the defence of rights of students in Cameroon) was started by students in 2004. It operates mainly as a student movement; albeit one that has been influential in improving the conditions of students by mobilising massive student strikes and protests itself and negotiating on behalf of students with public authorities. Our survey indicates that ADDEC typically is included in major negotiations between (mostly institutional) student leaders and national ministry officials in times of crisis; generally contact between the Ministry of higher education and student leadership is, however, only ad hoc and informal, and typically a response to protests.

Neo-corporatist system would also apply in cases of countries where the existing national student association is dormant, or there is no national student association, and the student representatives from one university – typically the national flagship university in the capital – play the representative role for the general student body in the national policy arena. One such case is perhaps Kenya,

where the Kenyan National University Students' Union shifts between periods of activity and inactivity and the voice of Kenyan students is heard most often from students in the capital city, at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. The same has been the case in Botswana, where the formation of the Student Union of Botswana (BUS) was announced in 2013, but only got off ground in 2015 with the election of an interim board. BUS is hosted by the flagship University of Botswana's SRC. Conversely, the more prominent Botswana Student Network is not a political representative student organisation; rather it offers services to secondary and tertiary students in collaboration with the Ministry.

The pluralist system of national student representation rests on the assumption that political power is fragmented and dispersed and therefore no association has a monopoly of representation vis-a-vis the government. There may be several associations, which are similar in their objectives and function, and compete with each other for access to public policy processes and for any resources (e.g. project funding) granted by the state. In other words, the government recognises that there are representative student associations and is willing to involve them in public policy processes – either formally or informally -, but it does not grant a monopoly of representation to only one as in the (neo-) corporatist model. Instead, the government either meets with all student associations at the same time or negotiates with them collectively or meets with them separately, but it does not continuously privilege one over others. In pluralist systems competition and animosity between the various national student associations is frequent (and ought to be expected); after all, if these associations would agree they would have likely built one national umbrella body. In pluralist systems the principle *divide et impera* often proves a beneficial strategy for the governments when dealing with the multiple student associations. Making student associations compete for influence and resources deters their collective action. Access to policy making is not the only resource the associations are competing against. Often government funding for student associations may be dispersed on a competitive and/or project-funding basis. A variation of the pluralist system can be seen in countries where no national student association exists, but the government interacts with students unions (one or several) which are based at higher education institutions. If the government regularly meets with several such institution-based associations and does not privilege one over the others, such system would qualify as pluralist. If, however, the government privileges on institution-based associations, for example the student council of the national flagship university based in the capital city, to speak on behalf of students in government processes, this system fits better the (neo-) corporatist model.

Two most clearly pluralist systems of national student representation in our sample of countries are South Africa and Zimbabwe. The South African *Higher Education Act* of 1997 prescribes the establishment of an SRC in every public higher education institution, as well as SRC representation in major decision-making structures at that level. Some of the institutional unions or SRCs constitute themselves voluntarily into a national student organisation while others participate directly or via partisan student organisations in national policymaking. In the South African case two associations stand out: the South African Union of Students (SAUS) and South African Students Congress (SASCO). Both are similar in that they claim to represent South African students on national level. They also have the longest sustained history of student representation in the country in that they trace their origins to the historic merger between the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO) in 1991, whose establishment respectively date back to 1924 in the case of NUSAS and 1969 in SANSCO's case (Badat 1999; Luescher 2008). The

main difference between the two is that SASU (and its predecessor organisation, the South African Universities SRC) was established as a non-partisan organisation of affiliated institutional SRCs while SASCO operates as a partisan ANC-aligned student organisation with individual membership and campus-level branches. At the same time, a number of national student wings established by political parties woo for national attention, including the Democratic Alliance Students Association (DASO) and the student branches of party youth-wings like the Young Communist League (YCL), the ANC Youth League, and EFF Youth Command.

The Zimbabwean student movement has undergone many changes and its main national associations, the Zimbabwe National Students' Union (ZINASU) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Students' Union (ZICOSU), both operate in a partisan movement fashion. ZINASU is an umbrella body for a great number of institutional SRCs. Both unions are voluntary associations without special recognition or registration by the government; indeed, historically there has been much suspicion towards them for their ability to mobilise student protests. Zimbabwe's national student leadership has been operating under most difficult political (and economic) circumstances for over a decade now. In addition, while at institutional level there are some provisions for student representation, such as the recognition of an SRC by a university administration and, for example, student seats in the senate, no such provisions exist on national level. In 2015, a new national students' union, the Zimbabwe International Students' Alliance (ZISA) was established. Its leaders state that the union has been formed on non-partisan and non-discriminatory basis to counteract the other two unions, which both are accused of being sponsored by political parties.

Finally, there are the statist systems of national student representation where either national student associations exists, but are not recognised and engaged by the government, or there is no national student association and governments do not interact collectively with students unions based at higher education institutions. In our survey, only Ethiopia fits this category. According to our survey, student representation on the national level has become largely absent in Ethiopia, effectively with no national student association in operation currently. This would indicate a statist system. While there is legislation that provides for institutional level student unions and for student participation in university senates and boards, there are problems with implementation even at that level of student representation, which is described as generally weak and problematic (Ayele 2016).

**Table 1 National systems of student representation: statist, corporatist, neo-corporatist, pluralist**

Statist	Corporatist	Neo-corporatist	Pluralist
Ethiopia	None	Botswana Burundi Cameroon Ghana Kenya Nigeria Uganda	Zimbabwe South Africa

It is clear that to neatly classify national systems of student representation in our sample of African countries into the above categories proves to be a challenging task. The caveats that we ought to add to the classification we suggest are several. First of all, the systems continue to change. For example, as mentioned with respect to several cases, new national associations emerge while others

shift between periods when they are dormant to periods of activity. Their activity or inactivity depends on a number of possible circumstances and combinations thereof. The most important factor is, of course, the collective political will and shared interest to cooperate within the national association by the – at the time – elected student representative in institutional-level associations. In this respect, the short generations of student leadership are a well-documented part of the “structural realities of academic life” impacting on student organising (Altbach in Luescher-Mamashela 2015). The political recognition, financial support, access to policy making and/or political oppression by governments can play a role. Political party interference can cause internal conflicts, which can damage the collective interests and *esprit de corps* crucial for the continued existence of national associations. A strong political cause – such as a grievance against proposals to raise tuition fees – can work in favour of making or keeping a national student association strong and active as it proved in the case of SAUS with the #FeesMustFall movement.

Second, as mentioned above, student organising on national level is typically not stipulated in national higher education legislation – nor does it need to be so; it is part of the universal freedom of association enshrined in most national constitutions nowadays, and only in some cases, it may be regulated by provisions made for youth organising (such as national youth forums). The establishment and continued functioning of national student associations, as discussed above, lies first and foremost in the hands of institutional associations, i.e. the SRCs, guilds and unions. The decision to institutionalise collaboration on national level does not come easy and not without cost. There is always fear that the large and wealthy unions will call the shots and monopolise the national associations to pursue their own interest. Often there are fears that a non-partisan national association will be ‘captured’ or dominated by a political party. And there are occasionally suspicions that national associations become conduits of personal enrichment and corruption. Conversely, there are also reservations from the side of governments who fear that students, as a potential oppositional force, institutionalise their cooperation and gain political strength nationally to an extent that is regime threatening; there are enough such cases that bear testimony (Altbach 1984). All in all, most national student associations – where they exist – are still ‘volatile’ and they are susceptible to detriments of external interference and internal conflicts; much as the democratic social institutions in other spheres of public life are still consolidating. In these circumstances, it is often difficult to ascertain who it is that represents student interests on national level and who it is that governments engage in political processes.

Thirdly, there is an inherent difficulty in ascertaining the extent to which governments and legislative bodies effectively involve student representatives in national policy processes and its modalities. In a strict definition of statist systems of national representation, the government does not engage, does not recognise, and possibly even bans student organising on national level. As we will discuss in the next section, formal channels for student representation in national policymaking exist only in few countries. But this is not to say that informally students do not have a voice. If the government only talks to students when they are protesting, but does not ban their activities, does that qualify as statist or neo-corporatist or pluralist system of representation? The delineation between the systems here is indeed difficult to draw and we hope that by means of our work we will stimulate more research to explore the nuances in student organising on national level. Moreover, hopefully we are able to inspire scholars in other public policy sectors and scholars of youth studies to think critically and theoretically about the involvement of key constituencies in public policymaking.

### ***National systems of student interest intermediation***

The question how student interests are intermediated into public policy making provides for the analytical distinction between formalized and informal system of student interest intermediation (Klemenčič, 2012). Systems of student representation of the pluralist and (neo-)corporatist type can display formalised or more informal arrangements, depending on whether there exist legal and constitutional mechanisms for student participation in policy-making, what kind of structures exist for student representation and how they are used. The most common mechanisms for student participation in national policymaking are: legal provisions for student representation in a national higher education council or other decision-making, advisory or evaluating bodies relevant to higher education, and rules governing consultation procedures or meetings with the ministry responsible for higher education (Persson 2004). In contrast, informal state-student interactions are conducted predominantly through informal consultations and seminars, representation on non-permanent commissions, working groups or projects of the ministry, informal contacts with ministry officials, written or oral contact with members of parliament and representation in national councils, agencies or committees in charge of student affairs, and quality assurance (Persson 2004). According to our survey, there is a wide diversity across the ten African systems of student representation that we examined.

Formal systems of student interest intermediation are most developed in Ghana, South Africa and Uganda. In Uganda, higher education policymaking makes provisions for formal student representation, for instance, in the Uganda National Council for Higher Education, which has two representatives of students from universities and other tertiary institutions on its board as legislated by the *Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act* (2001). In South Africa, students are represented on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme Board, in the ministerial advisory body, i.e. the Council on Higher Education and in its Higher Education Quality Committee. In Ghana, student representatives have a seat in national higher education bodies (e.g. the National Higher Education Council). In addition, the NUGS has a seat on all national bodies whose activities directly affect students, including the Ghana Education Trust Fund, the Student Loan Trust Fund, the National Council for Technical Education, etc. In national development planning too, they are asked to submit written input.

While formal systems will typically also include informal contacts with government officials and ad hoc interactions between the student leadership and national policymakers, if only this form of interest intermediation is common, a representational system qualifies as informal. For example, in Nigeria, effectively, students have little formal voice in national policy; they may be asked to provide written input on policy but are mostly 'used' by the federal government for political reasons and invited for dialogue when students revolt or protest against anti-student policies by a university management. In Botswana, students used to be represented in the Tertiary Education Council, but since this Council has been absorbed into the new Human Resources Development Council, students no longer have a seat in this national body. We have not systematically investigated all modes of informal contacts between public authorities and student representatives on national level, but several of our respondents testified that these informal contacts often depend on the political party affinities between governments in power and the student representatives in national student associations. Not surprisingly, when new higher education laws are devised or new higher education strategies, students – if not formally involved – assert more strongly the request to meet with

government officials. Protest as a mode of political action remains a notable characteristic of student politics across Africa.

Even in countries, such as Ghana, South Africa and Uganda, where there is privileged access of representative student organisations as ‘insiders’ into national policymaking, student protests are common and often turn violent. Contentious politics is common in student politics for reasons which have been studied in great detail by Altbach and others since the 1960s (Luescher-Mamashela 2015). Among them is a perceived lack of responsiveness of public authorities to student interests and demands. As our respondents stated in the case of Cameroon, “most of the time students have to strike before they are listened to”. In several of the countries in our sample, students are depicted in public discourse, by public authorities and university leaders as potential ‘troublemakers’ (e.g. in Burundi, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe). The type of system and level of formalisation must therefore not be taken as indication of how ‘peaceful’ student politics is or be mistaken for the effectiveness and actual influence of student representation in national policymaking. A governmental advisory council for student affairs with a high share of student representatives may not have any real influence in policy process. In contrast, student representatives working primarily through a dense web of regular and frequent informal interactions might indeed be very influential.

In order to assess the actual influence of national student representatives in policy processes, one ought to also consider the relevance of ‘soft factors,’ such as the political culture, the reputation of student organisations among public authorities and stakeholders, and even the public perception of student organisations. Moreover, the significance of student access to mass media for the effectiveness of student interest representation is well documented (Luescher-Mamashela 2015). The value of Klemenčič’s analytical model of national systems of student representation discussed above is helpful in a comparison of case countries; yet it is based exclusively on formal, structural characteristics and as such will not directly address the question of effective influence which requires a substantial independent comparative study and in-depth case study work.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have argued that student politics in twenty-first century Africa can be understood in terms of at least four broad structuring factors. First, the impact of the political liberalisation and the re-institution of multi-party politics in the 1990s and 2000s have left an important imprint on student politics in Africa. Students remain a potent political force and associate with both political parties and with student representative associations. Political parties try to establish or infiltrate existing student associations to capitalise on their mobilisation potential and their influence in higher education institutions. This interference often works to the detriment of student associations as it fractures student unions and they lose legitimacy in the eyes of the broader student constituency, and because such interferences causes internal conflicts within the associations. The periodised overview of student politics in Africa highlights the growing importance of national political parties in student politics (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume 2014). Our survey confirms this observation: an aggregate estimate of the influence of different groups on student politics in the countries in our sample shows that the highest influence is attributed to political parties. Especially in Ethiopia, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe, political parties are seen as very influential in student politics, followed by Ghana and Kenya. The second most influential group in those countries is government, which typically equates to ‘ruling party’; in addition, high scores for governmental



influence on student representative associations have been given to Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana and Zimbabwe. Yet, in order to analyse the full impact of the influence of specific groups in student politics on the effectiveness of student interest representation, more research will be needed.

Second, the large-scale economic upswing in Africa of the 2000s has brought about a further expansion of demand for higher education and consequently led to growth in privatised higher education and technical, vocational and professional higher education. With massification, the student body has become more diversified and the higher education sector has also become more diversified. The new forms of higher education institutions have a different 'public ethos' from the old public universities. They also often have a different conception of students – more as consumers. Student representative associations and their formal rights in governance of institutions are less political and more consultative in these types of higher education institutions.

Third, higher education expansion has often come hand in hand with neoliberal reforms of higher education policies. Neoliberal reforms in higher education put emphasis on efficiency, competition and choice. The states have been unable or unwilling to increase public spending of higher education to keep up with the rapidly and massively expanding higher education sector. Public higher education institutions have been forced to become more corporate to succeed in the more market-oriented higher education systems. Student recruitment and student affairs are upgraded among the institutional functions when tuition fees are introduced and raised and when competition for paying students is increasing. At the same time, the role of student representative associations in university governance is changing: students are trading their political role for a more consultative and service role (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). The marketization of African higher education in the sense of the state passing on the burden for financing public institutions onto them who, in turn, pass it on to students does not go down well with the students. The anti-SAP wave of student protests across Africa were a first continent-wide manifestation of this; with the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, the continent has joined the global wave of student protests against tuition fees in the form of an internet age student movement.

Fourth, conservative cultural values manifest in the conceptualisation of students as 'pupils' with limited agency to constructively and critically interfere into their educational experience or as 'troublemakers' who need to be disciplined. The conceptions of students evoked by university leaders, government officials or media, shape not only student-teacher relations in the classroom, but also the structures and processes of student representation and students' real opportunities and positive freedoms to intervene in their educational context and influence their educational experience (cf. Klemenčič 2015; Luescher-Mamashela 2013). In other words, for students to have real influence, formal pathways of involvement need to be reinforced by a culture of partnership. This implies reciprocity in relationships, a sense of shared responsibilities and collective commitments to mutually agreed goals. It involves a sense of respect that does not privilege generational structures over personal experience. Such culture would "not only offer students spaces and pathways of involvement but also grant them a leadership role, in which they have the freedom to invent new spaces and pathways of involvement, as well as to redefine and introduce new parameters of institutional quality" (Klemenčič 2015, 539). Conversely, student representatives themselves have not always managed to escape the lures of political patronage systems. Yet, to gain an effective voice in shaping public policy, irrespective of the current system of student representation, student leaders need to be critical and principled in their articulation of the student

perspective. The lesson for successful student organising is to emphasise the significance of claiming and sustaining a moral high ground, like African student movements have done in the past by advocating freedom and democracy and are currently doing with social justice-related demands for equity in higher education as illustrated by #FeesMustFall.

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