CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of the project Student Representation in Higher Education Governance in Africa is to map out and compare across the African continent recent changes in the higher education landscape overall and the different models of how students as a collective body are organised on both institutional and national levels; how their interests are aggregated, articulated and intermediated into institutional and national policy processes; and what the role of political parties and other social groups is in student representation.

This book brings together the work of eighteen scholars working on questions of higher education development, governance, and student politics in Africa. Most are early career African academics who are using the opportunity of this project to network with peers and hone analytical writing and publishing skills. Following an open call for proposals in December 2013, we received over twenty abstracts and eventually draft chapters which we thoroughly reviewed and individually engaged the authors on, making extensive comments, providing access to local and international literature and advising them on conceptual, analytical and methodological approaches to guide their studies. In August 2014, the group of authors and editors met for a three-day symposium and workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, presenting to each other our respective work, reviewing each other’s contributions, and discussing the key cross-cutting issues emanating from them to present in this book, as well as its companion publication, the special issue of the Journal of Student Affairs in Africa entitled ‘Student Power in Africa’ (Vol. 3, Issue 1, 2015).

Originally, the core research questions we asked the authors were: First, how has the expansion of higher education in Africa, the massification of existing public institutions, admission of private students and in some institutions the creation of ‘parallel’ student bodies, as well as the mushrooming of private higher education institutions across the continent, affected student representation in different countries on systemic and institutional level? Second, how do campus-based and national student representative organisations relate to political parties and/or social groups and cleavages in society (e.g. regional, religious, ethnic)? How do they uphold their organisational autonomy and legitimacy to represent the student voice? Who are their members? Where do they get their financial and other resources from? What resources do they have? How do they fare in managing these resources to the benefit of students?
Collectively we have addressed these questions by means of theoretical work, overview chapters on historical developments in student politics in Africa, as well as single-university case studies (as in the chapters on student participation in the University of Buea in Cameroon and the University of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia) and comparative studies (such as the comparative study between Makerere University and the Ugandan Christian University in Uganda). In addition, there are several in-depth studies on national student organisations like the National Union of Ghana Students. The chapters in this book thus represent a combination of collective coordination and discussion and the individual work of their authors; they have been developed from original empirical and theoretical studies, engaging with the core questions individually and collaboratively in their respective ways.

Our work as editors and that of the authors has also been cognisant of and informed by recent empirical and theoretical work conducted in various other projects, including CODESRIA’s investigations into higher education governance in east, west and southern Africa, the studies done by the HERANA Network on higher education and democracy and the Centre for Higher Education Transformation on student leadership, student engagement and citizenship competences in Africa (cf. Cloete et al. 2015). We have also been inspired by the publication of recent special issues on student representation of the European Journal of Higher Education on student representation in Europe (Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2012) and of Studies in Higher Education on student representation in a global perspective (Vol. 39, Issue 3, 2014).

The project is first and foremost an opportunity to produce new knowledge on the politics of students in Africa; a means to empirically investigate student representation in the African context and to further develop key concepts, analytical approaches and theoretical frameworks for studying student representation in the African context and beyond, taking into consideration the different characteristics of higher education systems, institutions, and traditions of student representation in this context. In this respect, it is not only meant to ‘document’ student representation in African higher education governance at this conjuncture but also to contribute to the growing body of literature focusing on students’ political agency, on the institutionalised forms of student political behaviour, and on key questions confronting higher education in Africa against a context of democratic consolidation and higher education massification.

The book is structured in twelve chapters. The chapter by Manja Klemenčič, Thierry Luescher and Taabo Mugume addresses itself to the key conduits of student organising and representation: student governments and national student organisations. It analyses student organising in relation to higher education polity, the structures and processes of higher education governance and the place of students therein; the politics of student representation, student representative organisations and student leadership, as well as different types of national student representative organisations. The chapter concludes by looking at students’ influence in making ‘student-friendly’ policies, the relation between student protests and formal representation, and finally the policy recommendations from the 2015 African Higher Education Summit and their implication for student politics.
Chapter 3 by Thierry Luescher accounts for key concepts, analytical approaches and theoretical perspectives available to the study of student politics and student representation. It starts with a discussion of the macro-context of an emerging massification of higher education in Africa, analysing the challenges that arise from it for student representation. It then presents the theoretical work of Altbach (1965–2005), Clark (1978), Epstein (1974), Olsen (2005), Trow (2006) and others, on student politics and higher education governance, arguing for a theoretically rich engagement with the topic (cf. Chapter 3). Luescher concludes the chapter with reference to the 2015 #RhodesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town to illustrate the relevance of this conceptual tool for understanding contemporary student politics in Africa.

The chapter by Ibrahim Oanda analyses trends in the historical evolution of policies and practices for student participation in African universities. It draws on research conducted as part of the CODESRIA Higher Education in Africa Leadership Programme, examining the institutional structures to support student participation in university governance, sources of funding, and influence of students’ voice in management decisions across the continent and with specific reference to Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania. Oanda’s analysis covers the historical context within which student participation in university governance in Africa has evolved: the dynamics of student participation in the 1970s when African universities increasingly became national projects; the period from the 1980s and higher education during economic crisis and structural adjustment; and the 1990s as a period of higher education revitalisation, expansion, privatisation and commercialisation. The chapter concludes with analysing the current state of student representation in African universities and challenges to effective student representation in the context of the ongoing expansion and differentiation of higher education in Africa.

Pascal Bianchini’s chapter takes a similar longitudinal approach to student politics in Africa, but focuses on student movements and the experience in Francophone Africa, especially in Burkina Faso and Senegal. His analysis issues in three periods which he respectively calls the age of anti-colonialism from the early 1950s to the early 1960s; the age of anti-imperialism from the late 1960s to the early 1980s; and the age of anti-SAP and pro-democracy struggles of the 1990s and beyond, during which student movements in Africa provided inter alia a ‘political barometer of a general atmosphere’. The comparative analysis reveals important variation between Senegal and Burkina Faso in terms of student movements’ counter-hegemonic action and governmental responses of repression and negotiation – involving efforts to corrupt student leadership as well as the use of authoritarian methods which do not bode well for the ‘generative functions’ of student politics. With reference to the current context Bianchini argues:

* A decade later, the picture remains ambiguous. Students’ protests in Francophone sub-Saharan countries are still chronic not to say permanent. No matter what the governmental answers (i.e. repression or negotiation), universities are still battlegrounds for generations coming of age. However these mobilisations seem to have a lesser
impact on political systems than in the previous decades, especially before the era of massification and pauperisation of the student body. (Bianchini 2016: 103)

Chapter 5 concludes the section of overview chapters of the book. Chapters 6–11 provide more in-depth studies of student representation in specific national, institutional or organisational contexts.

The chapter by Sam Fongwa and Godlove Chifon analyses student participation in university governance at the case of the University of Buea, Cameroon. It starts with a broad historical overview of higher education governance and student politics in Cameroon and a review of previous research on student activism in that context. In its core section, the chapter analyses the transition from a central student body to the current form of student representation and its implications for student representation in university governance at the University of Buea in the period from 2004 to 2013. The authors argue that

student participation in university governance continues to be fraught by external factors such as local and national political dynamics as well as ethno-regional battles. [Moreover, there is] a significant lack of cordial dialogue between the students and administration. (Fongwa & Chifon 2016: 125)

Fongwa and Chifon argue that the absence of dialogue between student leadership and university administration, leadership authoritarianism and the use of force, perpetuate a student political culture of violent protest. The chapter also confirms earlier findings that student politics in Cameroon continues to be affected by ethno-regional factionalism – compounded by the Anglophone-Francophone divide in the country. Perhaps it is due to this sensitive political terrain that student leaders at University of Buea seem to have managed to somewhat ‘insulate’ the student union from the influence of political parties.

Chapter 7 by Bekele Workie Ayele presents an in-depth mixed methods study of the participation of the student union in the governance of the Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. He addresses the questions how the student union participates, how it relates to political parties, and how it upholds its legitimacy by using Olsen’s framework of four ‘visions’ of the university (compare Chapter 3). His study finds a widespread exclusion of students from participation in decision-making. Moreover, student representation at AAU appears to be marred by a practice whereby university authorities ‘select’ the student leadership in such a way as to exclude students who sympathise with opposition parties. Ayele also finds challenges with regard to ethnic divisions in student organising; a lack of communication and internal deliberation; a lack of resources and perceptions of leadership corruption. These and other challenges produce a general ‘deficit of legitimacy’ for the student union to be able to effectively represent students. Thus, overall he concludes that the participation of students in the governance of AAU has been left at the margins, in keeping with Olsen’s governance model of a university as a national instrument.
An insightful comparison of student representation in a well-established African flagship university and a private university is provided in Chapter 8 at the cases of Makerere University and the Uganda Christian University (UCU) in Uganda. Mugume and Katusiimeh show the differences between student representative structures in the two universities; the extent to which a relationship between student leadership and national political parties is either tolerated or suppressed; and the consequences of this relationship for the representation of student interests. Most importantly, the authors examine in detail how the emergence of private (i.e. self-funded rather than government-sponsored) students in public and private higher education has shaped student representation. They find that the politics of private students has indeed affected student representation in various ways: new student organisations were set up by private students (such as the Makerere University Private Students’ Association) which have reshaped the structures and the scope of student representation in dialogue with the student guild; student claim-making has become more focused on the interests of private students; political activism has decreased since fee-paying students seem to fear questioning or challenging university management; and therefore, student politics has lost some of its visibility. Mugume and Katusiimeh also show how the re-institution of multi-party politics in Uganda is being handled in the two different institutions and its consequences for student representation. While at Makerere multi-party competition in student guild election is institutionalised, political parties are barred from contesting student elections at UCU which, according to the authors, may be the reason why ethnic-based, so-called ‘tribal’ student associations have come to play a bigger part in choosing student leaders at UCU.

The chapter by Mlungisi Cele, Thierry Luescher and Terri Barnes applies Cele’s analytical framework of four types of student actions to a milestone wave of protests and its aftermath at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Cele et al. argue that the simultaneous pursuit of a massive expansion of higher education for black students in post-apartheid South Africa, which in effect meant creating opportunities of access for historically disadvantaged students who came mostly from working class and poor backgrounds, and a government-imposed commitment to fiscal austerity reflected in the rejection of free higher education provision, the continuation of a cost-sharing policy with only limited financial aid provisions, represented a policy paradox which further deepened and compounded challenges of financial sustainability and student affordability at that university in the mid-1990s. They argue that students challenged the effects of the paradox in student life through a range of actions vacillating between collective protest and negotiation, as well as individual ‘survivalist’ strategies. The authors show how through prolonged engagement between the university leadership and student leaders, an innovative institutional solution was found ahead of the establishment of the South African National Students Financial Aid Scheme.

The next two chapters analyse in detail two student organisations of national significance in Burundi and Ghana. In Chapter 10, Gérard Birantamije investigates student participation in the governance of the University of Burundi and the role that the university’s student union, the Association des Etudiants de Rumuri (ASSER/Association of Rumuri Students), has played
in national politics in Burundi. Birantamije highlights ASSER’s important role in defending both students’ and general Burundian interests with regard to higher education policies and through positions it has taken on public policy. He argues that student representation in decision-making on all levels of the University of Burundi engendered both efficiency and efficacy in governing the university, and established within student organisations the basis for student leadership skills on higher education governance matters. In this way, the student organisation has also provided a privileged space for building a national leadership.

The chapter by Gyampo, Debrah and Aggrey-Darkoh shows that in the case of the National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) the influence of multiparty politics on the form and content of student interest representation in institutional and national higher education policy-making. They find that the partisan ‘politicisation’ of student politics in Ghana changed student interest representation in so far as leaders have apparently become more loyal to the interests of political parties than to those of their student constituency. This, they argue, has produced a double-edged effect: on the one hand, it has undermined the radical expression of student interests; on the other hand, it has also fostered a gradual institutionalisation of dialogue, negotiations, collaborations and compromises as an alternative form of achieving student representation in Ghana. Partisanship has thus enhanced student leaders’ ability to secure some relief and yielded some favourable policies for students; however, it has also narrowed NUGS’ leverage within the political landscape, which in turn has raised questions regarding the legitimacy of the national student organisation to articulate and represent the views and interest of students in Ghana.

Collectively a number of issues emerge as significant for understanding student representation in African higher education governance at this conjuncture. Firstly, it is quite clear that the topic of student representation is still elusive of a common conceptual or theoretical core. This may be a good thing for growing the scholarly discourse in the field. The diversity of conceptualisation and operationalisation of key issues leaves the field a wide area of interdisciplinary inquiry. There are, however, some common analytical approaches: the understanding of higher education governance as a multi-level system of structures and processes within which student representation operates and related to that the stakeholder approach to analysing student political behaviour and focus on the role of student organisations and their organisational characteristics. Furthermore, it is clear that student politics and its relation with higher education governance needs to be contextualised with even more rigour.

The literature surveys done by the authors show that student representation in higher education governance is an area largely ignored in African higher education studies, hence the timeliness of this book. There are national systems and institutions on which much more is known than others, especially with respect to the extent to which government and institutional policies have been shaped by the influence of students. There are also certain student organisations that have been subject to much more scholarly attention than others. We hope that this book goes some way in addressing these gaps.

There are broad trends discernible from the studies published here. For instance, while
student politics and representation in the earlier years was hinged on ideology, the marketisation of African higher education in the last two decades has apparently led to a ‘dearth of ideology’ in student politics. The two periodisation of student politics in Africa included in Chapters 3 and 4 show similar histories but different transformations, especially after the experience of structural adjustment in the late 1980s and 1990s. Thus, while there appears to be a ‘grand narrative’ of African student political history, the story gets more interesting and diverse in the debates beyond the 1990s. Nonetheless, several chapters bring contemporary developments and shifts in institutional governance to the fore that suggest elements of a common present and future. There are several case studies that show how the marketisation of higher education in Africa, and especially the admission of private (fee-paying) students has brought new dynamics into institutional governance which permeate with stealth student participation in governance. Many chapters also showcase the penetration of national politics and growing influence of dominant political parties in student representation. They will continue shaping student politics in Africa in the coming years. Thus, on the one hand we find a partisan politicisation of student politics on the leadership and organisational level; on the other hand we observe a ‘de-politicisation’ of the student body in general, led perhaps by the growing influence of private students, involving a certain lack of political engagement or even political apathy. Finally, identity politics still plays an important role: issues such as ethnicity and religion come out clearly as having impacts, in most cases negative, on student leadership and governance. How different student representative organisations will respond to these developments is likely to further hone typologies of student representative organisations such as the one proposed by Klemenčič.

Another topic frequently mentioned in the case studies are so-called institutional ‘incentives’ to student leaders – often with the intent to co-opt them rather than to make them more effective representatives of the student interest. We have therefore paid some attention to the organisation of student representation and limitations on autonomy of student representative associations. The book shows that formal provisions for student representation are not always granted by law, but need to be negotiated and therefore result in very different practices across countries and institutions. This is linked to the question whether student representatives are perceived as legitimate intermediators of the student interest and honest brokers in negotiating the future of African higher education. What are we to make of wide-spread perceptions of corruption? Are they based in actual observed corrupt practices or do they precisely arise from the paternalistic, authoritarian relations that curb student leaders’ influence, rendering student leaders ineffective and unresponsive to students’ concerns? Furthermore, several chapters talk to the dynamic interaction between student protest and student representation – on institutional and national levels. To what extent is the former a symptom of the ineffectiveness of the latter? While Cele provides a suggestive heuristic framework of different student actions, Klemenčič shows that there are different ‘modes’ of interest representation at play – are they equally effective?

Further studies will also need to consider influences on student representation that have
not been sufficiently covered here. Among these developments, the most significant is likely the long-term impact of the ICT revolution on politics and higher education in Africa in general, and on student political organising in particular. Smartphones, tablets and laptops have become ubiquitous in student life on African university campuses; even where Wi-Fi is patchy and mobile data bundles are costly, they are both a status symbol and an essential tool for accessing information and networking with classmates and friends. What will happen to African student politics – indeed youth politics – once student organising has caught up with the opportunities for political conscientising and mobilising offered by social networks? Luescher’s brief overview of the #RhodesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town gives an early indication; the subsequent nation-wide protests under the banner of #FeesMustFall have shown that student mobilising in cyberspace – and thus the emergence of internet student movements – have become a reality in Africa. Will the overall outcomes be for the better? It is painful in this respect that we have not managed to get contributions from North Africa which would have shed light on these questions with regard to the ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions (cf. Castells 2015).

We hope that this book will make an important contribution to our understanding of higher education governance, student politics and student representation in Africa.

References