Reflections of South African Student Leaders: 1994 to 2017
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In 2016, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) published the reflections of eight former vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors in a book titled Reflections of South African University Leaders, 1981 to 2014. Reviews of the book suggested that it contributed significantly to a better understanding of the stringent demands of visionary and transformative leadership required by university leaders in the fast-changing and increasingly complex public higher education sector.

As a sequel to Reflections of South African University Leaders, 1981 to 2014, the CHE, in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), is pleased to publish Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017, as a collection of the reflections of 12 former student leaders who served in positions of leadership in South African public universities – typically as presidents or executive members of respective Students’ Representative Councils (SRCs) – between 1994 and 2017. The Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended) recognises SRCs as legitimate structures within the broader governance matrix of public higher education institutions. In order to present a balanced perspective on how transformation of higher education has unfolded since the dawn of democracy, it is in the view of the CHE quite critical that the voices of students are also recorded in accounts of the seminal changes experienced over this period.

Twenty-five years since the dawn of democracy, higher education institutions still face many challenges of not being able to effectively address the concerns of students on key issues of access, success, transformation and funding. The frustrations of students in this regard have sometimes triggered student protests, some of which have been accompanied by violence, resulting in the suspension of academic activities and closure of university campuses. Readers will recall the highly publicised student protests such as #RhodesMustFall at the University of Cape Town, which gathered momentum as it spread to several other campuses and itself transformed into the ‘decolonisation movement’ before transitioning into #FeesMustFall and related campaigns such as #EndOutsourcing. One of
the many lessons learnt from these protests is that there is a dire need for the decision-makers in higher education institutions to recognise the student voice. As key stakeholders, students should be engaged meaningfully and constructively, especially when they represent the vanguard struggles which address legacy and contemporary struggles in our society.

An intriguing aspect of the 2015/16 protest movement was that it was portrayed as ‘leaderless’. This has raised questions about the role of leadership in student governance. Do student leaders represent the masses of students? Do they have real authority and influence on the student body politic? Whose interests do they serve? How do they determine if they are successful or not? How are they perceived by those they purportedly lead and represent? The search for answers to these and other questions was the main motivation, on the part of the CHE, to contemplate the research project that has culminated in this publication. At the time that the CHE was still conceptualising the research project, the HSRC received funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a nationwide research and archiving project on the 2015/16 student movement, including a focus on the developmental trajectory of the student movement from the early post-apartheid movement to #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. The clear convergence of the research project that the CHE was planning to embark on, and that which the HSRC had just started to work on, led the two organisations to agree to work together on the reflections of former student leaders.

Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994 to 2017 is based on comprehensive interviews with former student leaders, each of whom provided a personal account in their own words of their experience in the position of student leadership. The interviews were transcribed and written as chapters focusing on the backgrounds of the interviewees, their respective journeys to become student leaders, and their roles and responsibilities while in student leadership positions. The chapters also cover the former student leaders’ views on the threats to, and opportunities for, the development of the higher education system broadly, and student governance in particular. The former student leaders concerned were provided an opportunity to review the earlier drafts of their respective chapters, and they approved the final chapters published in the book.

The interviewees are from different backgrounds and of diverse political persuasions. Some were student leaders in universities located outside the urban areas while others were student leaders in township and urban universities. The representation also covers historically white universities and historically black ones. Furthermore, among them are those who were student leaders at merged institutions and those who were leaders at institutions that were not merged. They also represent a mix from traditional universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities. With respect to political persuasions and affiliations, the interviewees are affiliated to different political parties and/or student political formations.
The book is a ‘must read’ for current and future student leaders. The experiences shared by the former student leaders, including the lessons they learnt in hindsight, are invaluable to the current and future crops of student leaders. They are likely to glean much from the book about student leadership visions, strategies and tactics which could contribute to making them better leaders.

The book is important for current and future leaders of higher education institutions as it provides insights into the thinking, aspirations, desires, fears and modus operandi of student leaders. Such insight can contribute to developing and implementing appropriate strategies for achieving meaningful and constructive engagement with current and future student leaders.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the former student leaders for their voluntary participation in this project, and for willingly sharing their experiences and the lessons learnt from their experiences.

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Denyse Webbstock, who led the book project on the CHE side until she resigned in December 2018, and Prof. Thierry Luescher, who was the project co-leader on the HSRC side, for a job well done. This book would not have progressed to completion without their steady resolve in the face of many obstacles.

I thank Mr Ntokozo Bhengu of the CHE, Mr Nkululeko Makhubu of the HSRC, Dr Denyse Webbstock and Prof. Thierry Luescher for conducting the interviews with the former student leaders, transcribing them and converting the transcriptions into book chapters. I also thank the publisher, African Minds, for seeing the value of a book of this nature and agreeing to publish it.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the role played by Dr Amani Saidi in taking up the leadership of the book project in January 2019, on the side of the CHE, following the resignation of Dr Denyse Webbstock, and steering the project through to completion.