The University in Africa and Democratic Citizenship

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Executive Summary

The context

In the past two decades, a great number of African nations embarked on a political transition from single-party authoritarianism, military rule and presidential strongman rule, towards economic and political liberalisation and democratisation, embracing competitive, multi-party electoral systems within an enabling framework of political and civil rights. Various comparative indicators of democracy and good governance indicate, however, that the democratisation of state and society in Africa is an ongoing project; democratic governance in Africa remains constrained by serious flaws. While well-designed political institutions and processes constitute the necessary ‘hardware’ of a democratic system, democracy requires democrats to consolidate.

Higher education is recognised as key to delivering the knowledge requirements for political development. It is essential for the design and operation of key political institutions of a modern political system, from the judiciary to the legislative and executive arms of government, the top staffing of the state bureaucracy as well as key institutions of civil society. Moreover, public higher education in democracies is typically mandated to contribute to the development of an enlightened, critically constructive citizenry.

Whether and how higher education makes a contribution to democratisation beyond producing the professionals that are necessary for developing and sustaining a modern political system has remained an unresolved question. Research conducted in the African context has produced so far ambiguous findings, ranging from a strong positive correlation between higher levels of education and democratic attitudes and behaviours to conclusions that higher levels of education only offer ‘diminishing returns’ for the development of democratic citizenship in Africa.

The research

Much scholarly thinking about the contribution of higher education to democracy in Africa has been normative and empirically qualitative in nature. Only with the regular rounds of Afrobarometer surveys (since 1999) have large-scale, comparative, quantitative analyses of the political attitudes and behaviours of African publics become possible. Provided that Afrobarometer surveys are representative of their national populations, the very small higher education participation rate of most African countries (hovering at 5% for sub-Saharan Africa) has meant that the country-specific samples of Africans with higher education are often too small to allow robust intra-country and inter-country group
comparison. Moreover, even where such comparison is possible (e.g. in the South African sample and across ‘Afrobarometerland’), the question of whether there are university-specific mechanisms or pathways by which higher education contributes to democratic attitudes and behaviours, and how these mechanisms operate and relate to politics on and off campus, cannot be explored. The Student Governance Surveys represent an attempt to address these gaps.

To understand the contribution of African universities to citizenship development, the project places at its core an extensive investigation of the political attitudes and behaviours of students and student leaders. At a general level, the question is whether African universities serve as potential ‘training grounds’ for democratic citizenship or whether they are merely ‘hothouses’ of student political activism whereby students lose their impetus once away from the university. In particular, the investigation has focused on the following research questions:

- To what extent do students demand democracy? Are they ‘committed democrats’?
- What are students’ perceptions of the supply of democracy in their country? Are they ‘critical citizens’?
- To what extent are students cognitively engaged in politics and participating in various ways in politics on and off campus? Are they ‘active citizens’?
- What are students’ views on democratic consolidation and regime change in their country? Can they be considered ‘transformative democrats’?

A particular focus of the study is on exploring the relationship between students’ active political involvement on and off campus and students’ attitudes towards democracy. Moreover, the surveys were designed so as to enable close comparison between the views of ordinary students and student leaders, between data collected from students at different universities in Africa, and between the Student Governance Surveys data and data representing the political attitudes and behaviours of African mass publics as provided by Afrobarometer (Round 4: 2008/2009). Thus, intra-group and inter-group comparisons, and cross-case and cross-country comparisons were made possible, provided that the survey instruments were specifically designed to be compatible with the Afrobarometer.

The project began with a review of the international literature on the relationship between higher education and citizenship development on the one hand, and student politics and student involvement in decision-making at African universities on the other hand. This was followed by the adaptation of Afrobarometer instruments for the purpose of the study and the selection of three universities located in three different African countries as research sites. The universities selected were: in Kenya, the University of Nairobi (UON); in South Africa, the University of Cape Town (UCT); and in Tanzania, the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM). The three universities were not chosen for being representative of their national higher education sectors; on the contrary, it is their unique status as the oldest and arguably most prestigious universities within their respective higher educational and national contexts, and thus their potential significance in the reproduction of the social, economic and political elite of their countries, which warranted their selection for this study.
The surveys were conducted in 2009 by local research teams with students and student leaders, whereby each survey produced a weighted sample of 400 respondents, representative of the third-year undergraduate student body of each university. By stratifying the sample by faculty, representation across all faculties was ensured. In addition, interviews were conducted with key institutional managers and student leaders to gain further insight into the relevant student political and university context.

In the analysis, data from the latest round of Afrobarometer surveys (2008/2009) from Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania was added to the university-specific datasets. In this way, the students’ responses could be readily compared with those of the general public and the relevant age cohorts of youths without higher education in each country.

**A potential contribution of higher education to democracy?**

The design of the research assumed that by studying students’ political attitudes and behaviours and comparing them with those of mass publics, the contribution of higher education to citizenship development and democratisation could be investigated. In the cross-university/cross-country comparison, the influence of the respective national political contexts on students’ political attitudes and behaviours can be perceived throughout the survey findings. Yet, the particularities conditioned by the macro-political context do not distract from important commonalities found among the students at the three universities, and common differences discovered between students and the non-students and mass publics in their respective countries.

This most general finding indicates that students’ perceptions and experiences of politics and their related political attitudes and behaviours are not only honed by a particular national context and they are not equally evident among the respective national cohorts of youths without higher education. Moreover, they cannot be explained by analysing students’ social structure and specific institutional or cultural factors. The most plausible explanation for certain student-typical commonalities must therefore be that it is higher education, the university, and distinctive features of student life, which predispose students to certain typical political attitudes and behaviours. Thus, at this most general level, the research therefore confirms in important ways the fundamental assumption that gave rise to the project. More importantly, if there is indeed something unique about higher education, the university, and student life, that conditions students’ political attitudes and behaviours in distinctive ways, the conscious cultivation of certain values and practices that are conducive to more democratic political attitudes and behaviours offers the potential for higher education to uniquely contribute to citizenship development and democratisation in Africa.

**Awareness of democracy**

Democracy is not only theoretically a contested concept; it also means different things to different people. Thus, the surveys investigated students’ awareness of the term
‘democracy’, their conceptions of democracy, and their views on what features of society were essential for a country to be called a democracy.

- More than nine out of ten student respondents from the three surveyed universities can provide a comprehensible and valid definition of democracy in their own words. Almost all of their definitions carry a positive connotation.
- When defining democracy in their own words, nearly half of the students (47%) define it in terms of political rights and civil freedoms; just over a third (34%) as popular participation and deliberation in politics; and less than a tenth as equality, fairness, justice, rule of law or good governance. The notion of democracy as socio-economic development or access to basic services is almost completely absent from students’ definitions of democracy in their own words (1%).
- However, when prompted with a multiple choice of potentially important features of democracy, most students consider all of them as ‘absolutely important’ or ‘important’. On closer analysis, social-democratic concerns (such as provision of basic services; equality in education) now top the preferences of important features of democracy marginally ahead of political goods such as freedom of speech or majority rule.

Preference for democracy and demand for freedom

Taking the notions of ‘demand for democracy’ and of ‘committed democrat’ as touchstones, the research investigated to what extent students prefer democracy (and related freedoms) over authoritarian regime types. The following findings have been made:

- Over two-thirds of students (69%) always prefer democracy and over 80% always reject non-democratic regime types such as one-party rule, military rule and presidential strongman rule as alternatives to democracy for the way their national government should work.
- Demand for key political and civil rights, such as free speech, press freedom and freedom of association, is high among students of all campuses (and highest at UCT), albeit not as unfettered freedoms.
- Overall, only a minority of students at UON (45%) and UDSM (36%) can be described as unreservedly committed democrats in that they always prefer democracy and reject non-democratic regime alternatives in all cases. The students from these two universities also emerge as less committed to democracy than their respective national age cohort of youth who have no higher education (Kenya: 55%; TZN: 43%) and the mass publics in their respective countries (Kenya: 63%; TZN: 46%). In contrast, 54% of UCT students can be considered committed democrats by this definition, which is considerably more than the South African mass public (where only 35% are fully committed to democracy) and their age peers without higher education (32%).
- There is no significant correlation between involvement in formal student leadership on campus and being a committed democrat. Moreover, the attempt to explain support for democracy among the students of the three universities in terms of social structure, institutional and cultural factors, and attitudinal and behavioural variables yields very weak and few statistically significant results.
Perceived supply of democracy and democratic consolidation

Related to the question of students’ demand for democracy is the consideration to what level the present political systems of Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania actually satisfy students’ political ideals. The research asked whether they consider their country a democracy and related questions as to students’ perception of the freeness and fairness of elections. Analysing students’ demand for democracy and perception of democratic performance, the research shows the extent to which students may be considered ‘critical citizens’ and ‘transformative democrats’ who always prefer democracy, are critical or very critical of the current extent of democracy in their country, and are impatient to see regime change.

- The majority of the students of all three universities consider their country as ‘not a democracy’/‘a democracy with major problems’ (UON 86%, UDSM 66%, UCT 52%). Most critical are students from the University of Nairobi where less than 15% consider their country democratic.
- The students from all three universities are generally far more critical of the extent of democracy in their country than their age peers without higher education and the mass publics in their respective countries. While 43% of Kenyans consider their country a ‘full democracy’/‘democracy with minor problems’ only 15% of UON students do. 74% of Tanzanians and 58% of South Africans think their country is a full or almost full democracy as against 34% of the UDSM students and 48% of the UCT students. The low democracy endorsement that Kenya receives may be understood in relation to the post-2007 election turmoil there.
- Most of the students from the two East African universities are not satisfied with the way government works in their country (UON 87%, UDSM 70%). Only at UCT is a majority of the students ‘fairly’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the way democracy works in their country (57%), which is more than South Africans in general (49%).
- Taking the notions of equilibrium/disequilibrium between demand for democracy and supply of democracy as an indicator for the extent to which an existing regime is considered as consolidated, it emerges that the Kenyan political system is unconsolidated and ready for pro-democratic regime change from a UON student perspective, while the Tanzanian regime offers some room for reform and deepening democracy from the UDSM student perspective (but less so from the perspective of Tanzanians in general). In contrast, South African democracy appears fairly consolidated in the UCT students’ view.
- Correspondingly, a majority of UON students (61%) emerge as potentially transformative democrats, that is, citizens who always prefer democracy, are critical or very critical of the current extent of democracy in their country, and are impatient to see regime change. Just under half of UDSM students (47%) and about 40% of the UCT students equally qualify as pro-democratically minded potential regime transformers. The number of complacent and fairly uncritical democrats is highest among UCT students with over 32% of respondents falling into this category.
- The students from all three campuses are significantly more likely to be critical and impatient transformative democrats than their respective fellow citizens and their same age peers without higher education. (Percentage of transformative democrats
Cognitive engagement, political participation and active citizenship

Democratic processes require the active participation of citizens, over and above participation in elections, in order to be sustained. The classic Kantian distinction between active and passive citizens implies that only those citizens who in one way or another actively participate in decision-making are indeed different from the subjects of a non-democratic polity (Weinrib 2008). In order for students to be able to successfully participate in politics on and off campus, they need to be cognitively engaged and aware of public affairs and politics around them. Conversely, active participation presumably also has a positive feedback into cognitive awareness of politics as citizens learn about politics while doing it. The following findings were made:

- Students are not necessarily more interested in politics than their fellow citizens in general. However, they discuss politics far more frequently than their age peers without higher education or the general public in their country. Almost all the students of all three universities (≥95%) say they discuss politics frequently or at least occasionally with their friends and family, as against three-quarters of same age youths in general in Kenya (78%) and Tanzania (75%) and 63% in South Africa.

- Students make frequent use of a diversity of news media (i.e. radio, TV, newspapers, internet) at a level equal to or above that of mass publics. While access to and use of radio is the most popular and frequently used news medium among mass publics in all three countries, the Nairobi students use radio as frequently as TV and the internet (86% use it daily or almost daily); the students in Dar es Salaam most frequently use radio (93%) and TV (92%); and Cape Town students most frequently use the internet (86% daily or almost daily use).

- Use of newspapers among UCT students (52%) is about equal to that of mass publics (54%) and their age cohort without higher education (52%). Among University of Nairobi students, newspaper use is considerably higher (72% read it daily or almost daily) than the national usage (30%). The difference is even larger in Tanzania where 79% of the University of Dar es Salaam students use newspapers almost daily as against only 23% of Tanzanians in general.

- Internet access to news is almost entirely a student privilege. While 85% or more of the students in all three universities say they have access to and use the internet daily or several times a week, only around 10% of mass publics have this kind of access. Even among the relevant age cohort without higher education, internet use is no higher than among publics in general.

- Thus, on all three campuses, access to information about public affairs and politics (and thus potential for informed cognitive engagement) is considerably better and more frequent than among the relevant publics in general and the same age peer groups without higher education in their respective countries.

- Whether the advantages for cognitive engagement provided by the university environment translate into better knowledge about politics cannot be said conclusively. The surveys show, however, that UON students are highly knowledgeable about
political incumbents and officials on and off campus, and about features of decision-making institutions (albeit much less so), followed by UDSM and UCT students.

- Self-reported student participation in national elections is about equal to their age cohorts among UON and UCT students (79% and 62% respectively), but lower among UDSM students (62% as against 83% of the national age cohort).
- As has been found in the Afrobarometer surveys, generally a much greater percentage of respondents participate in collective political activity (meetings and protests – 39% in the student surveys) than in individual political activity (writing letters and contacting officials – only 13% of students surveyed).
- Student participation in political meetings and protests on and off campus is highest at UDSM, followed by UON and UCT. At UDSM, 50% of students have taken part in a student demonstration in the last 12 months and 36% in a national demonstration; 29% of UON students participated in a demonstration on campus and 28% off campus; and 21% of the UCT students demonstrated on campus and 17% participated in an (off-campus) national demonstration. Except for UCT students, who participate in national demonstrations about as much as South Africans in general, students at UON and UDSM are around twice as likely to demonstrate as their respective compatriots.
- Active organisational membership in non-religious voluntary associations off campus is much higher among UCT students (43%) and UDSM students (53%) than among their respective national age cohorts (SA: 11%, TZN: 29%). It is slightly higher among UON students (48%) than Kenyans of 22–25 years without higher education (43%). Active organisational membership in religious groups off campus is about the same (UCT, UDSM) and slightly less (by about 10% at UON) among students than their age cohorts without higher education.
- In addition to more prevalent active membership in off-campus secular voluntary associations, students are also highly involved in campus-based student organisations. As many as 71% of the students at UDSM, 63% at UON and 57% at UCT claim active membership or leadership in a campus-based organisation.
- Students are more likely to be leaders of off-campus voluntary organisations than their respective age cohort without higher education – 29% of UON students (vs. 12% of their Kenyan age cohort); 15% of UDSM students (vs. 1% of 22–26-year-old Tanzanians), and 13% of UCT students (vs. 4% of South African 20–23-year-olds) claim being an official leader of an off-campus secular association.
- With respect to cognitive engagement and political participation, all three universities therefore offer significant advantages to the politically interested and politically-participatory student.
- A minority of students on each campus can be described as active citizens in the sense that they always prefer democracy and either participate in protesting/demonstrations or act in formal capacities as official student leaders on campus. The active citizens represent 35% of students at UDSM, 27% at UON and 22% at UCT. However, compared to their fellow citizens in general, students are much more likely to be active democratic citizens. The disaggregation of mass data into the relevant age cohort shows that it is not youthfulness in general that accounts for the more activist involvement of students in politics, but predispositions and/or conditions associated with being at university.
Students specialise politically in that they focus their political activity on a particular type of political participation. Student leaders who operate within the formal organisational context of student government and student representation also tend to take leadership in other formal organisational contexts (on and off campus); conversely, students inclined towards informal collective political activity on campus (especially protesting) also engage in such political activity off campus. Formal and informal student leadership represent different student political specialisations on all three campuses.

Overall, the university and student life therefore present unmatched opportunities for exercising political activity and organisational leadership at a young age. Students are not only seated closer to the political action as observers but also as political actors. While the university and various aspects of student life therefore offer a potential training ground for active citizenship (both in conventional and unconventional forms of political participation), the findings are also consistent with a potential ‘hothouse effect’ whereby high levels of citizenship involvement might disappear once a student leaves university and loses the advantages for cognitive engagement and political participation offered by the university.

**Student representation and university governance**

If extra-curricular student development and student governance can serve as a training ground to instil and support democratic values and practices, to what extent do students perceive this to be the case already? What are students’ views on their university, university governance and student representation in university governance?

The majority of students of all three universities look to the university to provide them with the kind of qualification that will enable them to find quality employment and to provide them with an education of the highest international standard. They see the university first and foremost as an academic facility and a community of learning; moreover a sizeable group also concedes to a national developmental mandate for the university (most at UDSM, least at UCT).

Correspondingly, students have a rather enlightened view of university governance. Overall students prefer the university to be governed representatively, whereby decisions about the university should be made predominantly by internal constituencies (senior management, the professoriate/academic staff and students) rather than by national government. Over 80% of students reject the suggestion that student involvement in decision-making is a waste of time; almost the same large majority supports student representation at all levels of university decision-making. Yet, even if it may present a tempting proposition, the idea that students should have ‘the predominant voice and run the university responsive to student interests’ struggles to gather a majority at UON and UDSM and receives support of only one-third of the students at UCT.

Support for representative university governance and democratic student representation comes in a context of student dissatisfaction with the way student representation actually works as well as relatively high levels of distrust in student leadership and perceptions of student leadership corruption (especially at UON and UDSM, and to a much lesser degree at UCT).
The disjuncture between students’ demand for representative university governance and democratic student representation on the one hand, and student perception of the supply of democratic student governance on the other hand, along with their displayed lack of trust and faith in student leadership, offer an opportunity for rethinking student participation in university governance.

Democracy, the university and student development: Conclusions and implications

Overall, the research shows that the potential of a university to act as a training ground for democratic citizenship is best realised by supporting students’ exercise of democratic leadership on campus. This in turn develops and fosters democratic leadership in civil society. Several related findings point towards a distinct student pathway to leadership in civil society. The university’s response to student political activity, student representation in university governance and other aspects of extra-curricular student life needs to be examined for ways in which African universities can instil and support democratic values and practices. In this way their potential as a democratic training ground can be realised.

In conclusion, encouraging and facilitating student leadership in various forms of on-campus political activity and in a range of student organisations is one of the most promising ways in which African universities can act as training grounds for democratic citizenship. Strengthening student development in various organisational and leadership contexts through specific training and targeted support represents a key opportunity for the African university to simultaneously enhance student life and the university’s contribution to citizenship development and the development of a national democratic political culture.

The following implications for African universities can be derived from the findings and conclusions in this report:

• It is necessary to stimulate a series of dialogues between governments, institutional managers, student development professionals and student leaders on student development as a pathway to democratic citizenship development in Africa.
• In-depth investigations into democratic best practice of student development in general, and student leadership development in particular, should be conducted and the findings presented in a series of handbooks for use by student development professionals in African universities.
• The number of surveys should be extended to other African universities along with the in-depth investigations into best practices of democratic student development.
• A study of the role of youth and students in particular, and members of local universities in general in the current political transitions in West and North Africa (e.g. Ivory Coast and Egypt), should be conducted as a contribution towards a deeper understanding of the role of students in democratisation processes in Africa.