The University in Africa and Democratic Citizenship

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Chapter 6

Student Politics and the University: Implications and Recommendations

6.1 Overview of the findings

Overall the Student Governance Surveys have shown that students understand what democracy is, and that they understand democracy mostly in procedural terms. Their definitions of democracy have mostly positive connotations. Over two-thirds of students support democracy, and around half of the students are exclusively committed to democracy (more at UCT and less at UDSM). The survey shows that commitment to democracy, as measured in terms of preference for democracy and rejection of non-democratic alternatives, neither increases nor decreases significantly with involvement in student governance or other forms of student political participation.

Students’ perception of the extent to which their national political system can be called a democracy is consistently far more critical than that of mass publics (especially among the East African students). Students at UON are least satisfied with the way their government works (87% ‘not satisfied’) while UCT students are most satisfied (57% ‘fairly’/’very satisfied’).

Taking the notions of equilibrium/disequilibrium between demand for democracy and supply of democracy as indicators for the extent to which an existing regime is considered consolidated as a democracy, it emerges that the Kenyan political system is a fairly liberal but unconsolidated regime, ready for pro-democratic regime change from a student perspective (which, referring to the coalition government of 2009, is a perceptive assessment). The same analysis suggests that the Tanzanian political system is also a fairly liberal political system that is not fully consolidated and offers room for reform and deepening of democracy from a student perspective (but less so from the perspective of Tanzanians in general), and that South Africa’s liberal democracy is fairly consolidated from the UCT students’ perspective. Correspondingly, a majority of UON students emerge as the most critical and impatient democrats (in national and cross-campus comparison), while the number of complacent and fairly uncritical democrats is highest among UCT students. The comparison with Afrobarometer data shows that 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.
The surveys further show that all the three universities provide access to a greater diversity of news media than what is available to mass publics. Universities provide better access to newspapers and TV (in Kenya and Tanzania), and students at all three university/country contexts have almost exclusively access to frequent use of the internet. In addition, students tend to discuss politics more frequently than mass publics. Thus, students emerge as well informed about politics (at UON/UDSM better than mass publics, at UCT slightly worse). And yet, while students discuss politics more frequently than mass publics and are more frequently using a diversity of news media, they are actually not more interested in public affairs than the public in general. With respect to cognitive engagement, all three universities may therefore be considered akin to a hothouse in that they provide a unique environment for awareness and knowledge about politics to blossom. However, once a student leaves the university the hothouse effect may well disappear.

The universities also provide ample opportunity for students to participate in political activity and to take leadership in voluntary associations on and off campus. The surveys show that students specialise in certain types of political participation at university. Thus, while those in formal student leadership positions tend to also take up official leadership positions in off-campus voluntary associations, student activists are also typically activists (e.g. protesters) engaged in civil society beyond campus. The analysis of the student surveys and Afrobarometer data in terms of the notion of ‘active citizenship’ shows that relatively higher levels of active political participation of students is not an effect of their youthfulness but more likely the effect of specific predispositions and conditions associated with being at university. Thus, these findings suggest that the university has the potential to be a training ground in democracy for the upcoming leadership of state and civil society.

6.2 Enhancing the university’s training ground potential

In order to enhance and actualise the university’s potential to act as a training ground for democratic citizenship, several findings of the surveys related to students’ political participation have to be taken into account: Students mostly participate in collective political activity; the strongest correlations in the survey have been found between students’ participation in politics on campus and off campus; the types of political participation engaged in on campus and off campus are often the same ... and so forth. While the first finding is typical for political participation in Africa overall, the latter two point towards a possibility of a student pathway to leadership in civil society. The potential of the university as a site of citizenship development is further enhanced when one looks at various other correlations of students’ attitudes towards politics and political behaviour on and off campus (e.g. with respect to perceptions of leadership corruption and trust).

Confronted with student activism, the tendency of university administrations in Africa is typically to either respond with utmost severity to the student challenge, for example by calling in the police, criminalising student leaders, collectively punishing students with university closure, the banning of student organisations and the destruction of student
businesses and so forth.21 Alternatively, the strategy has also been to incorporate (or outrightly co-opt) the student leadership in more or less effective ways into the formal machinery of university decision-making (or a combination of the two). In most cases, the objective of the university’s response is to discourage and de-emphasise mass participation of students in political activity and to sanitize student leaders’ involvement in politics on and off campus. This is done in the name of restoring and maintaining a peaceful academic environment conducive to learning.

However, an academic environment where a sprinkling of students is co-opted into enjoying the spoils of office, while the majority of students are politically de-activated only to be ‘mobilised’ occasionally as ‘masses’ by student leaders for their own purposes (of name, fame and often financial gain) is not one conducive to students’ learning how to take up the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship, or one in which students can learn how to exert democratic leadership in civil society.

Rather, the Student Governance Surveys suggest that to depoliticise the university and sanitize student politics is to lose out on the very vehicle which African universities can use to make a key contribution to the democratisation of political culture. The study suggests that it is precisely by enhancing student involvement in collective political and non-political activity and supporting student leadership in a variety of organisational contexts, that the university can make a contribution to democratic citizenship.

6.2.1 Students’ preferences for university governance

The majority of students at the Universities of Cape Town, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi look to the university to provide them with the kind of qualification that will enable them to find quality employment in the market place and to provide them with an education of the highest international standard (N valid UCT 376, UON 342, UDSM 347). Students 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). The conception of the university as a service provider and private business finds, however, almost no support among students of all three student bodies.

Corresponding to these conceptions of the university, students agree with specific ways that the university should be governed. Overall, students prefer the university to be governed in a manner that is inclusive of all key constituencies. Decisions about the university should be made predominantly by internal constituencies (especially senior management, the professoriate, and students) in keeping with their respective criteria and interests.

Students have a rather idealistic view of the possible extent of student participation in university governance. On the one hand, students demand to be involved in making key decisions in the university along with institutional management and academics. Over 80%
of students on all campuses disagree with the notion that student involvement in university decision-making is ‘a waste of time from everybody involved’ (N valid 1 180); rather almost as many argue that ‘student representation in the University Council, Senate and their committees ensures that the student voice is heard’ (N valid 1 175). Students want to be involved in sensitive areas of university governance such as the appointment of academics and top managers, and they want to have a voice at the highest levels of decision-making, including University Council and Senate. Yet, the idea that ‘students [should] have the predominant voice and run the university responsive to student interests’ gains very mixed support on the three campuses. At UON a majority of students would agree (54%); at UDSM 47% of students agree while at UCT only 35% of students support this idea (N valid UON 390, UDSM 390, UCT 396). The proposal of equality among the different internal constituencies (i.e. academics, management, students) receives more support, whereby the sizable majority (UDSM/UON) or close-to-majority (UCT) of students on all three campuses supports ‘same rights and powers to participate in university decision-making
like other constituencies’ for students (‘agree’/’strongly agree’ UON: 67% of 378; UCT 48% of 388; UDSM 81% of 395; rest mostly indifferent).

6.2.2 Rethinking student representation and student development

The overwhelming student support for student participation in representative decision-making forums comes in a context where student representation itself faces a crisis of legitimacy. At UON, less than 20% of students are satisfied with the way student representation works in their institution (N valid 396), and only 26% consider the last student election free and fair (N valid 390). The situation is only marginally better at UDSM (‘fairly’/’very satisfied’ 24% of 400; elections ‘free’/’fair with/without minor problems’ 27% of 396); while at UCT, just over 50% of students consider student representation adequate or almost adequate (N valid 396).

Moreover, student representatives are among the least trusted groups on campus and perceived as more corrupt than management and academics. At UON only 19% of students say they trust student leaders (while over 52% trust their fellow students; N valid 396); conversely, over 70% of students think that most or all of their student leaders are involved in corruption. At UDSM, about half of the students not in leadership trust their student leaders (202 of 395), and about a third think student leadership is involved in corruption (30% of 396). Even at UCT, student leaders are the least trusted group (between student leaders, management and academics), albeit levels of trust are much higher there than on the East African campuses. While two-thirds of UCT students trust other students on campus, almost 80% trust senior management and over 90% trust the university’s academics and professors; student leaders in turn have only gained the trust of just over half the UCT student population (58%; N valid 399). Furthermore, even at UCT student leaders are more often perceived corrupt than any of the other university constituencies (i.e. top managers and academics) (albeit at a low level with 16% of 397).

In a previous paper we have shown that levels of trust and the perception of the responsiveness of student leaders to students in general are moderately positively correlated with each other, and moderately negatively correlated with perceptions of student leadership corruption (Luescher-Mamashela 2010a). Thus, it may be expected that as student leadership responsiveness increases, levels of trust increase and perceptions of corruption decrease. Correspondingly, perceptions of student leadership corruption may therefore decrease as levels of trust and responsiveness increase. How can levels of trust and responsiveness be increased and simultaneously perceptions (and practices) of corruption be reduced?

6.2.3 Developing citizenship through student development

On the one hand, students’ demand for representative, democratic university governance is seemingly thwarted by the way university governance and student representation is perceived to work (especially at UON and UDSM). On the other hand, students’ relative lack of trust in student leadership and perception of corruption offers an opportunity to rethink the way student representation works. Looking at the training ground potential of
the university, these findings suggest greater involvement of the university management and academics in making student representation work for students, rather than less. This does not mean micro-managing student government; rather it suggests that by empowering students and student leaders to make their contribution to the university in more democratic and effective ways, the university can make a significant contribution to citizenship development.

Without wanting to delve into the details of specific training and support programmes that offices of student development and Deans of Students might want to develop, there are various concrete ways by which effective and inexpensive solutions can be implemented. For instance, specific training to emerging student leaders could focus on leadership responsibilities in formal settings, for example developing a mission and purpose for an organisation; democratically choosing leaders; evaluating and supporting leaders; ensuring good management; being accountable for financial resources; developing and implementing a strategic plan; monitoring institutional development and transformation; being responsible for ensuring good order and a safe campus environment and developing and preserving institutional autonomy in a context of responsiveness to developmental needs etc. (Ncayiyana & Hayward 1999).

Developing a consensus on the operational and organisational parameters of student activity and politics should be set in consultation with student leadership along with policies as to the rules by which certain organisations are allowed to operate on campus. At UCT, for instance, political parties were banned from campus for most of the apartheid era but were allowed to establish branches on campus just before the democratic breakthrough in 1994. They now operate under the same rules as any other student organisations and play an important role in formal student leadership. Consideration must be given whether certain off-campus organisations should specifically be encouraged to establish student branches (e.g. Habitat for Humanity; Doctors without Borders) and correspondingly, student organisations who reach out charitably beyond campus might deserve special assistance and support to do so more effectively from student development offices.

Student entrepreneurship, on and off campus, provides opportunity for special support and attention from university management. In many of these respects the university management should act as an honest (and disinterested) broker, ensuring continuity and institutional memory across generations of student leadership along with monitoring to ensure that distributional politics do not become spoils politics. Student sport clubs, recreational, artistic and academic organisations, together with the student union/guild and student governments, offer the organisational context for students to train in various leadership capacities while exercising their talents or special interests. Lastly, support for a regular and high-quality student news medium (e.g. an online and/or print student newspaper) published in a context of responsible free speech and freedom of the press on campus and accessible to all members of the campus community should be a priority.

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22 At the University of Cape Town, an ‘Emerging Student Leaders Programme’ has been developed and implemented which annually offers co-curricular training in student leadership by means of seminars and conferences to over 100 competitively selected emerging student leaders.
In short, the potential of the university acting as a training ground for democratic citizenship can be actualised and enhanced by strengthening student development in various student organisational and leadership contexts through specific training as well as targeted support.

The Student Governance Surveys have shown that university and student life 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 critical observers, they are political actors who operate both on and off campus. While the university and various aspects of student life offer a potential training ground for transformative and active citizenship (both in conventional and unconventional forms of political participation), there is an equally likely potential for high levels of citizenship involvement to disappear once certain ‘hothouse conditions’ (e.g. with respect to cognitive engagement and political participation) are removed upon leaving the university. The potential contribution of specific curricular interventions to support democratic citizenship is not denied, but they have not been the focus of this study. Rather, looking at students’ political attitudes and behaviours, and particularly at political participation, there is clearly a potential of the university acting as training ground for an emerging democratic leadership of state and civil society. In this respect, it is apposite to re-emphasise Bleiklie’s point that citizenship education involves mode 1 and mode 2 types of knowledge, suggesting that ‘students need to learn how democracy works’ and learn to appreciate ‘that democracy works by experiencing that they can influence events and their own living conditions through participation’ (n.d., original emphasis). In both respects, co- and extra-curricular interventions by student development offices provide a way of fostering knowledge about democracy and democratisation. Among the key findings supporting this point are correlations of on- and off-campus student participation in political and civil society activity which suggest a distinct mechanism, a student leadership pathway, to democratic citizenship and leadership of civil society. Thus, strengthening student development in various student organisational and leadership contexts through specific training and targeted support represents a key opportunity for the university to simultaneously enhance student life as well as the university’s contribution to democracy. In this respect, by developing students’ capacity for democratic leadership on campus, the university fosters democratic leadership in civil society and ultimately democracy in the country.