

**AUDIT OF SRC ELECTIONS AT 21 UNIVERSITIES AND  
TECHNIKONS IN SOUTH AFRICA FROM 2002-2004**

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***COMPILER OF REPORT:***  
**MICHELLE BUCHLER**

***RESEARCHERS:***  
**CHARLTON KOEN (Lead Researcher)**  
**MLUNGISI CELE**  
**ARIEL LIBHABER**

**THE CENTRE FOR EDUCATION POLICY  
DEVELOPMENT**



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longstanding areas of social enquiry. Nonetheless, little is known about student elections and student voter behaviour in South Africa, although many inferences have been drawn about voter trends and reasons why some groups gain low levels of voter support. In this sense, the study clearly has significant academic value.

From a practical perspective, information on student governance and electoral practices will deepen our understanding about factors that promote or hamper the participation of students in democratic practices and factors that strengthen or mitigate the legitimacy of elections. Information on election practices will also provide insight into the operation of governance structures at universities and technikons and provide an overview of the way in which democratic practices have unfolded among students at universities and technikons in the recent past.

The study will also provide an overview of trends characterising elections from 2002-2004 at public HEIs in South Africa. Little is known about student perceptions of democracy, democratic practices at universities and technikons or about the reasons for low voter participation in student elections. For example, it is unclear whether males are more likely to vote than females, whether age cohorts in the 18-20 year group are more likely to vote than other students and why small numbers of youth voted in the last national election. Determining this is crucial to understanding the voting patterns of youthful cohorts and assessing the level of support for specific political groupings and their participation in civic and civil society concerns.

In addition, it is also important to understand the relationship between governance models and student representation and participation in issues that impact on their lives. In this area, a distinct lacuna surrounds our knowledge about the type of structures students rely on to further their democratic participation. We also know little about the type of practices they internalise during their study periods at universities and technikons. Since these study periods play a prominent role in the formative experiences of future leaders, this lacuna requires urgent redress in order for us to better understand student views on governance and democracy.

Politically, there are several reasons why research projects on student election behaviour, their choices and democracy are important. Principally, these reasons relate to South Africa's status as a fledgling democracy. This needs consolidation through strong participation in order to ensure that democracy can flourish. Democracy is at the very core of people's participation in civic structures and is essential to stability and decision-making in transitional states. Democracy also provides a mechanism to foster equal participation and to improve the status of people. This improvement can be an outcome of democracy or can simply reflect formal equal participation. In a fledgling democracy one democratic challenge is invariably to increase the level and nature of public participation in governance issues and to entrench democratic practices. Determining the level and nature of democratic practices in spheres such as student elections is accordingly crucial to establishing the extent and nature of democratic practices in society.

Elections provide one mechanism to gauge public participation in the democratic process. Specifically, student elections constitute one regular plebiscite in which leaders are annually elected to represent students and to advance their interests. In this way, student elections provide a platform on which national, regional and local political issues can be addressed. Student elections also offer a means to gauge public opinion of a significant interest group and their participation in activities to advance public interest. Where large numbers of students participate in elections evidence exists of strong participation in local, regional and national civic and political issues. Where small numbers of students participate in elections weak participation characterizes the involvement of people in local, regional and national political issues. Accordingly, elections provide a barometer of public opinion, their involvement in civic and political issues and an indication of their preferences.

Mainly elections produce future national leaders, reflect the nature of public participation, the influence the electorate wields in choosing leaders, congruence between views of candidates and broader opinion, and a sense of people's desires. In addition, elections also have important implications for local, regional and national political choices, policies and activities. That partisan politics intrude on elections and influence outcomes is well known. These pressures sometimes emanate from outside higher education institutions and provide a spark to local issues. The direct opposite effect is also common. In consequence, election events invariably have a bearing on other processes and provide some indication of the extent of democracy.

For example, electoral victories for national political student organisations during the 1980s enabled them to use SRC resources to advance their interests. At some institutions, control over resources was associated with denying other organizations a space in which to organise and to register as student organisations. This limited competition and ensured future election victories. Such practices also helped build the profile of other affiliated groups and helped the mass democratic movement establish a broader hegemony by linking institutional concerns to national political occurrences and validating student involvement in external activities through such links. For this reason, annual elections offer insight into broader democratic processes, the shortcoming of existing election provisions, and the manner in which external factors intrude on campus issues. This requires investigation since extremely limited data exists on the daily issues students grapple with.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH**

The origins of the study lie in the changes that characterise the development of student politics in the post-Apartheid period. Viewed longitudinally, the defining feature of student politics over the last 34 years concerns the constant militancy with which students at especially historically black universities have interacted with university authorities. In the period from 1970 to 1994, students played a pivotal role in raising general political consciousness about the sources of social inequality in South Africa. During this time, students were often in the forefront of battles with police when linking struggles around

power and resources in universities and technicians to national liberation concerns. Students also played important roles in linking student, worker and community struggles and in promoting the aims of the Black Consciousness Movement and the African National Congress.

They also still do this. There are many examples of student organisations that share close affinity with former liberation movements and with national political organisations. Students also still commonly engage in militant action and sometimes face police or security forces in confrontational circumstances. However, whereas student struggles before 1994 established links between student



The puzzle this raised for us is why student leaders have abandoned previous concerns with national political societal issues that characterised much of student political activities during the apartheid era. Related to this, what explains the doublespeak that characterises the seeming commitment to established aims of tackling societal issues in the political manifestos of student leaders and their later focus on local issues when elected? In looking for answers to these issues, we were also faced with questions on what else has changed in student politics since 1994.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In researching these issues, several research questions anchored this research:

- a. What historic patterns manifested with respect to past SRC elections at universities and technikons in South Africa (from 1985 – 2002) and the type of campaigns student leaders addressed?
- b. What patterns characterise the outcome of elections with respect to gender, race, disability and nationality at the twenty higher education institutions included in the study?
- c. What mechanisms, procedures and processes are used and followed at the different institutions to elect SRCs?
- d. What levels of support and legitimacy are evident for elected SRCs and what views do students hold on democracy, institutional activities such as participation in governance structures and broader political developments?
- e. What campaign issues emerge at the various institutions and what relationship exists between institutional, local, national and international campaign issues?
- f. What differences manifest in the campaign activities of national student political organizations, independents and other student coalitions?
- g. Of particular interest with respect to election results in subsequent years will be the following set of questions: Do students change their voting behaviour? If yes, why, and in what circumstances, do students change their voting behaviour?
- h. What is the impact of institutional restructuring processes on SRCs and how do SRCs respond to and participate in restructuring initiatives at higher education institutions?

### **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

Table 1 indicates the sample of institutions that were involved in the study. The study adopted a comparative descriptive approach that sought to sketch the main changes that

have occurred in student politics since 1994 across 12 universities and 8 technikons. That is, the research methodology involved an institutional comparative approach that examined changes in student governance, student responses to institutional efforts to minimize academic and financial waste, and differences in student participation in governance structures. This inter alia involved examining the tactics and strategies used by different SRCs to increase their chances of securing victories for students when negotiating with institutional managers and researching the mechanisms student leaders use to exercise power and maintain democracy.

**Table 1: Institutions involved in the Study**

<b>Western Cape</b>	<b>Gauteng</b>	<b>Kwazulu Natal</b>	<b>Other</b>
UWC	Wits	Natal (Durban)	Northern Gauteng Tech
UCT	RAU	Durban Westville	North West Technikon
Stellenbosch	Pretoria	Natal Tech	Technikon South Africa
Cape Technikon	Medunsa	ML Sultan Technikon	UNISA
Peninsula Technikon	Wits Technikon		Rhodes
			Fort Hare

The study involved a combination of participant observation, qualitative interviewing and quantitative work. In some institutions participant observation embodied anthropological fieldwork. At other higher institutions, detached observation and independent data gathering involving the use of strategic informants, and augmented by interviews, occurred along with tabulations of institutional totals and comparisons. More broadly, the research involved collecting primary data at twenty institutions, a review of published and unpublished sources on student politics and elections in South Africa and a repeat probability survey (prospective panel) administered to students at five institutions. We conducted about 82 interviews mainly with student leaders from student political organizations, SRCs, Student Affairs officials (including Deans of Students, student developers, Deputy Vice-Chancellors), executive personnel like registrars, and unions and academics. Interviews with students usually happened either after SRC elections or during or within 2 months of specific incidents such as protests.

In addition, a literature review was conducted which included a perusal of archival material stored at universities and technikons, discussion documents, internal reports, newspaper articles and material drawn from student newsletters. We also examined past research on students in South Africa, and international literature describing trends in student politics following significant transitions.

## **1.5 KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS**

While considerable variation exists across institutions with respect to student participation, governance arrangements, and the issues students take up:

- a. There are signs that students are being successfully integrated into institutional governance structures, and that institutions continuously re-align their structures to

enhance their participation. For example, to create and improve policy capacity several have established Student Parliaments. Also, to promote mergers several SRCs immediately restructured portfolios and created specific sub-committees. There is also a stronger focus on procedural democratic practices, and less so on direct democracy practices.

- b. There are signs of strong democratic practices and respect for institutional rules and of normative institutionalism. While democratic procedures are sometimes flouted, there is high and consistent participation in elections with most institutions recording high voter turnout, despite limited canvassing and low publicity levels. General patterns show that black students vote more consistently than others, that most SRC members are male and drawn from SASCO, and that international students feel marginalised.
- c. There is unease about the quality of student leadership amongst institutional managers, academics and student political organizations. This lack of confidence has often given rise to spontaneous student protest aimed at accelerating progress on specific issues, and to concern at the level of some Institutional Forums, Senates and Councils about the effectiveness of student participation.
- d. SRC leadership is about the exercise of power. There is constant contestation between democratic participation and authoritarian rule in SRCs. Successful SRCs generally have a core of strong authoritarian leaders who play a central steering role and act undemocratically. There are especially strong signs that SRC members use undemocratic measures against competitor organizations to achieve objectives they feel serve a bigger strategic interest.
- e. Many SRCs are crisis organizations that annually respond to challenges, but have little opportunity to put operational plans like a Programme of Action (POA) into practice. They also feel constrained about their ability to impact on youth consciousness, to take up political issues and to gain support. For these reasons, many stick to ceremonial sponsored events and use this as a way of maintaining contact with constituents.
- f. Many SRC members are detached from fellow students and institutional managers. In some institutions this is due to structural factors, as at Pretoria where Service Providers replace SRC functions. In other institutions detachment relates to not having a specified person with political influence to deal with, or having to take up issues through an administrative Dean of Students.
- g. There has been a decrease in the institutional support provided to SRCs and their membership. This is reflected in budget decreases, a decrease in the number of staff SRCs can use, and clashes between SRC members and SDOs about the services and support the latter provide.

- h. There are signs of a strong civic consciousness and civic responsibility and interest in contributing to the promotion of civil society organizations and societal development.
- i. Self interest and perks attached to student office drives many individuals to participate in student politics.

## **1.6 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

This project was housed at the Centre for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE), University of the Western Cape (UWC), under the leadership of Charlton Koen, who passed away in July 2005. The Education Policy Unit (EPU) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) was the partner institution. The UWC/Wits team was responsible for the data collection and major outputs of the projects (see section 1.6 below). However, after the passing away of Charlton Koen, the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) took on the task of collating all project related data and documentation and developing this final project report, with the assistance of the remaining researchers, Mr Gabriel Mlungisi Cele and Mr Ariel Libhaber from the CSHE and Wits EPU respectively<sup>1</sup>. Both researchers have subsequently left their positions at the CSHE and Wits EPU.

### **1.6.1 Building relationships**

Contacts and working relationships were established with student development organizations, particularly NASDEV, that are also involved in researching student political behaviour.

Also, relationships with the national student SRC organizations (SATSU and SAU-SRC) and student political organisations (such as SASCO, AZASCO and PASMA) were formed, with the researchers doing presentations to these bodies.

Relationships with academics were also maintained through presentations at Education Faculty seminars and at Southern African Sociological Association conferences, and with the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET).

### **1.6.2 Capacity building**

The project team included younger researchers. One of these researchers – Gabriel Mlungisi Cele – enrolled for a PhD and received a Spencer grant to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that not all primary data collected during the project was available to CEPD. This report is therefore a compilation/integration of the data that was available, and various articles, papers and working papers, written by the researchers, that were accessible to CEPD.

### **1.6.3 Advocacy**

Articles were published in the popular press; radio interviews were given by the researchers; student organisations, officials of institutions and government officials were engaged by the researchers. The research has been quoted by the Minister of Education, and in a literature review conducted for CHET on student governance in Africa.

## **1.7 OUTPUTS**

This Project has produced a number of outputs, both written and verbal. These outputs range from radio interviews, to articles in popular publications such as *The Teacher*, to presentations, to peer-reviewed journal articles.

### **1.7.1 Conference and seminar papers**

Cele, M. 2002. "Challenges facing SRCs", presented at the SAU-SRC conference.

Cele, M. (2002) "From Protest to Participation-Where is student leadership headed?" Paper presented at the South African Sociology Association, East London, South Africa, July.

Cele, M. 2002. "Student involvement in governance structures", presented as part of the UWC Education Faculty seminar programme.

Cele M. (2003) "The Higher Education Transformation In South Africa and the Challenges Facing SRC and House Committees", UWC SRC Strategic Planning Workshop December

Cele, M. 2004. "The implications of mergers for SRCs", presented to the annual conference of the Sociological Association of Southern Africa, Bloemfontein, July 2004.

Cele M. (2005) "Higher Education Student Access and Equity and Enrolment", paper addressed DOE "Advancing students unity behind a single coordinated Student Union" student consultative Conference, Braamfontein, 21-25 September.

Koen, C. 2002. "Challenges facing student organisations". NASDEV conference, Cape Town, 21-23 September.

Koen, C. 2004. "The implications of the changing political and social contexts for SRCs", presented to the annual conference of the Sociological Association of Southern Africa, Bloemfontein, July 2004.

Koen, C and Cele, G. 2005. Draft paper of "Political Apathy" to CHET workshop on African student networks.

Koen, C., Cele, M. and Libhaber, A. 2004. "Changes in student activism, democracy and governance in South Africa", presented at a conference hosted by the Centre for Education Policy Development on The Role of Education in a Decade of Democracy, 13-14 May.

Koen, C., Cele, M. and Libhaber, A. 2004. "Student activism, academic and financial exclusions and political mistrust in South Africa", paper presented to the Kenton Education Conference held at Cathedral Peak, KwaZulu Natal in October.

Libhaber, A. 2004. "The political participation of international students in the New South Africa", presented to the annual conference of the Sociological Association of Southern Africa, Bloemfontein.

Libhaber, A. 2004. Paper presented at Kenton

### **1.7.2 Book chapters, journal articles and monographs**

Cele, M.G. 2002. From Protest to Participation: Challenges Facing the South African Higher Education Student Representative Councils (SRCs). *UWC Perspectives In Education*, Vol. 2.

Cele, M. Forthcoming. The Role of Students in the Post-Apartheid South Africa, in *Student Politics and Higher Education in Africa*. CODESRIA.

Koen, C. 2005. Coming to grips with problems in student politics. *Quarterly Review of Education & Training in South Africa* 12(2).

Koen, C and Cele, M. 2003. Student politics in South Africa – an overview of key developments from 1960. *Cahiers de la recherche sur l'éducation et les saviors*, 2: 201-223.

Koen, C and Cele, M. 2005. Changes in student governance in South Africa, draft paper for publication to CHET.

Koen, C., Cele, M. and Libhaber, A. 2006. Student activism and student exclusions in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 26(4): 404-414.

Libhaber, A. 2004. The student protest at Wits University, and the context of access to higher education. *Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*, 11(2).

Libhaber, A. 2005. South African public higher education: access or success. *Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*, 12(1).

### **1.7.3 Newspaper articles**

Cele, G. 2004. Short piece on student struggles for *The Teacher*.

Cele, G. 2005. Short piece for *Cape Times* on student financial exclusions and protests.

Libhaber, A. 2005. Access or success (cover article in higher education supplement "Beyond Matric), *Mail & Guardian*, May 2005.

#### **1.7.4 Interviews**

Libhaber, A. 2004. Various interviews between October-November on SAFM, Metro FM, Radio 2000, Lesedi FM, RSG and Lotus FM.

Libhaber, A. 2005. Interview on SAFM, 24 February.

Libhaber, A. 2005. Interview on Khaya FM, 21 February.

## **SECTION 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: HIGHER EDUCATION, STUDENT ORGANISATION AND DEMOCRACY**

#### **2.1**





itself obvious from the initial efforts at UDW in 1972 to limit the influence of SASO and NUSAS. Recognition by university authorities of the right of student political organizations to operate at HBIs subsequently provided a platform for these organizations to contest elections as run-offs between political organizations. In 1989 this resulted in UDW returning a SRCs consisting of only SASCO (ANC-aligned members) with black consciousness organizations suffering their first outright defeat. Such elections, in turn, provided the justification for student political organizations to claim that they acted in the interest of all students and to try to monopolize political interactions with University Councils.

The history of SRC elections at UDW also shows variable patterns that are also evident at other black and white institutions. Among these, election percentages have varied considerably. In 1981 students returned a 12% poll (The Graphic 1981). In 1989, almost 45% voted – the highest poll recorded at UDW (Varsity Voice 1989). In 1992, this proportion was 22.8% (Varsity Voice 1992). In 1994, this was 28% (Varsity Voice 1994). The same proportion obtained in 1991 and in 2002. What this illustrates is that student support has tended to vary in relation to levels of contestation and period effects. When a low 12% poll was recorded, this followed on a student boycott that left students divided about when to return and about whether they had succeeded in achieving their aims. When the highest poll of 45% was recorded, some contestants were languishing in jail, and were, along with others involved in organizing activities of the mass democratic movement, able to draw on the philosophy of non-racialism to portray black consciousness organizations as racially exclusive and as causing divisions in the ranks of the oppressed. On the other hand, when polls of 28% were recorded - the mode and mean over the last fifteen years – struggles mainly focused on institutional resources with political organizations sharing the limelight with issue-based structures and independent candidates addressing institutional concerns.

These differences between the kind of issues addressed by independent candidates and issue-based structures such as religious or women's organizations and political organizations is also evident at the distance institutions and technikons where political organizations have dominated elections. At these institutions, SRCs have a much more recent history. In the case of distance institutions, the first SRC's at UNISA was established in 1996 after more than 50 years of petitioning for a structure to represent student interest. In the case of Technikon SA, the first SRC was established in 1997 and at Eastern Cape Technikon in 1998. In these cases, federal structures were established to promote unified action amongst students scattered across several campuses since crises political and financial crises at these institutions have dictated that students must increasingly play a political role to defend their interests. As a result, at UNISA office bearers in a region vary from 4-9 with regional presidents functioning as ex-officio members of the national executive.

At the same time, SRCs at the distance institutions differ somewhat from other SRCs in two respects. First, their period in office spans two years as opposed to one. Second, they place emphasis on both student service functions (due to the poor state of such service provision) and political matters (due to social background factors and interest from

political organizations to promote their aims). By contrast, SRCs at other institutions tend to emphasize one of these functions with SRCs at HBIs tending to focus on political crises issues while SRCs at HWIs tend to focus on service related issues such as standards and normative cultural experiences.

Regarding their historic composition, it is evident that the make-up of various SRCs shows two distinct patterns. First, in keeping with the majority ethnic characteristic of an institution SRC members were almost exclusively white, black, Coloured or Indian until 1985. Thus, the UDW SRC comprised of 13 Indians in 1995, the UWC SRC consisted of 12 Coloureds in 1985, the Stellenbosch SRC consisted of 15 whites and Africans made up the SRC at the University of the North. Second, SRC members have mostly been male at all institutions as is evident from the fact that in 1985 only 5 women served in the 52 positions at the four institutions listed above. This, amongst other, relates to male dominance of student structures, their greater levels of enrolment at universities and technikons and stronger political role. Among these factors, especially enrolment has changed sharply at all tertiary institutions in South Africa since 1985. In this light, we examine whether and in which way the composition of SRCs have changed, how elections are organized and what implications this has for the outcome of SRC elections.

## **2.2 TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

### **2.2.1 Policy and legislative reform**

Structured student participation in HE decision-making processes is a recent development. In one sense, the seed for this is also not local, but is rather embedded in the structure of public HE worldwide. Indeed, democratic co-operative governance involving stakeholders constitutes a general feature of the managerial revolution that swept through fairly young European HE institutions in the 1990s. In another sense, there is a local base to student participation since democratic governance, involving students in decision-making roles, was a central student demand in the Apartheid period. The seeds for this no doubt lays in the important role students played in challenging their exclusion from governance structures at universities during Apartheid and in the authoritarian nature of HE governance in South Africa prior to 1990. This meant that management showed little public accountability to students and that fundamental legitimacy weaknesses characterized decision-making.

Historically, these weaknesses included the perception that there was a lack of participation and transparency in how decisions were made at HE institutions. Other weaknesses included the view that management at several institutions enjoyed little student and academic staff support. The source for this view varied. At some institutions, it encapsulated the idea that an inner circle with ties to the previous government tended to steer several higher education institutions. At other institutions, it related to the view that conservative liberals tried to control and limit the pace of change. Consequently, since the composition of executive leaders did not bode well for HE restructuring post-Apartheid, students along with other groups argued strongly that executive leadership at

several HE institutions had to be overhauled. They also argued for new governance arrangements (for example, Broad Transformation Forums) that included students had to emerge in order to exercise some restraint on managerial influence.

In this regard, legislatively, the formal genesis for student participation is found in arrangements contained in the 1997 White Paper. This document commits institutions to formally recognize SRCs, to establish procedures for their operation, and to give student leaders representation on a wide range of institutional committees, including Councils and Institutional Forums. Before the 1997 White Paper, student participation in institutional governance at especially black institutions did not include participation in planning, budget, teaching and service, equity, quality assurance and ICT committees. However, the 1997 White Paper provided for convergence between student participation at historically black and historically white institutions in South Africa and for more extensive involvement in institutional committees.

Principally, the 1997 Higher Education Act 101 overturned four decades of excluding black students at historically black universities from participating in institutional decision-making. The Act requires that all HE institutions formally recognize Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and approve their constitutions. The Act also provides elected student leaders with seats in the highest decision-making body on strategic issues (Council), the highest academic body (Senate) and the highest advisory body (Institutional Forums).

Regarding the manner of their involvement, the Act stipulates that students should act in the interest of the institution when participating in governance structures, and not act as mandate-carrying representatives from student organisations (see Ncayiyana and Hayward, 1999: 46). This formulation aims to promote deliberative democracy (rational discussion and agreement). However, if voting is necessary to create agreement, students have to form alliances with other stakeholders and acquire further votes from HE managers to secure their preference. Fundamentally, the Act then did not dilute the power of institutional leaders. Rather, it promoted 'constructive engagement' between HE management and student leaders by facilitating the incorporation of student leaders.

Three primary factors underpinned this democratization. First, the trickle down effect of the corporatist arrangements that characterized South Africa's post 1994 political transition created a framework for promoting co-operation between former political opponents. Second, the ANC government had sufficient political muscle and legitimacy amongst student leaders and the new group of HE managers – whose appointment the Minister of Education approved - to legislate their co-operation. Reasons for this include the fact that the largest national political student organization – the South African Students Congress (SASCO) – in 1996 defined its role as 'complementary to strengthening, implementing and defending the educational policies of the government' (SASCO, 1996). As in other African countries (Munene, 2003), the implication is that some students form part of the national political order. Third, government and HE managers viewed incorporation of students into governance structures as the most

appropriate measure to 'professionalize' their actions and minimize annual bouts of protest and conflict, while simultaneously promoting democratic practice.

The consequences of this situation include student involvement in committees dealing with academic development, student fees, bursary allocations, institutional finances, financial exclusions, academic exclusions, appointing senior executives, equity committees and a host of other institutional structures. As in trade union contexts, the price SRCs were asked to pay for formal access to decision-making involved the possibility of being influenced by management and acting like an instrument of social order. The price therefore included the possibility of defending the decisions of HE managers to students and turning their back on the tried and tested means of dissent and mass protest because the ANC government and HE institutions desired stable academic processes.

The answer to why the shift occurred is complex. Viewed from an institutional standpoint, the antecedent roots for student participation clearly concerns the reciprocal responsibilities students and institutional leaders have. It further relates to the fact that student protest became endemic at several institutions during the early 1990s and helped destabilize academic and managerial approaches. Indeed, struggles against financial exclusions, over food, squatting and the demographics of institutions obstructed social stability at many HE institutions up to 2002. Therefore, to resolve ongoing student protests, given that the material conditions that inform most student protest still exists, institutional leaders had to channel student political activity into institutional structures and promote structured political engagement. For this, institutional leaders clearly had to accede to student leaders that they be formally recognized as important stakeholders and become involved in decisions that affect students. What further informed the shift was the idea that resolving the competing claims of HE interest groups through bargaining and consensual decision-making was central to establishing the legitimacy of institutional leaders and to restoring stability at conflict ridden institutions.

Beyond this, for unstable HBU's, political stability through an end to student protest and a decrease in political activity were key objectives. Another objective involved making decisions more realistic to students by involving them in decision-making. Student assistance in addressing the vexed questions that surround the material issues that give rise to student protest was another carrot. For HWU's, untroubled by political instability, the answer is less obvious, given that the involvement of students in decision-making were always likely to produce its own complications. However, it probably relates to government prescription and the fact that co-operative governance held no dangers for the shift from professional collegiality to managerial control (Muller and Cloete 2000, 49) that recently manifested at HWUs. Student involvement in more governance issues, in the context of devolving executive authority to lower levels, rather held the promise of extending indirect executive control over students.

The answers to why students accepted co-operative governance mainly relates to the advantages participation held and the fact that participation was identified with influencing institutional decision-making. Amongst others:

- 1) Participation suggested that consultation must precede policy enactment. Through this participation offered student leaders access to institutional information. Participation also promised an implicit constraint on unilateral management decision-making and policy implementation. In other words, participation enhanced the status of SRC members as co-decision-makers and as potential powerbrokers<sup>2</sup>.
- 2) Related to this, participation implied a dilution of management's power and more fluid decision-making. Additionally, seats on Councils and recognition as important stakeholders offered the prospect of student participation in processes leading to the election of Vice-Chancellors and of other senior executives. This necessarily meant that student support could play a vital role in institutional battles and could be used to increase student influence.
- 3) Equally important for students and HE managers, participation implies that opposition and 'cat and dog' relationships need not define their engagement. Instead, participation meant that bargaining about issues that affect students could form the cornerstone of their engagement. Another possibility was that students could form temporary alliances with other stakeholders and so extend their influence. Yet another dimension provided by participation was that student leaders and HE managers had opportunities to strike a balance between the interests of institutions and those interests student leaders represent.

Viewed from a political standpoint, the emergence of co-operative governance must equally be placed in the context of the shift in national power relations that accompanied the increasing adoption of co-operative governance, democracy and stakeholder involvement in decisions as cornerstones for HE transformation in South Africa. What underpinned this shift in power relations was essentially the idea that students were clearly agents of transformation and that democracy in HE presupposes student participation. The answer also partly lays in government and institutional recognition that student voices need to form a crucial part of efforts to implement policies in HE. What helped facilitate government recognition was no doubt the fact that many government policy makers in 1994 included education activists who bore the brunt of undemocratic institutional decisions during the 1980.

What also played an important role was the centrality of negotiations and bargaining in providing a basic platform for consensus on how restructuring in South African society would manifest. Therefore, the inclusion argument and switch to corporate type governance emphasized that institutions needed to promote democratic values, function more democratically, be more transparent, and allow for greater participation. In other words, nationally policy makers put forward the precise mechanisms used to foster a co-operative transformation spirit and to stabilize national government relations as a solution

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<sup>2</sup> One consequence of this, at some universities, involved a decrease in the influence exercised by the South African Student Congress (SASCO) – the leading national student political organizations. In this regard, structured participation has meant that SASCO, which at some point viewed itself as a key student stakeholder organization, no longer represents students in institutional governance structures at some institutions, although it still maintains this role with regard to NSFAS statutes.

to help stabilize managerial and institutional instability at HE institutions. Along with this, it was hoped that participation would lead to consultation, consensus and greater stability by allowing groups with competing interests the opportunity to discuss and debate issues and to reach common ground.

### **2.2.2 The changing student profile**

The students we investigate have been changing rapidly over short intervals. From 1920 to 1980 student numbers at universities in South Africa increased from slightly more than 3 000 to about 103 000 of whom about 46 000 (53 per cent) were involved in distance education. By 2001 university enrolments increased to close to 430 000 students while enrolments at technikons reached 215 000. Over this time, the number of distance students reached 238 000 (37 percent) while female students increased from 40 percent in 1980 to 52 percent overall in 2001 (54 percent at universities and 44 percent at technikons) and black students changed from 20 per cent in 1980 to 72 percent (60 per cent African) in 2001.

As a result student bodies changed. With the exception of the University of Stellenbosch (US), all historically English and Afrikaans white universities and technikons now have a majority of black (not African) students. But, because 45 per cent of black students are enrolled in distance programs they do not necessarily form a majority among residence students at historically white universities and technikons. The number and proportion of African students also shifted markedly at the University of Durban Westville (UDW) and at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where they reached majority status in 1995 and 1994. But changes in recruitment patterns have also affected the shape of these student bodies and resulted at the University of the Western Cape in Coloureds comprising 46 per cent of the student body and Africans 43 per cent in 2003. A further crucial aspect of these changes at a national level is that black students especially comprise a majority of undergraduate students who in 2001 made up about 85 per cent of university and technikon students.

Another change has involved the number of international students. In 1971 slightly more than 2000 international student (mostly Rhodesians) were registered at mainly four historically English white universities. This constituted 2.5 percent of university students. Thirty years later, international students constituted 43 000 students (7 percent of the total) of whom about 30 000 came from African countries other than South Africa (Bunting 2003). Most of these students enroll at UNISA, but historically English white universities in South Africa continue to cater for most residential international students due to the combined influences of historical legacies, language of instruction, resources and the strength of international ties. One consequence is that international students constitute influential constituencies at particular two historically white English universities: Rhodes University where they comprised 24 per cent of students in 2001 and the University of Cape Town (UCT) where they comprised 18 per cent of students. At all other institutions they form between 2 and 12 per cent of the student body.

Between 1999 and 2003, first entry students at South Africa's 21 public universities and 15 technikons increased from about 131,000 to about 182,000 with total headcount students increasing by about 180,000 (i.e. by 25%) from 540,000 to 718,000 (Department of Education 2005). Two main factors informed this expansion. Through its new National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) the state put pressure on institutions to swell the HE participation rate from 15 to 20% because South Africa needs a larger pool of high-skill labour to promote development (Ministry of Education 2001). Second, the new higher education funding formula introduced in 2004 continues to link funding to student numbers while providing further incentives to increase the enrollment of black students which in fact increased from 71% to 75% of total enrolments from 1999 to 2003.

Annually at least 100,000 mostly black students (Cloete, 2004) do not reregister in the following year because institutions exclude them on financial or academic grounds, or because they withdraw voluntarily, often for the same reasons. The associated institutional patterns of rapid growth and 'revolving door' students is well explained by the functionalist view that HE institutions have become 'sponges' that take in excess students at the behest of politicians. Parallel to this, mainly working class students' dropout and become victims of the educational 'sorting' and class reproduction patterns that Bourdieu and Passeron (1971) attribute to HE institutions in general. Given the nature of the South African social formation, this class separation reinforces race alignment between white and small numbers of black students, and intra-class sorting amongst black students.

For these reasons, the major concern of many disadvantaged black students is not whether HE institutions will accept them or not. Their major concern – and that of the country as a whole - rather relates to whether they will cope academically and whether their financial security is sufficient to enable them to complete their studies. Another central concern for students who do not want to leave HE institutions after failing or incurring huge debts relates to the outcome of institutional negotiation that seeks to extend rather than curtail their academic studies. Such negotiation is widespread especially at historically black institutions where fees are cheapest, resources are most needed and student debt is highest.

This national student debt, which reached R5.5 million in 2003 (Edusource 2004), escalated throughout the 1990s because institutions admitted more disadvantaged students than before, continued to increase fees and put little pressure on students – prone to resort to violent protest – to recover debt (Jansen 2004). From 2000 this changed because South African institutions, as Stumpf (2004) puts it, needed to become more private – due to declining state allocations - in order to become more public. Since then institutions have vigorously promoted upfront payment and cost recovery strategies such as employing debt collecting agencies to stabilise student arrears. To reinforce the payment culture they desire, HE institutions, and more particularly historically black institutions, often withhold academic results of indebted students - sometimes preventing students from graduating - and also increasingly exclude students on financial grounds.



But, protest inspired by material factors also occurs at historically white institutions, for two reasons. First, African and other black students constitute more than 50% of students at South Africa's four historically white English-medium universities whose recent expansion policies included large-scale recruitment of black students. There they face similar academic and financial problems despite the increased availability of financial aid because student fees in particular are higher than at historically black institutions. Second, institutional mergers which aim to reduce the 36 HE institutions that existed in South Africa in 2003 to 21 institutions by 2007 has resulted in five out of seven historically white Afrikaans universities and one out of four historically white English universities merging with historically black institutions. Concomitantly, given language, tuition fee and other resource differences between black and white institutions, newly merged institutions face protests about the medium of instruction, efforts to equalize fees and the unequal spread of resources across racially segmented campuses.

Much of the above touches on the question of the changing composition of the student body, and their financial status. For the most part, the demographic composition of the student body has changed significantly since 1980 and is beginning to reflect the composition of the national population. As described in the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education the most striking change in the growth of the HE student body concerns the enrolment of black students which increased from 191,000 to 343,000 between 1993 and 1999, i.e. by 152,000 (or from 40% to 80%), and the enrolment and distribution of African students who in 1999 constituted 59% of the total head count enrolments in higher education. This headcount enrolmen

institutional environment, better accommodation and improved chances of finding donor support for studies (Cooper and Subotsky 2001).

Four other noteworthy points are:

- Much of the growth in black students at white Afrikaans-medium universities occurred in distance education programs and in programs offered at satellite campuses. This implicitly means that large numbers of black students are not properly integrated into institutional affairs and lack a voice, except where representation is provided for sectional groups, in institutional matters.
- The increasing diversity of the national student body extends to an increase in the number of international students from about 10,000 in 1993 to 43,000 (7% of the national student body) in 2002 (Bunting 2003). What stands out about these students is that most come from SADC countries, that most are concentrated at the distance education university and at historically white English universities and that international students comprise almost 30% of Doctoral candidates.
- The growth in black student numbers has been accompanied by a decline in white student enrolments. This fell from 222,000 in 1993 to 164,000 in 1999 - a decline of 58,000 (or 26%).
- In terms of total enrolments, gender equity has been achieved in the higher education system. This is a consequence of significant differences in headcount growth since 1993. Whereas female headcount enrolments increased by 89,000 (or 44%) between 1993 and 1999 (from 202,000 to 291,000), by contrast male headcount enrolments grew by only 2,000 (or 1%) between 1993 and 1999. The main result of these different growth rates is that the proportion of female students in the higher education system rose from 43% in 1993 to 52% in 1999. However, gender equity continues to remain a problem in the technikons, where the proportion of female enrolments increased from 32% to 42% in 1999. Furthermore, as with black students, the spread of women students across different programme areas remains uneven with female students clustered in the humanities and under-represented in science, engineering and technology, business and commerce, and in postgraduate programmes. Based on this study the majority of students (82%) indicated that the SRCs should promote debates on equity, gender and non-sexism on campuses.

Concerning the financial status of students, no detailed empirical data are available on income levels of parents, their educational and occupational background and the resources they have and plans they made to finance HE education for their young. The result is that very little empirical information is available on social class positions, but there is a broad range of indirect indicators that is suggestive and demonstrative of significant divergence in social class positions. Among these factors, 80% study full-time and 20% part-time with most part-time students involved in undergraduate studies. Some of these students qualified for tertiary education due to mature age exemptions.

Besides this, national socio-economic data indicate sharp variance in average income levels of black and white South Africans and for the most part underscores the point that race remains an indicator of social class in South Africa. Another indicator relates to debt levels of black and white students that further illustrate the difference. While the extent of

this debt varies at any given moment during a financial year, student debt at historically black institutions in 1998 at one point reached R500 million. Considering that this total was almost equal to the state subsidy allocated to four historically black universities in 1998, it is easy to see why student debt was responsible for most of these institutions being overdrawn at banks in 1999 and being required by the government to take urgent steps to minimize debt levels that accumulated steadily from 1993.

That this debt is indicative of an inability to pay fees is not disputed, although it has been argued that some student leaders and student organizations, by the mid 1990s, did not accept the notion that students should share in the costs of their higher education. This latter position relates to a demand for free education, which some student leaders believed should be a policy goal of the African National Congress. Nor is it disputed that this inability to pay is largely found at historically black institutions or that probably more than 50 percent of students at historically black institutions need loans and scholarships to afford HE. For this reason, students at these institutions were initially the main beneficiaries of loans provided to students by government through its national loan scheme – the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) - introduced in 1994. This scheme has to date supported more than 300,000 students, but does not cover all student costs and leave most owing considerable amounts because it allocates an minimum of about R2,000 and a maximum of about R18,000, with an average of about R6,000, to students whose annual tuition, accommodation and living costs vary from R25,000 to R40,000. The majority of students (80.5%) indicated that their SRC should play a strong role in determining tuition fees.

### **2.3 GAPS IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE**

This literature focus has, however, produced a fragmented picture of student politics as student behaviour has been described as somehow different from mainstream political behaviour, but has not been examined in these terms. Indeed, the collection of studies described above pays homage to student activism without examining the developmental and instrumentalist democratic practices and procedures that gave birth to different SRCs or that has characterised their existence. One result is that we are left with a limited historical understanding regarding voting procedures and practices and the absence of attitudinal data on democracy views amongst students, despite the fact that considerable data of this nature has been collected on the national citizenry.

For example, the literature is silent about the clashes between members of the Azanian Student Movement (AZASM) and South African National Student Congress (SANSCO) and anti-democratic practices implemented by SRCs in the 1980s and early 1990s to limit competition in SRC elections and to ensure SANSCO victories. The literature is also silent about restrictions imposed on the South African Democratic Student Movement (SADESMO) that limits their efforts to organize support at institutions such as the University of Natal (UN), ML Sultan Technikon and the University of Durban Westville (UDW).

A further lacuna concerns analysis of the impact of the transition from student opposition to Apartheid and university governance structures at universities and technikons to the deliberate construction of democratic institutions. This has enjoyed little scrutiny in literature. For students this transition has involved entrenching procedural democracy by involving external organizations and institutional structures in the formalization of election procedures and the conduct of elections. Substantively, free participation in annual elections by individuals and civil society groups has augmented this minimal form of democracy. Yet, little is known about how students use the democratic space they currently enjoy to exercise their civil rights and about the factors that promote or stymie voting patterns among students.

Little is also known about student views concerning the legitimacy of elections. Yet it has been suggested that an instrumentalist and developmental approach such as representative democracy is associated at some institutions with sectional politics (Maseko 1994). Where this tendency has been described previously, theorists such as Smith (1997) and Hunt (1980) have associated political behaviour with nepotism and exclusionary group politics. In itself, this does not highlight any un-democratic features since democracy in many ways is a mechanism to protect the interests of specific elite groups (Hunt 1988) and to advance the interests of cultural groups (Jessop 1988) and voluntary associations (Smith 1997). Nonetheless, while a practical distinction exists between the outcome of democracy and its form, it is form and legitimacy that structure the arena in which competing interests are displayed (Beetham 1991). It is also form and legitimacy that provides SRCs the capacity to wield influence and to contribute to social developments such as the promotion of human rights and social justice. In consequence, to understand the actions of SRCs it is necessary to also examine the means by which they were constituted.

## SECTION 3

### UNDERSTANDING POST 1994 STUDENT ORGANISATION AND MOBILISATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

#### 3.1 STUDENT REPRESENTATION AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

##### 3.1.1 Representation on SRCs

In 2003 students were eligible to participate in about 65 SRC elections (and as in the case of the Pietermaritzburgh campus of the Durban Institute of Technology in elections for a Local Student Council). While 35 universities and technikons existed, some institutions hold more than one election because students are found at either a main campus or a satellite institution<sup>3</sup>. But there exists a basic similarity in elections since a unitary system is followed at all institutions with students voting for candidates at the same location. As a result, although the University of Natal (UN) has four SRCs at different campuses, students each only bring out one vote at their campus. The same applies at Eastern Cape Technikon where a central SRC is formed through proportional representation from the four SRCs independently elected at the East London, Butterworth, Queenstown, and Umtata campuses. In line with these voting patterns, SRC elections at all residential institutions are based on a unitary model, while outcomes at the distance education institutions and at Eastern Cape Technikon show features of federal governance systems.

In addition, all institutions use a Class Representative and Faculty Representative system to cover academic concerns. Another standard feature is a residence house and hall committee system to afford residence students a greater say in institutional issues. This mostly involves annual elections of class representatives, annual or bi-annual elections of faculty representatives and annual elections of residence and hall committee members.

But proscriptions on voting also exist. At most institutions the only proscription on participation of candidates relates to the exclusion of students with criminal records and the idea that a subsidy-earning student should be registered for more than six months to participate in SRC elections. Both these views are widely accepted as legitimate with students at the University of Zululand even limiting candidates to second and third year students only. More contentious at some institutions are proscriptions that relate to academic performance. Aimed at minimizing the influencing of “professional politicians<sup>4</sup>” at universities, this regulation - that a student should have passed two-thirds

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<sup>3</sup> In 2002, about 30 SRCs existed at satellite campuses.

<sup>4</sup> This term has been used by Altbach (1996) to describe the role played by some student leaders at universities in India. Characteristics associated with their enrolment include lengthy study periods, poor academic progress and longstanding involvement in political matters. This tendency of spending many years at universities was also for some time associated with the performance crises of some SASCO members at HDIs and the tendency of some SRC members to accumulate large amounts of student debt. One result for political formations included entrenched perceptions that involvement in political activity and poor academic performance fitted hand in glove and that political involvement represented a negative

of his/her courses satisfactorily - tries to ensure that students with satisfactory academic records who have shown steady academic progress are nominated. While this is broadly accepted in student ranks as a fair expectation, it is not used at HDIs. Such regulations has also been criticized as potentially aimed at minimizing the political influence of African (black) students at historically white universities and has on occasion lead to placard demonstrations at Potchefstroom University and fierce debate at Free State University where agreement was reached that academic criteria would apply from next year to the election of a Central SRC that co-ordinates student activity at the main campus of Free State University, the Qwa Qwa branch and the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University.

As this indicates race remains an important feature in student life. The popular vision at HDIs and at historically white English institutions is of open contestation between individuals and political organizations for all portfolios. But, this is not the case at all the historically Afrikaans universities. Race has continued to play a role in the constitution of the SRC at the satellite campus of Potchefstroom University. With the integration of black students at Potchefstroom University, they were allowed to participate in elections as candidates provided that they showed acceptable academic progress. But race was a more salient factor at the Vanderbijlpark satellite campus of Potchefstroom University where more than 50 per cent of the fulltime students in 2003 voted in their first democratic SRC election. Before this a quota system of four black and four white student representatives determined the composition of the SRC. In 2003 the SRC election resulted in the election of five black and three white representatives in an institution where 48 per cent of students were black.

Efforts to maximize electoral advantage through formal rules and types of consociational democracy have also had a profound effect on electoral competition. This is clear from the formal power sharing arrangements raised at Free State University and Pretoria University. In the case of Free State University, the dominance of white students elicited calls in 2002 from the Black Student Association that a selected number of seats should be reserved for African students after the Here XVII organization assumed control of the Student Parliament (SP)<sup>5</sup>. Similar calls were also made at Pretoria University where black students during 2002 were able to extract pledges that the most senior positions on

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development in professional development. A second tendency is that institutional managers have latterly also identified SRC members as candidates for financial exclusions with such actions in 2003 leading to the expulsion of SRC members at UFH, UDW and Venda University for Science and Technology.

<sup>5</sup> Essentially the Student Parliament (SP) is a longstanding governance structure that emerged at universities during the 1930s and was revived from 1997 onwards when student structures at several institutions decided to effectively duplicate the parliamentary structures in order to restore confidence in student governance and to provide forums through which wide consultation can occur in student ranks. The genesis of this structure can be traced to bi-cameral Westminster electoral initiatives that create a separation between an executive and a legislative body. Specifically, the SP aims to provide students with a policy making body that provides for effective representation of nominated or elected representatives from all main SRC affiliates and co-ordination of the activity by a Speaker or deputy Speaker. By doing this it has largely reduced the role of SRCs at several institutions to administrative bodies and given rise to considerable conflict about an appropriate role division between an inclusive policy making body and a directive executive body.

the SRC would be allocated on a proportional basis to leading candidates from organizations securing the most votes. While the dominance for some time of the Freedom Front Tuks resulted in the Freedom Front Tuks holding the main executive portfolios at Pretoria University, new regulations from 2002 resulted in the creation of an extra deputy-president position that was made available to African students.

Other provisions that have shaped the composition of SRCs relate to the influence of national politics on student practices. The views of the African National Congress (ANC) are clearly evident at several institutions and show that the current political system has helped shape the actions and orientations of SRCs. One striking example concerns efforts by SASCO branches in the Eastern Cape to meet the demands of social justice as they pertain to power inequalities by reserving 30 percent of positions they win in SRC elections for female students. Another example concerns the use of proportional representative election systems. In line with this, SRCs at black universities and technikons in the Eastern Cape are modeled on the national parliamentary system. In particular, the clause in the national Constitution that relates to proportional representation of political organizations and for an organization that gets 70 percent of the vote to unilaterally fill all positions (should they so wish) is also inserted into SRC constitutions at these institutions. One related consequence is that the candidates for SRC election are restricted to members of political student organizations. This excludes independent candidates and means that only those students who belong to political student organizations registered at a specific university or technikon may stand for election.

One further aspect of this democratic centralism, that draws on ANC policy, relates to the fact that students who support SASCO vote for a student political organization without knowing which individual candidates will be appointed to represent them. This is since a change in the nomination process of candidates by SASCO in 2002 resulted in the SASCO provincial executive committee in Port Elizabeth deciding the final composition of candidate lists in 2003 and not SASCO branches at particular universities and technikons. Along with this, it is required in the Eastern Cape that one SRC member from SASCO at a particular institution should hold a position on the SASCO Eastern Cape provincial executive committee.

### **3.1.2 Electoral systems**

The upshot of these examples is that the last point above captures one cogent distinction in electoral systems between institutions. While only political organizations contest elections at some institutions, at most institutions individuals stand for election to the SRC and are elected based on the number of votes they obtain.

There are five dimensions to this. One involves a system used at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where three sabbatical (full-time) and 12 non-sabbatical (part-time) SRC members are elected. In this case candidates need to clearly indicate whether they are standing for sabbatical (president, deputy president and general secretary) or non-

sabbatical positions with students required to vote for sabbatical and non-sabbatical officers.

A second dimension is found at the University of Stellenbosch (US) where candidates indicate their preference for a particular position and vie for this portfolio on the basis of demonstrated interest and motivation for why they are best placed to promote activities linked to this position. In these popularity contests, during which the fifteen highest scoring candidates are nonetheless elected with some SRC members later being allocated to portfolios they initially did not stand for, electoral outcomes depend strongly on the social status and name recognition of individuals and their ability to mobilize resources.

A third dimension is found at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where candidates either stand as independent candidates or as part of a loosely based alliance or as members of a student political organization and seek election to the SRC, but not to a specific position. In this system, the twelve candidates and fifteen candidates at UWC and Wits respectively who draw the largest number of votes are elected and jointly decide on the allocation and distribution of positions. In this case, and in the system used in the Eastern Cape, SRC members from political groups, once elected, tend to bargain about which positions a specific political group wants to control, if no structure obtained a clear majority after the election.

A fourth dimension involves candidates from political formations (as at UWC) contesting for specific positions (as at US) with the highest scoring candidate securing the particular position. This system is used at Technikon Northern Gauteng (TNG).

Finally, as indicated above, proportional representation is also used at a broad range of institutions with possible outcomes either involving possible compromise between groups or a winner-takes-all result. In these contests, participating organizations largely rely on the brand name association of the political formation they are associated with and rely on the credibility and reputation of national political organizations who provide continuity and cohesion to their practices.

In these systems students can cast more than one vote, but the vote of each student has an equal weight. For example, at UWC a student may vote for twelve candidates – the number required to constitute the SRC. In doing this, the student may therefore vote for twelve candidates from one political group or twelve from any grouping of candidates. This approach seems to rely on the idea that students show loyalty to an organization and are likely to vote for all twelve members of the organization they support. A second underlying assumption is that voters with a strong party/organizational identification are more likely to vote than voters with no party loyalty and that political groups will largely benefit from the twelve possible votes.

But election results (see below) indicate that while most students seem to display partisan preferences by voting for twelve members from one political formation, this does not always happen. An inherent danger in this system, therefore, is that it provides a clear basis for possible group domination in much the same way as the constitutional provision



in the Eastern Cape allows for group domination if a two-thirds majority was attained. To minimize this possibility, at the University of Natal a student can only vote for a maximum of six candidates, although the SRC contains 9 portfolios. This restriction provides for more lopsided outcomes and relates to efforts to limit the dominance of the

1997 when the Students Christian Association for English white students and Student Christian Movement for black students merged) which from 2000 to 2002 gradually increased the number of seats it won at places such as University of South Africa (UNISA), University of Transkei (UNITRA), Technikon Northern Gauteng (TNG) and Eastern Cape Technikon. This change elicited strong debate at UNISA, Eastern Cape Technikon and TNG among SASCO members about whether SCO is a religious or a political organization with students at TNG in 2003 deciding at a constitutional summit to categorize SCO as a “sectoral organization catering for Christians” and thereby exclude SCO from participating in the SRC election. This followed unsuccessful attempts at UNISA prior to the 2003 election from SASCO members to exclude SCO on similar grounds and is contrary to the SCO constitution declaration that SCO is “both a religious and a political student organization” and previous SRC rulings that accepted SCO as a political student organization.

What is clear from this is that SASCO tries to portray itself as the bearer of students’ political interest and as arbiter on who should contest elections. While intense partisan competition tends to bring in the voices of those excluded, SASCO’s vanguard type stance has instead resulted in agreements at some institutions that protect its electoral position. For example, at UNITRA, an agreement between SASCO and the Communist Party Youth League (Young Communists of South Africa which established six branches countrywide during 2003) holds that the former will support the registration of the SACP Youth League as a student organization if the Youth League agrees not to contest future elections at UNITRA. At other institutions SASCO and the ANC Youth League also have electoral pacts that provide for joint co-operation or which note that the organizations will not compete against each other.

The motive for controlling the registration of student organizations is clear. An instructive historical example about this comes from the University of Fort Hare where the SRC was dominated by the Students Christian Association and independent candidates until 1997 after which a constitutional amendment barred independents from standing and provided control of the SRC to political student organizations. At other HBIs, similar inconsistencies have arisen in recent years and resulted in a student political organization being recognized as a legitimate structure that can contest elections at one institution, but not at another. From 1987 to 1993 this applied at UWC where the Azanian Student Movement (AZASM) was prevented from registering as a student organization and therewith excluded from elections. This also applied at the English liberal Natal University from 1999 to 2001 when the Inkatha Federal Party-aligned South African Democratic Student Movement (SADESMO) was prevented from operating (a matter referred to the Human Rights Commission of SA), despite being allowed to do so at the adjacent UDW (where SADESMO was also initially restricted). In all these instances, since how we define what is political is a matter of convenience, it is clear that ideological differences and efforts to insulate groups from power contests lie at the root of excluding particular groups from participating in elections, despite the changing nature of student activism.

While a consequence of this involves a limit on pluralism, it is also a sign of vitality that political affiliation continues to remain at the core of struggles between student groups. In its widest sense it is clear that many campus-based decisions are affected by society-wide political struggles between external political groups. For this reason the main student political groups at universities and technikons remain closely connected to national political organizations. Thus, when SASCO in 2002 lost the SRC election at UWC, executive members of the local SASCO branch was asked to explain to leading members of the ANC why they lost student confidence at UWC. The main reason for this concern from national political parties relates to the all-or-nothing nature of the contest between the political groups, the powerlessness losers experience in influencing SRC actions and the concomitant need to recover quickly in or order to influence decision-making processes.

What is also especially noteworthy about SRC contests at HBIs is the overlap that exists between the relative strength of political organizations in a particular urban or rural part of a province and the strength of their student “affiliate”. In line with this, PASMA has relatively no influence at universities and technikons in Kwazulu Natal and other provinces, although it gained ground on SASCO at political (This (PASMA has GM (Su) on PASMA

(MSA) in 2003 endorsed the candidature for SRC positions of PASMA members at UWC. What is important about this is that it highlights the strength and significance of religious associations in student life and that it has attracted considerable political attention. This attention is not new. SASCO previously courted student religious organizations such as the Student Union for Christian Action (SUCA), the Anglican Student Society (ANSOC) and Young Christian Students (YCS) as alliance partners, because many SASCO members also belong to religious organizations. As a result, SASCO was able to win various elections at

way in which white politics has fractured at a national level and the absence of a non-racial political programme by student political organizations, this is not surprising.

The politics of the early 1990 merger of SANSCO and NUSAS still linger very strongly with SASCO emerging as the strongest political force and only constant student political presence at the four historically white English universities. But whereas the merger was expected to create a non-racial membership in SASCO at these institutions, this has not materialized in any significant way, nor did it provide for the incorporation and identification of many progressive white, Coloured or Indian youth with the SASCO ideals, since SASCO, as at UWC and UDW, has failed to bridge the gap between non-racialism in theory and non-racialism in practice.

One consequence is that several SASCO members at historically English white universities have chosen to stand as independent candidates, rather than as SASCO members. This essentially means that they are not bound to recite the campaign message the national SASCO office makes available to branch members at institutions, can pay greater attention to specific student concerns, are not directly tainted by SASCO's past mistakes and can provide more positive and visionary views. A second consequence is that the main organizational opposition to SASCO at Wits and Natal have in the last four years emanated from the non-racial alliances called the Independent Student Association (ISA) at Wits and Movement for Progressive Transformation (MPT) at Natal. A third consequence of the absence of a unifying and dominant organization, evident at Rhodes and UCT, is that the search to create inclusive practices and the growing body of international students have combined to make it easier for international students to play prominent political roles, to address institutional issues and to draw support for their candidature.

At these institutions, contests have largely been reduced to student-based issues (food in dining halls, safety, crime, entertainment, socialization patterns, and so on). One consequence at Rhodes University is that the 16 person SRC is tailored to incorporate independent candidates by providing for 9 hall representatives in residences and 2 representatives for oppidan students. This has resulted in a high number of independent candidates (36 in 2001) contesting elections. At UCT 42 independent candidates contested the 2003 elections, but the past election had stronger political tones because a combination of structural factors – directly linked to internal policies that has undermined the influence of the SRC – contributed to the elections being conducted by a mix of political associations and students promoting “sectoral” concerns.

At historically Afrikaans institutions the picture is more complicated with signs that political and identity-related issues remain pertinent, along with parochial student issues. Elections at Pretoria University are politically based with the Freedom Front, SASCO, ANC Youth League, PASMA and Democratic Alliance TUKS being the main contending forces. In this sense the elections are mainly between white and black student organizations, but another crucial distinction arises from the names of the white organizations: Freedom Front TUKS, DA-TUKS, TUKS, TUKS Afrikaanse Students, TUKS Student Christian Party, PROTUKS. As these names illustrate white student

organizations at Pretoria are projected as capturing the ethos of a static institution and designate their roles as defenders of a specific institutional cultural orientation. This role is in many ways similar to the Afrikaners longstanding struggle to crystallize a sense of who they are and where they belong.

This conservatism is also found at Free State University where the more right wing strands in Afrikaner youth politics still maintain student bodies such as the Herstigte Nasionale Party Jeug, Conservative Party Youth and HERE XVII organizations. The dominant feature of contests at Free State University and at an institution like Pretoria Technikon is not conservatism, however, but the fluidity and co-existence that mark engagement in student politics by a range of student bodies. At Free State University these bodies include groups aligned to national political formations such as the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), UDESMO, SASCO, ANC Youth League, Freedom Front (OFS), National Party Youth and Democratic Alliance Youth. At Pretoria Technikon they include SASCO, PASMA, Christian Voice, Student Christian Fellowship, Residences and Sports Forum.

But while low key signs of Afrikaner nationalism exist at Free State University and overt signs at Pretoria University, this is not evident at UPE, Port Elizabeth Technikon, Pretoria Technikon, Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) or at the University of Stellenbosch (US) where liberal English and black nationalist oriented student organizations like SALSA, SASCO and the ANC Youth League form the main organizations and where religious structures such as the Student Christian Organization (UPE), SHOPSHAR (US) and the Jewish Student Association (US and RAU) have been used by some SRC candidates to boost their profile. What is important about this is that the designation of the political party aligned organizations as the main student political organizations, at institutions that traditionally are associated with Afrikaans traditions, shows a rift between the cultural background of the largest groups of day students at these institutions and the political orientation of the main student political organizations – suggesting thereby that an organizational vacuum exists along with cultural distance. In this context it is no real surprise that SRC candidates at US and RAU stand as independents and mainly address value-based issues related to abstract notions of quality and standards. At the same time, it is also evident from an examination of the names of nominees that so-called independent candidates tend to form part of a loosely based association or political formation and work together, but do not stand for election in the name of a specific organization. In this sense it is evident that groups of politically inclined students at RAU and US (and at places like Pretoria Technikon, Free State University and Potchefstroom University) have yet to find an ideology powerful enough to unite students.

A further interesting difference with respect to types of organizations concerns the relatively minor political role that religious organizations seem to play in SRC elections at historically English universities and technikons. Thus, while several institutions have Jewish student associations and other religious type organizations, these structures have generally refrained from putting up candidates for SRC elections. As discussed previously, this is in contrast to developments at HDIs and at odds with the longstanding involvement of Christian student organizations at Afrikaans campuses.

### 3.1.4 Voter participation

One noticeable feature of student elections is the fact that voter behaviour of students has often been criticized as characterized by apathy, despite the strong awareness of political processes that higher education brings. At most institutions, constitutions require that a legitimate SRC should only be constituted after a minimum poll of 25 percent, but this threshold is not uniform. At DIT the required poll is 20 percent, at Rhodes University it is 40 percent and at some institutions the presence of a satisfactory number of candidates to constitute an SRC is sufficient. The minimum requirement aims to ensure that the SRC enjoys broad support and provides a benchmark to measure the level of interest and participation in student elections. The minimum also provides an indication of the popularity of candidates, their central place in the voting system, the level of legitimacy and vocal support the SRC enjoys.

But while almost all students may vote (at some institutions part-time students are excluded) media and public speaking campaigns during elections do not necessarily offer all potential voters an opportunity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of candidates. Distance and part-time students in particular - and to a lesser extent oppidan students - have much less opportunity to scrutinize candidates because electioneering activity mainly targets full-time students who are more strongly involved and integrated into university and technikon activities. One result is that distance and part-time students participate much less in elections than full-time students both in systems where they are allowed to elect their own representative and in systems where little provision is made to represent part-time students.

However, despite uneven participation among student groups and longstanding fears of heightened political apathy, SRCs have returned fairly high participation polls over the last few years. For example, after UCT was forced to constitute an interim SRC in 1996 because fewer than 25 percent of students voted, its voter percentage steadily increased by 1-2% each year from 31% in 1997 to 38 percent in 2002. At several other universities election results also show steady turnouts over the last six years, after much concern was expressed about falling interest in SRC elections and low voter polls during the late 1990s. In this regard, UWC has regularly achieved a 25 per cent poll since 1996 while Rhodes annually achieves its 40 percent (by sometimes offering incentives and or extending the voting period) while other small institutions with large captive residence populations and almost exclusively African student populations like Fort Hare, UNITRA, Zululand and Mangosutho Technikon have consistently recorded 50 percent plus polls.

But while polls at several universities are high, there is no clear trend across higher education institutions. At Natal and Pretoria University 22-27 percent vote annually. At UDW, US and Potchefstroom polls tend to vary from 27-34 percent. But low polls have also been recorded at universities. At Wits only 14.8 percent of students voted in 2003 compared to 26 percent in 2000. At RAU only 7.6 percent voted in 2001, while UNISA and Technikon SA regularly struggle to get more than 2 percent to vote. In the same way,

several technikons (Cape Technikon, Peninsula Technikon and Pretoria Technikon) have for many years returned SRCs after polls of less than 10 percent and even 5 percent.

These low polls have at times been attributed to limited support for political student groups and suggestions that technikon students are not particularly strongly motivated to engage in political behaviour. An example is the result of the 2003 election at Pretoria Technikon where 2 789 students (about 12 percent) voted in the Faculty elections and 2 728 in the election of organizations. This contrasts with participation at universities where faculty elections are held separate from SRC elections and generally draw a poor response with many candidates being elected unopposed.

But voter levels do not simply differ between types of institutions. Registration type, sex and race also accounts for differences. Voter results from UCT and UWC for 2002 show that 38 percent and 35 percent of full-time students voted compared to 5 percent and 3 percent of part-time students respectively. At Rhodes University results for 2001 show that 47 percent of undergraduate students voted compared to 15 percent of postgraduate students, while results by race and gender show that 57 percent of African males voted at Rhodes in 2001 while voter proportions for other race and gender groups varied from 25-40 percent. A similar pattern is also evident from results for 2002 at UWC. This shows that 12 percent of Coloured, Indian and white students voted at UWC compared to 61% of African students.

### **3.1.5 Election outcomes**

The importance of the first-past-the-post election outcome for political organizations and polarization between SASCO and other student political groups has been described. Election results indicate that SASCO tends to win most of these elections, but outcomes differ decidedly by province.

Table 1 compares results for 2002 at institutions in which student political organizations participated. This shows that SASCO was dominant in electoral contests in 2002 in elections between student political organizations at all institutions except UWC, Wits, Pretoria University and Cape Technikon.





Stellenbosch, independents tend to fill all positions with the relatively weak SASCO

despite high numbers of women SRC members, only 1 woman in 2002 was elected chairperson of a SRC.

- 2 Race figures indicate that very few Coloureds and Indians have recently been elected to SRC positions and that Africans tend to dominate positions at technikons, historically black universities and to some extent at historically English universities, but hold very few positions at historically Afrikaans universities. Whereas SRCs tended to consist mainly of members of one racial group before 1990, recent results indicate that mainly African students were elected at UCT, UPE, Rhodes (Grahamstown), UWC, UDW, and Wits and especially at technikons where very few white and no Indian students were elected.
- 3 Another notable observation about these election outcomes is that the dominance of African candidates at technikons constitutes a complete reversal of leadership outcomes that as recently as 1997 saw whites dominating SRC positions at some historically Afrikaans technikons. What lies behind this change is firstly a reversal in student enrolment patterns that has resulted in sizable increases in the number of African students that accompanied decreases in the number of white students at all technikons. A secondary factor at technikons is no doubt the politicization of institutional matters. A third important factor is possibly that the reversal followed on accusations that white students at institutions like Wits Technikon, Free State Technikon, Pretoria Technikon and Vaal Triangle engaged in racially motivated clashes with black students. A fourth factor is that white students (and Coloured and Indian) do not appear to be actively participating in student political affairs.
- 4 What is also interesting about the leadership distributions is that the dominant racial characteristic of the various SRCs overlaps with the dominant racial characteristics of residence students. Thus, at technikons and at institutions like UWC, UCT, UDW and Wits, where African students are in the majority in residences, the SRC is largely African, while at Pretoria, US, Potchefstroom and OFS where the residences consist largely of white students, the SRCs consist almost exclusively of white students.

**Table 2: Composition of SRC at Universities and Technikons in 2002**

<b>UNIVERSITIES</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>African</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>	<b>White</b>
University of Cape Town	12	3	12			3
University of the Western Cape	10	2	8	4		
University of Stellenbosch	12	3	1			14
University of South Africa (main SRC)	7		7			
University of Durban Westville	9		8		1	
University of Port Elizabeth	6	6	10	2		
Natal University (Durban)	7	3	4		4	2
Rand Afrikaans University	5	7	2		2	8
Rhodes University (Grahamstown)	9	7	9			7
Rhodes University (East London)	5	5	2		1	7
Pretoria University	8	6	3			11
Free State University	9	9	3			16
Potchefstroom University	6	12	2			16
Wits University	8	7	8		4	3
University of Fort Hare	9	4	13			
University of Transkei: Umtata	10	2	12			
Butterworth	3	3	6			
University of the North West	13	1	14			
<b>TECHNIKONS</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>African</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian</b>	<b>White</b>
Cape Technikon	10	5	10	3		2
Peninsula Technikon	11	2	13			
Border Technikon	7	4	11			
Eastern Cape Technikon (main SRC)	10		10			
Mangosuthu Technikon	8	4	12			
Pretoria Technikon						
Vaal Triangle Technikon	11	4	15			
Technikon Free State	10	4	14			
Technikon Northern Gauteng	11	1	12			
Technikon North West	8	4	12			
Technikon Port Elizabeth	8	4	10	1		1
Technikon South Africa	9		9			
Technikon Witwatersrand	9	4	13			

### **3.2 ACCESS TO RESOURCES, ORGANISATIONAL FEATURES AND COMPOSITION OF SRCS**

Access to resources varies quite widely across institutions. Such access is also influenced by former status as an HDI or HWI, and also on whether the SRC concerned is based at a satellite campus. Thus, the SRC at the former Tygerberg satellite campus of Stellenbosch

had an office, a website, office administrators and a newspaper. But, some other satellite SRCs enjoy limited access to phones, do not have offices, operate without office administrators, and mainly function as 'student counsellors who listen to complaints'. Lack of office facilities also features at HBIs. This makes it more difficult for them to engage in effective communication and to take up issues through pre-established formal channels.

Conversely, it is interesting that SRCs at HBIs mostly have bigger budgets than SRCs at HWIs. There is a general pattern that the amounts allocated to SRCs have decreased or remained about the same from year to year. Across the system budgets vary enormously with some SRCs receiving up to R1.3 million and others about R400,000. These amounts bear no relation to the total number of students at an institution, or the number of clubs and societies, or infrastructural support. Thus, the 4 SRCs at the University of Natal shared about half the money allocated to the one at the University of Durban Westville (UDW), despite the University of Natal having twice as many students. Similarly, the Technikon Northern Gauteng SRC receives R400,000 more than the SRC at the University of Pretoria (UP) despite the fact that the latter needs to award money to about 80 clubs and societies whereas the former awards money to about 15 clubs and societies. The amounts awarded to SRCs were also greater at some point. UDW, for example, cut their SRC budget by about R400 000 from 1996. Institutional cuts have also affected staffing. The common pattern is that SRCs now rely on an office administrator (receptionist) paid for by a university or technikon, whereas most SRCs previously had two or three institutionally paid staff.

### **3.3 STRUCTURES OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE, AND PARTICIPATION IN INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES**

#### **3.3.1 Responsibilities of SRCs**

At all institutions, SRCs constitute the centrepiece around which other student organisations function. Regarding duties, SRCs generally are:

- 1) Responsible for the co-ordination and administration of student affairs, and are
- 2) Required to regulate administrative decision-making and to assume political authority for student actions.
- 3) SRCs are also required to promote the student participation in elections and institutional matters by establishing academic councils and structures through which students can articulate their grievances, and are expected to unify students through cultural activities.

Regarding these responsibilities, amongst other they are typically expected to:

- a. Operate within the ambit of legislation pertaining to the institution, but reserves the right to challenge such legislation in the best interests of its students
- b. Represent the students in all matters affecting them

- c. Decide on the recognition and affiliation of clubs and societies and student organizations
- d. Decide on the allocation of resources to clubs and societies and student organizations
- e. Release press statements on behalf of the SRC and the student body
- f. Elect representatives, and committees, from the SRC to any body, or committee, that will affect the rights and interests of students
- g. Appoint committees from the general student corps in order to further its aims and objectives
- h. Investigate the decisions and activities of clubs, societies, official residences, organisations and committees of the institution

Among these responsibilities, affiliation of clubs and societies and allocating resources between clubs and societies are among the more contentious internal issues SRC's confront. Across institutions, there is no uniformity on how to manage these two rule-making issues because of its enormous political and social implications. For example, in some institutions student wings of political parties are allowed to affiliate and to operate freely, but not in others. An instructive historical example about this comes from the English liberal Natal University from 1999 to 2001 where the Inkatha Federal Party-aligned South African Democratic Student Movement (SADESMO) was prevented from 1999 to 2001 from operating (a matter referred to the Human Right Commission of SA), despite being allowed to do so at the adjacent UDW (where SADESMO was also initially restricted). Restrictions have also been applied to religious organizations to limit their involvement in SRC elections. For example, at the University of Fort Hare, where the Student Christian Association and independent candidates until 1997 dominated the SRC, a constitutional amendment barred independents from standing and handed control of the SRC to political student organizations. As this case (and several more recent ones at other institutions indicate, a standout feature of even administrative aspects of student governance is its highly politicised nature.

Besides the affiliation and resource allocation concerns, politicisation applies equally to the vexed issues that surround the accountability of SRC members. The focus on accountability is twofold: financial accountability and political accountability. The focus on the financial accountability relates to the extensive accusations of financial corruption among student leaders and the longstanding difficulties various SRCs experienced in balancing student accounts. For this reason, several institutions codify procedures that govern allocation of financial resources from SRCs. This ranges from a central SRC, along with university finance executives, being required to approve all financial disbursements to regional SRCs at UNISA, to SRCs adopting standard rules that regulate how much money is allocated to a particular club or society, to university authorities over time increasing the extent of their control over the allocation of money to SRC structures.

Regarding the amounts SRCs control, there is a trend towards increasing the

institution, or the number of clubs and societies, or infrastructural support. Thus, the 4 SRCs at the University of Natal shared about half the money allocated to the one at the University of Durban Westville, despite the University of Natal having twice as many students. Similarly, the Technikon Northern Gauteng SRC receives R400 000 more than the SRC at the University of Pretoria (UP) despite the fact that the latter needs to award money to about 80 clubs and societies whereas the former awards money to about 15 clubs and societies. But, the amounts awarded to SRCs were greater at some point with the University of Durban Westville (UDW), for example, having cut their SRC budget by about R400 000 from 1996.

Concerning political accountability, different mechanisms are inscribed in SRC constitutions. Viewed in minimal terms, all SRCs account to students at an *Annual General Meeting* (AGM). At all institutions, the AGM is the highest student decision-making body of an SRC, its affiliates and sub-structures. Over and above this, some SRCs are also expected to call 'Mass Meetings at least once per quarter to report to students and receive mandates from them' (UWC SRC constitution 2002: 27). Along with this, mass meetings are still inscribed as decision-making forums and as a compulsory activity of SRCs at especially historically black institutions. However, while students constitutionally place strong emphasis on public accountability, the capacity of ordinary students to control SRCs is limited. Indicative of this, a court order in 2002 to force the Peninsula Technikon SRC to hold its constitutionally prescribed mandatory public meetings with students – where they were expected to face a no-confidence motion – was simply disregarded by the SRC.

### **3.3.2 The structure and composition of SRCs**

Most SRCs are unitary SRC structures, but some federal structures also exist at multi-campus institutions. At these institutions, a basic division exists between autonomous SRCs (for example, the East London branch of the former Rhodes SRC) and strongly controlled federal structures. Indicative of the latter, Eastern Cape Technikon had 4 separate SRCs (East London, Butterworth, Umtata and Queenstown) which were steered by a central SRC (comprising 6 members from Butterworth, 2 from East London and 1 each from Umtata and Queenstown). In this case, political control is exercised by the central SRC, whose responsibilities included issuing press statements, calling boycotts or protests, and determining the agenda of public meetings of individual affiliates.

Regarding composition, SRCs demonstrate that student politics tend to be dominated by a small group of activities. They tend to be highly centralised and small with a president, deputy president<sup>6</sup> and secretary general as the important leaders. On average, SRCs at residential institutions consist of 13 members<sup>7</sup>. This varies from nine members at UDW

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<sup>6</sup> It bears mentioning that some institutions have two or three deputy presidents. This is aimed at balancing the influence of opposing political organisations and satisfying the demand for leaders of student organisations to be given senior positions.

<sup>7</sup> SRCs at distance education institutions are smaller. Before its merger, the central UNISA SRC, which was first established in 1996, comprised 6-8 members, with regional presidents functioning as ex-officio

to 18 at Potchefstroom, with most SRCs consist of a core executive comprising a president, deputy president, secretary general and treasurer. The roles of the president and deputy president generally embody inspirational, rather than operational features. Consequently, some SRC presidents and deputy presidents have no formally assigned portfolio-type responsibility. At some institutions, there also appears to be a gradual drift to combining presidential duties and a specific portfolio, although the tendency to be drawn into bargaining relations has also acted as a counterweight. At heart, the tension emphasises that the operational and practical requirements of office often forces executive members to choose between managing an executive and devoting more time to administrative detail.

The source of this tension is twofold. Viewed longitudinally, there has been:

- 1) A decline in the operational support most institutions provide to SRCs, and
- 2) An increase in the participation of SRC members in institutional committees.

Regarding this, it is evident that most SRC's are poorly resourced. In terms of physical resources, SRC's at HBUs and more especially at HBTs and at minor multicampus sites lack basic office equipment. Thus, whereas the SRC at the Tygerberg satellite campus of Stellenbosch has an office, a website, office administrators and a newspaper, some other SRC's are barely functional. Most have access to telephones, but do not have offices, operate without office administrators, and computers. As a result, their capacity to liaise effectively around the multitude of issues they confront is compromised. One consequence is that SRC members need to devote more time to administrative and factual matters. For this reason, some operate with two secretaries or two deputy presidents and alter the standard SRC positions from time-to-time.

Regarding other positions, most SRCs at HBUs and HBTs further have an Academic Officer, Gender Officer, Transformation Officer (covering race and equity), Sports Officer, Cultural Officer, and a Residence Officer. Along with this, up to three SRC members tend to be nominated to the SRC at most institutions. These members mostly consist of a nominee representing a substructure of the SRC such as the Student Press, Residence Bodies or a Sports council. However, there is no uniformity since sports unions or councils are in most institutions independent of the SRC administratively and financially. For example, at some institutions sports councils are under the university or technikon sports science departments and have different lines of accountability, responsibility and management from other student structures. In this sense, besides the core set of executive positions, there is considerable variation in the structure, size and composition of SRCs.

The diagram in Figure 1 demonstrates the kind of variation that exists in the Western Cape between three institutions. This indicates that Gender officer is a standard position at UWC and Peninsula Technikon, but not at UCT. Figure 1 also shows minor differences in the description of some portfolios, but more importantly indicates that the SRCs have very different priorities. In the case of UCT, priorities include health, safety and security

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members of the national executive. On the other hand, regional office bearers at UNISA varied from 4-9 members.

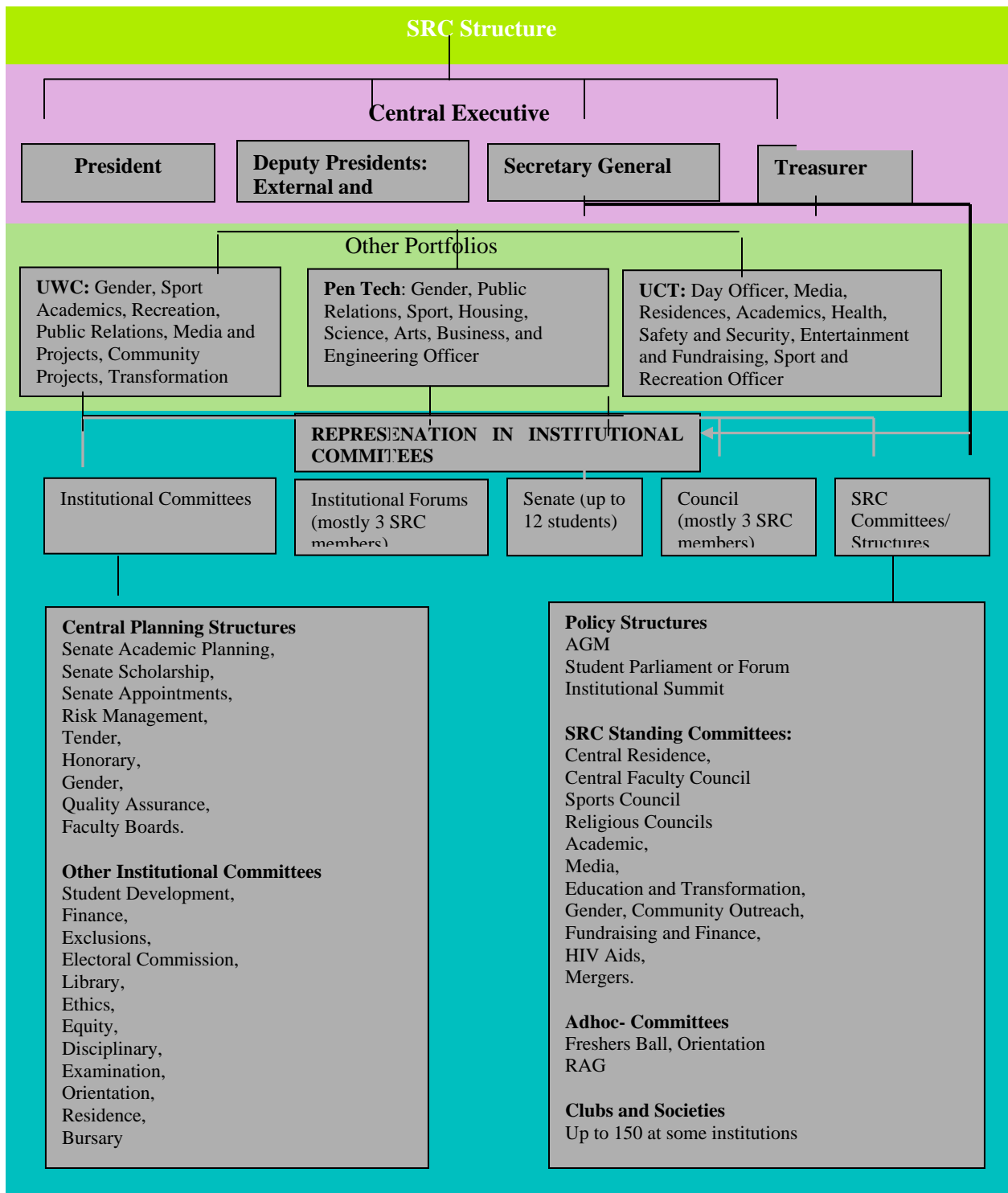


– a response to high levels of crime such as car theft and rape. Entertainment and recreation further feature prominently at UCT, whereas UWC appears to place greater emphasis on transformation and community projects<sup>8</sup>). On the other hand, Peninsula Technikon reserves seats on their SRC for four faculty officers. Before the constitution of the new SRC at the Durban Institute of Technology, this represented the only case in which SRC members were elected from faculties. At most other institutions, the tendency is to conduct SRC and Faculty elections separately, to constitute Faculty Councils with a central executive committee and to assign an Academic Officer position to one SRC member.

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<sup>8</sup> It bears mentioning that student activity is organized differently across institutions and that SRCs are not solely responsible for community development. In the case of UCT, SHAWCO for example, plays a prominent role in health and social development initiatives in the Western Cape.

Figure 1: SRC Structure and Institutional Representation



Generally, while the size of SRCs only really changed at the University of Pretoria over the last decade, organizationally SRCs have changed in many respects over the last decade in relation to changing HE developments. The adaptation has taken several forms.

- a) SRCs have re-aligned portfolios and created new organizational positions such as Transformation Officer to enable them to engage more effectively with institutional issues. In the process, they dropped 'political' portfolios such as Political Education and Training Officer and focused more on institutional transformation, and less on national political transformation. A further portfolio change with significant implications involves the creation of 'Entertainment and Recreation' portfolios to satisfy the increasing need for SRCs to organize 'bashes' to promote interaction amongst students and to show that their role is not limited to campaigns, protests and participation in meetings.
- b) Students have tried to increase their capacity to participate in policy issues. The decrease in funding that many have experienced has meant that they cannot commission research to address policy issues, as most desire. Instead, they have convened Institutional Summits or Regional Summits to provide forums where students from different institutions share views. A further development involved the creation of Student Parliaments that draw representatives from all clubs and societies and function as policy-making bodies that are supposed to partly direct the participation of SRCs in institutional matters. This has deepened the level of democracy by providing clubs and societies with expanded opportunities to participate in policy suggestions, and has actually replaced mass meetings as decision-making forums at some institutions. Embedded in this switch is an implicit shift from what some view as "mob-rule" to more consultative, time consuming and less confrontational engagement between students and university managers. What is further significant about this shift is that it points to a move away from pressure politics to a pre-occupation with administrative and management related issues. This has increased the need for SRCs to develop better administrative procedures and decision-making mechanisms to deal with a broad range of issues.
- c) Student culture has changed. SRCs increasingly spend money on entertainment such as beauty pageants (which previous student generations rejected as "cattle shows"). They also spend more on funding sport codes and on bashes for the "Jam Alley" and Kwaito" generations, and less on education and development related concerns. In monetary terms, entertainment-related spending mostly accounts for a third of expenditure by SRCs, compared to earlier periods when 5 percent expenditure on entertainment was viewed as irresponsible. Consider the following. In 1988, the SRC at one institution organized three functions for students compared to seven organized fifteen years later. In 1988 the functions related to "welcoming first-year students", an end-of-term ball and an end-of-year function. In 2003, the functions included two Jazz festivals, two beauty pageants and the traditional welcome and farewell. But, the increase in the number of events is not the only important matter, here. Several SRCs at HBUs have over the last few years begun to hold their "major bash" – to which "youth stars" are invited because students need "top performances" – just before the annual student elections. This is done to spur the future electoral chances of those who wish to return to office, to provide impetus to the organization they represent, and, by implication to 'buy' votes. Several SRCs, for example at Border Technikon where the SRC organized 13 social functions last year, also focus almost exclusively

on social events and spend lavishly. Regarding what appears to be excess spending, in 2001, one SRC spent R430 000 on one event. This year, another SRC spent roughly R350 000 on one event that spanned 3 days. What is also important is that ‘bashes’ at most HBIs are used to provide ‘handouts’ to students in the form of ‘food parcels’ and ‘drinks’ and that these ‘handouts’ are viewed by some as important election boosting devices.

- d) Organizational developments have also involved changes in the relationship between SRC members and ordinary students. This engagement was often direct with SRC members “manning” offices and being available to assist students. While this element still exists, some SRCs have created “service providers” (sub-committees comprising of students) that address particular needs and responds to queries. Where this exists, the SRC itself mainly functions as an administrative body that deals with correspondence and representation in committees. On the other hand, the service provider interacts with “ordinary” students and provides a “professional” service in a designated domain. Where this has occurred, SRC members have subsequently indicated that they have “lost contact” with students, but believe that the development is a logical consequence of three factors: a lack of interest in student political matters; under-resourcing in terms of administrative positions; the increasing need for SRC members to attend institutional committee meeting to remain informed of institutional developments and to communicate this to students. Where limited support for SRC members exist, they conversely complain that their day-to-day functions are often similar to that of student counsellors. For example, they are often plagued to provide information on careers, subject choices, what courses one could register for, making phones available to students, arranging funerals, and raising bursary or scholarship funds. What this of course points to is that institutional failure to provide proper and extensive ‘client services’ to students continues to affect the role of SRC members.

### **3.3.3 Policy and other elected structures**

Figure 1 also highlights the range of committees and structures SRC members participate in. The emergence of Student Parliaments and Student Forums constitute a fairly new innovation that arose from student tinkering with governance structures and efforts to:

- Overcome the difficulties inherent in notions of mass participation,
- Broaden the scope of their participation in policy matters, and
- Improve cooperation and communication between student structures and about student activities.

Such participation has for some time constituted a source of concern as AGMs have tended to lapse into meetings where political battles are fought (since it immediately precedes the annual student elections).

In addition, concerted efforts have been made over the last decade to increase student participation in SRC activity and policy deliberations, and to create structures that could 04 Tc 0.14

promote policy debates in the absence of an institution having a functioning SRC<sup>9</sup>. For these reasons, student organizations have over the last decade convened annual Institutional Summits or occasional Regional Summits<sup>10</sup> to provide forums where students from different institutions share views. After 1996 Student Parliaments that function as policy-making bodies that are supposed to partly direct the participation of SRCs in institutional matters further developed. For example, the UCT constitution indicates: that the SP shall have powers and duties: a) to develop and determine policy of the student body; and b) to promulgate resolutions, which shall be significant policy decisions of the SP, and amendments to such resolutions.

Essentially the Student Parliament (SP) is a longstanding governance idea at universities that students have periodically mooted. Since 1997 SPs also became functional structures at several institutions after students decided to duplicate the national parliamentary structures in order to restore confidence in student governance and to provide forums through which wide consultation can occur.

of representatives from the various sectors of the student body of UCT, namely the SRC, clubs and societies, sports codes, residences, faculties, and student-based organizations with a community development emphasis, which do not qualify for representation in any other sector.

Figure 1 also indicates that student governance structures include clubs and societies, residence committees, faculty councils, and a policy-making forum. Clubs and societies exist in all institutions. Clubs and societies consist of political, academic, social, cultural and religious groups guided by their respective constitutions and programmes. In most cases, these structures affiliate to the SRC, or its subsidiary structures, but there is also some variation. For example, at UPE clubs and societies affiliate and receive resources from a Student Forum, and not from the SRC. There are also instances where Deans of Students allocate money to clubs and societies not registered with a SRC due to a dispute. Most SRC constitutions also do not recognize clubs and societies as part of formal student governance structures or decision-making bodies, but some allow for clubs and societies to play an influential role in policy decision-making.

Regarding other areas where student participation involves elections and representation, residence committees provide another manifestation of pluralism. At most institutions, their importance differs in line with the type of institution and the size of an institution's residence population. At Rhodes, where most SRC members are drawn from hall and residence elections, residence committees play a central role in the SRC. At most other institutions, a Central House Committee (CHC), elected following the constitution of residence committees, plays a coordinating role and representing house committees in the SRC and is viewed as constituting an SRC standing committees or sub-structures. In such cases, SRC have superseding powers to even amend decisions made by house committees, for example at UPE. However, not all institutions offer residence representation in a SRC. For example, the UCT SRC constitution is silent on the relationship between the SRC and house committees. Along with this silence, residence students are expected to address their institutional concerns with institutional residence structures.

### **3.4 STUDENT PARTICIPATION, PROTEST AND ACTION**

#### **3.4.1 Participation**

During interviews student leaders further indicated that participation in governance structures has largely involved a focus on adhering to procedures and not really addressed outcome issues. At all the institutions, the main emphasis has involved adapting to the changing organizational context and trying to learn what student organizations should do. For student leaders this adaptation has generally involved paying much greater attention to management issues since their roles, at one extreme, appear to involve considerable office functions. Indicative of this, student leaders we interviewed indicated that the SRCs they participate in have more formal bureaucratic features than before, are generally understaffed, involve an increasing number of official activities. For them this

means that they perform a wide range of administrative duties and act as “professional counselors to those who voted for them” and as “management consultants’ to the university executive who they keep informed of student decisions and possible actions. The reasons for these two perspectives and their implications are in many ways plain to see. Since student leaders interact with university and technikon management they are knowledgeable about institutional policies and in a position to inform other students. Second, they are trusted – because they were elected – and are believed to act in the interests of students, whereas other university officials are widely viewed as putting bureaucratic interests first. Third, their involvement in institutional meetings involves carrying student views and putting student perspectives on issues.

But, while process issues have featured strongly in student participation, they have not always participated equally. One reason relates to poor attendance. This is attributed in some institutions to ‘leaders not showing enough responsibility’ and in other institutions to student leaders being “overworked” since they mostly remain full-time students, but sometimes serve on more than 10 institutional committees, while also being involved in SRC activity and in the work of their student organization. But, poor attendance in meetings also relates to the fact that student leaders sit on consultative structures that lack of decision-making powers. For example, one common student comment highlights that Institutional Forums were “toothless” and only active when faced with senior appointments and re-naming of buildings and structures. A second gripe involves students’ difficulty in dealing with issues, documents, deliberations in Senates that do not deal with “fancy issues” such as governance, but with hard academic issues, which in most instances would have gone through long *interactive processes* (Hardy et al 2001), from departments up to Senate, and merely require endorsement.

In these cases, student leaders highlighted a central criticism that SRCs are often expected by management representatives to advance only mandated positions from the student body or at least to speak more on issues which are in line with the general student body and not to contribute to general issues. A further perceived expectation relates to a perception that student participation in governance structures is exploited to legitimate decisions since their limited voting power does not provide for veto rights, while they often have no real chance of influencing decisions. For this reason, student leaders evaluated their participation as not being robust and as characterized by silences on issues in which they are expected to speak on. In general, they speak mostly on issues, which have direct impact on students such as fees, access, the appointment of senior management especially the vice-chancellor etc. But there was a feeling also that students reserve their comments on things that they are comfortable with.

### **What have students achieved through participation?**

This question elicited varied responses. Mainly staff and students suggested that students have displayed mature leadership and shown that protest was not the sole means through which change could be effected. For them, this change in tactics produced the following results across the five institutions:

Student leadership has worked with management in establishing common frameworks around which future negotiations around student access, retention, exclusion and individual financial difficulties could be addressed. This involved extended negotiations for several years in forums outside Council, Senate and IFs, but was greatly helped by participation in such forums since students participated in relaying the outcome of negotiations. The “pacts” in turn provide a platform for future engagement around issues and implies that “institutional memory” and not “strength” will determine the outcome of future engagements around access, retention and exclusion.

Student leaders have continually provided a student perspective on issues and highlighted historical trajectories with respect to how some issues affect students and how they have historically been handled differently. This, in the view of students, has contributed to several important victories. For example, all institutions have lately raised tuition and residence fees substantially, but student leaders feel that they have been able to contest the scale of tuition fee increases and are responsible, in cases, for lower than envisaged increases.

Involvement with management representatives has contributed to student leaders establishing up joint bursary and tuition support schemes to support needy students. This has increased the scope of SRC activities and has contributed to SRC members playing a greater role as part of the corporate face of institutions. It has also meant that their overall contribution to institutional investments has greatly expanded.

Student leaders have gained from the presentation of “institutional pictures” in forums and have gained a greater appreciation for longstanding institutional efforts to promote student welfare. They have specifically gained greater insight into budgetary concerns and issues that impact on institutional performance and have been able to look at the way developments impact on the institution, and not simply on students. This in turn has meant that they have tried to defend student interests in a more guarded manner and that they have not necessarily contested issues that the larger student body views as crucial.

Student leaders have represented foreign students and other student views and experiences in consultation with management representatives and have consistently been able to push a student position and to improve the position of sectional student groups. This has especially happened at UCT and Stellenbosch.

Student leaders have developed and improved administrative and policy skills. They have gained familiarity with national priority issues confronting institutions such as the Size and Shape debate, the development of three-year strategic plans and have helped shape the vision embodied in institutional responses to statewide developments.

However, others expressed discontent and disillusionment with their participation in policy and institutional governance issues. They described their participation as debilitating since their views are often not taken very seriously. This is most forcibly expressed in the following argument:



Student participation is a joke. There is a mentality that students are about protests. We are capable of causing violence and bringing institutions into turmoil. We are not seen as intellectually capable to contribute to transformation, but are expected to listen to senior professors. ... Most of the time we attend to get information about what is happening. No agenda is given. No preparation takes place. No mandate is carried. ... Although we don't fully participate, it is really better to get access to information, than to abstain and remaining ignorant. Sometimes we don't understand the issues under discussion. ... With finance issues we wait for stuff around students and then contribute. Otherwise our views don't matter. Some see us as delaying decision-making. (Student leader interview)

Arranged opposite these are comments indicating that student leaders are expected to participate equally in committee meetings and to be actively involved in deliberations, but are hamstrung by the onerous demands of full participation.

Asked what organizational difficulties student leaders and structures encounter in responding to the changing political landscape, several interviewees noted that while unevenness exists across institutions, leadership and policy training was essential, research expertise necessary and that official skills require improvement. Further complicating their tasks are the fact that in some cases previous SRCs did not keep adequate records; that they lack information about the terms of agreements reached with university management; and that little continuity marked the handing over of positions<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, SRCs members are not always fully prepared for the responsibilities they need to take and the tasks they have to perform. Many also lack experience in staffing organizations and lack a clear idea of what they need to do in their various portfolios, or what possible strategies they could follow to improve organizational performance. As a result members conceded that they often flounder in meetings with university management, feel powerless in representing students and need training in organizational procedures and university protocols<sup>12</sup>.

In their defense, several also noted that bureaucratic difficulties was similar to problems experienced by earlier SRCs, but that new benchmarks existed in terms of financial accountability and proper reports and that formal demands were great. For them, the enormity of this adaptation requires socialization into new organizational practices. Thus, whereas lax accounting procedures were sometimes tolerated in the past, to circumvent misspending audited statements brought tighter controls and formal accountability in performing tasks. Others noted that besides administrative difficulties, it is arduous to mobilize students in support of actions and unlikely that protest action could be sustained for a few days without incidents of violence. While it happened in 2003 that protest action at the University of Fort Hare and Witwatersrand Technikon lasted for extended periods, this partly related to institutions being closed to take the sting out of protest and

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<sup>11</sup> The UCT SRC represented the sole exception. Most notably minutes of recent years' meetings are available on its website along with other historical information and information from newsletters.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewees at all institutions expressed this sense of powerlessness. In addition, interviewees at four institutions indicated uncertainty about tasks. SRC members at three institutions revealed that they were particularly unsure about demands since they had no idea what was expected of them in some forums (that have existed for several years).

to limit the damage caused by newspaper reports of disruptions. Flowing from this, interviewees intimated that SRCs were responding to pressure from small groups when mobilizing students and that proper representation of concerns through appropriate channels is time consuming, frustrating and exhausting.

Further compounding administration and governance difficulties is the fact that portfolios were not always neatly aligned with emerging responsibilities, but that constitutional changes were difficult to make as apathy made it difficult to get quorums<sup>13</sup>. Also, SRC members conceded that it needs analysis to determine how best to address student issues were uncommon. Instead they inherited organizational features and operated within their parameters. Consequently, when new issues arose, responses were haphazard or characterized by inaction as it wasn't always clear who was responsible for taking up specific issues or how this should be done. Also while SRCs are now more involved in policy considerations than before, they lack knowledge of legislative frameworks and policy processes. Nor do their budgets allow for commissioned research or other assistance when engaging in policy actions, yet, they, and other student representatives, are expected to participate in committee's dealing with appointments, employment equity and transformation issues. In consequence, several SRCs have requested that leadership skills, project management, entrepreneurial management, skills training and capacity building programs should be institutionalized and that they receive training in administrative, management and policy related issues.

### **3.4.2 Participation through protest**

Student political behaviour has not (according to expectations) necessarily disappeared and been replaced by participation and negotiations as the acceptable face of student political behaviour abound, it has not replaced protest action. Institutional protests in South Africa have frequently been analyzed in terms of the hostility it depicted. To take one example, Gwala (1987) highlight marches, sit-ins, hostage taking, vandalism, pickets,

involves institutions calling on police to arrest ‘unruly’ students. These students are subsequently released on bail so that negotiations can resume resolving the initial problem. Later, institutions drop charges against ‘unruly’ students because it hinders further negotiations and provides an additional rationale for further protests.

The main difference between past and present actions is that the inability of student leaders to obtain, for them, meaningful concessions from HE managers during negotiation is responsible for protests that spur further negotiation. However, this turn to protest is neither strategic nor tactical because those involved in participation in institutional government do not necessarily organize or lead protests. Our interview data indicate that it remains difficult to determine the source of protests. At the same time it is clear that student leaders at historically black institutions are sometimes the objects of protests and conflicts, rather than institutions, because they have been unable to resolve grievances through negotiation.

### 3.4.3 Recent student protest patterns at historically black institutions

Our analysis of public protests at the 12 historically black institutions in our study shows that disruption of academic activities and aggressive behaviour (n104) occurred over the last three years, but that the nature of student engagement reflects considerable stability in the general political system and in institutional governance. These protests targeted the state, student leaders, and institutions. Four important features (depicted in table 1) are that the degree of order evident in these protests differs, along with the frequency, size and type. Moving from the least common and most orderly to the most frequent and disruptive, political protests directed at the state tend to involve small officially arranged placard demonstrations and marches. On the other hand, protests aimed at students and those focusing on institutional grievances are sometimes spontaneous and aggressive actions that involve ‘unofficial’ vocal placard demonstrations, violence and large-scale vandalism.

**Table 3: Focus of Protests and Conflicts at Historically Black institutions (2002-2004)**

	State Directed	Student Leaders	Institutional Grievances
Size	Generally small marches	Mixture of small and large protests: often marches	Generally large marches
Nature	Memorandum, March, Placard demonstration	Memorandum, Marches, Sporadic protests, Court action	Spontaneous protests, Mass meetings, Class disruption Class boycott, Marches, Vandalism
Focus	State financial aid (n4) Mergers (n5)	Financial accountability (n14) Political accountability (n12)	Racism (n7) Financial aid (n15) Exclusions (n24) Fee increases (n12) Mergers (n7) Residences (n8)
Type	Officially Approved	Unofficial	Unofficial

Bearing these issues in mind, we next sketch some of the other key dimensions that characterize the foci of protests.

#### *3.4.3.1 State directed protests*

Looking firstly at protests directed at the state which were routine during the last five years of Apartheid, it is evident now that politically inspired protests in particular occur infrequently. Students at our case study institutions have not participated in any large-scale political protest directed at the state over the last five years. Nor have the few relatively small protests that they organized had any real national dimension. This suggests that the new state has reasonably succeeded in resolving the key student-linked HE challenges that it faced. For example, state intervention in 2000 at the University of Durban-Westville contributed significantly not only to the appointment of a commission to investigate student and management actions and the appointment of a mediator to moderate engagement between students and management, using a style appropriate to trade union negotiations, but also dispatched senior officials to mediate-in fact student leadership attributed the resolution of the conflict to the involvement of the director general. This followed on public outrage after a student was killed during protests motivated by financial exclusions and in response to signs that student leaders had lost confidence in the institutions leadership.

Outside of this it is clear that interest in anti-state (or dissatisfaction) action has largely dissipated, barring two exceptions. The first exception concerns a series of marches by SASCO members mainly in the Western Cape – including members of other student political bodies such as the Anti-Privatization Forum - to the national Parliament. These marches showed political discontent about the size of state financial aid awards and reflected problems encountered in accessing financial aid. Overall state financial aid provided through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has increased from R667million in 2003 to R776 million in 2005, but remains inadequate. NSFAS currently only provides between R2 000 and R30 000 per annum to about 120 000 mainly undergraduate students who receive 40% of this as a loan and 60% as a bursary. These allocations, to about 16% of HE students, are based on a disadvantaged student index (DSI) and a full cost of study (FCS) index (Education Portfolio Committee, 2005). Financial aid bursaries allocated by HE institutions, bank loans, and donor support to science students' in particular complements this state aid. However, this has not impacted significantly on reducing dropout rates because many students receive no financial aid and because individual NSFAS allocations amount to less than 20% of study costs. As a result, the marches coincide with annual meetings of the Parliamentary Education Portfolio Committee and its discussions on higher education funding and largely function as a measure that increases public awareness about the financial difficulties that students encounter.

The second exception deals with placard demonstrations at a small number of black institutions in 2002 against the idea of merging black and white universities and technikons because students attacked black institutions as constituting second-rate educational organisations. These protests dismissed the idea of mergers as misguided, but quickly changed to looking at the impact of mergers on the labour market value of qualifications and how mergers will affect individual study costs (Cele, 2004).

What is important about these individualistic financial and merger related concerns, in our view, is that it partly signals a shift in student ranks away from contesting state interventions in HE to the pursuit of narrower interests and the defense of students who are likely to be most affected by changes. Boudon (1979) described this trajectory from a period of student turmoil to the pursuit of narrow interests that affect specific groups as signaling a transformation from societal-universalistic cultural orientations to a corporate-particularistic-materialistic orientation. Boudon describes this as marking a change from a conception of student organizations as upholders of general interests to a view that student organizations should defend and promote distinct claims. We discerned a similar pattern, both with respect to anti-state actions and in responses to institutional grievances.

It is especially evident that students no longer share a core set of values or an organization that binds them nationally. This contrasts with the recent past when Apartheid provided the glue that held different political movements together and when African, Coloured, Indian and white students at times protested collectively. The marches described above could have been co-ordinated nationally, or within a region. Nationally and regionally students face the same financial problems. They also have two national student federations – dominated by the ANC friendly SASCO - that represents university and technikon students separately, one political student organization with members at 70% of HE institutions and another that operates at 54% of institutions. The yearly marches to parliament are expected, poorly attended and tend to reinforce a more general perception that it is only really African students from certain institutions who protest about financial grievances.

#### *3.4.3.2 Protests targeting student leaders*

Our data on protests directed at student leaders indicate that they relate mainly to matters of corruption and political accountability. The key variables implicated in political accountability appear to relate to the visibility of SRCs, the success or failure they achieve in protecting students against exclusions and fee increases and in securing financial aid, the extent to which SRCs follow and apply procedures, and failure to gather and implement student mandate and give feedback and reports.

When we initially focused on financial corruption as a motif for student protests, we did so knowing that corruption complaints annually manifest themselves at 70-80% of institutions. From accounts provided by students and administrators, the reasons for this focus on financial corruption relate in the main to a combination of the quality of financial controls at institutions and irresponsible actions by student leaders. Reasons also include the fact that there are very few cases where guilty parties have been made to pay back money. The consequences include a long list of unaudited SRC financial reports, the removal of student leaders from SRCs following student protests, and intensifying institutional efforts to tighten financial controls.

Regarding accountability, the main complaint at 10 of the 12 black institutions was that student leaders do not report back to them on certain matters in mass meetings and that they demonstrate little political accountability to the student body during their term in office. Reasons for this are complex. In one case ‘inactivity’ followed on one SRC explaining the exclusion of slightly more than 1 000 students as ‘*a victory*’ because they had helped to re-instate about 900 students – many of whom were excluded a year later for the same reason. In this case, as at many other institutions, student leaders ultimately accepted arguments from the university that each individual case of threatened exclusion should be examined on its own merits. In this manner they provided a rationale for treating a general student problem (financial security and aid) and a national education problem (exclusions) as problems that afflict individuals. This SRC also paid a high price. Its partial success paralyzed all future communication efforts, and the SRC operated for four months without holding any meetings before it was disbanded and replaced with an interim structure of which management and other students approved.

In other cases there is clear discontinuity between the representative democracy imposed by the 1997 Higher Education Act and the direct or participatory democracy that previously underpinned reliance on mass meetings. In one recent case in 2003, the outcome of long-term bargaining relationships that earlier involved an SRC agreeing to a formula that regulates exclusions for a three-year period was one problem that a subsequently elected SRC faced because that agreement had not been communicated to other students. This nullified the ‘representative’ expectations that the SRC should develop a strategy to campaign against exclusions and should convene a mass meeting for this purpose. The SRC refused these demands because members felt obliged to uphold union-type agreements with management and feared that they would lose political control to ‘unruly’ students whose sole interest was to blame the SRC for an agreement its predecessor had signed without disclosing its contents to the student body.

There are obviously also cases where SRCs cede political influence to other groups whether they hold mass meetings or not. This happened at four institutions in our sample because ‘invisible’ SRCs created space for other groups<sup>14</sup>. While limited contact between SRC members and ordinary students is often strategic in nature, at 8 of the 12 institutions mass pressure and defiance has been used at least twice during the last three years to compel report-back meetings on the outcome of negotiations or to force other constitutionally sanctioned meetings to be held. By contrast, court action was only used once unsuccessfully to achieve this objective. In this case, the court ordered the SRC to act within constitutional provisions and to report back to students on specific issues. However, the offending SRC ignored the court order as its term of office had nearly expired and members reasoned that disenchanting students did not have either the financial resources or time to commit themselves to another legal process.

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<sup>14</sup> There also is another side to ‘inactivity’. At some institutions it has involved non-attendance at Council, Senate and Institutional Forum meetings because student leaders feel they are not taken seriously. Because this non-attendance has hampered institutional operations, it has, for example, transpired at three black institutions over the last three years that interim SRCs displaced elected SRCs with management approval because student groups and HE managers desired progress on student issues.

There have also been several recent cases where SRCs have held meetings where management officials ‘act as umpires’ because opposing student groups physically disrupt meetings. For example, ideological differences at the University of Zululand have created a situation where the incumbent student leadership struggles to constitute meetings. There have also been recent cases where management at some institutions ‘refereed’ disputes about the conduct and outcome of student elections, following changes in the composition of electoral bodies or in election rules. What this indicates is that student protests and conflicts often follow pressures for change and that participants often interpret their roles differently as a result of a redefinition of the nature of political activities.

#### *3.4.3.3 Protests focusing on institutional grievances*

The prominent issue regarding protests focused on institutional grievances is the emphasis on three overlapping but analytically distinct issues that all significantly affect student dropout rates: financial aid, fee increases and financial exclusions<sup>15</sup>. These concerns about student retention account for 42% of institutional protest and instances of conflict that we examined at historically black institutions and demonstrate that class remains an important variable in student politics.

Two other common focus issues include protests about the availability of residences and racism. The residence focus typically relates to overcrowding, the quality of food, infrequent building maintenance and repairs and the general quality of residences. This is often poor with some institutions being accused of renting out single sex rooms (a reference to the housing conditions of migrant labourers on South African gold mines). The main residence problem also has Apartheid overtones as it involves squatting and cases of up to four students sharing a room, or large groups living in dining halls because black institutions in particular have limited funds to provide residences and are generally located in areas that lack suitable student accommodation.

The main contemporary complaint about racism relates to student performance in examinations or class essays. This typically surfaces where high failure rates are manifest and only occasionally leads to large-scale protest. Evidence of the actual racial dimension is therefore not always clear, although protests have also occurred because students feel that academics are ‘unfriendly’, ‘not supportive’ or ‘hostile’ because of racial preferences. In this regard, the recent Nelson Mandela Medical School case is illustrative. In this case SRC launched a complain alleging that some academics were implicated in racist practices. The university then instituted an investigation which vindicated student concerns and resulted in some academics being suspended pending the completion of the investigation.

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<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps important to note that student leaders generally do not contest academic exclusions because they see little justification for doing this. Where they address academic exclusions typical defences focus on the personal circumstances of particular individuals and whether large numbers of students previously indicated that they felt aggrieved at mark allocations in specific courses.

Another racial dimension has involved student calls for the advancement of Africans into management positions to help transform HE and for fundamental improvement in the quality of student services and in resource allocations at historically black institutions. At the same time, while not a source of protests, it was evident at the former Coloured and Indian institutions in our sample that racial tensions persist as political student and cultural organizations tend to draw their membership from specific racial groups.

#### **3.4.4 Recent protests at historically white institutions**

Contrasted with the patterns at historically black institutions, our data shows that protest at historically white institutions over the last three years relates mainly to issues of institutional culture as opposed to financial issues, and also extend to internationally-related and civil society oriented concerns. An important issue is that the institutional issues in most cases have been related to the main national political questions of reconciliation and racial integration. Thus, while students at historically white institutions have not really participated in anti-state protests, they have objected to Ministers addressing students during the most recent national election. White students have also raised their voices around perceived language marginalization and about racial integration in residences. Regarding other differences with historically black institutions, it is clear that protests calling for the removal of student leaders rarely occur and that corruption-related protests and protests around financial issues are less common, while protests related to crime (in particular theft and rape) and the non-availability of parking is more common.

Looking at protests that do not have a clear local institutional and individual dimension, it is evident that students at historically white institutions show a greater propensity than others to highlight solidarity with under-paid contract workers and for cross-national conflict. Indicative of this, there are recent indications of solidarity actions at English white universities against increased labour outsourcing and about the social impact of privatization. Cross-national and international issues have also featured in public protest, along with social movement concerns such as disagreement with government policies on HIV Aids and relations with Zimbabwe. For example, students at historically white universities marched in support of anti-farm evictions and pro-democracy activities in Zimbabwe in 2002. In the same year, the Israeli-Palestine conflict continued to generate support for both sides with students on each side participating in placard demonstrations and marches at different institutions. The year 2003 also witnessed protests related to the World Environment Summit, the invasion of Iraq and increasing US monopolization of world affairs.

Examining institutionally focused protests, a sampling of cases at historically white institutions over the last three years shows that racial integration, language and financial issues constitute the main concerns. This is illustrated in Table 2, which distinguishes between protests directed at the state, student leaders and institutional grievances.



**Table 2: Focus of protests and conflicts at historically white institutions**

	State Directed	Student Leaders	Institutional Grievances
Size	Small	Small protests	Mostly small protests
Nature	Placard demonstration	Memorandum, Marches	Memorandum, Mass meetings, Marches,
Focus	Mergers (n2)	Financial accountability (n3) Political accountability (n4)	Integration/ Racism (n17) Language (n12) Financial aid (N5) Exclusions (n4) Fee increases (4) Mergers (n4)
Type	Unofficial	Unofficial	Unofficial

In the immediate post Apartheid era, racial integration at especially former Afrikaans technikon was often marked by violent confrontation between black and white students and by *de facto* social segregation. This subsided by 1998, but race has remained a salient conflict marker at universities formerly associated with Apartheid in cases where it regulates access to power. For example, black students demanded changes to the race-based regulation of the number of black and white SRC members at the University of Potchefstroom in 2001. This provided for the election of four white and four black SRC members at one campus. Black students also objected to the racial composition of the SRC at the University of Pretoria (UP) in 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2005 because white students were dominant and hence minimised their influence.

Looking broadly at culturally related protests, language conflicts have moved in two directions. On one side, this has involved white Afrikaans students protesting in public meetings against the use of English at the University of Pretoria and University of Stellenbosch. On the other side, black students have demanded tuition in English at all former white Afrikaans institutions because that language has a much stronger job market currency in South Africa than Afrikaans, and because most study material is available in English. Cultural localism also characterized a series of protest incidents at the University of Stellenbosch (US) where student initiation rituals produced confrontation between white and black students and the subsequent condemnation of the ways in which some rituals denigrate and humiliate students. In addition, in 2003 students at Witwatersrand Technikon marched against policies that limit contact between sexes in residences, while race and sex-based incidents occurred at the University of Stellenbosch and the University of Pretoria.

## SECTION 4

### CONCLUSION

There are several key strategic challenges facing SRCs. The first crucial issue concerns the unequal nature of participation as raised by SRC members who sit in governance structures. It was indicated that sometimes students possessed limited knowledge about issues they were required to engage with and that had contributed to some level of dissatisfaction and frustration. This could be partly attributed to the lack of necessary and sufficient resources available to ensure maximum and effective student participation.

Regarding this, Dahl (1989) has indicated that “equal opportunities” could be reduced to nothing more than formal or legal requirements that ignore important differences-in-resources (114). Thus, although students participate in budget discussions at Council level, they invariably indicated that they did not understand budgetary procedures and were unable to formulate clear questions about the information they were confronted with. The net result for them involved a sense of uncertainty about how they should take up issues related to tuition fees or other increases that directly impact on their constituencies.

In this sense, the democratic process had not necessarily increased “justice”<sup>16</sup> for students since participation, in the view of some students; it had not provided a platform for successful engagement. Exposure to facts had rather disarmed some leaders who felt that it limited their capacity to gain consensus on starting point issues:

...Unlike in the past the need for broader understanding of issues has been substituted for details. For instance, if we are presented with specific issue or programme, we as SRC may have strong political arguments. But beyond that, what makes it difficult is that if you don't have enough information you can be easily be beaten by the facts, though as student leader you want to maintain the image of the institution, but your priority is the ordinary student. .... (UWC SRC Interview 2002 March 08)

... What may seem to be facts can easily be misrepresented to you and if you don't have information to counter that it is going to be difficult. I think that another issue people get intimidated because of lack of information that they cannot speak on certain things. So I think the issue of capacity makes people not to participate. ... (UWC SRC Interview 2002 March 08)

...It is quite an adjustment to participate at Council level, Senate and IF levels. Issues are quite involved there, policy issues you deal with, financial management, academic restructuring especially it is only now that technicians are starting to develop their

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<sup>16</sup> Dahl (1989: 163) argued that the justification for the democratic process allows us to say that, given certain assumptions, the democratic process is itself a form of justice: it is a just procedure for arriving at collective decisions. Moreover, insofar as the democratic process allocates the distribution of authority, it also provides a form of distributive justice: a proper distribution of authority is a just product of a good constitution. Distributive justice requires a fair distribution of crucial resources-power, wealth, income, education, access to knowledge, opportunities for personal development and self worth, and others. Among the most crucial resources in any society is power.

research capacity and postgraduate studies, so those SRC members Who sit in academic boards do not possess necessary capacity. In most instances they have to cope by way of extrapolation taking from the available resources. There is no time to caucus because you cannot pre-empt some of the things that come. It basically requires lot of capacity, technical, financial skills, academic knowledge, and academic matters... (Pentech SRC member, 2002 September 23).

In the previous decade the rampant effects of globalisation and encroaching of market forces on higher education have posed a major challenge to student organisations in general and SRCs in particular. Vice-chancellors are now playing a much more dominant and influential role in defining and shaping the culture and mission of their institutions. There is increasing marketization and corporatization of higher education institutions leading to the concentration of authority in the office of the vice-chancellor. HE institutions, universities in particular, have decentralised executive authority to lower levels of the institution through the devolution of decision-making and other executive responsibilities to the Deans. Within these rapidly changing conditions, the nature of student participation, activism and participation is particularly challenged as the activities are at odds with collective decision-making. Implicitly, they shift emphasis from collective expressed consent to managerial prerogative.

Importantly for students, new challenges have emerged. To engage effectively in rule making processes students need to acquire mastery of administrative techniques. Further, they need to exploit technical legitimacy expectations and to link these to their own sectional interests – else the advancement of student interests will lag behind. In consequence, the form and content of organizational activity in student ranks have changed. Not all SRC actions currently focus on negative and defensive student activities. Indeed, much of it is concerned with representation. To this end, their tasks and functions are being defined as engaging with faculty boards, Senates and Councils, facilitating the disbursement of monies to clubs and societies, procuring resources and organising functions (Cele, Koen & Mabizela 2001:5).

A further challenge concerns forward planning to advance student interests. Implicitly, a focus on formal procedures and expressed consent involves binding other actors to long held expectations and setting a normative framework for the advancement of specific interests. For students this presents specific problems as their transient status at institutions give rise to a lack of continuity in student participation and complicates effective participation. However, whereas this indicates that specific structural obstacles limit the effectiveness of student participation, there is another argument to this story of lack of continuity, which is often overlooked or neglected. New persons often introduce new dynamics into organizational relations and could create new readiness for change. In other words, lack of continuity could serve well as boost effective student participation. But this cannot just happen under any SRC leadership. Instead it requires transformational leadership. In their analysis of transformational leadership in colleges and universities, Cameron and Ulrich (2001 296) argue that readiness for change can result from introducing new people into the organisation who bring fresh perspectives or varied experiences. Because norms and expectations governing interactions and relationships become rigid over time, it is difficult to create a desire for change when no

changes occur in the players. Shared interpretations of reality are created and reinforced to help protect the organization from threat and uncertainty, and those interpretations often inhibit the emergence of any dissatisfaction. The introduction of fresh ideas by new people, however, can help create awareness of alternatives that unfreezes individuals from the standardised interpretations and behavioural rituals.

The paradox of this strategy is that new people must be integrated into the organisation's culture and must become socialised in order to have credibility and to adequately perform their roles. Yet it is precisely the absence of such socialisation that makes new people valuable as change agents. Creative and useful ideas may emerge from people who haven't yet been confronted with the large number of new-idea-killers that exist in most organisations, such as "we tried it before," "It's against our policy", or "the president (or Chair of Council or Rector) won't go for it". In consequence, for students, a balance must therefore be maintained between the elimination of new perspectives by means of socialisation and the absence of socialisation that eliminates legitimacy and credibility.

Almost all interviewed management representatives recognised and identified students' capacity building deficiency as requiring immediate attention. But most institutions did not have specific capacity-building programmes, except those organised by students themselves. Where capacity building existed, the focus has been largely on traditional elements of leadership and management training, thus lacking in technical, financial management and policy areas.

A further disconcerting issue raised by some student leaders concerned the role of Student Development Offices (SDOs). Such offices exist at most institutions since their functioning is inscribed in the Higher Education Act. Overall, they are supposed to provide "student service support" and to ensure that gaps in resource provisioning and in capacity building of student leaders is redressed. In practice, current SRC members described relations at four of the five institutions as poor or non-existent because:

... Student development officers - particularly those without student politics background - tend to be problematic in a sense that they see student leaders as rebellious, only capable of sowing conflict. As a result these officers have neglected the aspect of resourcing the SRCs, simply because they still view them as confrontational structures of the past. SRCs are equally guilty, because most of them do not trust anyone from management structures of the institution (Pentech SRC 2002 September 23).

... Those student development officers with previous student politics background are less willing to give space and opportunity for newly elected SRC members to lead the way they want. In this, student development officers would expect things to be done the way perhaps they used to do during their studenty.

While these examples indicate that Student Development Offices are viewed by SRC members as structures that aim to limit or control SRC activities, on the other hand, student development officers complained about th

senior management representatives who dealt with SRC issues before SDOs were established. Collectively, this has undermined the role and influence of SDOs, since senior management officials have tended to intervene in disputes in favour of SRC members. The broader result is that the structures that were primarily established to provide greater resources to student leaders and to improve their knowledge over student service issues are largely bypassed by both students and management and that the capacity challenges that SRC and other student leaders faced in the past have largely remained the same.

Asked what organizational difficulties student leaders and structures encounter in responding to the changing political landscape, several interviewees noted that while unevenness exists across institutions, leadership and policy training was essential, research expertise necessary and that official skills require improvement. Further complicating their tasks are the fact that in some cases previous SRCs did not keep adequate records; that they lack information about the terms of agreements reached with university management; and that little continuity marked the handing over of positions<sup>17</sup>. Consequently, SRCs members are not always fully prepared for the responsibilities they need to take and the tasks they have to perform. Many also lack experience in staffing organizations and lack a clear idea of what they need to do in their various portfolios, or what possible strategies they could follow to improve organizational performance. As a result members conceded that they often flounder in meetings with university management, feel powerless in representing students and need training in organizational procedures and university protocols<sup>18</sup>.

In their defense, several also noted that bureaucratic difficulties were similar to problems experienced by earlier SRCs, but that new benchmarks existed in terms of financial accountability and proper reports and that formal demands were great. For them, the enormity of this adaptation requires socialization into new organizational practices. Thus, whereas lax accounting procedures were sometimes tolerated in the past, to circumvent misspending audited statements brought tighter controls and formal accountability in performing tasks. Others noted that besides administrative difficulties, it is arduous to mobilize students in support of actions and unlikely that protest action could be sustained for a few days without incidents of violence. While it happened in 2003 that protest action at the University of Fort Hare and Witwatersrand Technikon lasted for extended periods, this partly related to institutions being closed to take the sting out of protest and to limit the damage caused by newspaper reports of disruptions. Flowing from this, interviewees intimated that SRCs were responding to pressure from small groups when

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<sup>17</sup> Here UCT SRC represented the sole exception. Most notably minutes of previous years' meetings are logged on an Internet site and are available along with other historical information and information from newsletters.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewees at all institutions expressed this sense of powerlessness. In addition, interviewees at four institutions indicated uncertainty about tasks. SRC members at three institutions revealed that they were particularly unsure about demands since they had no idea what was expected of them in some forums (that have existed for several years).

mobilizing students and that proper representation of concerns through appropriate channels is time consuming, frustrating and exhausting.

Further compounding administration and governance difficulties is the fact that portfolios were not always neatly aligned with emerging responsibilities, but that constitutional changes were difficult to make as apathy made it difficult to get quorums

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