PERCEPTIONS ON A STUDENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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Abstract

Leadership development involves the empowerment and preparation of individuals to be social change agents by developing their understanding of others and self awareness of their roles and responsibilities as leaders in different contexts. In the South African context, student representative councils (SRCs) at universities is an important mechanism to ensure that all South African students receive quality higher education in a safe, disciplined and healthy environment, that is underpinned by access, success and equity which are critical areas of focus in the transformation process. SRCs, as a well organized body, with the necessary skills can channel their capability and commitment toward improving university life for students. As Fullan (1993:182) argues that we hardly know anything about what students think about educational change because no one ever asks them. A student leadership initiative can be a potential for change in universities, since students as the "guardians of the existing culture can be the final arbiters of any change" (Wideen, 1992: 182). Further, by harnessing SRCs as potential reinforcers for improvement, there is more concern with the process through which successful change can be introduced in universities. Since SRCs are vested with the authority to contribute to good governance within universities, students place their trust in it. Therefore, SRCs need the requisite skills to make decisions that do not compromise the interests of students whom they represent. The study aimed to examine student perceptions and expectations of leadership through democratic deliberation at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), in partnership with the International Centre on Non Violence (ICON) and The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Conflicts (ACCORD). The student leadership course was a pioneer initiative for student leaders, comprising of local and international students studying at DUT. The rationale for this was the identified need for focused research into what student leaders perceive leadership to be and the value they derive from attending leadership initiatives. The partners felt it important to document student voices through a leadership initiative. The narrative, through a qualitative analysis, captured the contradictions and conflicting challenges student leaders face today, which are always problematic and dynamic, especially when public interests are not at the forefront of the agenda. Students stated that the course was beneficial, because it helped to: focus on purpose and goals of being SRC members; understand cultural diversity; show more interest in developing leadership skills as a collective; gain a sense of clarity of personal and university values; gain improved negotiation, conflict resolution and decision making skills; deal better with complex issues; and willing are able to use leadership practices for the benefit of all stakeholders. It is ultimately envisaged that the leadership initiative will be extended beyond the frontiers of DUT to other local, national and possibly international higher education institutions. As part of an on-going series of courses relating to student leadership, it is expected that such initiatives with the university partners will strengthen the effectiveness of student leaders, thereby contributing to the process of higher education transformation.

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Introduction

During the period from the 1960s to the 1990s, university students in South Africa played a pivotal role in the struggle against the apartheid system. Despite considerable transformative changes in the higher education system after the institution of a non-racial democratic government, significant challenges remain. In so far as students are concerned, poor preparation at the school level for university admission, the lack of student financial aid and accommodation remain their principal concerns. They

often see government and management of universities as being insensitive to their plight and needs.

The failure in the resolution of such problems has periodically led to outbreak of violence on many campuses of South African universities. Destruction and burning of buildings and classrooms, the intimidation of students who are continuing with academic classes and examinations and boycotting of classes have been the common manifestations of what protesting students see as their continuing struggle against the legacy of apartheid. The financial cost of these outbreaks of violence, as well as the morally corrosive effect of resorting to violent means to resolve differences are considerable.

The situation demands leadership that is visionary, compassionate and thoughtful, that leads to resolutions positive to the diverse stakeholders in higher education transformation. In addition, the nurturing and development of student leadership at the university student level would provide a cadre of emerging leaders to fill critical positions in the new South African democratic dispensation.

Accordingly, participative governance, which is influenced by policy, students, parents, the Department of Higher Education and members of the community, should contribute toward the establishment of a society based on democratic values, social justice and quality of life (South Africa, 1996). SRCs were established with the aim of promoting the well being of universities; encouraging responsibility among students; liaising between students, lecturers and the university management team; promoting discipline; protecting students against discrimination; listening to students problems; ensuring that universities have a good reputation in the community; and encouraging leadership among students (South Africa, 2002:103).

Need for student leadership development

Literature pertaining to student leadership shows that there is an identifiable gap in our knowledge of students' understanding of leadership and how they see, experience and interpret it in different situations. What is lacking is the production of credible accounts of leadership development benefits from the student's point of view (Dempster and Lizzio, 2007: 280). This view is reinforced by Posner (2004:444) in his statement, "*Studies investigating just how leadership development occurs would be invaluable not just for those involved and responsible for student leadership development, but also for people who provide leadership education for corporate, civic and community organizations*".

While many believe that leaders are born, the authors believe that student leaders can be nurtured by focusing on improving their leadership skills through leadership development initiatives. Such initiatives can grow the ability to think, act and share leadership skills. The contribution of SRCs to transformation is largely dependent on them being effective and efficient leaders within the university governance system.

In this regard, Motala (1995: 10) argues that showing responsibility for governance within universities requires the development of appropriate practices, procedures, language, skills and capacities. This is important in view of the impact of the socio-economic, political and cultural realities that continually impact universities. Dohahue (1997: 45) states that there is abundant evidence of conflict, lack of respect, abuse, incompetence, violence, poor discipline and highly authoritarian structures in universities.

Further, the university culture in determining and reflecting how the elements of university life develop, and is powerfully influenced by people's attitudes and behaviour (Davidoff and Lazarus, 2002:21). This is supported by Thurlow (1996) who states that capacity must be strengthened, since governance is an important aspect of comprehensive reform. By promoting a culture of service; devotion to duty; loyalty to the university; mutual respect; and morality amongst students, the basic principles for effective leadership are developed. In this regard, SRCs play a significant role in assisting students to survive the system and in capturing the hearts, minds and souls of students. . According to Jones (2005:39), "*if you engage with people you learn from them. It does not matter where people exercise leadership, they are still leaders*". This is supported by Goffee (2005), who views leadership as something that leaders do with other people, thereby establishing a relationship between the leader (SRC), the led (students) and the university context. This is supported by Kouzes and Posner (2002: 118) who purport that leadership effectiveness is related to self-awareness and relationships between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. By articulating a vision and purpose which serves the interests of students, the SRC can serve as a conduit to higher levels of performance which is meaningful to students.

SRCs cannot ignore the situational (contextual conditions) and relational (students) variables. The three forces –SRCs, students and university management must interact to generate leadership. Therefore, SRCs need to engage in skills development programmes that will assist them in the following ways (Alexander, 2005: 15):
- Adapt to the context.
- Understand the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.
- Strategic thinking: ability to formulate a vision and clearly articulate it.
- Right action: ability to do what is most effective, while obeying an ethical code.
- Motivational influence: ability to influence students with enthusiasm and dedication through persuasion.

- Commitment to purpose: ability to make a vision a reality through persistence.

An advocacy for leadership development programmes for students is supported by Lambert (2006:239) who considers student leadership as vital for student performance. A study by Lambert (2006:241) on high student leadership capacity schools revealed a high focus on teaching leadership understandings and skills; creating extensive opportunities for participation in governance structures, involvement in action research; conflict resolution; monitoring learner attendance and suspension, responsibility for translating the vision of the school to the community; and planning school and community events.

Therefore, any conceptual framework for student leadership has to be underpinned by activities that enhance relationships, participation and skilfulness. A multi-faceted approach is needed to address the barriers to enhanced quality of learning experiences, academic excellence, educating students to the best of their ability and preparing students for life after school. The development of leadership competencies among SRCs can be one such approach. Some of the objectives in developing strong and effective leadership of student councils can include:

- Understanding the nature and context of leadership theory.
- Reflecting critically on SRCs' and student leaders' role and function in the institutional context, in the light of underlying values and ethics
- Ability to handle conflicts in ways that affirm the rights of different parties in the conflict and develop resolutions that are positive for the institution
- Ability to develop a base for continuous and lifelong learning for leadership skills, including from interaction with others, on the course and beyond
- Ability to identify the steps of their development as leaders and set goals for their future learning.

Research design

The study explored student perceptions of leadership and their challenges as student leaders after attending a three day leadership course. The course content focused on an interactive conceptual understanding of leadership (small group discussions, guest speakers and presentations) and skills building (role playing activities, self reflection exercises) approach. This method was chosen to allow student leaders to freely present information on their perspectives of student leadership, improve students' knowledge through exposure to the topic of leadership and provide opportunities for students to practice leadership in a developmental context where there is less pressure and a lower cost of failure (Jenkins, 2013:50).

The focus on integrity, values, conflict and negotiation drew attention to the importance of not just solving problems, but doing so with ethics in mind, while realising that it is important to accept responsibility and accountability. The sharing of personal experiences by the presenters enhanced the theoretical basis of their presentations, thereby making it more relevant and drawing attention to the fact that not only students are facing challenges. The simplicity of the presentation methodology, which included presentations and discussions, on very complex issues made assimilation of knowledge easier.

The following outcomes were expected after the three day interactive course:

- A basic understanding of the knowledge, skills and values underpinning leadership
- An appreciation of the constraints and complexities of leading and managing a university
- The ability to manage and resolve conflicts non-violently through dialogue, negotiation, mediation and arbitration
- The importance of providing visionary, compassionate and ethical leadership to student representative councils
- To be committed to developing personal leadership on a lifelong basis
- To network with students from other universities including from the SADC region in order to nurture and foster leadership that promotes non-violence and development of societies in a sustainable manner.

Given that this was the first Leadership course offered and one that was very much on a learning trajectory it was confined to students of DUT. The 32 participants comprised four groups from DUT – SRC members, faculty representatives, international students and a women's group were also included. The following criteria guided the selection of 32 students: diversity to include gender mainstreaming, evidence of being involved in leadership activities, involvement in extra-curricular activities, an adequate academic record, and fluency in English.

Data collection

A qualitative approach was used. Data was collected from student surveys and discussions held throughout the three day programme. Content analysis guided the themes that emerged from the surveys and student discussions. Student feedback allowed the facilitators to assess the effectiveness of the activities and discussions, as well as the students' understanding of the topics.

Discussion

Challenges facing student leaders

The experiences of student leaders are not always positive. Identification of negative elements is necessary to address challenges that students may perceive. Students were given an opportunity to

discuss their experiences, which were typically relevant to the leadership experience by discussing the challenges they face as leaders and sharing their problems, a supportive environment was facilitated. Students felt a need for collaborative initiatives with staff, students and external partners to address the following challenges:

• The university was cited as being like a river, whereby students and staff enter and leave at various times, but the river still continues flowing. The term of leadership for SRC members is one year, which impacts on continuity. Further, there are no formal handover processes and procedures between incoming and outgoing SRC members.

• The university has a long term existence and the challenge is how to position the university in 50 years from now. In the national context, DUT falls into the disadvantaged category of universities, therefore needing to galvanize support to build on its limited resources. Some of the challenges include: the need to build DUT and see it growing; identify how students have access to the best opportunities; know who the students are, who their parents are, what skills they possess, what access do they have to technology, attitudes of parents to technology; and how are students affected by universities that are still part of the colonial system.

• Students need to separate the political manifesto from the SRC manifesto if they are sincere about their purpose. Students need to accept that they will be unpopular if the political agenda is not at the forefront of their student leadership, but a leader has to be a survivalist amidst such challenges. One can ensure confidence by being principled, while valuing diversity. There is a need to find ways of separating the personal and political agendas in leadership roles, where the focus is not about being seen as a winner, but rather as an honest person who has accomplished goals with integrity.

Student leaders recognised the need to develop the following competencies to execute their responsibilities effectively:

• Ability to listen and read– Need to listen to the constituency and others, be genuine toward the feelings of others and be courageous to "hold their ground". Getting all students interested and to participate hinges on being good listeners. One cannot be a leader and not engage with the world of ideas through reading. The idea of having a framework of what students want to achieve, like working toward eradicating poverty or building our democracy helps to make sound judgements.

• Planning- Students need to know their goals, how they want to achieve transformation and how they aim to measure success. Student leaders only plan for one term of office. Challenges occur because management must plan for longer periods. Planning for continuity means keeping records so that other leaders can pick up after their term. The need to focus on adequate record keeping, monitoring and evaluating; and using terms of reference when the need arises.

• Policies - SRC members need to be aware of institutional and national policies before they attend meetings and participate in discussions.

• Conflict – This can be minimised or avoided if students take ownership during policy making and understand the purpose of being a SRC member. Leading peacefully requires knowing and understanding the following: What is your purpose of existence? What is the purpose of SRCs? Why are you a student leader? Were you meant to be a student leader? What is your role in the proper management and governance of the university? How can you respond to challenges that management may have different perspectives on? How can you achieve the middle ground, without compromising student needs? How can you educate students that what they always want they do not necessarily get? How do you relate to power and what does this mean for you? How can the pressure of managing diversity be handled? How do you manage power problems with management? How do you manage power problems within the SRC?

• Complex cultural identities-Recognising the cultural identity of SRCs and recognising whether one wants to continue this cultural identity or disrupt it. This requires an acknowledgement that purpose and cause are more important than self-interest. This can become complex in view of different social identities of SRC members.

• Power- Power contestations obstruct progress in addressing student needs and can result in the wastage of resources. There is a need to avoid becoming power drunk, to the extent that student interests are compromised. This can be addressed through more rigorous communication between student leaders, students and management.

The competencies highlighted that students recognised the following important precepts in leadership (Logue, Hutchens and Hector, 2005: 399):

• Being part of something larger required collaboration, teamwork and building relationships.

• The team is more important than the leader.

• Cohesion in a team determines success.

• Focussing on service to others and for the greater good

• Leadership is not about winning or being the best.

• Focus on getting things done in the current to achieve long term goals.

• Getting things done involves planning to meet responsibilities.

• Awareness of the personal identity that the organization provides to leaders in terms of tasks, rules and activities.

• Motivating different personalities.

Much of the aforementioned precepts are interwoven in terms of people, actions and institutional purpose which are integral for successful

student leadership. While current literature support the assertion that there are benefits associated with student leadership, few studies focused on personal costs and the lack of skills to respond appropriately (Logue *et al.*, 2005: 405).

Benefits of a leadership course

Students reported the following benefits accruing from the various presentations pertaining to leadership theory:

- Awareness of the life-long nature of learning on leadership and need to acknowledge, apply and attain learning.
- Identification of what qualities they had as leaders and areas they needed to develop as student leaders.
- Importance of being a successful leader with authority.
- Being able to see things from different perspectives and reflecting on their own value systems and that of multi- stakeholder interests
- Being able to identify their strengths and weaknesses as student leaders and in their personal lives.
- Without the knowledge and understanding of leadership in general and student leadership specifically, they were not able to differentiate between good and bad leadership, citing Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Julius Malema as successful leaders; and Buthelezi and NATO as unsuccessful leaders.
- Choice of clear and concise words in negotiation is important- This requires recognition of the following: maybe difficult to change people, but not impossible; good to have instructions, but may not be necessarily good for everyone; clear interpretation of instructions that is shared by all; open mindedness and be able to adapt; be prepared to compromise; do not get tired of engaging; do not take rash decisions; cannot just trust anyone; must test other's first, before buying into their ideas; need to deal with those who are not willing to listen, possible to change and move forward; when decisions are taken, be firm and resilient to pressure to change; take responsibility for decisions, without blaming others; persevere when engaging with others; speak with one voice that is not influenced by self- interest; use clear and concise language.
- Collaboration and compromise- Realising that collaboration involves the retention of personal interest in negotiation, while compromise moves from conflict prone to conflict averse, by engaging in fair and workable decisions. The use of the process map of collaborative conflict management helps to unpack the problem and systematically move toward the solution. Apart from applying it in their respective constituencies, they felt that it can be applied in their personal lives as well

- The need for proactive behaviour before issues become unmanageable, therefore necessitating the need to engage in strategic planning.

By initiating discussions and recognizing the challenges associated with student leadership, it is expected that the students would be able to respond to these challenges with a new vision of how to prevent these challenges from festering. However, this requires subsequently a structured approach to initially prepare student leaders as a first step before they become embroiled in SRC issues. Apart from focusing on leadership competence, there is a need for knowledge in: foundations of SRCs, information resources, organization of recorded knowledge and information, research, continuing education and lifelong learning, and administration and management.

Understanding of leadership

Students acknowledged that, s student leaders, they need to recognise the following:

- Setting goals and being honest to oneself and one's followers is vital. Students often lose sight of their purpose as student leaders and become embroiled in conflicts that can be avoided.
- The SRC in not the platform to advance their political agendas, but rather recognise the vision of the institution and the SRC when making decisions.
- Managing change and being able to adapt to change is important for transformation. This requires focusing not only on the present, but also reflecting on the past, so that improvements can be made with the future in mind.
- By having the knowledge, the task can be simplified to a certain extent.
- While it is important to be principled and be firm in one's stance, compromise may be necessary if the benefit is for the common good of all stakeholders.
- The issue of materiality or personal gain should not feature in leadership priorities.
- The achievement of goals can be difficult to accomplish if there is a lack of commitment. Commitment requires leading by example and being transparent about decisions.
- The role of civil society should not be underplayed, when developing leaders.
- Bearing in mind that students have different cultural backgrounds, levels of ability, intellectual capacity and many are from rural backgrounds, the use of different presentation styles and an interactive approach succeeds in reaching out to student diversity.
- Need for education for leadership in other contexts and opportunities for continuity.

Students identified important aspects relating to change, cultural diversity and context, which Dempster and Lizzio (2007:281) see as "*young people's emerging notions of leadership which can be*

seen as an appropriate response to a social context that is characterised by high levels of cultural change and social pluralism". This makes inclusion and collective cooperation more challenging and complex. Dempster and Lizzio (2007:281) suggest the capacity to self regulate as a leadership skill to manage challenge and change; and to successfully negotiate diversity and difference. A further response by Thompson (2006:344), is that students need to engage in systemic thinking, which requires an adaptive environment that can lead to higher levels of success. In this regard, the leadership process theory of Allen, Stelzner and Wiekiewicz (1998:75) assert that individuals with higher levels of systemic thinking are more adaptive, cooperative and open to new ideas. It can therefore be posited that moving from a "leading by a few" perspective to "leading by all" perspective can generate higher levels of leadership empowerment and cohesiveness among student leaders.

Students cited the following characteristics of good student leaders:

- Never tire in the quest for knowledge and gaining valuable insight into the experiences of others.
- Importance of reading as it sharpens mental agility.
- Valued. respected, trusted and noticed .
- Important to determine the extent to which a leader is willing to define how he/she becomes successful.
- Use of power with discretion.
- Do not fight to finish as it destroys legacies.
- Leaders understand that different contexts demand different leadership styles.
- Use of sound and ethical tactics to persuade the community.
- A leader is an entrepreneur with a sense of single mindedness and clear goals.
- Power of persuasion, either verbally or through a simple actions.
- Self-awareness, ensuring that personal weaknesses are not the focus of attention.
- Leaders are patient, give attention to detail and are committed.
- Leaders always listen to their critical voice and conscience.
- Understand the context and balance of forces and compare to different eras..
- A good implementer who can sustain a course of action.

Collectively, the student perceptions is aligned to Burns (1978 cited in Hicks and Given, 2013: 9) understanding of leadership that placed the leader in a position of communal influence, by acting as an agent of the followers. Students recognized that leadership is transformational, where they have to work collectively on end- values based on liberty, justice, and equality. In the absence of all student leaders in SRCs not transcending their personal goals in favor of

collective goals, purpose and goals can be compromised.

Student perspectives on leadership can be aligned to Kouzer and Posner's (2002: 18-25) leadership challenge model which encompass the following:

- Inspire a shared vision- others are attracted to share the vision to change the way things are and to create something new.
- Challenge the process- gain support for new ideas that foster progress, innovation and improvement.
- Enable others to act – provide the platform for collective efforts to take risks and create change.
- Encourage the heart- show care and appreciation through one's actions.
- Model the way- demonstrate self-awareness, clarity about one's values honesty, forward-thinking, competence and inspiration.

Unlike the social change model and the relational leadership models, the leadership challenge model identifies an observable set of skills and abilities that are practiced by effective leaders and can be learned by anyone.

Conclusion

Since the 1990's, the higher education landscape has changed in South Africa. Universities were then seen as sites of political struggles. The focus now is on addressing social struggles. In the university context these include: student access, student loans, student accommodation, teaching and learning, broadening student experience and diversity.

Student leaders, with management, need to focus on real issues that can be collaboratively responded to through strategic plans, with an end in mind. This requires determining where the university wishes to go and what will it take to get the job done. Thus, universities must expend efforts to expose student leaders to the concepts of leadership so that they can receive the tools necessary to deal with leadership challenges that may arise during their careers as SRC members. Further, such initiatives have the potential to broaden student leadership behaviors which can also promote opportunities to increase their personal growth, and enhance their academic career success (Patterson, 2012:8).

In view of the discourse on change, especially in the post apartheid era, the element of leadership in training and educating for SRCs is critical for transformational leadership which requires problem solvers, team players, leaders, and articulate spokespeople who are driven by vision, trust, empowerment and values (Burger, 2006: 3). It is only if the SRC is effective, will other stakeholders have trust in them and share the vision.

Strategically, student leaders need to develop ongoing sustainable initiatives that address challenges beyond the social issues like: separating the political

agenda of SRC members from their purpose within the SRC, maintaining a link between outgoing and incoming members, encouraging students to articulate their grievances, inspiring confidence from others, balancing academic and leadership responsibility, managing relationships when decisions do not go down well with the rest of the SRC, managing student responses when the SRC takes decisions with management that negatively impacts on the students, convincing students that decisions taken are for their benefit.

While feedback from sstudents showed that the initiative helped them develop and improve their personal leadership skills through various means of interaction, the researchers acknowledged that this has to be a continuous endeavor by the university partners as the tools needed to execute their roles and responsibilities has to be expended on a continuous basis. This is consistent with Posner"s (2012:233) study findings that the more opportunities that student leaders reported having to develop their skills, the more they reported engaging in the leadership practices of inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, encouraging the heart and modeling the way.

There is a need for further research that describes leadership from the students perspective, which would give a more in depth understanding through the voice of the student. Such research is important when developing relevant student leadership development programmes based on student perceptions and provides a potential foci for future research. However, the researchers recognize that there is no best approach to leadership. Since students are individuals, with unique traits, their leadership journeys start from different points and end at different points. Leadership development for student leaders should be modeled on providing them with the critical attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge sets that they can use to build their own unique personal leadership model.

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