

Policy Brief

Establishing a Space of Dialogue and Possibilities: The Role of Student-Initiated Support Structures

Executive Summary

With the increasing student enrolment and diversification of students and staff in South African higher education institutions since the late 1980s, we have seen massive proliferation of student-initiated organizations that have played a significant role as support structures of different kinds. Its typology includes social, political, academic, religious, ethnic organizations and a variety of organizations constituted around the different groups of international students (Botswana Student Association, Lesotho Student Association, Zimbabwe Student Association, Italian Student Association, etc.). Besides providing spaces for student engagement in institutional life, they potentially constitute critical nodal points in the creation and recreation of institutional culture and can form part of the social fabric of learning and enrichment. Particularly student political and academic associations have played an important role as agencies for learning, skills development and academic citizenship.

However, there seems to be a degree of institutional uncertainty about what strategies should be put in place to facilitate constructive engagement between current student organiza-

tions and the university, a task that cannot be solely played effectively by the Student Representative Councils (SRCs). With adequate mediation, student organisations offer a powerful space for student dialogue, academic and cultural enrichment with immense possibilities. The central purpose of this policy brief is to offer a framework for developing effective strategies to maximize the role of student-initiated support structures.



Background

Two patterns have emerged in recent years across the country concerning the nature of student organizations and student-initiated support structures.

- A shift from traditional predominance of student affiliation to political organisations to a preference for social, cultural, academic and religious organisations. A survey conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand was quite telling in this regard. Of a total of 450 students surveyed in 2004, 191 belong to academic organisations, 170 to social organisations, and 164 to religious organisations; only 46 were members of a political organisation. Forty-two (42) were affiliated to international students' associations. This pattern has become more expressive in most South African universities today.
- The incubating and nurturing role of student organisations in student academic development. Most students see student organisations as providing *common spaces* and *resource networks* within a community at loggerheads or in confrontation with itself on racial, religious, ethnic and cultural issues and in confrontation with a somewhat strange or unfriendly institutional environments. They see them as providing spaces where once-isolated individuals may now live in communities or as some have indicated in adopted 'families'. The 'impersonal' and very often carefree environment on campus force students to seek refuge in the friendly atmosphere that brings students together into these communities.

These two trends have strengthened the range of possibilities and opportunities that student organizations can offer in student social and academic development. The challenge rests on our ability to mediate their activities productively.

Findings

Three important features characterize student-initiated support structures in university campuses in South Africa:

- They comprise a range of campus organisations, forums and social groups through which students find spaces for mutual engagement, joint enterprise, construction and expression of group identity, affirmation of difference, and the development of awareness and learning. Students also use these groups to negotiate meaning over social issues of interest to them (e.g. religious beliefs, cultural values, professional careers and academic work).
- Sometimes these organizations represent constellations of competing – and in some cases,



conflicting – interests and values, constituted around different interests and socio-cultural activities, leisure and recreation activities and sports, which can be highly fragmented (e.g. Zulu Society, Chinese Society, Xhosa Society, Gay Pride, etc.).

- Current student organisations do operate as – or in some cases have the potential to become – effective ‘communities of practice’ with focus on intellectual and academic engagement such as health sciences research groups, the Engineering Society and so forth (Wenger 1999; Tierney 1993; Bellah et al. 1991). As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, ‘such communities hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people’s lives’ (Wenger 1999, 85).
- They serve different purposes as:
 - * Spaces for identity formation, intellectual engagement, imagination, spiritual healing and affirmation of power.
 - * Part of the social fabric of learning and enrichment.
 - * Networks of civic engagement (i) to foster sturdy norms of mutual trust and generalised reciprocity within the group or organisation; (ii) to facilitate coordination and communication; (iii) to amplify information about the trustworthiness of indi-

vidual members; and (iv) to lower transaction costs and speed up information transfer and innovation.

- * Networks for collaborative work.

A matter of concern is that these fragmented communities seem to demonstrate little effort towards promoting politics of articulation, beyond individual or group boundaries. Students tend to accept dispersion and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new social order that reveals fully where they are and what they can become, and which does not demand that they forget (Hooks 1990, 148) or consciously unlearn certain forms of behaviour inculcated by apartheid. Against this background, the challenge is to enable students to live on campus guided by the rules of a dynamic academic environment, by establishing a space of dialogue and possibilities that allows for regeneration, innovation and enrichment. Establishing a space of dialogue and possibilities necessitates facilitation of meaning construction around the experiences that students have of campus life, regardless of their diverse backgrounds.

Insights and Lessons

In our view, Woolcock and Narayan’s (2002, 230) concepts of ‘bonding’, ‘linking’ and ‘bridging’ provide insights that could prove useful in devising mediation strategies. ‘Bonding’ means building connections to people who are ‘like you’; or ‘getting by’, which is mostly a survival strategy. Bonding explains how students with similar backgrounds build connections among themselves that can culminate in student organisations around

politics (e.g. Independent Students' Association), religion (e.g. Muslim Students' Association), or music and dance (e.g. Ballroom Dancing Club) and other forms of recreation. 'Bridging' refers to building connections to people 'not like you'. It provides a channel for mobility or 'getting ahead'. By emphasizing difference, what most student support structures do is to provide opportunities for bonding culturally students with the same or similar background. In such a politically, socially and culturally fragmented environment, limited opportunities exist for building links and bridges across difference.

'Linking' is about building of connections to people in positions of power, which can provide access to new and ample resources. This could be translated into vertical links; tying students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to people with historically advantaged backgrounds. With few exceptions, strategies that reflect this dynamic seem to be lacking in student organisational life and in campus life in general. A widespread pattern is that students are open to, and cooperate with, those who have something in common; who share similar biographies or backgrounds; and who share the goals of the organisation, its norms, values and principles, and who share its traditions.

The following are some insights and lessons for developing mediation strategies to address this challenge.

1. Make governance and leadership skills training available to student leaders and student structures.
2. Promote social and cultural events to create shared spaces for shared meaning across difference.
3. Coordinate student-initiated struc-

tures via joint student bodies with institutional support.

4. Promote academic student support structures across the faculties (e.g. research groups, Writing Groups, Debating groups, Readings Groups, etc.). These tend to predominate in faculties such as Engineering and Health Sciences.

References

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