RE-ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXTERNAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND STUDENT POLITICAL BODIES IN THE LIGHT OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of student leadership bodies at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is central towards facilitating a good relationship between students and management and for catering for the well-being of students at HEIs generally. On paper, Student Representative Councils (SRCs) as part of the HEI system in South Africa are supposed to function autonomously to be effective in carrying out and enhancing students' relationship with University management. However, university autonomy has experienced a significant decline, impacting both academic freedom and public accountability. This decrease is attributed to various factors, including administrative restrictions, laws, and regulations. There has also been a notable incursion and interference by external political parties in student politics at different HEIs in South Africa. Notably, there is a lack of discussion about the influence of student political organisations and their connections with external political parties regarding the discourse on institutional autonomy.

Against the backdrop of the above-stated problem, the study adopts a phenomenological qualitative approach, utilising both primary and secondary data to reassess the relationship between external political parties and student political bodies in light of the notion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Key findings revealed that the relationship between external political parties and student political organisations influences institutional autonomy and ultimately the policies. The inability of universities to have oversight of these relationships leads to a lack of

public accountability from both the institutions and the government. Despite universities being seen as places where there is autonomy and where academic freedom can be fully exercised, the findings indicate, among other points, that the partisanship of student leaders affects the autonomy of higher education institutions. These findings continue to add to the discussion on student leadership and partisanship, which also has implications for the operations of public higher education institutions in South Africa.
Keywords: Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy, Political Control, Political Parties, Student Political Organisations

INTRODUCTION

Student leadership organisations within the Higher Education (HE) context are now recognised as a cornerstone for promoting robust relationships between students and the management of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Mpanza et. al. 2019; Mugume and Luescher 2017; Shozi-Nxumalo 2023). In the South African context, Student Representative Councils (SRCs) are established as autonomous bodies that represent students' interests and serve as a channel for amplifying students' voices and encouraging a cordial relationship with the university administrative body (Cloete 2020). However, it will seem that in recent times that the notion of university autonomy has met with considerable challenges, which have impacted negatively on academic freedom and public accountability. On this, it has been established that the decline of university autonomy in South Africa could be blamed on, among other factors, administrative challenges and legislative constraints (Belluigi 2023; Gray 2017; Habib, Morrow and Bentley 2008).

Furthermore, as it concerns the issue of student leadership in the South African HEI context, it is noted that the problem of limiting autonomy is on the rise, which in some cases could be blamed on the intrusion of politicians and political party representatives in student politics. Notably, political parties external to HEIs in the country have in recent times encroached into student politics, exerting their influence on student governance structures (Mpanza et. al. 2019; Mugume and Luescher 2017). Mugume and Luescher (2017) affirm this and further note that the manifestation of students' relationships with politicians and political parties external to the HEIs could be seen during SRC elections at different institutions. It is noted that there is a kind of transactional association between the students and the external politicians, in which the political parties provide and support the students with various campaigning resources, including financial resources. It is argued that this transactional relationship could potentially impact negatively on student political structures by limiting their

autonomy, since the students will have to comply with the wishes of the politicians and external political parties as the need arises.

Despite the importance of this issue, there is an apparent dearth of research on the topic of interference of external political parties into student politics at HEIs in South Africa. The topic is significant as it borders on the issue of institutional autonomy and the need to maintain academic freedom and public accountability. Consequently, the current research adopts a phenomenological qualitative approach, utilising both primary and secondary data to explore the complex relationship between student political structures at HEIs and external political parties. Also utilising the case study approach, the research focused on two HEIs in the country – the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The effort is to examine how this intricate relationship illuminates the understanding of and debate on the notions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability in the South African HEI context.

Notably, at both UKZN and DUT, elections into the SRC are an annual event aimed at electing representatives into the student governing structures. There is a constitution at each of these universities which provides guidelines on how these elections are supposed to be conducted (Shozi-Nxumalo 2023). The UKZN SRC constitution stipulates a dual system which allows both student organisations (present at least in three campuses) and independent candidates (who meet set eligibility criteria) to contest elections (UKZN 2018; Shozi-Nxumalo 2023). On the other hand, the DUT SRC constitution stipulates a fully independent system which encourages eligible candidates to register and participate in student elections (DUT 2014; Shozi-Nxumalo 2023). Despite this clear stipulation in the DUT SRC constitution, it is noted that at both DUT and UKZN, there has been a proliferation of partisan student organisations, which mimic and in most cases are an offshoot of the main political parties in the country. At DUT, even though the SRC Constitution is clear on its preference for independent candidates, what has become the norm is that students now align themselves with political parties, which makes it challenging for some students who want to run on an independent platform to succeed (Habib 2020). Notably, while political party alignment may provide certain advantages (access to needed resources and support networks) for aspiring student leaders, it also poses some ethical challenges and raises the issue of control, exploitation of the student and academic disruptions amongst many (Shozi-Nxumalo 2023; Habib 2020).

CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

The main concepts that guide this study include the notions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability in the HEI context. Pertinent to the utilisation of these

concepts in this study is an understanding that there is an interconnection between them which shapes the undercurrents of leadership and governance at HEIs (Belluigi 2023; Habib et al. 2008). The UNESCO defines autonomy as that level of self-governance which a higher education institution needs to achieve effective decision making with regards to "academic work, standards, management and related activities consistent with systems of public accountability, especially in respect of funding provided by the state, and respect for academic freedom and human rights" (in Appiagyei-Atua, Beiter and Karran 2015, 15). Sequel to this definition, UNESCO recommends that institutional autonomy is central towards the preservation of academic freedom and the rights of humans in academic communities.

Notably, closely connected to the notion of institutional autonomy is the concept of academic freedom understood as that liberty that accrues to academic community members to embark on teaching and learning operations and research inquiry without unjustified intrusion (Belluigi 2023). In addition, Academic freedom, as elucidated by scholars such as Bergan , Gallagher and Harkavy (2016), is a cornerstone of intellectual inquiry and innovation within HEIs, fostering an environment conducive to scholarly exploration and critical discourse.

Complementing the notions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy is the principle of accountability, which entails a dual responsibility for HEIs: to justify the allocation of public funds and to uphold professional standards in research and teaching practices. Huisman (2018, 1) states that "Accountability/ Answerability" previously related "to universities that consider –in the traditional meaning of the term –government funds utilized but also to scholars clarifying, in their academic endeavors, how they organized their research, the methods they employed and the reasons for those choices, as well as discussing the degree to which their findings are valid, reliable, and applicable more broadly." Traditionally, accountability in higher education encompassed financial transparency and the demonstration of the validity and reliability of academic work (Franklin 2013; Bothma and Rossouw 2019; Koga, Beaupré-Lavallée and Bégin-Caouette 2021; Macheridis and Paulsson 2021). However, as highlighted by Huisman (2018), contemporary discussions on accountability have shifted to include a broader array of stakeholders and emphasise performance measurement.

Moreover, the evolving landscape of accountability in higher education suggests a delicate balance between fostering institutional autonomy and ensuring transparency and public trust. Sometimes, at the expense of institutional autonomy, it is noted that the current program rather places a higher emphasis on putting in place accountability measures. The imbalance highlights the centrality of putting in place nuanced governance and decision-making strategies at HEIs in which established accountability mechanisms complement autonomy rather than undermining it. On this, it is envisaged that the Stakeholder framework will assist in

underscoring the issues of accountability as it concerns the different higher education stakeholders.

BRIEF LITERATURE PERSPECTIVES

Student Representative Councils at African Universities

Notably, there has been an extensive appreciation, recognition and respect for student political constituency and their views on politics (Kgarose et al. 2023). Student leadership and political structures, throughout the history of African universities, have served as a link between students and university administrative leadership, and have served as advocates for student interests and assisting in creating a pleasant campus atmosphere for all (Bhana, Jali and Suknunan 2021; Bourne and Winstone 2021; Kgarose et al. 2023). It showcases the various needs and issues of the student population, allowing students to play an active role in influencing their educational journey. This student organisation provides a forum for candid discussions with the university leadership, guaranteeing that students' viewpoints are considered during the decision-making process (Bhana et al. 2021; Bourne and Winstone 2021). Hence, it has become mandatory that the SRC structure be established at all universities; however, it is noted that not all universities in Africa respect this mandate (Klemenčič 2017; Kgarose et al. 2023).

Considering that the SRC could be a training context for prospective leaders, it becomes central to interrogate its leadership processes and activities. This is also important since the university and student leadership activities are areas which, if not carefully marked and cultivated, could perpetuate and reproduce negative systems and unjust structures existing in societies (Bianchini 2016; Muswede 2017). The positive aspect of universities, according to Bradbury and Mashigo (2018), is that they serve as a space where systemic, standing practices of sexism, inequality, and stereotypes, among others, could be challenged and rewritten. Furthermore, Bradbury and Mashigo assert that state universities are places where learning and unlearning should be taking place, and where adjustments and reconfigurations of views and beliefs are modified. This necessitates a provision of an overview of SRCs and how they are constituted.

Running for a position on the Student Representative Council (SRC) continues to be fiercely competitive within public higher education. As the top tier of student leadership in universities, the Student Representative Council (SRC) is officially set up to champion student interests. Established under the Higher Education Act of 1997, the SRC plays a crucial role in the governance of universities. Members of the SRC actively participate in various university committees, such as the Student Services Board, Senate, Board of Trustees, and the Council,

which is the highest governing body. On this, Klemenčič, Luescher and Mugume (2016) note that SRC members often build direct connections with university management or communicate through other institutional channels. Also, SRC representatives are involved in discussions about important matters like university tenders and other significant developments.

In addition, SRC members often affiliate themselves with external political parties and politicians, engaging in a sort of give-and-take with student leaders and politicians. It is further established that independent candidates struggle to secure positions within SRCs, largely because student politics is so deeply intertwined with political agendas in national politics (Sebake 2019; Habib 2020). As a result, those looking to take on student leadership roles frequently align themselves with political parties to boost their chances of success. However, this political alignment creates significant challenges for universities in Africa, as students often place their loyalty to political organisations above their commitment to their institutions (Cloete 2020). Furthermore, this allegiance to national political parties can undermine the independence of student leaders, who might prioritise the demands of their political affiliations over the needs of the university and the students they are supposed to represent. This situation has led to disruptions in university governance, with student leaders often being controlled and directed by political parties. It's worth noting that there is still a lack of research exploring just how much control these political entities have over student leaders in these contexts.

Academic Freedom and Autonomy in the South African Higher Education Context

The concept of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in South African higher education has been subject to scrutiny and debate over the years, particularly in light of governmental regulations and control. This literature review explores the evolution of regulatory frameworks and the implications for autonomy and academic freedom within South African universities.

Debates on the concept of academic freedom and the closely related idea of institutional autonomy have focused on what those notions mean in the contemporary South African context. This literature review focuses less on the contemporary debates themselves and more on the evolution of the two concepts (or ideas) in South Africa over the past few decades. It is noted that the regulation of higher education in South Africa dates back to important documents such as White Paper 3, which laid the groundwork for the governance and management of universities. Moja, Cloete and Muller (1996) further note that another important milestone was the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework, which further standardised educational qualifications and accreditation processes, and this helped to also lay the necessary foundation for university governance with as little state interference as possible. Along with

these regulatory measures, there was an increased state intervention, in the form of budgetary control by the Department of Higher Education extended to institutions and initiatives such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NFSAS (King 2007). It is further noted that the state's financial control over HEIs directly affects institutional autonomy and academic freedom. On this, Sayed (2000) observes that universities often receive stringent orders from the state that curtail their authority to make independent decisions. This is especially true with regard to financial matters; the more money the state allocates to universities, the more control it exercises over them. Consequently, public universities find themselves caught between two undesirable options: comply with state orders or lose their funding from the state.

The concepts of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, fundamental to higher education, are closely related (Habib et al. 2008; Bergan et al. 2016; Gray 2017; Belluigi 2023). However, the regulatory framework and state control have an impact on the exercise of academic freedom in South Africa. Concerns about the potential restriction of academic freedom when universities are subject to government oversight and intervention have been raised by scholars (King 2007; Butler-Adam 2015). Subsequently, the dynamics of academic freedom and institutional autonomy have been altered by the regulations of South African higher education, which started with White Paper 3 and extends to modern budgetary control mechanisms. While these guidelines aim to promote accountability and ensure quality, they can also create hurdles for the independence and intellectual freedom that higher education institutions have traditionally enjoyed. Hence, it is pertinent to assess how a balance can be created between state oversight and the preservation of institutional autonomy and academic freedom at South African universities.

As it concerns the context of the two institutions chosen for this research, UKZN and DUT, there appears to be a dearth of literature on the subject of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Rather, a large amount of existing research focuses on student activism, specifically exploring the relationship between political parties and student organisations. Studies that primarily concentrate on student activism and the relations between student organisations and political parties, against the more fundamental concerns of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, are examples of this trend (Bhana et al. 2021; Mpanza et al. 2019; Mbhele and Sibanyoni 2019). This points to a possible knowledge gap in the academic investigation of these important facets of HEIs, and this study aims to contribute to bridging that gap.

The Issue of Autonomy in Student Leadership

Research by Cloete (2020) and Mugume and Luescher (2017) suggests that the alignment of student organisations with political parties stems from a mutually beneficial relationship. However, this symbiosis has been shown to disrupt South African public universities, as student leaders often prioritise loyalty to political parties over their responsibilities to the universities. Autonomy, as defined by Klemenčič (2014, 401), encompasses decision-making competencies and freedom from constraints on their utilisation. Klemenčič (2014, 401) elaborates that policy autonomy, governance autonomy, and managerial autonomy pertain to an institution's ability to determine its political and professional agenda, internal structures and processes, and financial matters, respectively. On the other hand, financial autonomy, legal autonomy, and symbolic autonomy relate to funding conditions, legal status, and relations with political parties.

Political parties provide students with resources, funding, and other forms of support, leading to challenges in autonomy, particularly when the relationship is based on resource dependency. Consequently, student leaders and their political affiliates may relinquish autonomy as their operations come under the control of political parties. This poses difficulties in representing students authentically, as political agendas take precedence over genuine student concerns. Given the literature indicating the lack of autonomy in partisan student organisations, it becomes imperative to explore the experiences of student leaders affiliated with such organisations in terms of control within political structures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - STAKEHOLDER THEORY

Stakeholder theory is a conceptual framework that originated in the field of management and organisational studies. It proposes that organisations should consider the interests and expectations of all individuals or groups (stakeholders) who can affect or are affected by the organisation's actions and decisions (Parmar et al. 2010; Lau 2014; Dmytriyev, Freeman and Hörisch 2021). In essence, stakeholders are individuals, groups, or entities with a vested interest in the activities and outcomes of an organisation (Gerard 2022). Stakeholders may include entities lacking legal authorisation yet exerting influence over specific organisations. In this case, political parties exemplify such stakeholders, given their relationship with students and the consequential impact on universities.

The key tenet of stakeholder theory is that organisations are not solely accountable to their shareholders (owners, investors), but rather to a broader network of stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, communities, government entities, and even the environment (Sulkowski, Edwards and Freeman 2018; Freeman, Phillips and Sisodia 2020; Dmytriyev et al.

2021; Gerard 2022). Stakeholders can make a significant impact on an organisation, and they can influence it in various ways—through economic transactions, legal regulations, social pressures, or even moral expectations (Lau 2014; Freeman et al. 2020). Using the higher education ministers as an example, it is noted that they are often part of political parties. Additionally, Stakeholder theory highlights the need to manage relationships with all stakeholders in a way that balances their differing interests while maximising the overall value the organisation creates. This means looking beyond just the short-term financial gains for shareholders, also considering the long-term sustainability and reputation of the organisation.

According to Hickman and Akdere (2017), the stakeholder theory is based on the ideas of urgency, legitimacy, and power. It acknowledges that stakeholders may differ in their legitimacy, urgency, and power in relation to the organisation, which can result in differing levels of significance and influence. For Mugume and Luescher (2017), external political parties do influence how student leaders are chosen and how institutional procedures and policies are shaped in the context of university student governance. Additionally, this is where student leaders are chosen by outside political leaders to represent them in parliament or the government. Political parties, in particular, are regarded as significant stakeholders because of their resources and ability to affect results. Power is the capacity of one stakeholder to exert pressure on another. Therefore, effective stakeholder management involves identifying and prioritising stakeholders based on their significance to the organisation and engaging with them in transparent and collaborative decision-making processes.

Overall, stakeholder theory provides a framework for organisations to adopt a more inclusive and ethical approach to governance, one that considers the broader impacts of their actions on society. However, the theory has been subject to documented limitations; Lau (2014, 763) contends that although the theory offers a robust ethical framework for business operations, it remains highly contentious regarding determining what constitutes “right”, “just”, “fair”, or “moral”, as well as other normative concepts applicable to stakeholders, non-stakeholders, shareholders, or organisations. This means that the questions of fairness, of which stakeholder to ask, and to whom to ask, remain open in the context of the debate on higher education autonomy.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed qualitative empirical research methods, which stress how study participants perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences with the world around them (Mojahan 2018). Hence, the qualitative research method was chosen for its effectiveness in exploring participants' lived experiences (Mojahan 2018; Smith and Osborn 2015). Notably,

as a qualitative study, the stated objectives around which the data collection process focused included: investigating the influence of external political parties on student political bodies; assessing the impact of partisanship on institutional autonomy; and examining strategies for enhancing public accountability in higher education.

For the primary data, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, with study participants selected using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In total, 11 participants from both the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) took part in both the interviews and focus group discussion in this study. The universities were selected due to their status as the two largest public universities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and their geographic spread across Pietermaritzburg and Durban, areas influenced by similar societal and contextual factors. Utilising the stated sampling techniques, initially, invitations were extended openly to purposefully selected students who had previously engaged with the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the two different universities (Abdulai and Owusu-Ansah 2014).

The initial inclusion criteria for the research focused on student leaders who were currently serving in the SRC, were members of student political organisations, and were over the age of 18. Membership in political clubs associated with the research site was essential for addressing the research questions, as these clubs provided the context in which the student leaders would have encountered external party politics. When it became challenging to recruit current SRC leaders, the participants were asked to recommend other leaders who might be interested in participating, thus facilitating a snowball sampling approach (Simkus 2023). adopted a referral approach. Additionally, due to confidentiality concerns and the violent nature of politics, the demographic details of participants are restricted to their political affiliations. For instance, certain EFF SRC members were unable to take part in the study. Some were required to obtain approval from their local branches, fearing potential retaliation or violence if they were perceived to criticise the organisation.

Table 1: Demographics

University	Political Association	Number of Participants
DUT	EFFSC	3
DUT	SASCO	2
DUT	(Not mentioned)	1
UKZN	SASCO	3
UKZN	EFFSC	2

Efforts were made to ensure a diverse representation of political affiliations among participants in the two institutions. The breakdown (as seen in Table 1) of the political affiliations of the

selected study participants is as follows: South African Student Congress (SASCO) – 2 students from DUT and 3 students from UKZN; Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFFSC) – 3 students from DUT and 2 students from UKZN; 1 of the students from DUT declined to state her political affiliation. In addition, this study incorporates a selection of secondary sources that delve into the themes and issues being explored as part of the data collection process.

The transcription and analysis of data in this study were shaped by interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). This qualitative method enables researchers to draw on their prior knowledge and interpret the responses of study participants about their lived experiences (Smith and Osborn 2015; Tuffour 2017). The following section will present the findings and discuss the insights gained from this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and the discussion section explore the complex relationships between student leadership and political participation in higher education. The study reveals the intricate connections between student leaders, political parties, and institutional autonomy by examining stakeholder theory and the effects of power dynamics. This section provides insights into the opportunities and challenges of navigating the intersection of student governance and outside political influences by looking at the documented limitations of current theoretical frameworks and empirical data. It also carefully examines how these findings may affect university governance frameworks. Summarily, the complex interactions among stakeholders, power relations, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and public accountability in the context of higher education are thoroughly examined in this section. The findings and discussion are presented under the following subthemes: the relationship between external political parties and student political organisations; Student activism and autonomy; and Public accountability.

The Relationship Between External Political Parties and Student Political Organisations

Mthethwa and Chikoko (2020) note that the apartheid government's enforcement of separate university education systems, which sparked a demand for representation among Black students, was a major factor in the historical emergence of student political organisations. Student organisations consequently started joining forces with political organisations. Even though there is still a relationship between students and political parties, it is still mainly unregulated (Shozi-Nxumalo 2023).

To understand the relationship between student leaders and political organisations, it is important to first analyse the documents sustaining these relationships. The researchers analysed the policies and constitutions of political parties and their student wings. Notably, Section 32 of the EFF Constitution (2019, 27) states that:

- " The EFF Students' Command shall be established as an autonomous structure existing in all institutions of higher learning and post-secondary education and training institutions.
- Any decision of the EFF Students' Command to exist outside institutions of higher learning should be taken at its National Students' Assembly and should have the concurrence of the EFF CCT."

Related to the above, empirical data from interviews with participants provide different views on the roles of political parties in higher education. Some students feel that they are there to serve a fundamental purpose of fighting for students, while others feel that they are using students as a means to an end. One student said:

> **Kayise: "**They are there to fight for students, support them, help them with the memorandums during strikes. They are also there to support our projects with funding, in order to gain more students in numbers during the recruiting campaigns. They also provide students with t-shirts, funding and cars to move from point A to B."

The above statement highlights the role played by political parties in student organisations, while the statement below indicates the role of students towards political organisations:

> **Asanda:** "There is a lot we do for the organisation. We campaign for them. We do what they want us to do. Sometimes we even push their agendas even if it doesn't benefit us as students but their businesses. But truth be told, they provide us with so many things, even jobs, lucrative jobs, look at that Mkhatshwa girl, even funding, and many things."

The findings indicate a symbiotic relationship between external political parties and student political organisations, founded on mutual agreement. This relationship exerts a significant influence on institutional autonomy, effectively narrowing the scope within which universities can operate autonomously and shape policies. The presence of external political influences can potentially limit the freedom of universities to make independent decisions, as policies may be influenced by the agendas of political parties rather than the academic or institutional needs of the university. The stakeholder theory is very crucial in understanding how the relationship works; it states that stakeholders have a reciprocal relationship (Lau 2014; Sulkowski et al.

2018; Freeman et al. 2020; Dmytriyev et al. 2021; Hickman and Akdere 2017; Gerard 2022). The Stakeholder Theory, as discussed by Parmar et al. (2010), further emphasises the significance of ethical conduct within stakeholder interactions. It highlights the necessity for engagements to be guided by principled foundations. However, the findings of this study present evidence contrary to this notion concerning the relationship between student political leaders. It is observed that students are also used as instruments to advance political and business agendas, a practice that can be deemed unethical.

Student Activism and Autonomy

Mpanza et al. (2019) state that national party politics have been competing badly to win control of student organisations to gain power and increase the numbers of their followers, but also to influence higher education. The authors further state that in the past, the role of SRCs has been clear in fighting against racism, inequality, access and many issues that were affecting higher education at a time. The findings below highlighted the role of student leaders in the autonomy of the institution in their participation in critical decision-making of the institution. The participants stated the following:

> **Zanda**: "They help us fight for the right course like the insourcing of our mothers and fathers."
>
> **Amile**: "Sometimes, they want us to do strikes for issues that are not really student related but they are about them".
>
> **Asanda**: "But also the fact that we have powers in council, also makes us influence who gets hired even the VCs and other strategic positions. So this works for them and us."

Zanda's perspective explains the role of SRCs in advocating for social justice issues, such as the insourcing of workers' rights, but the question that remains is: is it a student interest or a labour issue, and does this fall under student issues? Zanda's statement also shows that the apparent symbiotic relationship between student leadership and political parties has led to the students championing some of the broader societal issues that concern political parties, which has little to do with students' welfare at the universities. Relatedly, Amile's viewpoint introduces a note of scepticism regarding SRC motivations; it is suggested that sometimes SRCs may prioritise their agendas over genuine student issues, potentially leading to discord within the student body. This observation raises questions about the transparency and accountability of SRCs in representing student interests. The substantial influence that SRCs have within university governance structures is clarified by Asanda's comment. SRCs are crucial in determining the course of the organisation because they participate in council decisions, which

include the appointment of senior employees like vice-chancellors. A complex interaction between the interests of SRC members and the larger student body is suggested by this dual role of influence.

Klemenčič et al. (2016) assert that the political affiliations of Student Representative Councils (SRCs) inevitably undermine their autonomy. The authors also point out that SRC members actively participate in various university bodies, including the Senate, Council, Student Services Board, and others. Because of their involvement, they can lobby university management directly. As a result, they have a say in how universities run, which affects institutional autonomy. The study emphasises how political upheaval and student activism affect university governance and the strain they place on institutional autonomy.

According to Klemenčič et al. (2016), the autonomy of Student Representative Councils (SRCs) is inherently compromised by their political affiliations. Additionally, the authors highlight that SRC members play active roles across different university bodies, such as the Student Services Board, Senate, Council and other structures. This involvement allows them to establish direct connections with university management, where they lobby issues. Consequently, they wield influence over university operations, thereby impacting institutional autonomy. The study stresses the impact of student activism and political unrest on university governance, highlighting the pressure it brings to bear on institutional autonomy. The findings align with previous research (Bhana et al. 2021; Bourne and Winstone 2021; Kgarose et al. 2023; Lo 2023), indicating that student political organisations play a crucial role in championing various issues within the university environment. For example, initiatives like the Economic Freedom Fighter Student Command's (EFFSC) push for staff insourcing demonstrate how these organisations can lead the charge on labour-related matters, which significantly affect university operations.

Additionally, the power of student leaders goes beyond lobbying, as student leaders have a lot of influence in making employment decisions, contracting, and deciding how opportunities are allocated in the university. Being members of student councils gives student leaders a great deal of influence in organisational activities within universities. This power extends to university councils and further, indicating the politicisation of central facets of university governance. Vice-Chancellors (VCs) of universities/ colleges are appointed, for example, through a political process, and the outcome is determined by student political organisations. These findings can be additionally clarified by the stakeholder theoretical framework (Freeman et al. 2020; Sulkowski et al. 2018; Dmytriyev et al. 2021) that delineates the power and legitimacy concepts, which different stakeholders have to different extents in relation to the organisation (Lau 2014; Mugume and Luescher 2017; Hickman and Akdere 2017). It is

affirmed that the student political organisations, in a way, do influence the governance relations in the universities.

Public Accountability

Several studies (Franklin 2013; Huisman 2018; Bothma and Rossouw 2019; Koga et al. 2021; Macheridis and Paulsson 2021) have examined accountability reforms since the mid-1980s, highlighting the continuous difficulty of finding a balance between autonomy and accountability. Depending on the audience—including political forums like parliament, higher education, student leaders, and the media, among others—this balance is interpreted differently. Accountability for student leaders would mean being open and responsible for their choices, actions, and resource usage on behalf of the student body they represent. Whereas, for political organisations, accountability would involve being transparent about their interactions and influence over student leaders, they would need to demonstrate that their involvement in student politics is ethical and serves the interests of students rather than their political agendas. Additionally, they would be accountable for any resources they provide to student leaders and ensure that these resources are used appropriately and in accordance with the law.

The predominant theme emerging from the study's findings revealed that student leaders are often selected not based on their qualities, merit or qualifications, but rather on their ability to advance the agenda outlined by political organisations or influential individuals. This was expressed by one of the participants, Elihle, in the following statement:

> **Elihle: "**Yes, actually, they are the one who tells us who is gonna be based on our positions. They instruct us before we even go for portfolio allocation. You go with that mandate…."

Asanda below affirmed that she entered politics because of political party leaders who wanted her to champion their issues.

> **Asanda: "**For me, I entered leadership because of external political people -connections. Then at first, I was told what I was waiting for because I was competent enough to lead am. But after I was told if I am not listening, I'll be kicked out in the branch level…."

Findings further noted that there have been instances where political leaders speak against the suspension of student leaders in universities. Notably, some student leaders who break university rules are supported by political leaders who also provide them with lawyers to defend them at disciplinary hearings. This is affirmed by the participants' responses as indicated below:

> **Kayise**: "They do so many things. They provide lawyers for students who get suspended when participating in strikes. For example, you will know a case of ***** who also got provided with *** lawyers."

Against the backdrop of the preceding findings regarding the point of accountability at universities, it could be noted that the dual role of the state as both referee and player in university governance complicates matters of public accountability (Koga et al 2021; Franklin 2013; Huisman 2018; Bothma and Rossouw 2019). Limited accountability becomes prevalent due to the partisan nature of student political organisations, which may prioritise political agendas over institutional transparency and accountability. This statement suggests that the model of higher education inadvertently perpetuates a system where power is wielded over universities rather than shared collaboratively with stakeholders.

The findings are corroborated by some studies (Tondi and Nelani 2017; Kuttig 2019), which have noted the fact that university politics are also influenced by local party leaders and business individuals seeking to leverage their positions for influencing tenders and various projects within the university. This convergence of interests results in external political parties or politically connected individuals securing business opportunities within the university. As students are often involved in these negotiations, agreements may be reached beforehand, bypassing proper procedures. Consequently, former student leaders may also transition into roles as suppliers or contractors, even after graduating. This relationship appears to be mutually beneficial, operating as a political mechanism sustained by state resources for the benefit of both parties involved.

Further on this, Habib (2020) stated concerns about the detrimental impact of political parties' presence in universities. He argued that political parties can be highly disruptive forces within university environments, contributing to instability and undermining the democratic processes of student governance. In this scenario, instead of student leaders representing the interests of their constituents, they become loyal to the agendas of political parties, thus deflecting accountability away from the student body. Habib (2020, 1) further affirmed the following:

> "Finally, we have to speak about the presence of political parties in the universities. There is no more destructive a force in universities, and in promoting instability within it, than the political parties. I am cognisant of the fact that our Constitution gives political parties the right to mobilise and organise. But it is precisely this in the universities that marginalises the broader student community from student governance and leadership, deflects the accountability of leaders from their constituency to political parties, and frankly introduces the fascist and Stalinist discourses and behaviour in student leadership circles."

The significance of power dynamics in stakeholder relationships is crucial (Dmytriyev et al. 2021; Freeman et al. 2020; Hickman and Akdere 2017; Mugume and Luescher 2017; Derakhshan, Turner and Mancini 2019). The fact that political organisations have financial power and can control students suggests unequal power dynamics. According to Greenwood and Van Buren III (2010), imbalances in power within stakeholder relationships can pose challenges, particularly when one party holds more power than the other. The findings of this study corroborate the views in extant literature on stakeholder relationships, revealing that the relationship between student leaders and external political parties is characterised by unequal power dynamics. According to participants, this relationship is conditional, which is consistent with findings by Mpanza et al. (2019), who claim that political parties spend a lot of money on students in order to control them. The roles of student leaders are particularly impacted by the unequal power dynamics present in the relationship with political parties. Even though the partnership might be advantageous to both sides, it is unbalanced because outside political parties have more resources and, consequently, more sway over student leaders. Because political parties are frequently state employees, accountability is thereby jeopardised.

Furthermore, the study's findings indicate that the influence of political organisations is evident, suggesting that their impact on university student leaders may have a substantial impact on academic freedom. Student leaders, for instance, stated that there is a chance that academic discourse and inquiry may be jeopardised because those who are chosen are frequently chosen primarily for their support of political agendas rather than their dedication to academic freedom and integrity. Additionally, political meddling in student government systems may result in pressure to fit into predetermined ideological narratives, restrictions on intellectual diversity, and the repression of dissenting opinions. Furthermore, putting political goals ahead of academic values could compromise academic institutions' independence and erode public confidence in the quality of higher education. In general, the study suggests that political party influence on student leadership can be detrimental to the preservation of academic freedom in the university.

Summarily, the results indicate that student partisanship severely reduces institutional autonomy, with universities having little control over how student leaders interact with political parties. These dynamics make it clear that the higher education model needs to be reevaluated to guarantee increased accountability, transparency, and shared governance among all parties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined the influence of student partisanship on institutional autonomy in universities, emphasising the challenges arising from the relationship between student leaders and political parties. It showed how student partisanship can limit institutional autonomy, considering that universities do not have control over this relationship. Using the Stakeholders Theory, the study showed how this relationship might not be valid and how it might result in unequal power dynamics. Moreover, the study highlighted the dominant model of higher education, which favours "power over" instead of "power with," thereby exacerbating challenges in preserving institutional autonomy. These results have important implications for how universities are run. They suggest that universities need to look into how student partisanship affects how decisions are made at the university level and encourage student leadership structures to be more open and accountable. Consequently, the study makes the following recommendations:

Establishing Legislative Actions:

The implication of students' partisanship on the autonomy of institutions demands that there be an immediate legislative intervention. It is recommended that the relevant ministry of higher education draft befitting legislation to manage the complexities of students' relations with political parties outside the institution. The legislation must stipulate the boundaries of autonomy within institutions and lay down clear lines of action for managing the relations between the political and student union spheres. The use of legislative solutions to govern the engagement of political parties with student organisations in institutions of higher learning, safeguarding institutional independence and academic freedom, involves a multi-faceted process that involves among many a consultative process among stakeholders and the preparation of an infrastructure of monitoring the use of the legislation, including mechanisms of accountability. This would involve establishing oversight committees made up of students, staff and administrators.

Encouraging Depoliticisation Debates:

To counteract the erosion of institutional autonomy, universities must place a strong emphasis on depoliticisation discussions. This means establishing guidelines and frameworks that work to diminish the impact of external political forces within the university setting. By cultivating a culture of neutrality and objectivity, universities can protect their academic integrity and maintain their independence. To lessen the sway of outside political parties, universities can

implement strategies such as scrutinising external funding and partnerships to avoid conflicts of interest. They can also strive for self-sufficiency to reduce dependence on external funding. Also, empowering student leaders and organisations to function autonomously can help foster a culture of self-governance and critical thinking.

Seeking Financial Self-Sustainability:

Considering that universities are financially dependent on the government, they should seek avenues to become financially independent. To rely less on government funding, it is important to source funding from different places and use good financial management practices. Universities can lessen outside pressures and keep their independence in decision-making by ensuring they have financial independence.

CONCLUSION

The results from the two universities provide important new information about academic freedom, government funding, university autonomy and accountability, and the connections between student SRCs and outside political parties. First, political factors have a significant impact on both institutions because they are public universities. Political parties play a significant role in student politics, influencing the goals and operations of SRCs. Although student organisations are formally answerable to their respective universities, it is clear that their primary allegiance is to the political parties with which they are affiliated. Decision-making procedures are frequently impacted by this alignment since student leaders put party interests ahead of institutional requirements. Second, both universities rely heavily on government funding because they are public institutions. Because of this dependence, there is a fine line between upholding academic freedom and following the law. Higher educational regulations are influenced by political parties in authority, which can have an indirect effect on curriculum choices, research priorities, and institutional governance. Academic independence may occasionally be restricted by governmental directives, particularly when funding choices are linked to particular political or economic goals. Thirdly, the requirement for government subsidies is posing a growing threat to institutional autonomy and accountability. Higher education is heavily financed by the government, so institutions are subject to particular accountability frameworks that are set by legislators. As universities work to preserve autonomy while guaranteeing financial sustainability, this frequently results in conflicts between institutional decision-making and political influence. In the end, national political

decisions directly impact university operations by influencing long-term planning and governance frameworks.

The results of this study underscore the significant ramifications of student partisanship on institutional autonomy in higher education. The absence of jurisdiction that universities have over the interactions between student bodies and external political parties presents considerable obstacles to preserving autonomy. The current model of higher education, which is based on "power over" instead of "power with," makes this problem worse. To tackle these issues, it is essential to implement appropriate legislation that unequivocally delineates the roles and responsibilities of universities in overseeing student-partisanship dynamics. Also, efforts to depoliticise must be given top priority to create an environment that is good for academic freedom and intellectual inquiry. In addition, universities need to work towards being financially self-sufficient so that they do not have to rely on the government and can make their own decisions. Universities can successfully negotiate the complexities of student partisanship and maintain their independence as hubs for education and intellectual discussion by putting these suggestions into practice. Universities can only fulfil their mission of promoting knowledge and acting as foundations of societal advancement by working together to address these problems.

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