

# Chapter 1: Student Organising in African Higher Education: Polity, Politics and Policies

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## Introduction

Student representation is typically seen as one of the key aspects of higher education governance across the globe, and it is essential for a full understanding of the higher education polity, politics and policies. Student representative bodies, variably called student associations, councils, guilds, unions or governments have the primary aim to represent and defend the interests of the student body. All of these student organisations are similar in that they organise, aggregate, articulate, and intermediate student interests along with providing various services and organising student activities (Klemenčič, 2012). Student governments have historically played a visible role in governance of higher education institutions which has become particularly prominent with the Cordoba revolts in Latin America in the 1910s and since the 1960s revolts in Western Europe and North America. In Africa, they have played an important role in challenging colonial rule and authoritarian governments across the continent (Altbach, 1983; Munene, 2003; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014). As a result, the state frequently intervened in student organising by imposing one compulsory national student organisation with a deliberate representational monopoly and fully controlled by the regime (e.g. Boahen, 1994; Bianchini, 2015). After Africa's 'second liberation' and the re-introduction of multi-party democracy in a large number of countries in the course of the 1990s, some universities shifted from a government-controlled bureaucratic to a more democratic collegial model of university governance, which naturally accommodates student representation and typically also provides for the existence of representative student associations. In South Africa, for example, this has been conceptualised in post-apartheid higher education policy in terms of a philosophy of 'co-operative governance' (Hall, Symes & Luescher, 2004), which ensures that student representation is extended across all institutions at the level of institutional governing bodies and their committee structures, and

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at system level in bodies such as the boards of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme and the Higher Education Quality Committee, and in the Council on Higher Education.

Moreover, in the course of the macro-political developments of the 1990s and early 2000s across the continent, representative student associations in many African nations have had to re-position themselves in relation to liberal-democratic multi-party politics. This occurred either by embracing partisan politics or asserting their autonomy from political parties, be it on the national level and with associate branches at higher education institutions or independently at institutional level, where especially the student representative councils (SRCs) or guilds of the prestigious national flagship universities<sup>4</sup> continue to have nation-wide political appeal and sway. In some countries, multi-party politics occasionally wreaked havoc with student representation so that any expression of partisanship became prohibited, as in Tanzania with the *2005 Universities Act*, or in South Africa by means of changes to SRC constitutions in some universities (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014).

A much varied picture of stipulations in higher education legislation as well as institutional acts and statutes regarding the formal involvement of students in national policy making is evident. Only in few African countries are there explicit provisions for a national student representative organisation. Their relation to higher education governance structures, such as a ministerial advisory body, quality assurance agency or student loan board, is often not explicitly legislated, even if there is provision for student representation (Bailey, 2015). Similarly, there is much variation across countries in explicit legislation of the extent of involvement of student representatives at institutional and sub-institutional levels of university governance.

Related to the question of the extent of student representation at institutional and national levels is also that of the legitimacy and autonomy of student representative associations, including their resourcing and capacity, and the actual influence that student representatives wield in policy-making. While some student representatives may view formal representation in governance structures and committees as a learning opportunity or an “opportunity for self-expression”, rubbing shoulders in “proximity of adult policy makers”; more activist students may seek more than a ‘voice’ and rather see the task of student organising in “making a difference in the world through collective effort” (Taft & Gordon, 2013, p. 94). The legitimacy of student representation and representative organisations is therefore not only a matter of legislated involvement; it has to contend with substantive outcomes, insisting that formal student participation in higher education governance is more than a means to co-opt and ‘tame’ dissent, but a real opportunity to express student power (Taft & Gordon, 2013; Brooks,

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<sup>4</sup> African flagship universities have several typical characteristics: they are usually the oldest university or ‘mother university’ of a country; they typically are the most prestigious institution historically and have been responsible for the production and reproduction of the political and socio-economic elite, and they aim to be the leading developmental and knowledge producing institutions in their country (Bunting, Cloete, Li Kam Wah & Nakayiwa-Mayega, 2015, p. 33). The notion of ‘flagship university’ has been elaborated in greater detail beyond the African context in Douglass (2014; 2015).

Byford & Sela, 2015). The dynamic relationship between student representation and student protests – the formal and informal expression of student interests - is precisely symptomatic of the effectiveness of different forms of, and the responsiveness of the ‘dominant’ policy makers to the student voice (e.g. Luescher, 2005; Cele, 2014).

To start mapping the landscape of student organising in African higher education, this chapter draws on a survey conducted in 2014 with higher education experts in eight countries which has sought to gather their observations and perceptions of student representation in their countries. In keeping with the countries covered in depth in the latter chapters of this book, the focus of the survey has been on Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.<sup>5</sup> In particular, we have sought to understand the conditions and practices of student interest representation in different kinds of institutions (especially universities; polytechnics; private institutions) and at the national or system level; how many representative student associations are active on national level, what their organisational characteristics are (in terms of their legal status, resourcing, membership, etc.); the influence of different kinds of groups on student politics (including political parties, ethnic, religious or regionally defined groups, government, and university officials); the extent and mode of formal student representation; the role of student representatives and representative organisations; and finally the ways in which students are seen in public policy discourse. In addition, the chapter draws on yet unpublished results from earlier surveys conducted as part of HERANA projects in Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania.<sup>6</sup> By providing a comparative perspective, the chapter sets the stage for in-depth studies of national and institutional student representation. The chapter proceeds in three sections respectively focused on the higher education polity and students place therein; student politics as part of higher education politics; and finally higher education policy with specific focus on the policy agenda for African higher education and key student issues emanating from that.

### **Student Organising within the Higher Education Polity**

Higher education governance operates at various levels: at supra-national or regional level, at national or system level, in federal systems at state and provincial level, and at institutional and sub-institutional levels (e.g. faculty, department, halls of residence). Representing student interests at these different levels may take different forms – ranging from protest action to student representation in formal decision-making structures and reflecting the inherent tension between student activism and

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<sup>5</sup> No responses were received from Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Tanzania, which are also covered in various chapters. The Nigerian chapter was published in the sister publication to this book, the Special Issue “Student Power in Africa”, Vol. 3 Issue 1, of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* ([www.jsaa.ac.za](http://www.jsaa.ac.za)).

<sup>6</sup> HERANA is the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa coordinated by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) in Cape Town, South Africa. The HERANA network encompasses eight flagship universities across the continent.

representation “the first signifying aspiring to change the status quo, the second that of carving a better place within the status quo”.<sup>7</sup>

At institutional level, student representation is typically formally organised in structures of student government such as a SRC, Student Guild or Student Union. Members of these bodies may participate in the formal university governance structures: as student representatives in council, senate/academic council, various committees and other fora. In addition, they may have a special relationship with the university top management, either directly through consultative meetings or mediated by student affairs officers like a dean of students. Institutional SRCs, student unions and student guilds may provide student services beyond representation and arrange student activities. The extent of student representation in university governance is often formally provided for in a higher education act, a university private law or charter, an institutional statute and the rules of the university.

Institutional student governments in many countries associate on the national level into representative structures aiming to represent student interest towards the public authorities and other national-level higher education stakeholders. These national student representative associations formalise and institutionalise their organisations to a different degree. Some associate in formal organisations with highly developed joint institutions to which the government confers decision-making and representational powers. Others work more as loose networks, which do not have common institutions at all or only coordinating bodies and execute their representational functions collectively. In some countries, there is not one, but several national-level associations which compete with each other for access to policy making and representational role. Finally, there are systems where there is no national-level structure, but institutional student governments compete for influence in national-level decision-making, with those from flagship universities typically having most influence. We present below a typology and analysis of national student representative organisations in Africa (Table 1).

National legislation basically in all democratic countries allows freedom of association and students can register non-governmental, non-profit student organisations. Many national associations acquire such status. Unlike student representation in higher education institutions, provisions for the establishment of national student bodies and their representation in national higher education structures and processes is rarely specified in higher education legislation. The existence of such national associations almost universally depends on the collective action of institutional student associations to associate at national level and on the negotiations between the governments and student associations or from pressure from students to their governments to be consulted in national policy making. Student associations, like interest groups, lobby different national structures, such as ministries responsible for higher education, parliamentary portfolio committees, or political parties.

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<sup>7</sup> The authors credit the anonymous review for this insightful quote.

Where students have no formal mechanisms of representation they tend to voice their grievances through protests and other forms of activism.

Higher education polity is indeed a complex system of interrelated structures and agents involved in governing the sector. Formally defined, a polity refers to any organised political unit within which politics takes place and political authority is exercised (Heywood, 2002). The basic governing structures of the higher education polity, their interrelation and the location of key actors and stakeholders such as students, thus defines the higher education regime as a set of legally codified as well as operational rules. In this section we explore the differences in student organising at national level in context of the higher education polity of a particular country. Furthermore, we discuss how students are conceived in public discourse which is an important marker of the students' position within a national higher education polity.

### *Student Organising on National Level*

National student representative organisations, which usually take the form of a national association or union, stand out because of their claim to the representation of all students in the country (Klemenčič, 2012). While there are undoubtedly commonalities across countries in student organising at national or system level, there are also significant historical differences between countries and broad regions (e.g. Francophone vs. Anglophone Africa; Central, East, North, Southern and West Africa). The differences in the characteristics of the national systems of student representation concern questions such as: how many associations compete to represent students at national level; what are their organisational characteristics; and which ones are accepted as representing the general student body in formal sector bodies, government and institutional structures. Furthermore, the structure and processes of the higher education policy processes differ significantly and with them the role and influence of representative student associations. These differences may originate in legislation and in informal norms and practices of state-student relations.

These differences in student representation within national higher education polity can be explored from two analytical perspectives (Klemenčič, 2012): the types of national systems of student representation and the types of student interest intermediation into the national public policy processes.

The first analytical perspective examines how student interests are aggregated and articulated on national level. Here we refer to different types of national systems of student representation, whose characteristics are defined in terms of the number of associations and whether the state has granted any representational monopolies. The distinction here is made between corporatist, statist, neo-corporatist and pluralist systems of student representation (Klemenčič, 2012).

In the corporatist model, government controls or effectively creates a student representative association. Such student association is granted by the state the right to speak on behalf of all students and to present the interlocutor between the state and the collective student body. At the same time, such association is not autonomous in terms having the ability to decide on its own political and professional agenda (policy autonomy), on internal structures and processes (governance autonomy) and having discretion over financial, human and other resources (managerial autonomy) (Klemenčič 2014, 401). In corporatist system of student representation, the student association depends on the state financially and in terms of access to power, and in turn, the political authorities control student associations by influencing (or outright hand-picking) who the student representatives are. Such dominations curbs the student associations' freedom and autonomy, which indeed define its political power (Klemenčič 2014).

In the neo-corporatist model, government formally or informally grants monopoly of student interest intermediation to one or few student associations by acknowledging these as the representative voice of all students and formally or informally involving them in structures and processes of national higher education policy making. Neo-corporatist system of student-state relations frequently involves some provisions by the state to support the existence and functioning of student representation, however – and here comes the distinction from the corporate model - while respecting these associations' autonomy. This may be by regulating that higher education institutions collect fees from all students which are then diverted to student representative associations within the institutions (and these institutional associations in turn pay membership fees to their national umbrella associations) or the state provides administrative grants for national student associations (typically along funding the work of other non-profit, non-governmental youth organisations through national youth councils or national youth foundations) or by some other means. Again, for the neo-corporatist model to exist it is not necessary that there exist only one national or system-level (“umbrella”) student associations. What defines neo-corporatist model is that there is one association with a privileged status to represent all students or a few which differ functionally (for example, one representing universities and the other polytechnics, or one representing public institutions and the other private) or territorially (when different institutions represent different regions) or ethnically or religiously.

In contrast, in pluralist systems, the government recognises that there are representative student associations and is willing to involve them in public policy processes – either formally or informally -. The state does not grant a monopoly of representation to only one association. There may be several associations, which are similar in their objectives and function and compete with each other for access to public policy processes and resources granted by the state. A variation of the pluralist system can be seen in countries where no national student association exists, but the government interacts with university-based students unions. If the government regularly meets with several such institution-based associations and does not privilege one over the others, such system would qualify as pluralist.

Finally, statist systems are characterised by absence of any relations between public authorities and student representatives. Either national student associations exist, but are not recognised and engaged by the government, or there is no national student association and governments do not interact collectively with institutional students unions based at higher education institutions.

The second analytical perspective addresses the question how student interests are intermediated into public policy making. Here the analysis is concerned with the characteristics of public policy processes in the areas of higher education and student social welfare, and whether there exist formal mechanisms of student interest intermediation or students approach the public authorities only informally (Klemenčič, 2012). Thus, we can distinguish between formalized systems where students have formal seats in higher education bodies on national levels and informal system of student interest intermediation, where students meet with government representatives only informally.

According to the responses we obtained through the expert survey, the eight African countries we examined, paint a diverse picture of student organising on national level (see Table 1).

**Table 1: A typology of national systems of student representation and student interest intermediation**

Corporatist	Neo-corporatist		Pluralist		Statist
	Formalized	Informal	Formalized	Informal	
None	Botswana Ghana Uganda	Burundi Cameroon Kenya Nigeria	South Africa Zimbabwe		Ethiopia

Of the eight countries, none displayed characteristics of corporatist system of student representation, although such systems certainly existed in the past. All these countries have at least formally democratised and the democratic norms preclude overt control over representative student associations. However, this is not to say that such control does not exist informally. Autonomy of national and institutional student association from interference and control of political authorities, political parties or university leaders is one crucial area that calls for further investigation.

Our survey shows that formally there exist several neo-corporatist national systems of student representations: Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. This means that there exist recognised national student associations that are autonomous – at least formally in terms of legal status, financing, and governing structures and processes - in their operations. Neo-corporatist system would also apply in cases of countries where the existing national student association is dormant, or there is no national student association, and the student representatives from one university – typically the national flagship university in the capital – play the representative role for the general student body in the national policy arena. One such case is perhaps Kenya, where the

Kenyan National University Students' Union shifts between periods of activity and inactivity and the voice of Kenyan students is heard most often from students in the capital city, at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. The same has been the case in Botswana, where the formation of the Student Union of Botswana (BUS) was announced in 2013, but only got off ground in 2015 with the election of an interim board. BUS is hosted by the flagship University of Botswana's SRC. Similarly in Burundi, a student union has existed since 1964 which currently goes by the name of *Fraternité des Etudiants de Rumuri* (FER, Brotherhood of Students of Rumuri). It is based at the University of Bujumbura but represents all Burundi students.

In some countries, intermediary bodies, such as a national commission/council on higher education, have been established to carry out certain delegated functions, including regulatory, distributive (funding), monitoring and quality assurance, advisory and coordinating functions (Bailey, 2015). In her analysis of national councils and commission in African higher education in eight HERANA countries, Bailey (2015) shows that there is some student representation. For instance, the Uganda National Council for Higher Education has two representatives of students from universities and other tertiary institutions on its board as legislated by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (2001). There are also legal provisions for the inclusion of student representatives in the Tertiary Education Council of Botswana and at board level in national agencies, such as the Ghanaian Student Loans' Trust Fund (Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014, p. 509).

The two most clearly pluralist systems of national student representation in our sample are South Africa and Zimbabwe. In South Africa, two associations stand out: the South African Union of Students (SAUS) and South African Students Congress (SASCO). Both claim to represent South African students on national level and have the longest sustained history of student representation in the country. In Zimbabwe, there are also two main national associations: the Zimbabwe National Students' Union (ZINASU) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Students' Union (ZICOSU), both of which operate in a partisan movement fashion. In terms of student involvement in national higher education decision-making, student representation is reported in both South Africa's Council on Higher Education and the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education. In addition, in South Africa, students are represented in various national agencies, including the Higher Education Quality Committee and the National Students Financial Aid Scheme of South Africa. However, attempts in South Africa to move towards a more neo-corporatist form of student interest intermediation are hampered by the fierce independence of statutorily provided, institutional SRCs and the lack of coordination and communication capacity and resources of the voluntary national federation of SRCs, the South African Union of Students (SAUS), which was set up and is operating with the support of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training.

Finally, there are the statist systems of national student representation where either national student associations exist but are not recognised and engaged by the government, or there is no national student association and governments do not interact collectively with institutional students unions. In our survey, only Ethiopia fits this category. Student representation on the national level has become largely absent in Ethiopia, effectively with no national association in operation currently. While there is legislation that provides for institutional student unions and student participation in senates and boards, there are problems with implementation even at that level of student representation (Ayele 2016).

We should add, however, that the relations between state and students in all these countries are highly dynamic and the situation may shift rapidly: from statist system where the government does not involve students in any way to some informal contacts and from informal contacts between government and student leaders to no contacts at all. This makes attempts at classifying systems of student representation and intermediation at national level difficult and susceptible to errors. The change in the relations are typically conditioned by who comes to power, what political issues are at stake (more or less contentious) and how cooperative or adversary student representatives are or how autonomous and independent or legitimate the student associations are perceived to be. Much more stable relations between the state and student representatives exist in countries where these relations are formalised and students have formal rights in national bodies. For example, even though we have classified here Nigeria as neo-corporate system, our respondent observes that often in Nigeria “students have no voice in national policy making, they are just like ordinary electorate during general elections. In national development planning too, they are asked to submit written input: They are only relevant in matters where the ruling Federal Government want to use them to score political points” (Survey response). As our respondents stated in the case of Cameroon, “most of the time students have to strike before they are listened to” (Survey response).

### *Conceptions of Students in Public Discourse*

The place of students in higher education governance differs from system to system and often from institution to institution; it is not the least dependent on students’ own organisational capacity and leadership, as well as the conceptions of students and attitudes of the ‘dominant’ actors, chiefly the ministries of higher education and university leaderships. A useful indicator of students’ location within the higher education polity is how students are conceived in public discourse (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). This typically is implicit and requires interpretation. Thus, whether students are seen as minors or even children may be indicated by *in loco parentis* rules and other paternalistic student rules and regulations, and this is typically extended into formal governance as an exclusion of student representatives from formal decision-making forums or their treatment as mere observers therein. Conversely, students may be treated as adults and citizens with all the rights and

responsibilities that entails. Students may be conceived collectively as a legitimate higher education constituency, an important stakeholder, who has an interest in the development of higher education and experiences and expertise relevant in the making of decisions, or perhaps as mere troublemakers whose youthfulness must be contained and who must either be excluded from formal governing bodies or be included in a manner so as to tame or ‘domesticate’ the student voice (cf. Brooks et al, 2015). In marketised higher education, students are seen primarily as clients of higher education, consumers of higher education services and facilities, who have only an evanescent interest in the sector and institution but may serve as useful sounding boards for gauging the level of service provision and customer satisfaction; or perhaps they are a special type of clients, one with longer-term interests in the reputation of their institution, the quality of education provided, and ultimately the value of their qualifications. Finally, students may be seen quite akin to childish pupils or, conversely, considered co-responsible for their learning, an integral part of the functioning and success of higher education, and even ‘co-producers of knowledge’ (as conceptualised, for example, by Carey, 2013).

Our survey of the ways students are viewed in public policy discourse in the eight African countries included in our study found that the most prevalent conceptions are the traditional ones’ of students as the country’s future elite (compare, Mathieu, 1996; Wandira, 1977) as well as a new one, introduced on the back of the marketization, privatisation and commercialisation of African higher education, viewing students as clients. Particularly prevalent is the elite discourse in the prestigious institutions in Cameroon, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, which is curiously often paired with the neo-liberal notion of students as clients prevalent in the same countries, as well as in Burundi and Nigeria. Rather disempowering notions of students as minors and pupils are less prevalent, except in Burundi and to a lesser extent in Uganda. A generalised view of students as troublemakers is only widespread in Ghana. Finally, it is encouraging that perceptions of students as constituency in higher education sector are quite widespread, especially in Burundi, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe, as well as in Cameroon and South Africa.

The overall picture rendered by the survey of conceptions of students in public policy discourse suggests that the governance regimes of most higher education polities are in the course of an uneven transition as far as student representation is concerned: the traditional notion of students as future elite remains widespread, but it has come to be augmented with more democratised views of students as constituency and most widespread, with marketised, neo-liberal notions of students as clients of higher education. As argued by Luescher-Mamashela (2013), conceptions of students in public policy discourse typically coincide with the manner in which student representatives are formally included in decision making in different domains of governance. Thus, in academic governance, a widespread discursive construction of students as mere pupils would typically exclude them from decisions on curricula, timetabling, assessment, etc.; while a consumerist conception of students may introduce student representation in new areas such as quality assurance. The argument is therefore that the

combination of the traditional elitist and neo-liberal consumerist notions of students as clients *and* future elite signifies a regime of higher education governance in transition both, in terms of the implications of a larger transition from elite to mass higher education (see, Luescher, 2015, chapter 2 in this book) and related notions of higher education shifting from being a privilege and institution for producing the future elite to being a widely available, desirable good for which those who seek to acquire it will pay. By extension, it indicates a likely transition from government-controlled bureaucracy to managerialism (with or without aspects of academic rule and a democratic inclusion of students). The implications for student representation are an uneven regime where student interests and power are likely under-acknowledged, with prospects of more student protests as a common expression of student claim-making while formal decision-making structures fail to accommodate student power and interests adequately.

In the nascent transition from elite to mass higher education (cf. chapter 2), higher education's contradictory functions need to be assigned to institutions in ways that require greater differentiation in the system (Cloete et al, 2015). In the process, a quite diverse picture of student representation is likely to emerge: while at system level, notions of students as a legitimate constituency with various civic and consumerist interests may come to be dominant, in some institutions paternalistic views may prevail while in others outdated conceptions are discarded in favour of collegial-democratic governance, managerialist governance, or a combination thereof, with their respective implications for student representation (Luescher, 2009).

### **Student Politics as Part of Higher Education Politics**

Students who aspire to become members of an official student representation structure like an SRC or represent students nationally usually have to be elected into position. In some universities and some national organisations, a potential candidate may need to be a member of a student political organisation to be eligible for election; even where there is no such requirement, the backing of a specific constituency or a student organisation may be a requisite to gain enough votes (Klemenčič, 2012). If a student representative organisation is affiliated to a political party, a complex set of relations and mutual expectations may ensue (cf. Mugume, 2015; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014). Similarly, there are student organisations that predominantly (or exclusively) represent a distinct local regional, ethnic or religious group. Unpacking the complex relationships between national political parties and other politically relevant groupings on the one hand, and student representative organisations and student leaders on the other hand, is at the heart of understanding student political organising and representation. These complex relationships are reflected in the autonomy of student associations and in the characteristics of the representational structures and processes that govern the formal relations between higher education institutions (or public authorities) and student representatives.

### *Autonomy of Student Associations*

One of the key defining characteristics of student representation is autonomy of student associations. Autonomy of student associations can be defined as “having decision-making competences and as being exempt from constraints on the actual use of such competences” (Klemenčič 2014, p. 401). The former refers to policy autonomy i.e. the ability to decide on its own political and professional agenda; governance autonomy as the ability to decide on internal structures and processes, and managerial autonomy in terms of their discretion over financial matters, human and other resources. The latter includes financial autonomy i.e. the conditions imposed through funding, legal autonomy with respect to their legal status and ‘symbolic’ autonomy which is indicated, for instance in terms of their relation to political parties (Klemenčič 2014, p. 401). Autonomy is essential for student governments’ internal legitimacy in the sense of how student representatives are perceived by their constituency as being able to foster and represent student interests effectively and truthfully. The less autonomy, the easier it is for elected university officials or political parties or government to ‘domesticate’ the student voice, and student representatives have often been blamed for being co-opted by university officials or politicians.

We have compared the eight African countries on several aspects of autonomy of representative student governments. We found that in a number of countries governance autonomy is limited. In Kenya, Nigeria and in private universities in Uganda, candidates for student representatives are vetted by university officials. In Ethiopia, student representatives are appointed by university officials rather than subject to the democratic election process from student body. Countries where student governments at universities are fairly autonomous in their governance, policy and management decisions include Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa.

Legitimacy of student representatives also depends on whether they follow the principles of good governance: Are they maintaining democratic structures and observing transparent and democratic procedures? Corrupt student representatives who use their political power in exchange for material goods or symbolic favours present an acute problem in a number of countries and undermine the legitimacy of student representation.<sup>8</sup> The most typical examples are when student representatives endorse, affiliate to, or otherwise offer political support to specific political party in elections in exchange for personal favours such as study bursaries and the promise of jobs after graduation. Such practices are most notable in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. Corrupt practices of various kinds are not only characteristic of student governments, but, as perceived by our respondents, are also characteristic of university operations in general. Furthermore, corruption occurs also between university administrators and student representatives. As stated by one of our respondents:

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<sup>8</sup> An insightful in-depth study on this topic has recently been conducted by Mugume (2015) with student leaders and political parties operating in Makerere University, Uganda.

*“Student representatives sometimes receive financial and academic favours and promises of future job prospects at the institutions to buy their compliance with the university management” (Survey response).*

Indeed, one of the most pervasive problems with autonomy of student governments stems from relations to and interference from political parties. Such practices are present in the majority of surveyed countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Particularly strong influence from government itself on student representation is perceived in Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. Some of these countries are also those where student representatives fear expulsion or sanctions for their activities (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe).

An earlier study conducted among three HERANA institutions, i.e. the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Tanzania; the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, and the University of Nairobi (UON), Kenya, only corroborates our findings. Representative surveys conducted at these three institutions with undergraduate students found fairly widespread perceptions that some or all student leaders in their institution were involved in corrupt practices. Moreover, students at all three institutions considered their leaders more corrupt than, for instance, academics or university managers. These perceptions were further confirmed by student leaders' own perceptions of student leader corruption! The study further found that the levels of students' trust in student leadership and their perception of student leaders' responsiveness were moderately positively correlated and moderately negatively correlated with perceptions of student leader corruption (Luescher-Mamashela et al, 2011). These findings provide some clues as to the possible origin of, and ways of addressing, perceptions of political corruption in Africa arising as early as at the level of student leadership.

### *Relations between Institutions and Student Representatives: Representational Structures and Influence*

The other key defining characteristic of student representation are the intermediating structures and processes through which student governments represent student interests in institutional and national decision-making (Klemenčič, 2014). These are often, but not in all countries, defined and regulated through legislation or only some aspects of the relationship between student governments and their home institutions and student governments and national governments are regulated. The key question here is whether students have formal powers to influence decision-making in institutions or at national level, or whether they can do so only informally. At the institutional level, this question concerns the existence of legal provisions which would guarantee student representatives seats and voting rights in governing bodies of universities such as a university council, senate, faculty boards, etc., and the system of committees that typically cascade from them. Another question concerns the existence of legal provisions that grant students the right to organise into representative student associations and receive some financial support (from universities or through membership fees or otherwise), training,

office facilities etc., to ensure an existence and adequate capacitating and resourcing of these associations.

According to the findings of our survey, student participation in university governing bodies (e.g. university councils, senates, faculty boards, student services committees as well as disciplinary courts for students, etc.) is statutorily granted in legislation in Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda, but not in Ethiopia and Nigeria. The absence of such provisions in legislation does not preclude institutions to regulate student representation in their internal statutory documents and rules, but it also does not ensure that student representation exists across all institutions within the national higher education systems. Accordingly, there are significant differences between countries in terms of the mode of student participation in institutional decision-making. Co-decision whereby student representatives have full voting rights on all or some issues in governing bodies is practiced only in Burundi, Ghana and South Africa. Minimal participation as observers without voting rights is a common practice in the remaining countries. For example, as reported by our respondents, in Ethiopia, students “get involved in such lower level decisions as disposal of academic and routine orders. They also have some minimal roles in commenting on cafeteria services and clinical services”(Survey response). Furthermore, in Nigeria,

*“[students] are not usually considered for participation in the university governing and decision making process; they are only invited for dialogue when they revolt or protest against student policies by the university management” (Survey response).*

Moreover, among the examined countries student organising into representative associations is specifically stipulated in national legislation only in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda. The other countries (Burundi, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa) do not entail such provisions in the national legislation. It also varies across countries whether student governments within institutions have independent legal identity, own property and have independent bank accounts, or whether they are integrated into the structure of the university. Similarly, the funding sources vary significantly with respect to whether funding for student representation comes from membership fees directly to student government or via the university of which they are part. In several countries, student governments at universities tend to have commercial outlets (such as restaurants, student travel agencies, publishing presses, etc.). This is common in Burundi, Kenya and Uganda.

### **Towards Student-Friendly Higher Education Policy in Africa?**

The primary objective of student organising is to aggregate, articulate, and intermediate student interests. While the structures and processes of higher education governance more or less effectively facilitate the articulation and intermediation of student interests, the preferred output of the policy process may be termed student-friendly policies that respond to specific student interests.

Correspondingly, student protests are often a direct response to student-unfriendly policies; they frequently serve as indicator of the (lack of) responsiveness of dominant policy-makers to student interests and bear testimony to a lack of effective student representation in formal decision-making.

### *Student Representation in Africa's Higher Education Policy Agenda*

The African Union Commission (AUC) adopted in 2014 a continental development plan termed *Agenda 2063* designed to guide the African Union, its regional economic communities and member states, to coordinate development together for the next 50 year. Higher education access, quality and equity are outlined as very important issues to attend to in order for the vision and aspirations of *Agenda 2063* to be achieved. The role of students in supporting and shaping this development is, however, never mentioned, except perhaps implicitly in terms of African youth participation (African Union Commission, 2014).

The African Higher Education Summit of 2015 has aimed to “create a continental multi-stakeholder platform to identify strategies for transforming the African higher education sector” (Trust Africa, 2015, p. 2). Student associations with regard to their participation in the formulation and implementation of goals and policies will be a crucial part in steering the sector towards achieving its aspirations. In this respect, it was encouraging to see that student associations, such as the All Africa Students' Union (AASU), were invited to the Summit. Moreover, student initiatives such as the submission of a Students' Charter to the summit are pioneering. A group of student leaders<sup>9</sup> therein declared that

*“Our role as students and student leaders in universities must be recognized for who we are, and our role in the governance of the institutions must be acknowledged. In this respect, we have developed this charter to declare that:*

- *Students must be recognized as **adults**, as **citizens**, and as **equal members and stakeholders** of the academic community and accordingly be involved in the decision-making affecting students' social lives (e.g. in halls of residence; sports and recreation) as well as our academic lives. [...]*
- *Students' opinions should be heard, respected and taken into account in decision-making, and **student representation in all sectors and at all levels** of university decision-making should be encouraged.*
- *The **diversity** of the student body must be accommodated in the institutions.”*  
*(Recommendations from the African Student Leaders in Community Engagement to National and Institutional Higher Education Policy-makers, 2015, p. 1, emphasis in original)*

Overall the student leaders made a list of twenty detailed recommendations to the summit coordinating committee, covering teaching and learning, problem-oriented, student-engaging

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<sup>9</sup> The charter of declarations and recommendations was developed as a contribution into the African HE Summit 2015 by student leaders from across the African continent who attended the *Talloires Network Leaders' Conference* in South Africa in December 2014.

pedagogies, community-based research and engagement, entrepreneurship and social leadership; asking for the right to higher education to be recognised, for wide access to be facilitated with funding for needy students and academic support for under-prepared students; matters of credit transfer, articulation between academic programmes and qualifications; and inter-university and international mobility; and finally demographic equity and respect for diversity, non-discrimination, and a right to privacy in on-campus student life.

Both, *Agenda 2063* and the summit's *Draft Declaration of 2015* predict a massive growth and diversification of student body with further increase in demand for higher education. What the documents do not consider, however, is the extent to which students will be represented in the whole process of elaborating and implementing the Agenda at regional, national and institutional levels.

### **By Means of Conclusion: Challenges Ahead**

Our analysis in this chapter points to at least four main challenges to student organising on the continent. First is the legal ambiguity in terms of existence, legal status and financing of national and institutional student representative organisations. When any of these three provisions are not included in higher education legislation, the terms of student organising have to be negotiated at each individual institution and on the national level. Such negotiations result in varying arrangements with possibly less than optimal conditions for students to organise and thus contribute to higher education decision making; or no student organising at all. The existing student associations ought to work together with their governments and parliaments to develop legislative provisions (perhaps a national framework) on student organising which will affirm the rights of students to organize and specify the overall purpose of student associations, their membership (automatic or voluntary) and funding (through membership fees or from budget of hosting institutions or otherwise). Institutional student associations also need to work together to overcome their differences and collectively form or strengthen their national umbrella associations. Such cooperation is important for capacity building of institutional associations as much it is for influencing national policy making.

Second, and following from above, there is ample scope for improvement in terms of student participation in national higher education policy making, at institutional and sub-institutional levels, and in relation to the continental agenda for higher education in Africa. National level student participation appears to be particularly weak and there are very few formal representational structures in place to provide for such participation. When African governments are embarking on substantial reforms of their higher education systems the contributions from students are vital both for effective policy making and for the implementation of these reforms. Again, it is the task of institutional associations to work with their governments and parliaments to develop legislative provisions (perhaps a national framework) on terms of student representation in institutional and national structures and processes.

National student associations within Africa also need to act collectively to develop joint policies and positions regarding the future of African higher education and to intermediate their positions towards the African Union Commission and other supranational bodies and processes focused on higher education. The All Africa Students' Union presents an existing structure of cooperation among African national student associations which either needs to be strengthened (or reformed) to better serve the national student associations in influencing the African higher education agenda. There are ample possibilities for collaboration between national associations individually or collectively within AASU or otherwise with national student associations in other countries and world regions. Such cooperation can lead to exchange of practices, shared learning and thus capacity building of student associations, but also towards rejuvenating the global student cooperation to defend student interests toward international organisations and institutions.

The third challenge is interference from political parties through political party youth wings and student branches. At different stages of most recent history, national (and institutional) student associations have been blamed not to be defending student interests, but serving the interests of the political parties to which different elected student representatives belong to. Autonomy from party interference is vital for internal and external legitimacy of student representatives and student associations. Students will be disincentivized to engage with their representatives and in the activities of student associations if these are perceived to lack legitimacy. Equally, university leaders and governments will dismiss student participation in decision-processes if these representatives are perceived to lack legitimacy.

Finally, as elsewhere in the world, African student organising and student representation is facing an increasingly depoliticized student body. The marketisation of African higher education is increasingly 'economising' politics and students have turned their focus away from national politics to 'getting in, through, and out', attain a qualification and find employment. Thus, capacity building of the student associations necessarily means reaching out to individual students and student groups, raising awareness about student welfare issues before they explode, creating an interest in the quality of higher education and broader issues of democracy and social justice, and about the democratic means and processes of influencing decisions within the higher education context and in society at large.

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