



# Towards a New Conceptual Framework of Student Activism in South Africa

Damtew Teferra\* & Mthokozisi Emmanuel Ntuli\*\*

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## Abstract

While the phenomenon of student activism is not new in South Africa, it has escalated recently and has taken on new forms. The literature expounds the emergence of a new modality of student activism in the form of protest movements employing social media as mobilisation tools. While such activism traditionally manifested itself in student representation in university governance structures and student demonstrations, protest movements and social media have emerged as its modern manifestation in South Africa. This article systematically analyses extant theories and conceptual frameworks to assess their relevance to these new modalities. After closely analysing key conceptual frameworks including Stakeholder Theory, the Ideal-type Regime of Governance Model and the Activist Leadership Model, it demonstrates their limitations for describing the emerging trends of student activism in South Africa, the paper proposes a new and robust conceptual model called Unbounded Student Activism.

**Keywords:** Student activism, student movements, university governance, Unbounded Student Activism Model, South Africa

## Résumé

Si le phénomène de l'activisme des étudiants n'est pas nouveau en Afrique du Sud, il s'est récemment intensifié et a pris de nouvelles formes. La littérature expose l'émergence d'une nouvelle modalité d'activisme des étudiants sous la forme de mouvements de protestation utilisant les médias sociaux comme outils de mobilisation. Alors que ce type d'activisme se manifestait traditionnellement par la représentation des étudiants dans

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\* Professor, School of Education, Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. Email: teferra@ukzn.ac.za

\*\* Student Development Practitioner, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Umlazi, South Africa. Email: ntuliM@Mut.ac.za

les structures de gouvernance des universités par les manifestations des étudiants, les mouvements de protestation et les médias sociaux sont apparus comme sa manifestation moderne en Afrique du Sud. Cet article analyse systématiquement les théories et les cadres conceptuels existants pour évaluer leur pertinence par rapport à ces nouvelles modalités. Après avoir analysé de près les cadres conceptuels clés notamment la Théorie des Parties Prenantes, le Modèle de Régime de Gouvernance de Type Idéal et le Modèle de l'Activisme de Leadership, il démontre leurs limites pour décrire les tendances émergentes de l'activisme des étudiants en Afrique du Sud. L'article propose un nouveau modèle conceptuel robuste appelé Activisme Illimité des Étudiants.

**Mots-clés :** Activisme des étudiants, mouvements des étudiants, gouvernance universitaire, Modèle de l'Activisme Illimité des Étudiants, Afrique du Sud

## Introduction

According to Altbach (1984), student activism refers to the mechanisms that students use to express political discontent in their environments. He further notes that, while it affects academic institutions, it can also have disruptive implications for political systems. According to Cele (2008), although students enrol at higher education institutions to obtain qualifications and acquire knowledge and skills, they are also inclined to participate in activism to make a significant contribution to societal development. He adds that student activists act on what Altbach (1998) refers to as their 'conscience' to advance the development of society and the nation at large. Altbach likens student activism to a 'canary in a coal mine in that it may signal a social explosion to come or a potential political crisis' (1999:57). Teferra & Altbach (2004) note that student activists have been vocal on the African continent to protect their interests and benefits, and protest against various alleged injustices in the social, economic, political, cultural and other spheres.

Student activism in South Africa is, to an increasing extent, not constrained by the policies, guidelines and norms that seek to govern student activism. While formal activism continues to entail student involvement in formal university governance processes, informal activism includes collective mobilisation in the form of protest action using social media to galvanise support. Existing theories and models are not able to fully describe this complex phenomenon.

This article begins by examining the value of extant theories and conceptual frameworks used to describe student activism. Having highlighted the shortcomings of existing models and frameworks for describing the current situation in South Africa, the article proposes a robust new model called 'Unbounded' which seeks to more accurately describe new and

emerging forms of student activism in contemporary South Africa. The term 'Unbounded' refers to student activism being increasingly unconstrained by the existing policies, guidelines and norms governing student activism.

The article is presented in four sections. The first section provides a literature review on the manifestation of student activism in post-apartheid South Africa with an emphasis on social media. Section two examines existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks and highlights their limitations in describing student activism in contemporary South Africa. The third section presents a new conceptual model that encapsulates all forms of student activism in the country. This model provides a new lens to understand the manifestation of student activism in all its forms – bounded and unbounded. The final section provides a conclusion.

## **Manifestations of Student Activism in Post-Apartheid South Africa**

Student activism in post-apartheid South Africa has taken different forms including student representation in university decision-making structures and student protests (Koen, Cele & Libhaber 2006; Cele 2008; Luescher 2008). Koen et al. (2006) study on the drivers of student protests in 20 South African universities found that the majority centred on academic and financial exclusion and inadequate student housing. It revealed that institutional issues topped the list of triggers of such protests and that student grievances and concerns involved fees, access, and financial aid as well as racism in South African higher education institutions. Koen et al. (2006) concluded that, while universities have been open to negotiations with students, taking to the streets has been generally perceived as an effective tactic to bring about reforms.

Various scholars note that student activists tend to employ a variety of strategies and tactics that range from cooperative and constructive forms to antagonistic and oppositional ones (Cele 2008; Klemenčič, Luescher & Mugume 2016; Luescher 2005). However, they normally try to address their problems constructively first before resorting to protest action (Cele 2008). Klemenčič et al. (2016) concur and note that student activism has taken different forms that are influenced by the way in which students organise. They identify two forms of student activism – formal and informal. While the formal form, what we refer to as 'bounded', entails institutionalised student representation in the form of student representative councils (SRCs) to articulate and intermediate student interests, the informal form involves mobilisation where students use protest as a collective effort to demonstrate their power to bring about reform (Klemenčič et al. 2016).

Klemenčič et al. (2016) add that some students regard representation such as sitting on various committees and forums as opportunities for learning, self-articulation and a way of rubbing shoulders with policy makers. However, some activists hold a different view. Taft and Gordon (2013) assert that student activists want more than simply having a voice in decision making; for them, students are organised to make a difference in the world through collective effort. Brookes, Byford and Sela (2016) are of the view that the legitimacy of student representation and representative organisation is merely a tactic to co-opt student leaders or 'tame' dissent, and that protest movements provide a real opportunity to express student power.

Klemenčič et al. (2016) note the inherent tension between student representation to carve a suitable place for themselves in a status quo and student protest movements to change the status quo. However, Luescher (2008) observes that student activists involved in decision making forums may subversively require activist support from their constituencies in order to defend and possibly extend the gains made by previous generations, whether or not they are legally recognised. Furthermore, Klemenčič et al. (2016) state that, where formal mechanisms are absent, student activists have a tendency to ventilate issues and voice their grievances through protests and other forms of activism. Equally, Cele (2014) notes that formal and informal expressions are indicators of the effectiveness of different forms of activism and the responsiveness of the dominant policy maker to the student voice.

### ***Student Activism: Recent Phenomena***

During 2015 and 2016, violent protests erupted at most South African universities as student activism targeted free education and the decolonisation of the curriculum. Issues raised included fees, accommodation, and instructional languages as symbols of colonisation (Fomunyan & Teferra 2017; Langa 2017; Oxlund 2016). The combination of these issues produced a tense atmosphere of conflict and insurgency reminiscent of student demonstrations during the struggle against apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s (Oxlund 2016). Student activists engaged in new modalities of activism in the form of protest movements that employed social networks to mobilise and galvanise support (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017; Oxlund 2016).

The 2015 and 2016 student agitations began in historically white institutions (HWIs), namely the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). However, this was not a new phenomenon in post-apartheid South Africa as the historically black institutions (HBIs) had previously experienced typically violent protests.

The colonial legacy has been cited as a reason for violent tactics, where black students in HWIs demand to be treated with respect and dignity (Langa 2017). Oxlund's analysis of recent activism revealed three trends. First, the violent protests associated with the institutional life of HBIs are becoming a common feature in HWIs. Second, digital networks are being used to galvanise support within institutions and beyond. Third, these new modalities have taken student activism beyond student representative bodies to strike a chord with the student masses looking for change (Oxlund 2016).

### ***Social Media***

Social media has brought about substantial reforms to all spheres of social life, particularly social movements (Chapman 2016). The literature shows that social media has contributed to political participation, civic engagement and governance processes in the twenty-first century. Digital infrastructures such as e-government, on-line politics and others have been adopted to stimulate the involvement of citizens in democratic processes such as e-voting (Bannister and Connolly 2012). Similarly, the global environmental movement that addresses 'green' issues, the 'Arab Spring' in north Africa, 'Indignados' in Madrid, 'Occupy Wall Street' in the United States, and rebellions in Europe to oppose austerity measures and cuts in social assistance, are existing forms of civic action (Della Porta & Diani 2006; Romero 2013; Van de Donk et al. 2004). These social movements present unique types of activism to mobilise for participation in the cause. They all use new digital platforms, such as digital campaigns, chat-rooms and virtual mobilisation through Facebook (now Meta) and Twitter. These are digital tools that culminate in the rediscovery of social activism (Gladwell 2010). Furthermore, these tools are important to reach a large number of members and supporters of these social movements as they might be in different parts of the world while they engage in a political action at the same time around the world (Agre 2002).

A host of devices and resources are employed in all sorts of activism. Mobile devices used by these social movements offer high speed for communication and mobilisation. This enables a more rapid coordination and organisation, and hence the term "mobil(e)isation" (Hands 2011). Digital technologies create opportunities for individuals to become members of pressure groups, join organisations, contribute funds, receive and respond to emails, make proposals to authorities, intervene in 'online' discussions, circulate electronic petitions, exchange views, circulate announcements or activities, and call for demonstrations (Romero 2013). For instance, Castells concluded that

the Zapatistas (in Mexico), which he described as ‘the first informational guerrilla movement’ effectively used new technologies to instantly diffuse information throughout the world and to develop a network of support groups whose efforts crystallised in a movement of international public opinion (Castells 2015). Similarly, new technologies enabled hashtag movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements in South Africa to galvanise support across the country and beyond (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017; Ntuli & Teferra 2017). New social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook/ Meta offer unforeseen possibilities for the exchange of information on ongoing activism or campaigns (Christensen 2011; Phillimore & McCabe 2015; Ntuli & Teferra 2017).

The phenomenon of social media and political engagement is not without its critics. Social media is accused of causing the so called ‘slacktivism’ and that even if the internet can trigger activism, it may be pointless since the activism triggered may not have any impact on political outcomes in real terms (Morozov 2011; Cabrera, Matias & Montoya 2017). Chapman (2016) notes that the socio-economic inequalities could result in digital divides as the have-nots may lack adequate access to digital technologies and devices. Notwithstanding these critiques, social media tools and platforms are extensively utilised in social movements and have become significant conduits through which student issues can be mediated (Jungherr 2015; Mutsvairo 2016).

Proponents of social media show that these platforms assist in mobilizing the participation of large number of people including those who were not previously active and recent studies are generally more positive about the use of digital technologies (Jungherr 2015; Mutsvairo 2016; Ntuli & Teferra 2017; Phillimore & McCabe 2015). Furthermore, these studies show that the positive impact for effective mobilisation can increase over time. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no evidence to suggest that digital activism is replacing traditional political participation. Rather, it helps to mobilise citizens by increasing awareness of contemporary issues (Christensen 2011; Ntuli & Teferra 2017; Phillimore & McCabe 2015).

### ***Student Activism and Social Networks***

Castells conceptualises social movements and their mobilisation tactics using social networks as internet-age networked movements. This offers a new perspective to comprehend the hashtag movement in South Africa (Luescher and Klemenčič 2017). #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall are examples (Luescher, Loader & Mugume 2017). These movements originally emerged at two English HWIs, namely UCT and Wits respectively.

The #RhodesMustFall campaign emerged as a result of the notion that there has been insufficient debate on the colonial history of South Africa and the associated symbols. The campaign resulted in students across the country being actively involved in a struggle to dismantle colonial and apartheid symbols. The campaign reverberated in other countries such as the United States, and raised the question: ‘if at UCT it was the Rhodes statue that had to fall, what “must fall” in their respective contexts’ (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017).

Booyesen (2016) notes that the #FeesMustFall movement took the form of a national uprising with its epicentre at Wits and that the united front formed by students assisted in forging changes in fees and improving access to higher education.

Castells observes that the student movements in South Africa are digitally driven and employed for galvanisation, coordination and communication (2015). Luescher et al. (2017) concur and note that student movements utilise platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube and others. These platforms enabled the #FeesMustFall movement to secure a no-fee increase for the 2016 academic year, representing the largest and most effective victory by students since the inception of democracy in 1994 (Cloete 2015).

Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey (2009:4) aver that internet-age social movements tend to be ‘interactive and horizontal’. This is in accordance with the views of Badat (2016) who observed that during the #FeesMustFall movement at some universities, protesting students interrogated the stance assumed by SRCs, which are formally elected bodies to represent students’ interests. They also questioned how well the SRCs represented student interests. Allusions have also been made to the protest movements being ‘leaderless’ or represented by ad hoc committees that are informally formed (Badat 2016:95). These views have implications for negotiations by student movements with the government or university administrators as they perceive SRCs as somewhat ineffective and SRCs not being their representatives (Luescher et al. 2017). Luescher & Klemenčič (2017) note that this has resulted in the emergence of informal activists who operate parallel to institutionalised student activism in the form of SRCs.

Badat (1999) makes a clear distinction between informally and formally constituted representative student associations. He posits that while both may serve as platforms to collectively organise and shape student activism, they have distinct characteristics. Formal student organisations are ‘membership organizations’, while student movements are ‘broader entities, typically consisting of individual persons and several organizations with no formal individual membership’ (Badat 1999:22).

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Lenses**

This section examines key theoretical lenses and conceptual frameworks, including the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman 1984), the University Governance (Luescher 2008) and Activist Leadership models (Altbach 1989; Lipset & Altbach 1966). These frameworks provide the foundation for the development of a new conceptual model to reflect the contemporary characteristics of student activism in the higher education sector in South Africa.

### ***Freeman's Stakeholder Theory***

The stakeholder theory refers to 'any group or individual that affects or is affected by the achievement of organisational objectives' (Freeman 1984:21). However, Donaldson & Prestone's (1995) conceptualisation rests on three aspects of a stakeholder theory, namely descriptive, instrumental and normative.

### ***Descriptive Stakeholder Theory***

Donaldson and Prestone (1995) state that the descriptive stakeholder theory is concerned with the actions of managers and stakeholders in terms of how they behave and the manner in which they perceive their actions and roles in an organisation. They add that this aspect of a stakeholder theory presents a model that describes how the organisation is structured and what it stands for. It also examines the organisation as a constellation of cooperative and competitive interests with simultaneous intrinsic value.

### ***Instrumental Stakeholder Theory***

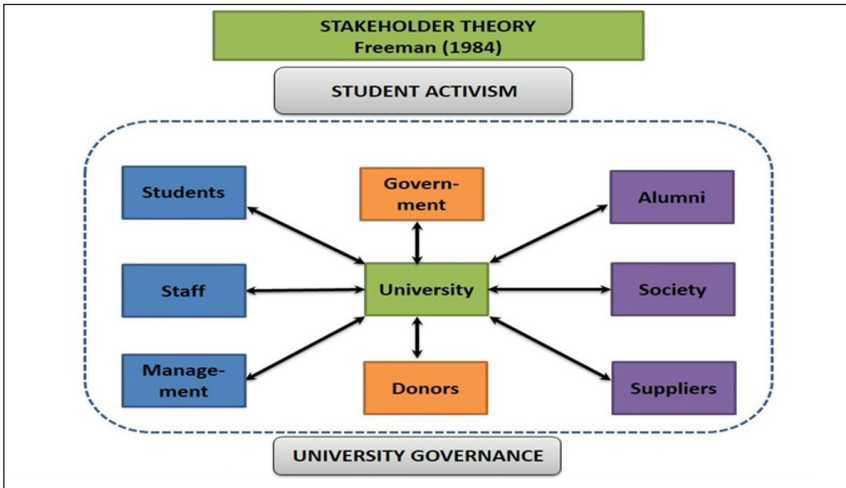
The principal focus of interest in this aspect of a stakeholder theory is the proposition that organisations practising stakeholder management will, all other factors being equal, be relatively successful in conventional performance terms, i.e., productivity, stability and growth (Donaldson & Prestone 1995). Furthermore, the instrumentality of the stakeholder theory is centred on how managers should act if they want to achieve the organisational goal of maximising profit and productivity. Donaldson and Prestone (1995) argue that if managers treat stakeholders in accordance with the stakeholder concept, the organisation will be successful in the long term.



### *Normative Stakeholder Theory*

This aspect of stakeholder theory assumes that stakeholders are groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of organisational activity. It also suggests that all internal and external stakeholders' interests should be considered as equally important in collective decision making. Furthermore, the normative stakeholder theory assumes that stakeholders are defined by their own legitimate interest in the organisation rather than simply by the organisational interest in them. However, it does not necessarily assume that management is the only lawful locus of institutional control and governance and does not imply that all stakeholders should be equally involved in all processes and decisions (Donaldson & Prestone 1995).

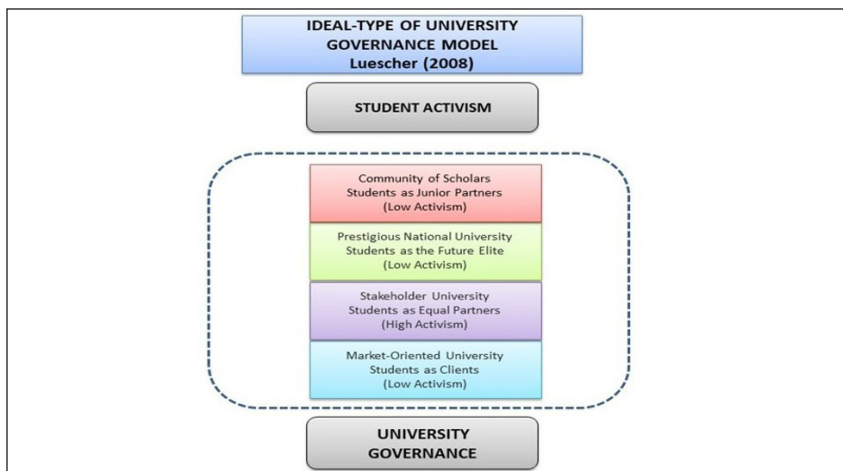
Other studies on organisation that adopt the stakeholder theory reveal that organisations that are devoted to the tenets of the stakeholder approach achieve high levels of organisational effectiveness that enable them to achieve their goals more readily than other approaches (Kotter & Heskett 1992). Figure 1 presents a diagrammatical representation of the stakeholder theory (Freeman 1984).



**Figure 1:** The Stakeholder Theory as applied to student activism and its interaction with university governance structures in South Africa

### *Luescher's University Governance Model*

This model identifies four ideal types of university governance that can be adopted depending on the institution's vision. These are the Community of Scholars University, Stakeholder University, Prestigious University and Market-oriented University. Figure 2 diagrammatically represents Luescher's (2008) model.



**Figure 2:** The University Governance Model as applied to student activism and its interaction with university governance structures in South Africa

The first ideal type, the 'community of scholars', refers to a donnish regime of university governance that regards students as 'minors' and 'junior members of the academic community'. It promotes professional self-regulation and academic self-rule by the professoriate by virtue of its expertise. Furthermore, it advocates for academic and scholarly freedom and autonomy, with the academic authority regarded as the foremost rule of legitimation (Moodie 1996; Luescher 2008).

The stakeholder university is the second ideal type of university governance. It supports representative democracy to promote representation of all stakeholders in decision-making, including students, academics and workers. Stakeholders participate in decision-making that is characterised by negotiations (Luescher 2008; Olsens 2007). However, Morrow (1998) notes that the first problem that emerges is who qualifies to be a stakeholder; this could be a source of continual suspicion and distrust between different groups who seek to be the dominant voice. This approach recognises students as a key constituent of the institution and they are involved in almost every

university committee as equal partners. As the executive branch of this democracy, the university executive is accountable to students, amongst others (Luescher 2008).

Thirdly, the prestigious national university ideal type of governance is based on the premise that a university is an instrument of a nation that is governed in accordance with the dominant political culture. It presents students as beneficiaries and the future elite of the nation who have trust in the political elders and act in compliance with external directives. Student activists are likely to be co-opted to a limited number of decision-making committees. However, the real decisions are made elsewhere and students' inclusion aims to socialise them on how they should do things. This approach to university governance is characterised by strong paternalistic tendencies, with the university providing oversight through a student affairs department using the *in loco parentis* rule where elders nurture students for their future role in the nation (Luescher 2008).

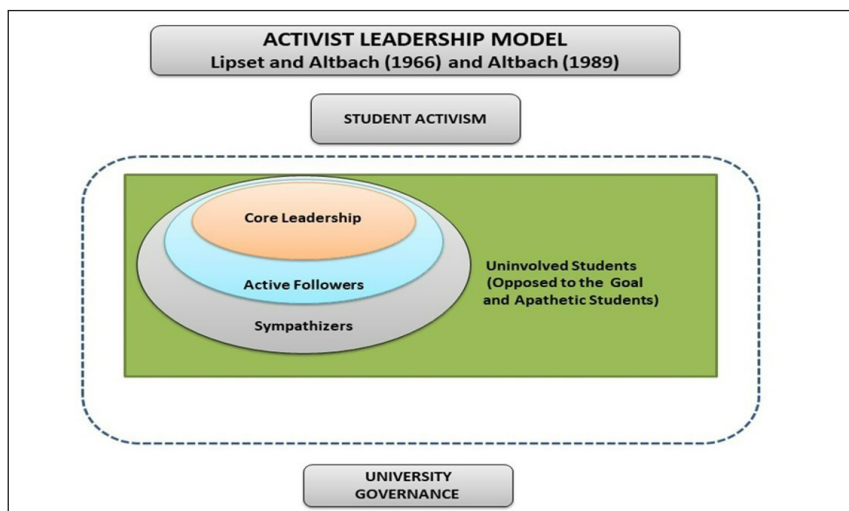
Fourth and finally, Luescher (2008) notes that the market-oriented ideal type of university governance adopts a managerial-professional approach. Students are viewed as 'clients' and 'users' of the higher education institution from a neo-liberal and consumerist perspective. In addition, the university is assumed to be a service provider that has identified a niche area and provides services competitively to meet the needs of that niche. Managerial leadership was adopted in universities to support more competitive and entrepreneurial activities that focus on value for money in respect of the product offered and are agile and effective in relation to market demands. Student activism is lacking and students are generally politically apathetic (Luescher 2008).

### ***Altbach's Activist Leadership Model***

The activist leadership model is based on the assumption that students become involved in activism at different levels. It is conceptualised by three rings of activism known as core leadership, active followers, and sympathisers. Uninvolved students fall outside these three rings (Altbach 1989). The core leadership is the smallest inner ring which comprises a tiny minority of student activists who are more radical than most other participants (Lipset & Altbach 1966). They are also more politically aware, tend to be ideologically oriented, and were members of political organisations prior to their involvement in student activism. They tend to be politically engaged during periods when no action is taking place on campus and in most instances, are part of an existing political community (Altbach 1989).

Active followers comprise the larger middle ring. They are well aware of issues at hand, committed to the goals of the movement, and keen to be actively involved to achieve the goals of the struggle (Altbach 1989). The third and largest ring is made up of sympathisers with the broad goals of the movement. However, they are somewhat unclear about issues and are rarely, if at all, directly involved (Altbach 1989). Finally, the model assumes that the largest group of students that is located outside the three rings of student activism are uninvolved students. It further assumes that uninvolved students are generally apathetic and not interested in engaging in student activism (Altbach 1989).

Figure 3 presents the Activist Leadership Model (Altbach 1989; Lipset & Altbach 1966).



**Figure 3:** The Active Leadership Model as applied to student activism and its interaction with university governance structures in South Africa

## A New Conceptual Model

Recent student activism in South Africa has been characterised by new forms of protest movements, where activists use social networks to galvanise student support (Langa 2017; Oxlund 2016). These new modalities in the digital age are aligned to what Castells called internet-age movements. Novel methods of participating in student activism culminated in the emergence of new groups, issues and events which cannot be readily understood within the framework of existing theories and models, calling for their reassessment.

This article examined the 1) Stakeholder Theory (Freeman 1984), 2) Ideal-Type Regime of University Governance Model (Luescher 2008) and 3) Activist Leadership Model (Altbach 1989; Lipset & Altbach 1966).

The stakeholder theory offers an understanding of the formal participation of students as a stakeholder group in university governance. It demonstrates that students have a stake in university governance and thus participate in decisions that affect them, though they remain small as a constituency in university bodies such as the Senate (Cele 2002). However, the analysis points that the stakeholder theory is confined to describing the formal activism of students.

Second, the paper examined the University Governance Model which consists of the four ideal-types of university governance, i.e., community of scholars, stakeholder university, prestigious university, and market-oriented university. However, the analysis of this model also demonstrates that it is limited to formal engagements of students in university decision making processes within university governance protocols.

Third, the review of the Activist Leadership Model (Altbach 1989; Lipset & Altbach 1966) demonstrates the three rings of activism as core leadership in the centre ring, derived from formal structures of students such as SRCs with their active followers in the middle ring, and sympathisers in the outer ring. Outside the three rings lie uninvolved students who are described as uninterested in the cause. However, a review of the literature on recent protest movements in South Africa indicates that the widespread protests were not only led by formal leadership in the core ring, as demonstrated in this model, but also other student activists who were not formally elected. For instance, the #FeesMustFall movement had no formally designated leadership and any activist who took an avid interest in the issue became part of the core leadership, thereby occupying the centre ring. This shows a key deficiency of the model as it currently stands.

It is on the account of these limitations and gaps of extant models and conceptual frameworks, that we are introducing a new conceptual model we call the 'Unbounded Student Activism Model' (Figure 4). This model tries to bring a holistic picture of all dynamic forms and manifestations of student activism in contemporary South Africa, both formal and informal, into its thinking.

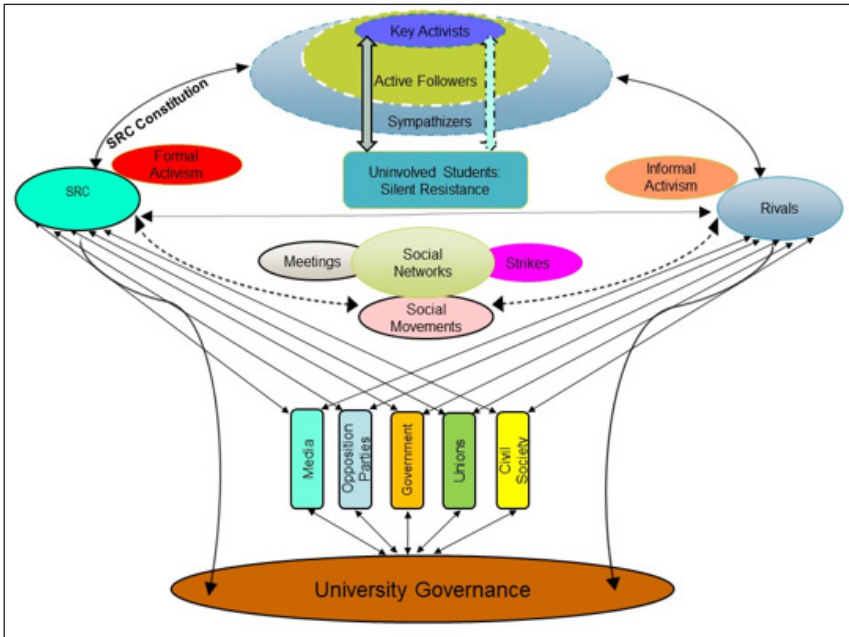


Figure 4: Unbounded Student Activism Model by Ntuli and Teferra

The model depicts the existence of a variety of stakeholders, both internal and external, with vested interests in the university governance. Within the framework of university governance arrangements, students stand as one of the stakeholders in university decision-making processes. University governance is conceptualised as a constellation of both cooperative and competitive interests with both internal and external stakeholders considered to be important in collective decision making.

In the formal camp of activism, elected student representatives articulate and represent interests of students as a constituency group in the university decision making processes per the applicable SRC constitution. Their activities are institutionalised and regulated in terms of the Higher Education Act, 1997. However, members of the SRCs may also opt to form alliances and lobby with other like-minded stakeholders – in an (informal) arrangement – should they find that their ability to secure certain concessions through formal university decision-making processes does not achieve the desired results.

Another set of students, dubbed as ‘rivals’, with alternative, and possibly contrary agendas and philosophies to those pursued by the formal camp, runs in parallel to the formal camp is presented on the extreme right of the model. This rival group may pursue alternative, if not contradictory,

agendas through informal engagements that counter prevailing narratives in the formal camp. However, the intention is broader – to gain visibility and popularity to 1) position itself for formal SRC leadership positions; or 2) to establish itself as an alternative – a parallel – ‘extra-parliamentary’ force in an informal structure that seeks to influence decisions. These groupings may mobilise other stakeholders in university governance structures to advance their cause. We dubbed this form of competing activism that projects alternative, if not opposing, narratives, within an informal setting as ‘rival activism’. It is important to note that a rival camp may be composed of or even led by students from the formal camp who lost a power struggle or whose term of office came to an end. Similarly, the formal camp may trace its history to the rival camp.

At the centre of the model lies the social movements that involve individual students, different student organisations, rival activists, SRCs and other stakeholders that drive and draw students in and out of the formal (SRC) and informal (rival camp) settings. Both settings are susceptible to the dynamics of social and political upheavals that may shake both camps indicating the fluidity – and unboundedness – of student activism. The two-way traffic is depicted using broken arrows to indicate the movement of ideas, narratives and positions to and from both camps in and out of the crucible of a multitude of popular and marginal discourses driving social movements. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, catalysed by social media, are cases in point. It should be noted that once movements have pursued their causes to the point where their goal is attained, they may return to their original roles or states.

The model lays out three rings of activism to demonstrate the degree of activists’ participation and engagements: namely ‘key activists’, ‘active followers’ and ‘sympathisers’. The formal setting, as in SRCs, operate within the soft boundaries of these categories in a more ‘fluid’ and interactive manner with direct and indirect interaction with the communities outside of the shell that encompasses uninvolved and ‘silent’ students. In recognition of the formal and informal steering of activism, we opted for ‘key activists’ than ‘core leadership’ as the latter appears to imply formality. The model caters to the dynamics of movement to and from each category (ring) towards another in recognition of the ‘waning and waxing’ of latency (dormancy) and/ or action (passion) of roles and engagements. For instance, if ‘uninvolved students’ began to participate actively, this could turn them into sympathisers and then active members and eventually into key activists. The inverse is also possible as active members may become less active over time and go dormant.

It is worth noting the potential of apparently ‘uninvolved students’ to engage in silent resistance or to participate anonymously through the now ubiquitous social media channels. Apparently ‘uninvolved students’ may not be unconcerned or disengaged after all, they may simply be operating under the radar.

This article argues that student activism has recently shifted from formal student representation in university governance and traditionally organised strikes to new forms of protest movements orchestrated by informal leadership, using digital technologies to galvanise students and the broader society. This new emerging trend of student activism is robustly captured in this unbounded model that recognises the multitude of stakeholders, the complex nature of their engagements, as well as the ‘mutable’ communication platforms.

## Conclusion

Student activism in the South African higher education context has been characterised by multiple forms of student representation and protest action. Existing models that seek to describe these phenomena seem to fall short in capturing the essence of these developments. For instance, the two prominent examples, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements, employed digital technologies to communicate with and mobilise a wider constituency of stakeholders around issues of fees and symbols of colonisation, respectively. In the process, they revealed the shortcomings of established models describing student activism.

This article argues that existing models and theories of student activism tend to be inadequate to describe the phenomenon of contemporary student activism in South Africa. On the basis of this analysis, we formulated a new conceptual framework of student activism, called the Unbounded Student Activism Model, to embrace the emerging phenomena, mechanisms, processes and tools governing student activism which are increasingly difficult to adequately describe using bounded models of student involvement in the governance of universities in South Africa.

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