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Research justification

Malcolm X once pronounced, 'Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.' This resonates strongly with the author's conviction and quest to contribute to the notion of education as the gateway to improved life circumstances and prosperity. This book recognises that students are central to the existence of tertiary institutions where they are equal beneficiaries. Despite the importance of education to both the student and the institution, students' access, integration and engagement differ, while there is the anticipation that the outcome of success will be the same. In South Africa, this has been observed through the differences in student and institutional types, both of which are reminiscent of the legacy of apartheid. This refers to the legislative basis, based on which the opportunity to access education differed, where students could voice their need for education and how they could achieve it. The promulgation of the *Higher Education and Training Act of 1997* was the gateway for the inclusion of students in university governance. This allowed for elected student representatives to advocate for authentic student needs, aspirations, challenges and opportunities to advance their educational ambitions. The primary focus of this study was the relationship between the Student Representative Council's participation in governance and their own academic persistence. In addition, the study sought to understand whether student representatives succeeded in their advocacy for ordinary students to ultimately help them with their academic achievements. The prospects of both governance and academic success, however, are exacerbated by their political affiliations and broader student activism, both of which influence their election and the continued pressure exerted on them to drive varying and often conflicting agendas while in office.

Social media platforms propagating the #FeesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter movements have brought a new dynamic to how students express their concerns. This raises the question of whether a small group of students, usually 18–24 elected representatives, can genuinely embody the plight of students and ensure their academic progress within the proliferation of digital activism. Importantly, the concern is regarding their ability to be exemplary academic stewards. Two cohorts of participants, including the Student Representative Council and ordinary students not in governance, were interviewed during the historical #FeesMustFall and unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic periods. The discourse of student governance and its true value could be expanded beyond the so-called 'boardroom' inclusion through a collective and controlled mechanism by which student voices could be heard. The book invokes greater awareness through participants' voices to inform scholars, student affairs practitioners, university administrators and policymakers alike on the extent of influence students have on society and the intention to positively advance future generations beyond the current stakeholder formations in university governance. The target audience consists of researchers and academics related to the field of student governance studies.

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Abbreviations and acronyms, figures and tables appearing in the text and notes

List of abbreviations and acronyms

#FMF	#FeesMustFall
#RMF	#RhodesMustFall
AGM	annual general meeting
ANC	African National Congress
AO	academic officer
ASUSA	African Students' Union of South Africa
AZASO	Azanian Student Organisation
CHE	Council for Higher Education
CP	campus premier
DA	Democratic Alliance
DASO	Democratic Alliance Students' Organisation
DP	deputy president
DSG	deputy secretary-general
DVC	deputy vice-chancellor
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
EFFSC	Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command
HBUs	historically black universities
HDIs	historically disadvantaged institutions
HE	higher education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEA	*Higher Education and Training Act of 1997*
HWU	historically white universities
IPADA	International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternatives
JPADA	*Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives*
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NRC	Natives' Representative Council
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PIO	projects and internationalisation officer
RADLA	Research and Doctoral Leadership Academy

SANC	South African Native College
SADESMO	South African Democratic Students Movement
SANSCO	South African National Students' Congress
SASCO	South African Students' Congress
SASO	South African Students' Organisation
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SG	secretary-general
SRC	Student Representative Council
SSO	student services officer
TERS	Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme
UCT	University of Cape Town
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
Unisa	University of South Africa
VC	vice-chancellor

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Biographical note

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Vuyo Mthethwa holds a PhD in Student Governance, conferred by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in 2018. Her career ranges from being a journalist and public relations officer to serving as a human resources practitioner (her most pursued career). Mthethwa's career path links primarily to her former qualifications, as she was awarded a BA in Social Sciences and a MA in Industrial Labour Studies, all obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Most recently, Mthethwa has been awarded a certificate with distinction in Labour Dispute Resolution Practice by Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Mthethwa has over 30 years' of experience in the human resources field, which includes both the private and public sectors, having established her own company, which operated for 20 years. She serves on various boards and chairs the South African Human Resources and Ethics Committee of one of these organisations. Although her area of specialisation has been human resources, she is passionate about student development and success. Her academic passion resonates with her conviction that students are our future and that it is critical to explore ways to assist them in giving a positive direction to their futures and the general well-being of South African people. After completing her PhD, Mthethwa presented her research at a Queens College, Oxford University conference. She has authored and co-authored academic research papers on student participation in university governance. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, Mthethwa succeeded in contributing a chapter on student governance to a book published by IGI Global. She has been employed at three higher education institutions in South Africa, occupying different roles, including lectureship, as a director in the vice-chancellor's office and is currently the deputy vice-chancellor of People and Operations at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa.

Preface

Student advocacy in university governance has been formalised in South Africa for almost three decades. Yet research related to the lived experiences of participants and how they navigate their responsibilities in governance with their academic obligation is scant. The primary intention of this study is to highlight the experiences of students who serve the interests of their constituency, having been elected to represent and articulate these needs to influence the decision-making processes, as these directly affect them. Student representatives are anticipated to be role models in their academic disposition while being elected stewards to address many issues to improve the well-being and, ultimately, the academic success of students at these institutions.

The key issues that impact student learning include tuition fees, accommodation, academic readiness and poverty. To address these challenges, students have resorted to radical protests using social media platforms to mobilise students for mass activist gatherings. More recently, the #FeesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter movements have brought a new dynamic to the student cause. A central concern is whether student representatives as an insignificant sample of registered students at any institution, usually 18–24 students, can effectively represent the needs of students while an increased proliferation of student digital activism exists, the latter providing students with an alternate means of expressing their needs. A major consideration is whether these elected students can be exemplary leaders by succeeding academically, while continuing their advocacy responsibilities to students who elected them to office. The book is intended to provide a critical review of the academic qualities of student representatives who participate in university governance. It should be expected that their participation ought to enhance their academic success. However, with the extensive time commitment necessary as mediators for student needs, there is a concern that this would negatively impact their own academic experience and ultimately compromise their ability to complete their studies.

A triangulation of semi-structured in-person interviews with student leaders in university governance and telephonic interviews with ordinary students were conducted and, together with a documentary analysis of the Student Representative Council constitutions, formed the basis of the data collection. Views were drawn from student leaders from three historically

disadvantaged institutions during the #FeesMustFall era, while an expanded investigation was undertaken with eight registered students who were not in governance structures from various South African higher education institutions (HEIs) during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. At the same time, the proliferation of #BlackLivesMatter (as prompted at an international level) was evident in South Africa. The varied data sources allowed for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be explored.

This study observed that the discourse of student governance and its true value could be expanded beyond the so-called 'boardroom' inclusion to explore collective and controlled mechanisms by which their voices could be heard. This has been even more intense during the COVID-19 pandemic, as student representatives were locked out of campus with very little opportunity to voice the concerns of students. This became much more evident during the quarantine period imposed to curb the spread of the virus. The study reinforced the importance of students in higher education, thereby necessitating that policies and practices should take cognisance of the central objective of their academic progression and avoid any distractions that may arise. It further calls for a much deeper examination of the role of student representatives when external conditions beyond the control of institutions of higher learning increase the strain on stakeholder engagement to benefit students and, consequently, the very survival of these institutions.

Introduction

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

– Aristotle

■ Chapter synopsis

This book is organised into nine chapters that explore the issue of students' participation in university governance and how it impacts students' academic experiences.

Chapter 1 introduces the background of this study, including the importance of education and the objectives of HEIs, students' grassroots experiences and the differing educational types. The concept of academic performance is explained through the lens of student integration, engagement and retention, drawing on student experiences that informed the need for student representation in governance.

Chapter 2 discusses student participation in governance in South Africa. The discussion in this chapter includes the legislative framework that guides students' involvement in university governance and how their role is influenced by partisan affiliations and student activism using social media platforms. Added to the strain already experienced by students in governance, the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the observation of other compounding issues that will impact the academic focus.

Chapter 3 describes the theoretical underpinnings of this study, notably Tinto (1975, 1999) and Astin (1984, 1999), both of whom point to the convergence

of social and academic experiences for students to succeed in their quest for education. While Tinto posits social (including extracurricular) activity as integrated with the academic experiences, the proposition by Astin is about sociopsychological and invested time by students to achieve their academic objectives. Drawing on the seminal works of Tinto and Astin, I review the South African experience, using the Circle of Progression Model developed by Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld (2008).

The chapter further examines Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969) as a theoretical foundation for examining student participation in governance to determine their ability to influence decision-making at tertiary institutions.

The research strategy for the study forms the basis of Chapter 4, drawing on the epistemological approach adopted, the selection and access to institutions wherefrom the participants were drawn. The subsequent approach followed for the second cohort of students interviewed is elucidated before the broader research protocols of data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are explained.

Chapter 5 unpacks details about the Student Representative Council (SRC) participants, describing the sites wherefrom they were drawn. The views shared about the reasons they contested for roles in the SRC are recorded, including their recognition of students as the major stakeholder in education, their quest to be agents of change, their political influences, their socio-economic background and their personal motivation to be in governance, including the financial benefit they derived. The profile of the students interviewed telephonically during COVID-19 is also shared.

Chapter 6 explores the academic discourse in relation to the SRC specifically, including their constitutional framework, representation in varied decision-making structures and the fulfilment of the academic pursuit. The views of both SRC and student participants are examined, drawing on the literature review.

The experiences of students in governance with their relationship to the learning objectives are analysed from the articulation by the participants about their lived perspectives, forming the basis for Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 invokes a deeper analysis of salient themes drawn from the study in relation to the literature, theoretical framework and participation model. The discussion further draws on the most recent issues that impact not only the SRC but the broader student body, particularly influenced by the forced physical distancing, sanitisation and face-covering requirements during what was deemed a state of disaster in the country.

A new model for defining the academic puzzle within the context of university governance and other external factors that must be incorporated to succeed is developed in Chapter 9. The study concludes with the identification of opportunities for future research.

Grassroots experiences from the campus

'A system which bears the scars of the past with historically white universities being more privileged than historically black universities, with long-term consequences into the future for its students.' (Case & Marshall 2018, p. vii)

■ 1.1. Introduction

Education is the pathway to economic prosperity. Yet the historical legacy of South African higher education institutions (HEIs) is one that represents differentiated opportunities, which, as this book demonstrates, will take time to repair. This indicates that concerted efforts must continue to be made to heal the wounds of the past and look forward to a brighter future. It is out of this quest that research into one of many efforts that have been made to increase access, integration and, ultimately, academic success, particularly for black students at HEIs, was conducted. The main aim of this study is to understand the effect of student representation in HEIs on academic transformation by way of experience and, ultimately, completion of studies. The value of including students in university governance is scrutinised through the lens of those in office regarding how they meaningfully synthesise their own academic pursuits with educational value to the ordinary students they represent. Fundamentally, it should be anticipated that their access to decision-making in relation to the overall educational

trajectory should provide a vehicle to prosper academically and become role models for other students.

The book is underscored by the notion that student incorporation in governance is intended to ensure that students are stakeholders in the decision-making that impacts their academic success. The role of the Student Representative Council (SRC) in South African universities is centred on advocacy for students' needs, challenges and opportunities related to their academic pursuits. The SRC ought to be consulted and must monitor governance efforts for the betterment of students. Ultimately, HEIs exist and are dependent on the academic success of students to survive, while the SRC has an indelible role in redressing student constraints associated with their aspirations for improved academic experiences and, ultimately, throughput.

All SRC constitutions acknowledge the fact that the prerequisite for students to qualify to be nominated and elected to the SRC is that they must have passed their studies in the year preceding their contestation (Bonakele et al. 2003). Although the threshold level by which they should pass differs from institution to institution, it is clear that academic progress is key to the SRC's participation in governance. It would therefore be expected that they continue with their studies even when in office. In other words, their governance responsibilities should not deter them from their own academic progression. Luescher (2016) notes that the inclusion of students in governance is to achieve the democratisation and transformation of higher education. The fact that the representatives are elected students indicates that they, too, should be in a position to fight for their rights and ensure that their own academic intentions should be realised from their advocacy role on behalf of ordinary students in university governance structures.

Although student representatives participate in governance, the legislation does not clarify the mechanism and roles they are to play. Section 35 of the *Higher Education and Training Act of 1997* (HEA) refers to the university statutes and SRC constitutions as approved by university councils as the basis for the provision of the policy framework in relation to their inclusion.

The SRC constitutions constitute the only approved framework that guides their roles and responsibilities in governance. However, according to Koen, Cele and Libhabher (2006a), the constitutional framework differs from one institution to another and is largely influenced by the levels of support and resources that the SRC is provided with by their equally varied institutions. Regardless of the nature of resources provided to the SRC, it is to be expected that they will participate in all the governance structures in some form or another (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). The obligation to participate in these structures will invariably impact their academic programme. It is noteworthy that there is a vacuum in clarifying how their

roles could directly contribute to the academic objectives of both the constituency they represent and themselves.

Despite the legal provisions for the SRC to be a part of university governance structures, there appears to be little convergence of these roles with the learning outcome that would be anticipated. With student leaders' advocacy against financial exclusions, insufficient financial aid and inadequate student accommodation, all of which are critical for their academic success, their ability to participate properly in governance structures is doubtful.

It may be argued that the legislation achieved its transformational objectives by ensuring student representation and advocacy in governance structures; however, this may have strained the ultimate objective of completing their own studies. This emanates from the lack of clarity beyond the entry requirements to contest for SRC positions. Regardless of their inclusion in various governance structures, their ability to exert influence is limited by the number of student representatives who participate at each level of governance, their capacity and their ability to meaningfully understand and participate in the discussions. Bergan (2003) further points out that the exemption of student representatives to vote on the curricula, staff appointments, administrative and financial issues means that they cannot influence their study trajectory.

In properly contextualising the rationale for student participation in governance in South African higher education, the history of the inclusion of students, particularly black students, cannot be ignored, especially as I discuss in this chapter the memories which remain three decades after the eradication of apartheid.

■ 1.2. The legacy of higher education

Historically, the opportunity for education was based on legislation that promoted inequality. The *University Incorporation Act of 1873* and later the Union of South Africa in 1910 initially identified certain tertiary institutions that were reserved for white citizens, with the apartheid legislation of 1948 further entrenching segregation. The University of Fort Hare (previously called the South African Native College), which opened in 1916, provided restrictive courses to black students (Massey 2010). Other historically black universities (HBUs) were to follow, which included the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), the University of Turfloop and the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Notably, students at the HBUs could not express their challenges regarding their study progression. Mapesela and Hay (2005) attest to these institutions being completely controlled by the government, including the appointment of academic staff as state employees Again, the funding of these institutions was drawn from churches and annual grants-in-aid to the college provided by the government, which was restrictive (Massey 2010).

The HEA, according to Massey (2010), was to expand the curriculum and subsidisation to HBUs similar to what was already offered by the University of South Africa (Unisa), the latter providing their facilities to black students for examination purposes.

After 1948, Unisa was described as an unapologetic organ of the state that was 'quietly complicit in the objectives of apartheid, acting as an incubator for its bureaucracy and forging close alliances with Afrikaner capital' (Manson 2016, p. 18). This highlights the discriminatory legislative policy that had predetermined segregation in relation to education, living spaces and in general socio-economic conditions. Cele (2008) asserts that the historically white universities (HWUs) focused on knowledge dissemination geared to propel white students towards industrialisation, while the HBUs prepared black students for occupations in human resources or soft skills. As aligned with the apartheid system, students at HBUs were excluded from any form of engagement on decisions that affected their education. This differed for students at the HWUs.

The continued segregation within HEIs propelled the high proliferation of student uprisings (Cele & Koen 2003). The establishment of the African National Congress Youth League in 1944 and other black organisations in the 1950s (Badat 2016) was done to contest the discrimination practices that black students experienced. Other organisations that would influence transformation at South African HEIs included the South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO), established in 1979 and initially known as the Azanian Student Organisation (AZASO) and the South African Student Organisation (SASO), which was formed in 1968 (Badat 2016). Denouncing students' frustration with the discriminatory practices, the first president of this organisation, Steve Biko, stated that 'the idea that everything is done for Blacks[1] is an old one, which liberals take pride in. But once black students want to do things for themselves, suddenly they are regarded to be militant' (Biko 1978, p. 14). The continued student protests resulted in Steve Biko's exclusion from the University of Fort Hare, as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo were similarly expelled in 1942.

Scholars have heralded the 1970s student riots as the cornerstone for the incorporation of students in the institutional governance of HBUs and for defying the employment of vice-chancellors by the State at these institutions (Cele 2008; Munene 2003). Cele and Koen (2003, p. 7) emphasise that 'black universities became seedbeds of protest', with such action often including vandalism, class boycotts and disruptions, which heightened the pressure for change. Bank (2018) further confirms that students at HBUs experienced continued oppression and marginalisation, which was different from the

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1. Refers to black African people.

experiences of students in HWUs. Protests at HBUs became rife as students responded to the various forms of discriminatory practices they experienced.

Student activism cannot be ignored in this study for various reasons In the first instance, the pressure brought on by protests between the 1960s and 1980s was the catalyst for the promulgation of the higher education legislation of 1996, which, once enacted, officially included student representation in governance structures. Secondly, it is relevant to understand the political influence that student leaders today have as emanating from this history of various student organisations that were aligned with political parties. Luescher-Mamashale (2013) avers that students have historically played an important role in South African politics, particularly in the struggles against apartheid. While student protests were highly prevalent at HBUs, this surge in activism was not confined to these institutions. At HWUs, a combination of black students, liberal white students and academics petitioned for the erosion of the legitimacy of the apartheid social formation (Reddy 2004). Thirdly, despite the recognition of the SRC as advocates for students in governance, growing sporadic forms of activism by students in expressing their dissent, some of which were not led by the SRC, appear to yield more responses, for example, the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement of 2015 in response to fee hikes. Saxton et al. (2015) confirm that hashtags are used for online advocacy to organically reach like-minded individuals and organisations to help in the viral spread. This is true for the student movements, particularly since 2015 in South Africa, where students were set to advocate for free education. The relevance of student activism to this study is that student riots directly influence the stoppage of academic activity, resulting in the adjustments of academic calendars, which ultimately impact the students' continuity and success, as some generally do not recover from such periods of disruption. Moreover, students who lead such movements find themselves excluded from the institution for their part in the riots, especially when these have often turned violent and disruptive.

■ 1.3. Compelling student representation

Despite the intentions of the HEA to integrate students from diverse backgrounds at tertiary institutions and eradicate historic inequities at HEIs, countless black students were unable to access educational opportunities. This is because of their schooling background, with limited resources to ensure academic readiness, the language barriers and the ability to adapt to the new university environment (Chetty & Pather 2015; Hodes 2016). Koen et al. (2006a) point out that the injustice of the apartheid era of poverty and inequalities is still prevalent, especially in the continued mammoth task of addressing funding for education. The steep university fees continue to

impede black students, despite the National Plan for Higher Education implemented by the Department of Education to increase enrolment and the establishment of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Ndelu, Dlakavu and Boswell (2017) indicate that NSFAS has been inadequate to cover university tuition and accommodation fees. Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) further add that institutional culture is tarnishing the ability of black students to fit in, especially for those who are the first generation from their families to attend tertiary institutions (Davids 2021; Mzangwa 2019; Naicker 2016). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) points out that:

> At the forefront of this struggle are students, many of whom were born after the dismantlement of juridical apartheid but are experiencing cultural alienation, exclusion due to high fees, and exposure to ideas of dead white men as a form of education inside universities. (p. 52)

The inclusion of the SRC in governance is in accordance with the objective of improving the lives of students, particularly those from poor backgrounds. The exploration of the ability of the SRC to steadfastly continue with their own studies while making an indelible mark in addressing obstacles to education for ordinary students was the intention of this study. The book draws on the students' experiences with respect to student governance participation and their studies.

■ 1.4. Problem statement

While one learns of the historical manifestations that prompted the need for student participation in governance, the effect of this on their own academic progression appears to be scant. On the other hand, this is because of the constitutions, which do not compel students to persist academically once elected and, on the other hand, the lack of evidence on how institutions would support the SRC academically while fulfilling their roles. For example, governance meetings are usually held during the day and at a time when undergraduate students in particular, who are not precluded from participation, ought to ordinarily be present at lectures (Mthethwa & Chikoko 2020). This implies that if they are to fulfil the stewardship roles on behalf of students who elected them, they would have to forgo the very reason for attending university. Cele (2008) further observed that the SRC felt overworked by their participation in institutional committees and having to be involved in student organisations. This would have an impact of providing less time to concentrate on their own studies.

Of particular concern in this study was the genuine ability of student representatives to succeed academically while discharging their roles in governance. During the preparation for this investigation, a pilot study was conducted to validate the concept and interview guidelines (Doody & Noonan 2013) with students at the tertiary institution where I worked.

Two students, who were piloted on account of anonymity, commented about their particular experiences. The negative impact of their roles in governance was clearly articulated:

> 'I've dropped in my studies. I was supposed to graduate this year, but now I failed my economics major [...] When you get into the SRC, students demand that you address their issues daily [...] The council meeting, for example, takes a whole day, which means I cannot attend my own lectures.' (Pilot A, a 24-year-old male student, repeating 2nd year)

> 'When you are elected into the SRC, you have committed to serving the students, and there is no time to pay attention to your own studies. Students expect you to be there when they need you. We must also talk to management about things they need and give them a response afterwards. My day is spent mostly consulting with students.' (Pilot B, a 22-year-old male student, doing 3rd year)

I was interested in exploring the challenges expressed by Pilot A and Pilot B in relation to their prospects for academic success. While elected to advocate for students, it appeared from their own admission that their academic commitments were challenged. Although recognising their academic strain, both SRC members confirmed their sense of responsibility in governance. In terms of their time, it was evident that they struggled to balance the two roles as student-stewards, while being exemplary successful students themselves.

What worsens the dilemma in relation to the need to focus on their learning is the observation that most candidates for the SRC utilise their political affiliations as a point of election contestation and, ultimately, entry, with minimal consideration of independent nonpartisan participants (Mazwai 2008). Political principals who financed students' election campaigns would expect these student leaders to advance the principals' political agendas. Dorasamy and Rampersad (2014) suggest that student leaders need to separate their political manifesto from their SRC manifesto to succeed in their advocacy quest and purpose in university governance. Their inability to do so deters them from the reason for their inclusion in governance: to advocate for resources required by students to complete all of their studies. Luescher-Mamashela (2015) agrees that the rivalry between students in office as related to their partisan affiliations, together with the transitory nature of their roles of 1-year tenure and the fact that those who participate carry both governance and study responsibilities, would reduce their impact in governance.

■ 1.5. Research framing

While appreciating the essence of education, the experiences of students in HEIs have been associated with many adversities that impact their ability to sustain their academic pursuits. The inclusion of students in governance was geared towards ensuring advocacy on issues that may negatively impact the academic success of students. It would be anticipated that those elected to

represent students do so as role models in succeeding academically and ensuring that they are the channel to help in improving the academic experiences of ordinary students. Against this background, the purpose of the study was to understand the effect of student involvement in university governance on the academic experiences of those who participated and the benefits to other students they represented. To address this, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How and why does the SRC participate in university governance?
2. How do student representatives benefit academically from their roles in governance?
3. How do ordinary students benefit from student representation in university governance?

The study sought to explore students' views about how their academic experiences were affected by the involvement of students in governance, specifically to ascertain whether there was a benefit firstly to the participants, as well as the constituency they represented. Thus, the research approach in this regard was qualitative in nature. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with members of the SRC at three previously disadvantaged institutions during the significantly intense period of the national student protests in South Africa of 2015–2016. These institutions were specifically selected as the catalysts for change through the proliferation of student activism where, after the eradication of apartheid, students could participate in university governance. Of particular relevance to this study is the fact that despite the deracialisation of higher education in South Africa, opportunities for black students' (especially those from poor backgrounds) enrolment at these institutions continue to be elusive. Once students are enrolled, this does not necessarily take away the particular challenges they face in terms of integration and retention.

To expand the understanding of the effect of student governance, interviews with eight ordinary students were conducted to draw on their understanding of the role of the SRC in promoting their academic experiences. These views were drawn during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which itself brought on an unprecedented dynamic to student governance. Given the lockdown regulations resulting in restrictions on physical contact with the closure of university campuses, it was not possible to limit the data source to students from HBUs. I relied on the chain-referral process, referred to as the snowball methodology, to access a second cohort of students with whom I could talk about their experiences. I anticipated that the unprecedented virus would have dire effects on the role of student governance during this period. Indeed, it certainly hampered my opportunity to interview students face-to-face. The mode of data collection was through telephonic interviews that I conducted with the referred students using the popular WhatsApp platform.

◼ 1.6. The interplay between co-curricular activities and academic performance

Participation in university governance can be seen as a co-curricular activity, as this takes place outside of the normal classroom curriculum. Based on the focus of this study, I interrogate the value of student governance participation on the academic objectives for students and, more particularly, how the academic experiences of these students are impacted. The description of out-of-class activities has been interchangeably referred to as co-curricular, nonclassroom or extracurricular activities (Emmer 2010) as these describe areas of student involvement outside of their normal classroom or academic engagements. Such activities are important in enabling students' holistic growth in emotional, physical, personal and social aspects, which ought to enhance their academic life. Consequently, enhancing the academic life would suggest that the overall experience that students who participate in both class and out-of-class activity should gain academically is that these two areas would be complementary. Scholars point to the overall well-being of students involved in co-curricular activity, which assists in self-concept, physical health, greater peer engagement and reduction of delinquency and absenteeism, amongst other benefits that provide holistic growth for those who participate (Abruzzo et al. 2016; Himelfarb, Lac & Baharav 2014). However, there is scant investigation on whether there is a positive or negative impact of co-curricular activities on academics (Rathore, Chaudhry & Azad 2018). Using a conceptual framework of co-curricular activities as a mediating effect on class attendance and examination performance, research was conducted wherein scholars who participated in co-curricular activities were found to score significantly higher in exams when compared to those who did not participate (Rathore et al. 2018). Another important aspect of co-curricular involvement would be the opportunity to socialise and network with peers, therefore providing mutual support. Within these activities, other growth prospects, such as teamwork, collaboration, cooperation and group tolerance could manifest.

The nature and type of co-curricular activity would differ and may have varied outcomes. An example of this would be participating in a sports team where the individual learns skills, such as team collaboration, support and dispute resolution, which are useful in personal development. Organisational skills could also be beneficial to students who participate in co-curricular activity in that students could learn how to plan their timetable while engaging with their peers. Leadership skills and preparation for adulthood, according to Zada (2021), are drawn from co-curricular activity. These skills were found to have improved from participation in sports-related activities where students learn traits, such as task completion and communication skills (Lupu 2011). The role of race and gender in co-curricular activity influenced the level of

student engagement and as such would impact academic performance (Naik & Wawrzynski 2018).

Looking at such participation differently, it may be argued that students who spend time in co-curricular activity, do so at the risk of their studies. In relation to this study, an area that has drawn much attention at South African higher education institutions, is student activism. Linder et al. (2019) contend that such activity is geared to achieve social change yet is likely to have a disruptive educational effect (MacGregor 2016). This type of activity, although intended to create change and improve student circumstances, as would have been noted with the zero increase in student fees in 2016 as a result of the #FMF movement, the build-up to this had evidence of compromising the very basis for the educational provisions with the burning of infrastructure, deferment of the academic calendar and some students not completing their studies as a result of their participation. Yet Naik and Wawrzynski (2018) support the notion that student activism achieved the benefit of a sense of belonging, a more holistic university experience and the development of cognitive skills. Notwithstanding this, more research is required to ascertain the relationship between co-curricular activity and academic outcomes (Kerr & Luescher 2018).

The contribution of this study draws the interplay between student governance (co-curricular) and the academic performance of both students who participate and their advocacy effects on the ordinary student.

■ 1.7. Activism, hashtags and COVID-19

One would hope that, with the eradication of apartheid, a new dawn was expected on the horizon in South Africa, with much to look forward to in terms of transformation. However, it would be unrealistic to anticipate change to happen instantly, and various signs of embedded discriminatory elements would prevail despite the democratic dispensation of 1994. While the educational landscape had changed with university mergers to increase access and improve funding arrangements, Jansen (2020) points out that these ideals were not achieved, despite the reduction from 36 to 21 universities at the time, and many of the institutions were still marked by the naming conventions of buildings, which were in favour of the pre-democratic ruling party while excluding black students. Moreover, while providing greater access to previously disadvantaged students, adequate preparation to absorb them was not in place and would ultimately erode the intended opportunity for academic success.

Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) point to universities as the microcosms of a broader society. This invariably means that societal issues will be mirrored on campus in some form or another. David (2020) avers that:

> Student activism, although located within the language of an educational institution, is not always limited to the parameters or concerns of education. This is because

the imperative of education and higher education cannot be extricated from its social, economic, political or cultural contexts. (p. 3)

Precisely for this reason, the #BlackLivesMatter movement that started in the United States (Samayeen, Wong & McCarthy 2020) translated to South Africa and ultimately found expression at various university campuses. Gore (2021) raised concern about universities' preparedness to accommodate and support predominantly black students from low-income backgrounds with poor schooling preparedness for tertiary education in township and rural schools. Davids (2021) further draws similarities between poor service delivery and student protests in that both have the common legacy of marginalisation and a lack of financial infrastructure to support their needs. Zeilig and Ansell (2008) agree that student protests have been used as a vehicle for socio-economic and political change. For Mengü et al. (2015), students have expressed their concerns about issues that directly impact their academic progress on campus and equally about the socio-economic conditions that affect them.

The spiralling effect of the hashtag movements (Small 2011) as associated with the Twitter social media platform impacted the academic calendar and continuation of learning by students. The #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement at the University of Cape Town, which was the precursor of #FMF, was a call by students for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue that was a representation of colonisation (Bosch 2016a; Oxlund 2016). In other institutions, students protested the mode, language of teaching and the statues that remained discernible reminders of the apartheid legacy. The spiralling of hashtag movements had a direct impact on halting students' academic pursuits. #FMF, #RMF and #OpenStellies are a few of many movements led by students to address symbols of prior discrimination and exposure to the financial strains felt by students when accessing academic institutions (Luescher, Loader & Mugame 2017).

In some of the movements of 2015, there are signs of these being SRC-led or having at least some involvement. The inclusion of the SRC was observed in #DownwithXenophobia and the subsequent #UPRising (Nomvete & Mashayamombe 2019). Mashayamombe and Nomvete (2021) highlight the fact that while some of the SRC members who galvanised students' participation in the #UPRising movements have since graduated and are pursuing postgraduate studies, others never completed their studies because of criminal convictions. In the midst of the contestation of fees and decolonisation of the curriculum and mode of teaching, criminal convictions spiralled out of student marches. A major concern with these movements is the destruction of resources, such as libraries and lecture halls, which poses a great threat to student learning (Duncan 2015). The problem, in the context of this study, is compounded by the participation and conviction of student representatives for damages caused to institutions (Mavunga 2019). This is in

direct contestation to their anticipated role to promote and facilitate academic progression at these institutions.

Since 2020, the challenges that existed for the success of student governance, as expressed by varying activist movements, took a different form. On the one hand, activism assumes a collective engagement of some kind, while the onset of the pandemic implied a state of isolation. In the latter circumstance, the limited or nonexistent networking opportunities with other students and engaging formally in governance during the lockdown period would have a detrimental impact on the very role of student representation. This period highlights the distinguishing differences between students, what Ndevu (in Sayeed 2020) refers to as the digital divide reality of the rich, poor and 'the middle' student identities. The COVID-19 lockdown and the ensuing change would have a dire impact on the effectiveness of the SRC in governance, their own academic experiences and the rest of the student body that they represent (Ramsden 2020).

It is expected that the incorporation of students in the decision-making structures of HEIs would steer academic access and address challenges that students face and which impede their academic progress. This study aimed to examine the educational trajectories of students who are involved in governance by way of exposing the possibility that as custodians of student governance, they could be exemplary to the students they represent. It was further expected that through the SRC, the challenges faced by ordinary students would be addressed to improve their chances of completing their studies.

■ 1.8. Conclusion

In South Africa, education opportunities for poor communities have been few, with an overdemand for limited spaces at HBUs. Research on student engagement with academic performance, particularly at these institutions, has been scarce (Schreiber & Yu 2016). Having regard for the role of the SRC after its incorporation into university governance structures in 1997, as academic stewards to students on matters that impinge on their retention and, ultimately, their academic success, this study focused primarily on their academic experiences.

The assumption was that students are incorporated into governance as a stakeholder in higher education to advance the academic prospects for students, and this, notably, is the core business of these institutions. It would therefore be anticipated that, for these institutions to thrive, a firm knowledge and understanding of the needs of students would be critical to sustaining the very reason for their existence. By hearing from student

leaders, it therefore suggests that various elements that influence academic experiences are considered. The manifestation of student academic experiences is expressed through, amongst other issues, access to education, affordability, accommodation needs, student academic and financial exclusions and resources, especially digital facilities and data provision during the pandemic. The thesis examines the SRC members' own academic experiences while advocating on these issues in governance. It is expected that the SRC, as participants in the various governance structures, should derive some learning value from the point of accessing the key decision-makers on matters that directly affect their academic interests. The reciprocal value from the academic success of the SRC – and in consequence, ordinary students – would be the sustenance of these institutions.

Student governance and advocacy in South Africa

'Through their participation in an array of learning activities, students actually co-produce their education.' (Hennig-Thurau, Langer & Hansen 2001, as quoted by Kotzé & Du Plessis 2003)

■ 2.1. Introduction

Most literature on student governance in South Africa focuses on the need to incorporate students in university governance, with little known about how their roles contribute to their own academic experience and the constituency they represent. This situation has been largely precipitated by the unrelenting student movements to vent their frustrations and convey their needs at HEIs. Nyundu, Naidoo and Chagonda (2015, p. 149) indicate that 'the catalysts to sporadic student protests have been in response to university bureaucracies making decisions that affect students without properly consulting or involving them in decision-making.' Ironically, in Muswede's (2017) view, students fiercely protested to resist increases in tuition fees and continued with sporadic mobilisation. The essence of involving students in governance structures is related to advancing the academic aspirations of students and improving their academic performance,

which is critical in invoking student advocacy in a structured manner rather than the institution becoming reactive to protests.

To contextualise the purpose of this study, it is important to provide an overview of governance at universities in the South African landscape from systemic and institutional levels of governance, as determined by legislative provisions for the incorporation of students, including the SRC constitutions, and underscore the reasons for their participation and the associated benefits. An overview of models that have been proposed to explain student governance participation is provided. This is followed by the observation of partisan influences that remain a strong element in student governance. A subsequent discussion and addressing of student governance would be incomplete without the acknowledgement of the critical role of social networking in student advocacy. A discussion on the impact of the surge of COVID-19 on digital access and the change of student experience from campus to home follows. The two issues are important in understanding the academic experience of students and the associated support provided by the SRC during the lockdown. The chapter concludes with salient themes that are important in understanding the SRC student advocacy in university in relation to their academic experiences.

2.1.1. Systemic governance

Systemic governance refers to the framework and instruments that are used in monitoring university governance. The overarching policies in relation to university governance are drawn from sector bodies responsible for various aspects, including a strategic framework, monitoring, quality assurance and accreditation of the curricula for each institution. These include the Council on Higher Education and its Higher Education Quality Committee and the Universities of South Africa.

Luescher (2005) confirms that the incorporation of students in governance has been well-documented, including the participation of students in advisory boards and as executives of governing parties, as well as formally consulting with students on policy matters. Cloete (2016) and Govender (2016) further confirm the existence of consultation at various structures within the sector and directly with the Minister of Higher Education and Training, wherein the most frequent debates relate to fee concessions or free education demanded by students. The latter is discussed later in this chapter and is important in determining how the SRC capitalise on this alternative demonstration of power or is excluded from meaningful advocacy for student needs.

2.1.2. The institutional framework

Key policy instruments that advanced the formalisation of students in governance include the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE)

report (Hall & Symes 2005), together with the *Department of Higher Education and Training White Paper 3* (Department of Higher Education and Training 1997). Kulati (2000) affirms that the guidelines on the definition of higher education, the national imperatives that were determined, institutional types and governance obligations were defined in the NCHE report of 1996. Subsequent to this, the Department of Higher Education and Training *White Paper 3* reviewed the transformational aspects that were to be incorporated in determining a single democratic system promoting cooperative governance (Moreko 2014). This culminated in the promulgation of the HEA, with a particular emphasis on providing all students an opportunity to attend any institution of their choice so as to eradicate past discriminatory practices.

Section 26(2) of the HEA formalised the establishment of various committees amongst these, including Council, Senate, SRC and the institutional forum. The Council is the apex decision-making body of the administration and management of the university, subject to the provisions of the HEA and institutional statutes. Senate is the highest governance body for dealing with academic issues, although it must account to Council. Thus, Mthembu (2009, p. 11) contends that there is 'some potential tension between the Senate and the Council in that academic authority is devoid of authority over resources', because of the democratisation of governance as legally stipulated. This means that 'Senate had to shed its image as the network of the professoriate' to be cooperative in nature, allowing for participation by various stakeholders. In relation to cooperative governance, this study delves into the role, advantage of SRC participation and influence in governance.

Council relies on the institutional forum to provide advisory services, particularly in relation to transformational issues. Mthembu (2009) notes that this structure can be traced to the numerous transformational fora established in the 1990s to support the active changes in higher education following the promulgation of the HEA. Since the promulgation of this legislation, governance in higher education has taken the form of multistakeholder involvement, with the principle of cooperative governance being applied in HEIs and incorporating various stakeholders in the decision-making process (Cloete 2008; Kulati 2000).

The inclusion of the SRC in governance structures has been embedded in the *HE Act* in terms of Council (section 27 [4]), Senate (section 28 [2]f.) and the institutional forum (section 31[2]f.). Bonakele et al. (2003, p. vii) note that while the Act makes provisions for the inclusion of the SRC in governance, it 'leaves much scope for individual institutions with regards to interpretation and implementation.'

The SRCs are represented in governance structures to address all aspects that affect students' university life, experiences and chances for academic success. It is to be expected that students' perspectives would be considered

based on the legal provisions; however, there would still be differences in how students participated, as determined by their individual statutes that each council at each university will recommend to the Minister for approval (s. 33 of the HEA). As Moreko (2014, p. 68) affirms, 'Institutional statutes are legal tools that seek to promote effective management of the HEIs in respect of matters not expressly prescribed by the *Higher Education and Training Act*.'

The location of the SRC and its relationship with the other statutory structures in university governance is shown in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 depicts the interconnectedness of the university governance structure, with particular focus on the positionality and relationship of the SRC with the other statutory bodies and the HEA. Alongside the pyramid, the HEA is the legislative framework that determines the overall policy framework for HEIs. The council, situated at the apex of the pyramid, represents the accounting body that reports to the Department of Higher Education and Training and is responsible for the establishment of the institutional statute that is aligned with the legislative prescripts. This augurs appropriately with recognising the fact that while the intention was to have a single overarching framework, each institution has autonomy in their relationship with the state within the context of the advancement of knowledge, as influenced largely by their structures, resources and programme offerings. In Figure 2.1, this is demonstrated by the link from Council to the institutional statute denoting
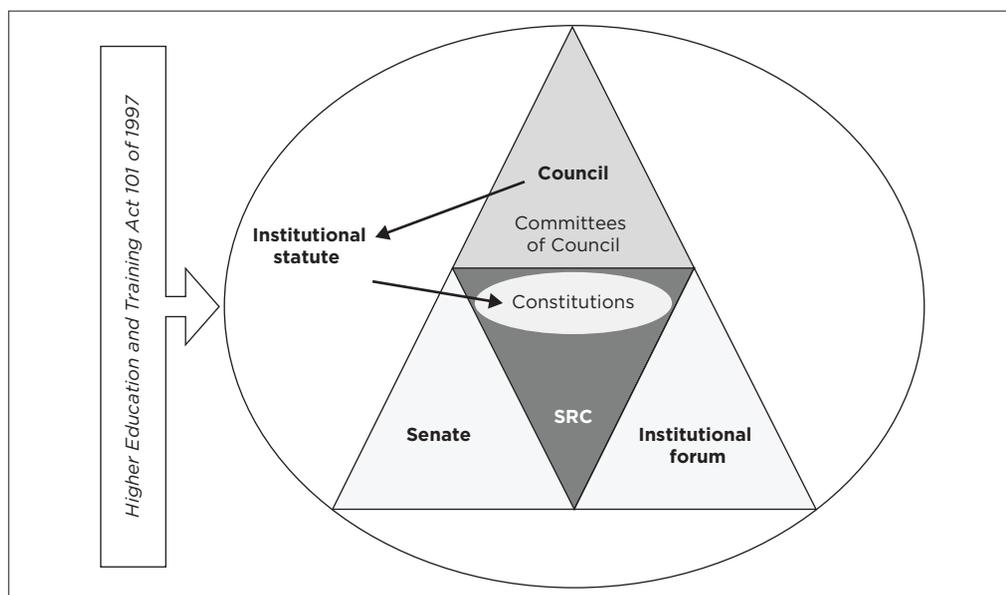
Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.
FIGURE 2.1: Student Representative Council positionality in university governance.

any governance directive as emanating from Council. Each university council will have subcommittees, each tasked to focus on different aspects of governance, notably financial management, human resources and audit and risk committees. These structures serve to discuss, vet and recommend all submissions for approval by Council. The Executive Committee of the Council is a subcommittee made up of the chairpersons of the other subcommittees who address urgent matters on behalf of Council outside the normal council meetings or in between different periods of the institutional calendar. Senate is the statutory structure in university governance where all academic strategic issues are discussed. The institutional forum is the advisory body to Council, focusing largely on transformational issues. In terms of this illustration, the SRC has been positioned in the centre of the pyramid to signify its representation in all the key governance structures, namely Council, Senate and the institutional forum. The SRC constitution is incorporated within the SRC structure, showing this to be the central instrument that guides the election process of the SRC into office and its operation and activities.

The overall pyramid with the elements described is ring-fenced by the institutional statute reflective of this instrument as the overarching framework for institutional governance, as specified by legislation. The statute is formulated by Council (hence the arrow pointing out from Council to the Statute), with the final approval signed off by the Minister of Higher Education and Training. From the legislative provisions, the institutional statute provides guidelines for the establishment of the SRC constitutions, hence the depiction of the arrow from the institutional statute to the SRC constitution.

■ 2.1.3. Student Representative Council constitutions

The main purpose of student governance constitutions is to provide a framework that guides the election, roles and general functions of student representatives. The provisions of constitutions provide the preamble, objectives, mechanism by which students are elected to office, the number of office bearers, their roles and responsibilities, the parameters of their operation, disciplinary procedures and term of office. For the purposes of this study, the focus is on the academic provisions of these constitutions, in particular, reference to student advocacy.

At the core of all SRC constitutions is the obligation for students who have an interest in joining the SRC to have progressed academically to qualify. This requirement disqualifies students who have not passed their first year of academic studies at a HEI (Bonakele et al. 2003). Given this prerequisite to join, it would be expected that elected students would persist with their academic obligation and pass while occupying their roles in governance.

While the SRC constitutions describe the various roles and responsibilities of members of the SRC, this does not indicate confirming the academic requirements for the SRC. It is no wonder, for instance, that Mandew (2003, p. 35) concludes that a sense of 'ambiguities and inherent tensions' exists with respect to cooperative governance involving different stakeholders at South African HEIs. This points to a void in knowledge about how the SRC members' student advocacy in governance supports what they set out to themselves to achieve academically as students.

An element to consider about the ability of the SRC to fulfil the academic objective set out in their constitution is to understand the provisions for their appointment into office. During the initial incorporation of students in governance, Luescher (in Luescher, Webbstock & Bhengu 2020) determined that four posts were reserved for a sabbatical. This meant that the SRC president and three other SRC roles relating to academic, transformation and student life issues would be given a sabbatical for the year in office while registered as students. The reservation of these roles allowed student representatives to focus completely on student advocacy in governance without the hindrance of pursuing their own academic goals. However, this provision may conflict with the perspective that suggests student leaders ought to show exemplary academic success notwithstanding the additional governance responsibility.

2.1.4. Reasons for and benefits of student participation

Central to the reason for students to participate in university governance is the urgency of a representative voice to articulate the different conditions that students registered at HEIs face. While the legacy of student governance points largely to increasing access to these institutions and succeeding in this call since the promulgation of the HEA, beyond this resonates the plight of students, particularly those who come from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds. It is for this reason that most of the students who access this educational opportunity can only do so through the support of the NSFAS (Bhorat, Kimani & Pillay 2018). Langa et al. (2017) explain that the NSFAS was previously issued to students as a loan to be repaid after graduation, and the #FMF movements of 2015 and 2016 forced this financial support to be converted to a bursary, provisioned on the continuation and successful completion of studies. Universities are therefore open to students who come from various strata, notably the very wealthy families, the opposite extreme of poverty and those classified as the 'missing middle', the latter group with a particular experience of middle-class background and yet faced with limited affordability. This suggests a very urgent need for South Africa to fix the economic disparities (The Conversation 2016). Student Representative Councils have fundamentally

been at the forefront of communicating challenges students faced in relation to financial access, academic and financial exclusions and accommodation requirements; this was addressed largely during the registration periods.

Empirical evidence points to understanding the rationale and motivation for students to participate in governance, without providing further details on how they are to participate, what their rights and responsibilities would be and how their role can enhance their academic experiences (Cele 2008; Cele & Koen 2003; Nhlapo 2011). Maseko (1994) points to student leaders voicing student needs in their academic pursuits and channelling student grievances to the institutional administrators. Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006b) state that the involvement of students in governance is intentional and helps to give students a voice and deter them from student protests.

Students' participation in governance has been seen to be motivated by their direct access to policies and by so doing facilitates an improved understanding of students regarding the parameters to progress their education (Ntsala & Mahlaji 2016). This could indicate that with direct access to policies, student representatives should be better positioned to guide their constituency and achieve their own academic goals. Better knowledge of rules in relation to academic exclusions and concessions should further prove beneficial. With this information at hand and accessible, the SRC could intercede on behalf of students, according to Ntsala and Mahlaji (2016). The SRC has further been observed to assist students in various projects that impinge on their academic experiences and progress, notably food insecurities (Van Den Berg & Raubenheimer 2015), sexual harassment and gender-based violence (Smit & Du Plessis 2011) and social prejudices against sexual orientation (Boonzaier & Mkhize 2018), amongst other concerns.

Nyundu et al. (2015) provide a critique of the commitment of the SRC to the student cause. Amongst their concerns about the SRC in South Africa is the fact that their interest is informed by personal reasons, including fee remissions and subsidisation. Ironically, while this may be the case, the SRC constitutions do not make provisions for how the SRC could be guided in discharging their roles. As most university constitutions (barring one that I observed, which provided a sabbatical for the secretary-general while in office) did not indicate any criteria beyond entry qualification for academic continuity, the paradox is that while most support students in governance to continue their studies through the subsidy benefit, the framework that guides their existence does not have any obligatory academic requirements once in office. Another dichotomy in understanding the SRC involves each member deriving fee remissions, yet in some cases, they have participated in protests for financial support as observed with the #FMF campaign (Luescher et al. 2017). Critically, it is concerning that the SRC, while claiming to support academic excellence, has been seen to be at the forefront of vandalism, destroying the facilities necessary for the continuation of the education the

SRC strived to support. The report by Thathiah (2016) regarding a university library being torched is a case in point of the contradictory behaviour by student representatives.

The practical contribution by the SRC to students has been a subject of concern (Mbambo 2013). Nyundu et al. (2015) have, in support of this notion, highlighted a view that since the incorporation in governance, there is a view that they become retrogressive or disempowered. Both these views point to the limited insight into or knowledge of the SRC influence in the various governance structures, where it appeared their role was that of participating to be updated about any decisions that are made, while being limited to updating these structures on potential student agitation that could be circumvented where possible. The SRC has been criticised as providing counselling and related soft issues without focusing on the academic challenges that students face (Cele 2008). With the formalisation of the SRC in governance, it implies that their roles are largely as mediators between management and students, attending meetings with both groups. While Ahmad, Ghazali and Hassan (2011) point to students in governance developing communication skills, this may be counter-effective, with increased engagement resulting in heightened isolation and less focus on their own academic pursuits. They conclude that 'the pressure will interfere with the student's emotional state, and this will take a great toll on their academic achievement' (Ahmad et al. 2011, p. 25). They would participate in formal meetings, such as Senate or Council and the student forum to provide the necessary feedback and obtain a further mandate from students. The gravity of these engagements, together with the administrative duties in the SRC offices indicates that a great deal of time is required to fulfil these responsibilities. Cele (2008) says that:

> [S]tudent leaders [are] being overworked since mostly they remain full-time students, but sometimes serve on more than ten institutional committees, while also being involved in SRC activity and in the work of their student organisation. (p. 94)

This type of commitment to governance suggests that the SRC members involved in these meetings will have very little, if any, time to pursue their own studies. Other perspectives on the negative association of students' participation in governance include the transitory nature of their roles, being in office for a short period (Luescher 2015) and a lack of requisite skills. The rivalry between students in office as related to their political affiliation (Luescher-Mamashela 2015) is yet another reason for failing to influence decision-making. This perspective is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

While student representatives may commit to governance participation, university academics generally do not notice many contributions by them during meetings. This relates to academics having discussions In other fora

where the students were not included, and as such, when in the governance meetings, students are likely to struggle to understand or follow the discussions (Cele 2008). Nyundu et al. (2015) corroborate this fact, suggesting that students are excluded from the more detailed curriculum changes already initiated at departmental or faculty levels. What may be brought to the meetings where students participate are the discussions pertaining to the financial challenges and academic exclusions that students face.

Even though Cele (2008) has pointed to the ineffectiveness of students' contributions to governance, a number of gains are identified:

- consultation on policies
- institutional information is provided
- SRC were seen to be powerbrokers
- the reduction of management powers in favour of other stakeholders
- accessibility of structures could assist in improving relations
- improving alliances with other stakeholders.

While there may be advantages as indicated, there is little indication that these translate to the academic throughput.

■ 2.2. Models in student participation

Various models have been developed in relation to the participation of students in governance. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) highlights these as the democratic principles of inclusion, the market-oriented and the academic community.

■ 2.2.1. Democratic principles

Democratic principles are about the cooperation of different university stakeholders in governance, allowing for constituency representation in decisions that are made in governing the institution. In South Africa, the democratisation of higher education, which enabled student governance has been rooted in student activism prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. Student protests against discriminatory practices and for civil rights were pivotal to the legislative changes that would incorporate them in university governance to engage them more formally and constructively to address the vanguard struggles instead of a reactive approach which could not be controlled (Altbach 2006; Luescher et al. 2020; Munene 2003). Luescher-Mamashela (2010, p. 260) describes this to be 'a reconstitution of internal decision-making in universities with reference to democratic principles, inter alia, by making decision-making processes in universities more representative of internal constituencies such as students.' The perspective of democratisation implies a process of inculcating broader stakeholder

inclusion and active participation for the common good of all involved in the interest of the fabric of the institution's existence (Luescher et al. 2020). Involving students as the biggest stakeholders would reduce conflict and avert student revolts.

2.2.2. Market orientation

Students are perceived as the consumers or clients in knowledge dissemination under the market orientation. Within this form of governance, students are anticipated to be directed on the level of consumption and have very little influence on how or what they are provided. As consumers, students would be confined to paying for the educational provision and therefore are not expected to influence the policies on the operation of the institution. The approach further suggests that the engagement with students is to obtain their feedback on decisions that may have already been made, and therefore their inclusion would largely be passive. Within this context, students would be included in the quality assurance aspects to determine the level of satisfaction with the service and product that they obtain from HEIs. In a sense, students can invoke a change within the academic ambit that affects their success, however, without much influence on other variables that would impact their studies, such as governance engagement on the one hand or the home 'bread and butter' challenges that impinge on their learning (Luescher 2020).

2.2.3. The community of scholars

In terms of the community of scholars, the most important stakeholder in the decision-making process would be the academic staff. Pabian and Minksová (2011) point to the lecturers being central to decisions because of their importance in the delivery of teaching, learning and research for the benefit of students (as recipients of the knowledge) and institutional sustenance. This is premised on the view that students would be consulted on issues that directly affect them, although they would not be eligible to participate in the decision-making process to determine what and how they are taught. From this perspective, student participation in governance would have moderate participation in relation to obtaining their views with minimal autonomy to contribute to the decision-making processes. From this perspective, it is expected that students primarily focus on their studies and minimise other activities. This way, their roles in governance would be passive.

2.2.4. State bureaucracy

From a state bureaucracy perspective, the government would hold the supreme power to determine what happens at institutions of higher learning.

This was the case, for instance, within the context of the apartheid era in South Africa. Not only did the legislation determine where students were to be enrolled through the extension of the *University Education Act No. 45 of 1959*, which defined institutional access according to racial segregation, but further, it had state-appointed staff to run these institutions. In the context of this form of governance, students are seen to be inactive, without having an opportunity to influence any decisions about their education. Within this framework, the state not only funds the institution, but it also has complete power and authority to determine how it is to be structured and run. The autocratic nature of this approach would have prompted the surge in student activism.

From the described models, the recognition of students in governance would be most positive in the democratic values as the highest level of consultation with them (Obiero 2012). This is followed by the market enterprise, with the passive level identified with the community of scholars (giving credence to academics) and state bureaucracy where the funder (the state) would determine the policy and operational arrangements of the institution.

■ 2.3. Student political partisanship

Political parties have played a major role in the expressions of students on campus. Scholars have highlighted the interrelationships between student campus mobilisation and political affiliations. Schmitter (2016) avers that political parties have used student unions on campus to exert their power and increase their voter base. Ngobeni (2015) further comments that political leaders have visited HEIs to mobilise students, which detracts from directly addressing student needs to political lobbying. Students have also been seen to emulate and aspire to become political leaders whom they admire (Nyundu et al. 2015). Invariably, this impacts the effectiveness of student representatives' genuine advocacy for students.

Student Representative Council elections, by their nature, lean on factional politics as the basis for contestation, which Sebake (2019) points out has resulted in chaos and volatility related to reaction to defeat by political organisations. To this, Sebake (2019, p. 56) further states that 'leaders circumvent the will of the people through technical means.' Bearing the already-contested space during the elections, this questions the true contribution and value of the SRC to the needs of the student body as a collective ahead of partisan mandates, which are likely to invoke conflict and division amongst students. Mpanza et al. (2019) highlight that during SRC elections, students use the lack of funding to garner support for their manifestos, canvassing funding for their campaigns under the banner of external political affiliations. As such, most students who contest for

membership of the SRC not only do so under the umbrella of their political affiliations (Mpanza et al. 2019), and according to Nyundu et al. (2015):

> [*M*]ay be using participation in student politics as a dress rehearsal for active political engagement in civil society organisations, or even the leading political parties such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). (p. 158)

This argument is supported by the example of Nompendulo Thobile Mkhatshwa, the former SRC president who led the Wits #FMF in 2015/16 movement, and who now is the youngest member of the National Assembly in the government and portfolio committee on Higher Education, Science and Technology (Naki 2019). Bhengu (2019) reaffirms that Naledi Chirwa, Vuyani Pambo and Peter Keetse, who were previous SRC members, were subsequently members of the opposition party, EFF. This may be seen to (Mpanza et al. 2019):

> [*D*]etract them from the genuine focus on addressing the needs of the students on the ground in their campuses to the needs of political parties that they are affiliated to. (p. 91)

Cele (2009) expressed a concern that SRC members do not possess the leadership competencies needed for their roles in governance and have been seen to ride the 'gravy-train' and get involved in corruption and misappropriation of funding to run the SRC office. What remains a reality post-apartheid is that while students have been incorporated into governance structures, they continue to use their political affiliations as the basis to articulate the challenges they experience. Davids (2021, p. 9) maintains that the nature of activism is embedded in the political resistance to apartheid and that despite this legislation having long been scrapped, the view remains that higher education 'has failed to replace its narrative of a politics of struggle with one of reconstruction and restoration.' Muswede (2017) agrees that while student activism during apartheid had a direct alliance with political parties, this had not changed after the promulgation of the HEA to scrap discriminatory practices. Institutions of higher learning in this sense are still seen to be reactive to activist protests and related forms of resistance rather than proactive in deliberately engaging with students as the most important constituency in the educational process (Klemenčič 2017), on which their very existence continues to rely.

■ 2.4. Internet age for student advocacy

A very real mechanism that students have and continue to use to express their plight, especially in the digital world, and that has rapidly beset society, is social media. The 2015–2016 #FMF campaign was a profound moment in South Africa, where social media played an important role as a means of quickly gaining public attention (Kavada 2020). The main contention with the

protest was the fee hikes that could not be afforded by the majority of poor black students (Langa et al. 2017). Bosch (2016(a) emphasised that Twitter became a viral platform for coordinated efforts by students to choreograph protest events and increase information dissemination. The interactive manner of communication appealed to students in that it was quick and spontaneous responses that kept updates alive on what was happening throughout the country. Much can be said about the various focal subjects that spiralled through social media, including the decolonisation of universities and campus brutality, in particular gender-based violence (Bosch 2016b).

According to Frassinelli (2018), the initial campaign started at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where students mobilised for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue. While the statue had been prominent at the institution, to students, this symbolised the legacy of inequality and discrimination. Coined decolonisation, this encapsulated the address of increasing black academics, Eurocentric curricula and modes of teaching, student debt associated with poverty and economic inequalities and institutional racism (Bosch 2016b; Naidoo 2016). Termed #RMF, this movement created a high impetus in media and especially with the administration of the institution, and it had the desired effect of removing this symbolic sculpture.

The #FMF, although initiated at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2015, was to spread rapidly nationally in response to the higher education fee hikes affecting students across all institutions during 2016. Cloete (2016, p. 116) describes the 2015 #FMF movement as the 'largest and most effective student campaign in post-1994', whose significance was the strategy of 'non-party aligned, no formal leadership mobilisation through social media.' Gerbaudo (2015, p. 918) explains that hashtags such as #RMF or #FMF were effective in their 'capacity to spread with extreme rapidity' and by their being 'highly conducive to processes of collective identification.' The effect of these movements in relation to this study is that, whether led by the SRC or not, they were a powerful public articulation by students who could not be heard in the formalised governance structures. The very notion of containing students through discussion with their leadership in the boardroom was now lost, as students were able to protest in much larger numbers against the obstacles that would minimise their academic opportunities. As scholars indicate, this was a historical moment where both government and university administrators were forced into a reactive mode of doing something to avert the continuation of these student revolts, which turned violent, including damaging the very facilities and resources needed to help students with their educational aspirations.

South Africans have also taken on the issue of the importance and recognition of anti-racism, finding expression in supporting the George Floyd movement on campus (Isilow 2020). Buttelli and Le Bruyns (2019) point to:

> [*T*]he social movement known as #FeesMustFall has at its core the intersectional encounter of a decolonial critique, a feminist critique, an anti-racist critique and a critique against neoliberal corporate management of the universities and higher education in South Africa. (p. 12)

This is further amplified by students' outcry against workers' struggle at HEIs, denoting the low salaries of staff whose services were outsourced, such as cleaners and security, playing out as the connective action of broader societal challenges (Bennet & Segerberg 2013). Similarly, the rape and brutal killing of first-year UCT student Uyinene Mrwetyana ignited the #AmINext movement as students voiced their resistance to violence against females.

For students, all of these concerns remained prevalent and formed part of marginalisation practices evident during the apartheid era, targeted at the low-income communities that were largely black. A reignition of the discriminatory legacy still prevailed despite the promise of a new dawn. While the protests were led by students in the post-apartheid era, the so-called 'born-frees', this was marked by students' accusation of the ANC-led government as sell-outs and a realisation of even deeper struggles for free and decolonial education (Buttelli & Le Bruyns 2019).

The proliferation of student activism through social media generally allows for much quicker responses by students and therefore places institutions at a disadvantage in responding. Duncan (2015) adds that although hashtag movements garnered support on a national scale in the country between 2015 and 2016, the protests that attracted media coverage were those that had a violent effect and caused damage to university property, including lecture halls, auditoriums and libraries. Much information about the devastation of the protests in destroying the prospects for teaching and learning for students has been reported. Mavunga (2019) points to the torching of a bus at UCT, the burning of a science building at North-West University and the auditorium at the University of Johannesburg, which dashed many hopes for education during the protests. Following the era of #FMF, the use of memes as means of quick convergence of social gatherings has become a reality. The #FMF movement depicted the magnitude of the rapid speed of communication but resulted in much destruction of universities that are the seedbed of education.

While #BlackLivesMatter may have started in the USA, this was replicated in South Africa as protests about inequalities. Frassinelli (2018) points to key themes about student debt demonstrating the continued deprivation, particularly amongst black people, suggesting that the so-called 'rainbowism' for transformation remained a fallacy for many. It is interesting that while evidence of heightened social movements prevailed, the voice of students through the formalised university governance structures appeared to be silenced or at least did not draw attention and response. I concur with Page (2010) that the importance of student leadership development must be seen

to be a positive step that would circumvent the harmful repercussions that coincide with incidences of activism.

While appreciating that this study is fundamentally about the academic experiences of the SRC, it is uncontested that the social aspects they advocate in university governance cannot be separated from the true realisation of their academic objective. The SRC's focus in governance has largely been about articulating the socio-economic plight of students, that is, a major stumbling block to their prospects for academic attainment. The reality is that the SRC advocacy on these issues ought to remain, given the more powerful alternative of students taking up these matters themselves through protests, as referred to in this section. My particular interest in this study is finding ways, by which the boardroom advocacy ought to find avenues for students in general and those tasked to lead the discourse for academic emancipation.

■ 2.5. COVID-19 and students' academic experiences

The unrelenting COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted HEIs as physical classes were suspended, and students were forced to evacuate campus residences (Mapanga 2020). The abrupt imposition of a Level 5 lockdown: first for 21 days, further extended for an additional two weeks and only permitting essential services and businesses to operate and trade (Soudien, Reddy & Harvey 2021) in South Africa, left the university administration setting up emergency committees to deal with the circumstances that were imposed. At the top of the agenda in these meetings was whether the academic year could still be salvaged, and if so, how this could be done, notably with vastly different institutional capabilities in digital readiness, lecturer capacitation, student resourcing and data provisioning. I recall that a colleague from another institution alerted me about a project they had launched, called #NoStudentLeftBehind, to raise funds to purchase laptops for students. During the untimely lockdown period, the government entered into a partnership with Internet service providers to enable students to access learning material, using digital platforms for free through a system called zero-rating (Gillwald 2020). While this effort served to ameliorate the challenges associated with access to online learning for students, its effectiveness was not as far-reaching as intended because of the network infrastructural challenges, particularly for students in rural environments (Khumalo & Mji 2014). Further, Chinembiri (2020) points to poverty-associated limitations for students, including high data costs, a lack of Internet-enabled devices and digital literacy.

At the university where I worked, emergency meetings were set up within the 48-hour contingency period before the clock struck on 26 March 2020 to shut down all operations. Pertinent issues on our radar included the evacuation

of all students from on- or off-campus residences, preparation of departmental plans for the interim period proposed by the government, review of staff compensation arrangements during the *force majeure* and determining the existing capacity in relation to Internet access. Ultimately, what remained in the minds of most was the safety of all stakeholders and ensuring avoidance of the spread of the virus, with very little certainty at the time. The initial lockdown was assumed to be for a short period of 20 days, with the further extension causing mayhem and confusion.

For Ndevu (in Sayeed 2020), the pandemic exposed the entrenched social inequality, the digital divide at HEIs, excluding students from poor backgrounds. Osman and Walton (2020) emphasise the reality 'of the different learning environments of students and their access to learning resources, appropriate devices and data.' The disparity between students in urban apartment blocks and rural environments became evident in their relative ability to access the learning facilities remotely (Schreiber et al. 2020). Desai (cited in Sayeed 2020, p. 357) highlights that the move to online learning was made with the speed of Achilles, eroding the student classroom experience of interactions, debate and a chance to spend time with peers. The differentiated opportunity to continue with online studies is evident with reports that Internet access in metropolitan households was 17.3%, compared to 1.7% of rural households (Statistics South Africa 2018). The devastating effects were that academic staff were not sufficiently prepared to migrate to online teaching and learning. Staff who had been acquainted with many years of standing in front of a class and physically engaging with students were forced to quickly overcome their inhibitions and fears related to technological approaches, for instance, recording their lectures and generally adapting to the technological mode of teaching. This points to the challenge being not limited to students but the academic staff who were required to quickly transition to new modes of teaching, which would be by trial and error. For students who already struggled with financial support while on campus, the magnitude of the challenge was exponential without equipment and data (Ndevu 2020). This was further aggravated by the household setup, particularly for students in the township and rural environments, where such struggle included cramped living spaces (Desai, cited in Sayeed 2020) with no allocated study area (as had been available on campus) and the further challenges of the lack of amenities, such as water and electricity.

◼ 2.5.1. Digital inequities

To properly grasp the magnitude of the challenges with the surge in digitalisation of teaching and learning, the situation before the pandemic needs to be fully observed. It is noteworthy to state that in the pre-COVID-19 era, of the 26 public tertiary institutions in South Africa, only one was classified

as an open distance learning institution (Letseka & Pitsoe 2014). While the technological advancements differed for the rest, the mode of teaching and learning conducted was predominantly face-to-face instruction. The forced quarantine compelled both teacher and student to meet online or minimally, where practical work formed part of the learning – a blended mode of instruction including some physical interaction.

In essence, COVID-19 brought about the forced change from in-person teaching and learning to unplanned emergency remote teaching (Affouneh, Salha & Khlaif 2020; Matarirano, Yeboah & Gqokonqana 2021). The emergency circumstances can be described as an abrupt and disruptive change to an unfamiliar technological learning mode for students who found themselves compelled to self-regulate their commitment and persistence with their education. I use the word *education* to broadly encompass teaching, learning, study time, research and assessment that students, as a result of the pandemic, would have to continue in isolation, away from their peers and with loss of real-time contact with their lecturers.

Buzzetto-More and Guy (2006, p. 156) describe the challenge of online learning for students in 'lower socio-economic backgrounds more likely to experience drill and practice.' Scholars aver that the effect of forced online remote learning exposed the digital divide (Asma 2020; Jansen 2020; Pather & Booi 2020; Segar 2020; Sosibo 2021) and the inequalities between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Ndevu (cited in Sayeed 2020, p. 283) aptly describes this, saying: 'the Internet was the epitome of this locked door in this case.' Maphosa (2021) observed that a key impediment for students was that they did not have laptops and computers, relying on their smartphones as they could not afford the required equipment for online learning (Pather & Booi 2020). Sosibo (2021) points to students without gadgets or reliable connectivity because of poor network access being left behind from access to e-learning technologies, with Jansen (2020), Motaung and Dube (2020) adding that WhatsApp was the most commonly used medium for students from poor backgrounds. Using their smartphones only, they could not access all material because of unstable Internet connections and data limitations. Pather and Booi (2020, p. 9761) conclude that the 'digital agency is severely diminished outside of the campus physical environment, [and therefore] had to become a paramount concern in respect of delivering the academic program.' From the empirical studies, the issue of the digital divide became evident in South Africa.

Maphosa, Dube and Jita (2020) note that the intention of electronic learning (e-learning) was to ensure the academic programme could continue in a concerted effort to retain the academic objectives for the year. Without physical contact with lecturers, assessment quality could be compromised and also the chance that students could submit work that they may not have authored (Letseka & Pitsoe 2014). Desai (in Sayeed 2020) criticised the

simplification of weekly activity to multiple-choice assessments, which removed the notion of engagement and debate in some of the subjects.

While we know of the struggle by the students as noted by scholars, equally, teachers who had not experienced nor received substantive professional development to support the change (Sayed & Sing 2020) were now compelled not only to recalibrate their teaching materials but to adjust to remote learning. Clearly, without this adaptation to the new pedagogical concepts and modes of lecture delivery (Rashid & Yadav 2020), the academic year would be compromised. The ideal of the teacher being fit for purpose, while not the focus of this study, has a fundamental and dire impact on students, including the SRC's ability to sustain their academic interest and pass. Reported challenges that the staff in HEIs faced included lack of being technology-savvy and the associated daunting task of setting online assessments for students (Sahu 2020). For those who themselves were not familiar with the new applications, such as Blackboard (Desai, cited in Sayeed 2020), the WhatsApp platform seemed to be most convenient, given its familiarity to both students and teachers, that it was free, the good turnaround feedback, cost-effectiveness and accessibility (Ngalombo 2020). While the WhatsApp platform was commonly used, it had its limitations, in particular what teachers reported as WhatsApp fatigue because of the continual interaction without any time limitations (Chirinda, Ndlovu & Spangenberg 2021), with students often reporting struggles to access the zero-rated applications and download videos from their lecturers because of network connectivity and data limitations. Chirinda et al. (2021) commend the innovative way that, despite these challenges, some teachers selected to network with their counterparts internationally to obtain support, guidance and in some instances teaching materials, given the pressure to change without much notice.

2.5.2. Home away from home

The notion that university residences resemble a home away from home implies that the comforts that students experienced at the university residences were similar to what they were familiar with at their homes. The veracity of this view is unpacked here, especially within the context of the breakout of the pandemic.

Many scholars have applauded the increased and improved living spaces for students. It has become a trend that student accommodation includes amenities, such as electricity, water, beds, study desks, fridges, cooking facilities, onsite laundry facilities, network points to connect devices and, critically, Wi-Fi (La Roche, Flanigan & Copeland 2010). Xulu-Gama (2019, pp. 22–23) emphasised 'student housing gives students the freedom to explore and determine their own identities away from familial and home pressures.'

Where students do not have their own laptops, computers are provided in a common area. Additionally, almost all campus residences and select external accommodations will provide cleaning services. These provisions assist in creating comfort for students, thereby enabling them to focus on their studies. With student massification, such facilities remain in demand and provide for a highly contested business by property owners located within proximity to the HEIs. Consequently, Tshifhiwa (2020) posits that students who lived on campus residences performed better than those students who lived at home. This is because the benefits of university residences included Wi-Fi connectivity, computer facilities, social interaction with other students and social and educational programmes offered in residences (Kanyumba & Shabangu 2021). Student housing was seen as an integral contributor to the academic success of students (Jansen & Dube 2013), with Czerniewicz (2020) emphasising the importance of human connection for continual support through student social life and pedagogical exposure, which is enhanced by the opportunity to develop leadership skills for those appointed as resident advisors (Benjamin & Davis 2016). Students have been seen to thrive academically because of the sense of community on campus, faculty interactions and emotional support they derived from their peers (Hagedorn, Wattick & Olfert 2021).

On 26 March 2020, the official lockdown period commenced countrywide, which necessitated not only the suspension of face-to-face classes but also for students to vacate university residences. The major significance of this shift, for students from poor backgrounds, was the move from residences with good facilities to the realities of their family circumstances: lack of running water, poor or no electricity, areas with no cell phone coverage, lack of fibre optic connectivity and no data for live classes.

Disparities between the students' living conditions became more vivid, as most of the students who had depended on the residential facilities were now forced back into the realities of their poor backgrounds of confined and congested spaces with their families, such as sharing a bedroom without any privacy (Jansen 2020) and being expected to do home chores and look after their siblings. Load shedding, together with poor electrical infrastructure in rural areas, meant that some students had to endure long periods of downtime (Pillay, Singh & Prinsloo 2020). What aggravated the difficulties for people living in dense informal settlements was the lack of physical distancing, worsened by limited water supply and poor hygiene, all of which are detrimental to the intended reduction of the spread of the virus (Xaba & Sayeed, in Sayeed 2020). Omodan (2020) argues that the unrelenting effect of COVID-19 brought about a stronger need for the decolonisation debate for rural universities, given the worsened impact on students from poor backgrounds forced to return to congested homes without the space for their studies nor the technology to support it. What aggravated the situation

was that many students from rural areas would face deeper societal challenges, including lack of electricity, proper roads and access to water. This would invariably result in limited access to technology platforms. By implication, COVID-19 exposed the digital divide described in the last section and, as such, the ability for education to continue. The move from physical classrooms and residences to remote classes and homes would exacerbate a problem that predates the pandemic. According to Dube (2020) the challenges of a rural learner would be magnified by COVID-19, especially as institutions were ill-prepared to support the learner beyond simply making provision for data bundles and equipment.

With the lockdown period, many companies could not sustain their businesses without financial reserves resulting in their staff either being supported by the Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS) under the auspices of the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). At another level, COVID-19 exacerbated the plight of students identified as the missing middle. This, according to Cloete (2016), refers to students who did not qualify for NSFAS funding and yet could not access bank loans. Habib (Fihlani 2019, p. 3) reinforces this, saying the missing middle are students who are 'too rich to qualify for scholarship but in reality, too poor to afford their education.' This sentiment was further expressed by affected students through a tweet on the Twitter platform stating, 'too rich for NSFAS, too poor for fees and too black for a bank loan' (Ngidi et al. 2016). Yet the pandemic was less selective on what group of students would be affected as even those within the middle sector were detrimentally affected with varying family dynamics of parents losing their jobs because of the shutdown of economic activity in the interest of health preservation. Job losses reduced this group to the poor category, leaving a great deal of them without resources and forced, ultimately, to deregister (Qodashe 2020). Students facing worsened family realities have been found to be inactive and did not engage with their lecturers, submitted their assessments late or not at all and or dropped out of their network during scheduled online classes because of connectivity challenges (Asma 2020).

■ 2.5.3. Family impact on the academic discourse

Access to education is generally seen to be a gateway for individual and family economic well-being. The intention of the South African HEA, as referred to earlier in this chapter, was to provide increased access to education and ensure that students who previously did not have access were given such opportunity. Moreover, certain institutions that were previously disadvantaged functioned with limited resources, infrastructure and the type of education they could offer, thereby constraining the number of students they could enrol, notably the three institutions (cf. clause 1.5) referred to in this study amongst them. As highlighted, the inclusion of student representation in governance was to ensure improved and increased access to those previously

disadvantaged and advocacy to deal with material issues that impacted their academic experiences. Hornsby and Osman (2014) report that the massification of HEIs provided greater access to students from poor backgrounds. For instance, enrolment figures increased from 578,132 to 975,837 in 2000 and 2016, respectively (Statistics South Africa 2018). Infrastructural provisions, such as student accommodation were expected to support social and academic integration to assist students, particularly those from poor backgrounds, with adequate resources to improve their chance for educational attainment. Notwithstanding such efforts to achieve academic objectives, this did not address the backgrounds that remained an obstacle to their education. Masutha (2020) emphasises numerous barriers to success for students drawn from poorer communities, which include limited or no infrastructure to support secondary education, poor living conditions, unemployed parents, food insecurities and little or no utilities to support their livelihood. Including the present heavy strain, students would not be able to afford to pay for their tuition at university, especially with the annual fee hikes, which were likely to cause strain on their families. In many instances, students who entered university from poor communities were likely to be the first generation to attend these institutions and, as such, were not likely to have the necessary support in respect of the actual study process and understanding of the university environment and culture. Scholars have reported extensively on the reaction of students to some of the challenges associated with the socio-economic difficulties as expressed in the 2015 student revolts which was about a call for free education and decolonisation (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam 2019; Muswede 2017). According to De Klerk et al. (2017, p. 3), '2015 was the tipping point when thousands of students across multiple campuses revolted against nationwide university fee increases.' Students, in their efforts to bring the public's attention to their socio-economic circumstances, extended their activism call to appeal for the insourcing of university support services. This was seen as amplifying the harsh economic circumstances experienced in the broader communities. Protests against other social ills that have continued to form part of student activism include gender-based violence (Hussen 2018).

Czerniewicz et al. (2020) agree that the COVID-19 exposed material institutional inequalities. It further amplified poverty and deprivation, with differentiated levels of adjustments by these institutions; for example, the provision of computers and resources to students could not afford such equipment to support their studies. The point about students from poorer backgrounds was that their circumstances were beyond simply the provision of resources, such as laptops and data to enable their continuity. The struggle included other social threats to their families, for example, the resultant loss of jobs of many during the lockdown, where many businesses could not operate. These difficulties were worse for small businesses that serviced the already deprived communities. Social grants were supplemented by the introduction of TERS by the UIF, which was made available to relieve employees badly affected

by job losses during the lockdown period because of the pandemic. Another reality in the family conditions was the increase in violence within households resulting from confined movement. Farber (2020) reports on 500–1000 daily calls from females about sexual and gender-based violence seeking help. Such family exposure would invariably have mental and physical strain on students beyond the simple relationship with institutions to continue their studies. COVID-19 would damage the ability of students to centre themselves on their education with numerous other challenges, including mental strain from physical distancing and isolation, insecurities about their health and nutrition and disrupted social and protective networks (Adebiyi et al. 2021).

Mathekga (2012) observed that the National Plan for Higher Education and Training in terms of the vision of the Department of Higher Education and Training (1997) *White Paper 3* placed emphasis on promoting:

> [*E*]quity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to advance their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities. (p. 49)

However, COVID-19 has exacerbated the disparities of students, with those from poorer backgrounds having less chance of achieving the throughput necessary to improve their family circumstances. Instead, more challenges beyond the university resources, infrastructure and facilities have threatened the very objective of redressing past inequities, this in addition to their fears about contracting COVID-19. Students from these backgrounds must primarily concern themselves with survival before even contemplating the anxiety, confusion and stress associated with the new drill of learning. This was especially true for students who depended on tutorial and peer support to grasp the study material, as discussed next.

■ 2.6. Conclusion

Key themes that have emerged from this chapter include the reason for, role and advocacy of students into governance. The legislative framework, the purpose of SRC constitutions, the role of the SRC, reasons for participation and the anticipated role of students in governance underscored this discussion. In recent times, there has been a shift in how the voices of students are heard through social media activism. The horrific experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have negated the very strides that the SRC has made, such as access, resourcing and facilitation of improved student life. This has been largely affected by the *force majeure*, where even the SRC was compelled to vacate campuses, with a changed form of advocacy from physical meetings with university administrators as part of the governance structures to varied online platforms, the most popular mediums being Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This mode has often created challenges for the SRC, be it connectivity challenges or unfamiliarity with the platforms themselves.

A common thread between the experiences of the #FMF and the COVID-19 periods in relation to students is the financial limitations that directly impact their academic experiences. By and large the revolts of 2015 were about expressing their grave socio-economic circumstances and calling for free education. The latter period of the pandemic deepened their circumstances, with the limitations they would experience now having to continue to study from home without the necessary infrastructure and facilities, such as water, electricity and data. Where previously the SRC's advocacy was based on the financial strain related to access and integration, this has been exacerbated during COVID-19 in that the strain would be worse where students are expected to study without the necessary resources.

While the literature presented suggests students have expressed themselves in governance structures albeit in a limited way, what remains a concern is the ability to translate their advocacy to their own academic progression. This poses an additional requirement to examine the role of the SRC in the student academic experience cycle, in the context of unprecedented disruptions for instance the pandemic and student social media activism. During COVID-19, the effectiveness of the SRC to advocate for students on issues that they could not control especially with little access to their constituency became a challenge. It further questions their ability to influence their academic circumstances and at the same time fend for their own academic survival.

Theoretical framework

'Educate our students as whole people, and they will bring all of who they are to the demands of being human in private and public life.' (Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner 2010)

■ 3.1. Introduction

In examining the theoretical framework for the study, the focus should be placed on understanding the overall academic influence of student learning and motivation, together with the understanding of the mechanism how students may be incorporated in governance. The academic influence of student learning is examined through the lens of Tinto's theory of integration and Astin's theory of involvement, both selected for the broad range of variables that must be considered in understanding student retention and, more importantly, applying the influence of sociopsychological and academic aspects. Using the model developed by Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld (2008), which is based on the South African context, I further examine what and how students' academic success may be impacted. The nature of student governance participation is observed through Arnstein's ladder of participation. Finally, understanding the learning process of students who are participants in governance is examined in the context of self-regulated learning, considering that their role of governance often interferes with their commitment to their studies. Self-regulated learning

was further considered relevant to this study with the shift towards e-learning for all students since the global COVID-19 pandemic set in, resulting not only in a shift in the learning modalities but a consideration of the role of student leaders in advocating for student academic continuity under changed circumstances.

Klemenčič and Bergan (2015) emphasise that student engagement is central to student governance and advocacy. Kuh (2009, p. 683) defines student engagement as representing the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities.

Numerous scholars have examined topics on student engagement, the investment of time in study activity and the quality of output (Kuh 2009; Pace 1982). Such knowledge has assisted in establishing a correlation between student relationships and efforts, with Trowler (2010, p. 7) concluding, 'students' investment of time, effort and interest in a range of educationally oriented activities, and favourable outcomes, such as increased performance, persistence and satisfaction.' In addition to student background, academic preparation and motivation, various components of student engagement offer the best predictors of student satisfaction and success in attaining desired graduate outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Strydom & Mentz 2010).

■ 3.2. Tinto's theory of integration

One of the most widely read theories on student persistence and success is Tinto's theory of integration of 1975 and as adapted in 1982. Tinto in examining the level of student dropout at colleges, concluded that there is insufficient integration of students in both their academic commitments and their social needs. Arguing for a stronger focus on this integration, Tinto posits that the integration of students in academic and social aspects of college life will lead to their persistence. From this perspective, the greater the consolidation of both academic and social aspects to college life, the greater is the likelihood that students would increase their commitment to achieving their goals to graduate. This theory is based on six components of student experience, which improved the level of self-confidence and leadership skills. These attributes include pre-entry attributes of academic and social backgrounds; goals, commitment and intentions; social and academic (institutional) experiences; integration or departure; re-evaluation of vision, goals, commitment and intentions; and outcomes (Berger & Milem 1999; Bettendorf 2008). In Figure 3.1, an illustration is shown of these attributes that I will examine in the context of this study.
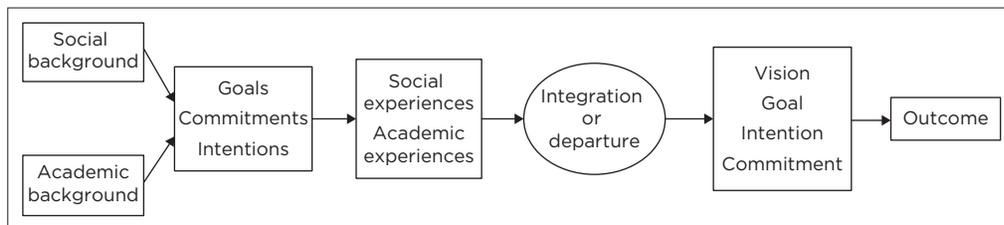
FIGURE 3.1: Tinto's model of integration.

The variables for student integration or departure as predicated by Tinto include social and academic backgrounds, students' goals and their assimilation into the new environment both academically and socially. Accordingly, these attributes would influence the students' academic experience and, ultimately, the completion of their studies. From this theoretical perspective, these attributes are described in different phases of the student's life according to the discussion that follows.

■ 3.2.1. Pre-entry attributes

Pre-entry attributes refer to students' experiences before they enter college or university. Tinto recognised the diversity of students who enter college or university, each with their unique personal, socio-economic and academic background that determines their level of preparedness and adaptability to the new environment. An example would be the type of schooling that the student has been exposed to which will impact their integration. Universities in South Africa draw students who come from various schooling types, which themselves provide different resources and infrastructure. A disadvantage for students drawn from a rural school with little resources and large class sizes means that this student would start university in a disadvantaged position, as pointed out by Dube (2020). Tinto (1987) advises that this places such students who would likely require much more academic support at a disadvantage. The social exposure would further limit their assimilation into the university. Students from an affluent education background would have a head start in acclimatising to teaching modalities and structured timetables. Socially too, students arrive at the institutions with their own influence, including family structures, culture and socialisation. Mannan (2007, p. 147) concludes, 'students enter HEIs with a variety of attributes, family and community backgrounds, educational experiences and achievements, skills and value orientations.' A student from a rural background, according to Tinto (1975), would find the new environment intimidating and would require additional support in adapting to campus life holistically.

■ 3.2.2. Goals, commitment and intentions

Based on their unique exposures, Tinto contends that students will plan and commit to specific goals, that will further influence their persistence at university. While the social and academic influences referred earlier (cf. s. 3.2.1) are significant for ascertaining whether students cope with the new environment, equally important would be their own goals, level of resilience and focus. Using Tinto's terminology, these are called goals, commitment and intentions. Demetriou and Schmitx-Sciborski (2011) advise that students are motivated to behave according to their own predetermined goals and commitment, and this is influenced by their academic and social background. For instance, a student coming from a poor background may be more determined and goal-driven to succeed academically to change their circumstances. Other students from the same deprived background may be inhibited to set realistic goals because of their limited exposure and knowledge.

■ 3.2.3. Institutional experience

Another element that influences students' integration, as pointed out by Tinto (1975), is institutional experience. Students' departure or persistence can be influenced by the overall institutional culture within the formal and informal contexts. Therefore, students' interaction at various levels of the institution, such as the faculty wherein they are registered, student services, in Tinto's view, will shape the way the student learns or observes and adds to their experience, of which the latter could be negative or positive. To achieve a positive outcome in learning, Tinto (1993) emphasised the importance of classroom engagement wherein the role of the lecturer would be critical. The way that the student would interpret or understand the lecturer directly impacts the outcome of their learning. According to Tinto, the socialisation between students that occurs outside of the classroom has as much influence on the student's persistence and commitment to their studies. As such various studies confirm that the greater the integration of learning and the social aspects on campus, the greater the level of intellectual development (Lundberg & Schreiner 2004).

In addition to the general integration, Tinto further argues that students who stay on campus would have a greater advantage and chance for academic persistence. This view relates to students on campus benefiting from their access to institutional facilities, opportunities to engage with lecturers outside of the classroom time and peer support. The opportunity to get involved in campus social activities enables the improved integration purported by Tinto. The disadvantage for those outside of campus include lack of access to the amenities offered on campus, the extended time they spent commuting to and from campus and in general, a lack of social experiences and interactions

with other students which form a part of campus life. A compounding difficulty for students who are off-campus would be the affordability for transport to enable them to get to campus. As such, students who are off-campus may be limited in fully maximising on the institutional culture.

3.2.4. Integration or departure

Whether students feel integrated is influenced by their past experiences, socialisation and education exposure. In Tinto's view, students who come from an environment where they had little educational facilities and are also the first generation to attend institutions of higher learning will enter this environment ill-prepared for adjusting to a university residential life whereto a student has never been exposed. This points to, for instance, students from impoverished backgrounds who start with limitations, including resources and amenities, such as water and electricity, and this would handicap their chances for academic success. The lack of ability of such students to integrate into a new environment where they are exposed for the first time to university culture and language barriers would impact negatively on their coping skills. For this reason, the effectiveness of student orientation and academic development programmes would determine whether students can sustain their academic objectives or drop out.

3.2.5. Goals, commitments and intentions

In a revised proposition, Tinto (1987) avers that the individual student's exposure, commitment and plan are key contributors to their persistence. In the new environment, it is necessary that the students constantly review their goals and commitments, with a willingness to adapt to new processes as influenced by the institutional dynamics. According to Tinto, the individual's own commitment to their goal is an important factor in determining their academic achievements. Importantly, the commitment the student makes to the institution will impact how effectively they are incorporated. In this regard, self-motivation and determination, according to Tinto, are evident in their contact with faculties and involvement in workshops and seminars that promote their academic intentions. Another way one could look at this would be that some students who come from not-so-developed backgrounds could be motivated even more and have goals to escape from difficult backgrounds and see education as a tool to improve their well-being.

3.2.6. Application of Tinto's integration theory

In the context of this study, Tinto's (1975) theory has been purposely selected because of its focus on the influence of academic and social integration on the students' tenacity in relation to their studies. The theory promotes the

dual influence of social and academic exposure to provide a holistic university experience and prospects for success. For this study, the extracurricular influence of student learning that is examined is student representative participation in governance in relation to their personal academic goals. Central to this examination is the impact of the SRC governance roles on their experiences and the progression of their academic pursuits. Two governance structures that impact directly on students' learning would be Senate and Faculty boards, both being about the academic aspects of the institution. Based on this theory, it would be expected that student leaders' level of participation and involvement in academic issues should positively impact learning prospects. What Tinto does not address in this context is the level of autonomy that students may have in influencing and contributing to the decisions that are made at these structures about their education. Furthermore, it would be of benefit to students if they were given the opportunity to articulate the obstacles that they have in their quest for education and the associated facilities required to improve their chances of success. This study particularly explores whether students who participate in governance succeed academically or whether their roles interfere with their academic experiences.

Tinto (1999) points to classroom engagement with their lecturer and peers being critical to their academic achievements. From Tinto's assertion, academic and social integration varies in intensity between different students and is linked to their socio-economic background, their own character and their ability to adapt to university exposure. The way students adjust to the university environment is further compounded by their ability to pay to stay at university residences where they could obtain further support from their peers. Financial challenges, for instance, impact their well-being and access to resources, resulting in reducing their chance to integrate and gain academically from the synergy with their peers. Students in university residences, for instance, would have better access to university resources – for example, the library and computer labs – to afford them a chance to succeed academically. This would be particularly important for those who come from deprived backgrounds and would need much more support, given their vast limitations at home, including a lack of computer equipment and Wi-Fi challenges, compounded by lack of electricity and running water.

This study examines how the SRC members maximise on their governance roles to complement their academic objectives and specifically their ability to balance their commitment to both responsibilities. The analogy of a first-time university student who must adapt to a new environment is appropriate. In terms of this study: a student leader getting involved in governance is expected to take on new responsibilities with extended time commitments, while continuing with their academic commitments. The ability of such students to balance and ensure their roles in governance complement their

studies is the focus of this study. In both instances, the ability of students to adapt will determine whether they cope and successfully navigate between their responsibilities and commitments in these circumstances.

Applying this theory to the SRC members in governance indicates that these students should be better integrated, not only to enable them to perform their duties, but also because this experience results in a positive outcome to their academic pursuits. Governance participation and the academic experience for the SRC should therefore integrate. Some examples to allow for the integration include induction to governance structures, leadership development workshops and institutional support to help them to balance their roles in governance with their academic commitments.

■ 3.3. Astin's theory of involvement

The other theoretical lens that I have adopted in this study for the purposes of examining the academic experience of students who participate in university governance is Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. This study revealed numerous variables that impacted students' university dropout, including the socio-economic circumstances of their family and educational exposure of their parents, secondary education, personal aspirations and prior knowledge about the institutions they enrolled in. Astin emphasises the level of students' exposure and social influence as a precursor to their ability to sustain their educational commitments. In further developing the study on academic persistence, Astin evaluated the relationship between students' involvement in academic and extracurricular activities and the impact this has on their overall academic development. Astin (1999, p. 528) explains that 'student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in their college experience.' Such involvement means that the student, according to Astin (1999, p. 518), 'devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organisations, and frequently interacts with faculty members and other students.' Conversely, uninvolved students therefore participate less in university activities, and this would have an adverse effect on their academic experience. As such, the theory posits that there is a positive correlation between active involvement in extracurricular activity and academic engagement.

In considering students' persistence and, ultimately, graduation, Astin proposed five key variables: investment in physical and emotional energy in the student experience; the continuum of involvement being dependent on the object and time; the effectiveness of policy or practice on increasing student involvement; the involvement of students, which has both qualitative and quantitative features; and the relationship of the amount of learning and development to the capacity of the student's involvement, as shown in Figure 3.2.
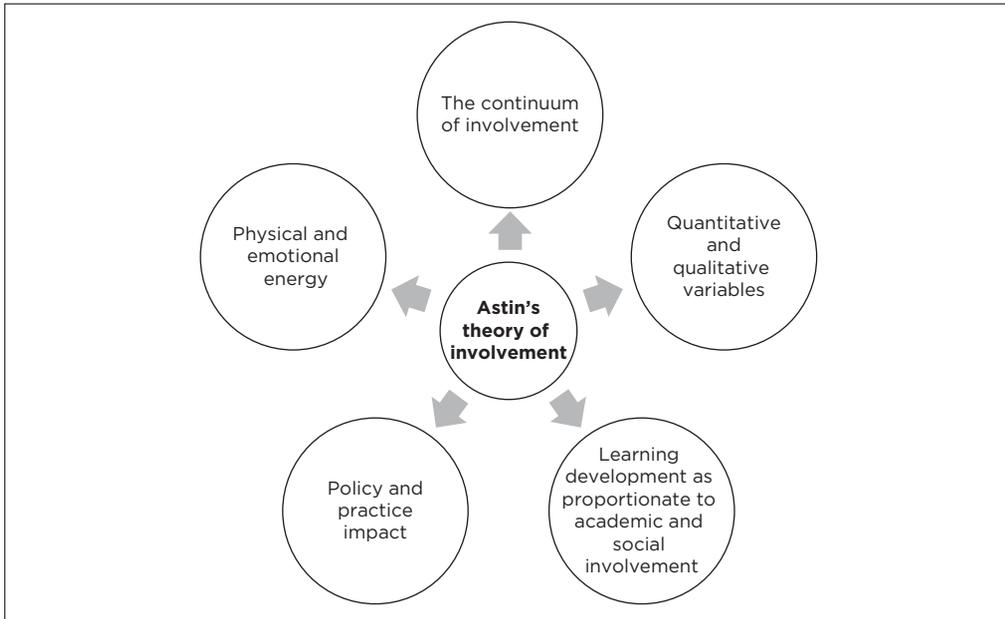
Source: Conceptual model developed from the theory referred to in Astin (1984).
FIGURE 3.2: Astin's theory of involvement.

This theory provides a broad basis by which students' involvement determines their academic success. Astin considers the psychosocial, the quality and quantity aspects, the policy provisions and the extent of involvement in both social and academic aspects as key determinants to academic success. Further, Astin suggests that the involvement of students would be on a continuum.

◼ 3.3.1. Physical and emotional energy

According to Astin (1999), students' physical and emotional states were important considerations regarding their motivation to continue and succeed academically. Therefore, how students perceive the institution and how they respond to it plays an important part in their ability to cope. Students with a positive outlook and the efforts they make are input variables that will impact the outcome of their experience. According to this postulate, students' attitudes and level of improved interaction with supportive peers will contribute to their overall well-being. Whatever experience students have would be predetermined by their unique psychosocial position. This would then propel them towards a negative or positive outlook of their learning and campus life.

■ 3.3.2. The continuum of student involvement

Another variable postulated by Astin is the continuum of student involvement. Students will exhibit different levels of involvement in the type of activities they participate in and the associated time commitment. While the extent and level of involvement by students in campus life may vary from one student to another, Astin suggests that the necessary activities would involve a process that is not static. When students focus on their learning, according to this theory, this should have a positive spin-off on academic achievement. Other students, however, may choose to spend more time in their campus life on other aspects that may not support their academic experience, negatively affecting their success. Astin (1999, p. 523) notes that 'although it might seem that working while attending college takes time and energy away from academic pursuits, part-time employment in an on-campus job actually facilitates retention.' This implies that students who are on campus would select how much time they spend or how they maximise the available facilities to them. At the same time, those who are constrained by their external commitments can still choose to plan better to enable them to balance these responsibilities to attain success. In relation to this study, it would be anticipated that different members of the SRC will cope differently with balancing their governance and study commitments based on their own planning and time allocation to their varied responsibilities. The continuum showed that students' involvement was varied with multifaceted influences, including type of activities, type of engagements and time allocation. In the context of this study, it would be important to determine from the participants what aspects of their governance participation they felt they could gain to determine their academic experience and completion. For Astin, greater student involvement in the decision-making processes means that students have an advantage in improving their understanding of the operations of the university and, more specifically, issues that relate to their academic processes. Applying the argument about full-time employees with limited time for their education made by Astin to this study, undergraduate students involved in governance structures would need to catch up on their academic work after hours and, therefore, appear to be in governance on a full-time basis, either in the formalised meeting structures or where they are required to consult with students to equip them to discharge their advocacy role.

■ 3.3.3. Effectiveness of policy and practice

Other influencing factors for students' success, according to Astin (1999), would be the institutional policies and practices that support students. Universities generally open the libraries until late in the evening, with some actually having a 24-h facility for students. Such an arrangement would allow

students who are working or, in this instance, those involved in governance to have an opportunity to visit the library after regular hours to support their learning process. Another common institutional policy that provides added support to the opened library facility would be the availability of buses to transport students who reside in off-campus student accommodation. Other resources, such as computer labs at student residences and access to Wi-Fi, are additional decisions that institutions would make to support students to continue with their studies and succeed. If, on the other hand, the referred facilities and resources are not provided by institutions, this would constrain students and create differentiation amongst them based on their socio-economic backgrounds. Astin (1999) therefore stressed that an aspect of student success would be much reliant on the university policies and practices. By way of an example, during the lockdown period where students were forced to vacate the very facilities provided by institutions, new policy arrangements had to be made to accommodate remote learning for students. This included the consideration of the provision of laptops, data bundles and additional resources to capacitate students on this new educational modality. It would be anticipated that the SRC, as part of the governance structure, would have been consulted on the specific challenges that students faced to inform the revised policies to support their learning.

3.3.4. Quality and quantity in involvement

The quality and quantity of students' involvement to support their academic experience refer to both the value (quality) of their engagement as well as the amount (quantity) of time and efforts made towards achieving their goal. When students focus and ensure they grasp the teaching provided by their lecturers, that would refer to the quality aspect. Furthermore, where students ensure they attend their lectures and spend time in the library revising what they have been taught, it would suggest investment in the quantitative aspects of their learning. If, on the other hand, students do not make an effort to participate in the learning opportunities and spend little time revising what they have learnt or completing assignments, this would detrimentally affect their ability to complete their studies successfully. Accordingly, Astin points to the necessity for students to ensure both quality and quantity investment to their studies are made to succeed.

From the perspective of the SRC, it is anticipated that their roles in governance are supposed to positively influence their study objectives. However, the less time they spent studying because of being compromised by, the greater their commitment to their governance activities, the lesser would be their chance for academic success. At the same time, it may be argued that the quality of their incorporation in governance could have a positive influence on their educational experiences resulting in the successful completion of their studies.

■ 3.3.5. Relating student learning to the extent of involvement

The essence of Astin's (1984) proposition is the level of commitment and effort that students make towards their academic experiences and, ultimately, towards their graduation. For Astin, the more committed students are in terms of time and effort on activities that would support their goals, the greater would be their likelihood to succeed. However, where students neglect to utilise facilities, such as the library and computer labs, spend minimum time studying and bunk lectures, the most likely outcome would be students dropping out. Astin does stress that student success is determined by their ability to balance their time and be involved in both formal and informal aspects of campus life. Korobova (2012) makes a distinction between the effect of the educational environment on student outcomes, whereas the students' inputs affect both the educational environment and student outcomes.

■ 3.3.6. Application of the theory of involvement

In this theory, governance is specifically viewed as complementary to helping students achieve their objectives because those students involved have better knowledge and understanding of the university and are likely to have access to the academic staff through the various committees participating; for instance, Senate serving as the apex structure for the academic protocols. This, Astin suggests, should help the students have a better grasp of the learning requirements and process and therefore help them to complete their studies successfully. Astin proposes that a time diary should be introduced to calculate the amount of time that the student takes in completing the various tasks and to compare this to the time spent on their academic activities.

■ 3.4. Student integration and retention in South Africa

Based on a 20-year student headcount at HEIs in South Africa, students from the African population rose from 27% in 1986 to 62% by 2005 (Bunting & Cloete 2008). Although this shift may appear to be steady, it falls short of representation within the context of the total South African population, which Bunting (2006) points out represents a participation rate of 12%. Central to the challenges experienced by black students is the insufficiency of the financial support provided by the NSFAS, where students would be compelled to work to augment the shortfall to pay for the cost of transport and food, apart from their study fees (Letseka & Maile 2008). This would no doubt diminish their chance for academic success, given the stress associated with financial difficulties added to the academic demands. Letseka et al.

(2010) pointed out that less than 25% of black students complete their studies in the allocated period of their degrees, with a further report that in 2015 about 47.9% of students did not complete their degrees (Department of Higher Education and Training 2015). It is necessary to explore the reasons for this lack of academic performance leading to a high dropout rate.

A major critic to the theoretical framework utilised in this study is the limitation in addressing specific nuances in relation to student integration at South African HEIs (Jama et al. 2008). Moreover, I and Mkhize (2018) while recognising the contributions of these theories to student retention and attrition, state that there is a dearth in addressing the influence of peer interaction. Within the context of this study this would be very important in terms of the interdependency between the SRC member and ordinary students. In one sense, students rely on the SRC to advocate for their needs and support their educational aspirations. On the other hand, the SRC members rely on their peers to provide them with notes from lectures they are likely to miss while attending governance meetings that are conducted to represent the needs and challenges students face. Interaction amongst students is important to reinforce academic learning while extending to other aspects of student life, which would influence their growth and development, thus ultimately promoting social and academic integration. There continues to be much debate on whether students who are highly involved in campus activities would necessarily succeed academically, as it is further pointed out that while some may attend lectures, study diligently and do their assignments, they may still drop out (Otu & Mkhize 2018). The circles of progression model (Figure 3.3) was developed in response to the South African context and describes the continuum of students from pre-entry (school and family background), the orientation period, exposure to teaching and learning and completion of their studies to what they refer as nontraditional students (Jama et al. 2008). The term nontraditional referred to black students from disadvantaged families and school backgrounds.

The biggest challenge that permeates across all levels of the circles of progression for nontraditional students at HEIs, according to Jama et al. (2008), is financial. The first circle at pre-entry includes the financial impact on students brought about by their family circumstances and the lack of resources at the schools that they attend. According to the model, the lack of knowledge about the financial aid schemes available may constrain the student. Alternatively, at this point the students, because of their socio-economic circumstances, are hopeful that having successfully completed their secondary education, they would be well-placed to be admitted in a university. Factors within this phase which impact their integration to higher education include family circumstances, the school background and the teaching methods they are now exposed to, including language, which could differ from their previous experiences. In phase two, students are socialised
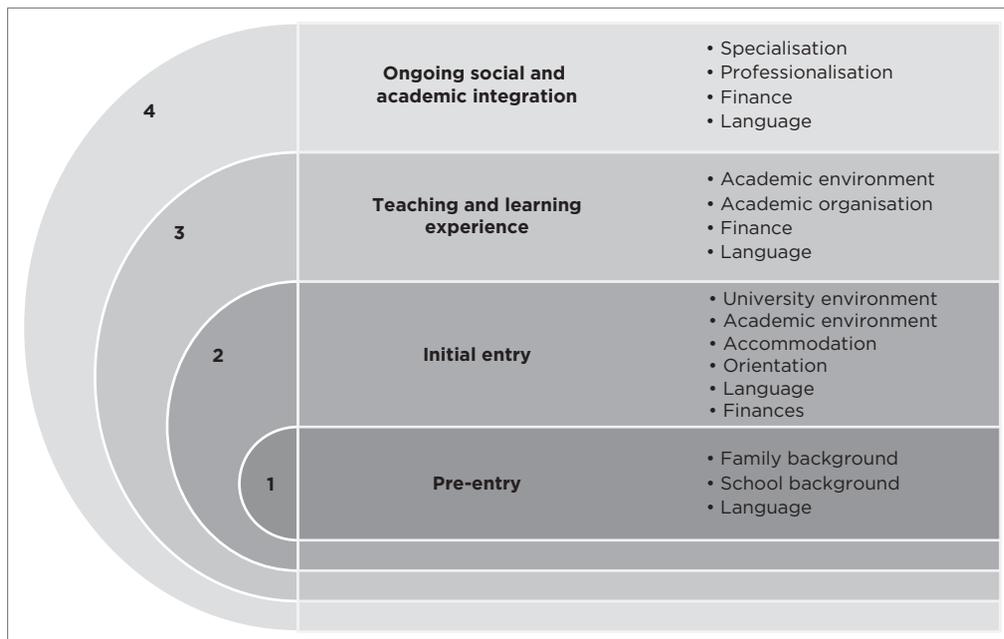
FIGURE 3.3: Circles of progression model.

into the new environment (Jama et al. 2008), although their ability to adapt to the new environment varies amongst students as influenced by their pre-entry socialisation and exposure. For instance, students who come from a background where they are the first generation to attend tertiary institutions are likely to be overwhelmed by this exposure. Further in the new environment, they would have greater needs that their financial limitations preventing them from accessing, including accommodation, transport and food. Students from nontraditional backgrounds are often strained to attend orientation because of transport challenges. During this phase, other students experience psychological strain as a result of separation anxieties from their families, which impacts their ability to integrate into the new university environment. This is similar to the fact asserted by Tinto. Phase three largely refers to academic integration as students begin to participate in lectures. Of major concern for nontraditional students is the language barrier that prevents them from adequately participating or understanding the teaching mode. Financial burdens are prevalent in this phase because of the unaffordability of fees and lack of general student well-being. Precisely for this reason the #FMF movement of 2015 was initiated by students, calling out for free education because of the exclusions related to fee payments. It should be pointed out that the possibility of retention relates largely to how students are able to integrate academically and to adjust student life in general.

This aspect of influence outside the classroom is important to the integration of students. Reliance on peer support plays a major role in students' progression, and continuation to phase four is how students may feel a sense of belonging and their ability to acquire professional skills.

From the description it is clear that the financial limitations for students will permeate in all phases, which has a compounding impact on challenges for food, ability to pay their university fees and books, as well as accommodation. The cost of transport will further add to the financial burden that students faced. Considering all these factors suggests that the intended integration of social and academic variables (Tinto 1975) will be detrimental to the academic experience and ultimately institute success. Regarding the phases described above, the role of the SRC is important not only in facilitating the well-being of students but also ensuring the success of students as a result of their own academic persistence.

While contextualised in South African, the circle of progression model does pull key concepts from both Tinto's integration and Astin's involvement theories in a number of ways. The key influence on social and academic integration (Tinto) is the financial circumstances that arise before students enter the institution and would have an impact on their continuity once registered. Based on the model, the impact of finances has an effect on all circles and, therefore, suggests a continuum of this experience, as theorised by Astin. The institutional impact on students in the second circle was similarly identified by Tinto's reference to the exposure that students have which directs their goals, motivation once they enter the institution and become exposed to the new environment. Astin, on the other hand, refers to policies and procedures that students are exposed to which impact their adaptation. The importance of the learning aspects, as identified by both Tinto and Astin, in how these would influence the continuity and success of students relate directly to the third progression circle. The fourth circle suggests the ongoing integration related to the influence of peers, language and level of integration, dependent on students' participation, which resonates with Astin's continuum suggestion, while aligned with Tinto's assertion that greater involvement by students would yield greater chances of persistence. Overall, the circles of progression accommodate both theoretical foundations of this study within the context where participants were drawn.

■ 3.5. Participation typology

While examining the academic aspects, this study was contextualised to students' participation in university governance. It was therefore useful to identify a theory that could be adopted to examine the extent of participation by the SRC in governance and the associated impact. Arnstein's (1969) participation typology was selected as a model to

examine the extent of student participation. This is based on the illustration of citizen participation in decisions that impact the community, commencing from an inactive state to active involvement. This model is relevant to the study as it provides an understanding of citizenry involvement in relation to their direct interests or issues that impact them. In a similar way, the level of participation that students have in governance would determine the effectiveness of their advocacy for the students they represent. The nature, degree and time in governance participation will determine how this impacted the student academic experience, this being central to my study enquiry.

I have broadened the perspective of these ladders by grouping them into three categories: in the first category, including manipulation and therapy, citizens are passive without any influence on decisions. The second category, including informing, consultation and placation is seen as tokenism, given that the citizens are provided the opportunity to advise without any influence on the final decision made by the power holders. Autonomy increases through the categories, with category three of partnership holding delegated power and control being prevalent.

In interpreting the level of participation by students in governance, Mbambo (2013) states that, in general, students' role is that of tokenism. This, he argues, relates to the short tenure of students and therefore their limitations to influence long-term decisions that could change the conditions and resources provided to students. In many instances, universities develop 10-year infrastructural plans where students who are involved at the time of conceptualisation would not yield any benefit. Students who participate generally would focus on existing issues that impact students during their own tenures and would not really have interest or benefit from long-term projects. Based on Arnstein's theory, the levels that are reviewed in relation to this study include informing, co-option, consultation, placation, voting, negotiation and partnership, as illustrated by Figure 3.4.

■ 3.5.1. Informing

At the level of informing, students are invited to meetings purely to be advised on decisions that have been made or to observe discussions that would culminate in some policy or protocol. At this level, noting few representations, usually limited to the SRC president, there is very little scope for voicing out an opinion or contributing to the discussion. An example of this is the manner in which universities established protocols in response to the call for institutional and business lockdown owed to the spread of COVID-19. At the institution which I worked, for instance, the initial meetings did not even include any student representation because of the emergency nature of the scheduling of meetings. The role of student leaders would be seen at this level
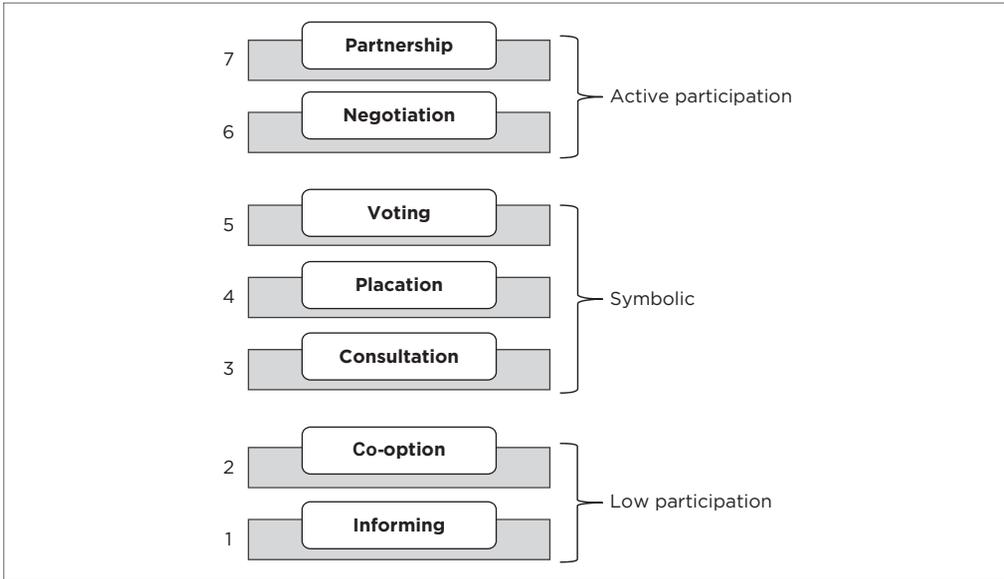
Source: Adapted from Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969).
FIGURE 3.4*: Student Representative Council participation levels in governance.

to be inactive or passive. Arnstein (1969, p. 219) states these meetings are 'one-way communication of providing information, discouraging questions or giving relevant answers.'

◼ 3.5.2. Co-option

Co-option suggests that students would be incorporated to confirm their inclusion in the attendance register to meet the legislative requirements and rubber-stamp the decisions without expressing their views. According to Luescher-Mamashela (2013), student engagement at this level is minimal, with the little contribution they could make largely being limited in understanding or clearly grasping the discussions.

◼ 3.5.3. Consultation

Consultation with students implies that they would be included in meetings to hear their views. However, this does not translate into their opinions being taken seriously or influencing the outcome of the decisions that are made. Where a policy is to be established, students could access and comment; however, the decisions taken may or may not include their contribution.

The second level of consultation in the context of this study refers to participants having to refer matters back to their constituency to seek their

opinion and they would then convey the message at a governance meeting (Klemenčič & Bergan 2015). Ultimately, the final decision on such policies is left with the institutional administration, noting that at Council for instance, student representation is usually confined to two members, the president and secretary-general.

3.5.4. Placation

At the placation level, student representatives are seen to provide an advisory capacity on matters that impact students. Arnstein (1969, p. 217) calls this form of participation tokenism in that 'the have-nots advise, but the power holders have the right to decide', where in the case of students in governance, they would be anticipated to provide guidance. Cele (2008) observes that at the initial stages of cooperative governance in the early 1900s, SRC members were unilaterally appointed and would be issued with their constitutions without providing any input to them. This was seen to be symbolic of aligning with the legislative dispensation. Since then, students are elected in office; however, the majority are elected based on their partisan alignment, which again demonstrates student representatives as guided by their own political principles on what is expected.

3.5.5. Voting

While students are provided with the opportunity to vote the SRC members into office, this did not appear to be extended further once in governance. Sanseviro (2007) and Cele (2008) attribute this constraint to the low representation and, therefore, the inability to meaningfully influence any decision.

3.5.6. Negotiation

The negotiation capacity of students is usually visible at meetings dealing with student affairs and involving the student body or the SRC in its entirety. At these meetings, there is a mutual understanding of the power base of each stakeholder. In South Africa, students have demonstrated their power base through strikes and protests.

3.5.7. Partnership

Partnership means there is respect and recognition of the contribution of each party in governance. An example of such a partnership between students and management could be a forum established to determine the annual student fees wherein both management and student representatives

agree to settle on a particular fee adjustment. In view of participatory democracy brought by the legislative framework in South Africa, the student power in decision-making is increasing, with universities anticipated to include students more actively. The threat of institutional instability as demonstrated in the #FMF campaigns, is an example of a potential disruption, not only to the formalised governance of the institutions but more severely on the academic prospects for the students who participate as would be for the student body they represent. The success of the SRC president in achieving academic cum laude during his incarceration (Pather 2017) during the fee demonstrations in 2016, is an isolated case that contradicted what would normally be negative academic consequences resulting from the sporadic disruptions to the academic programme.

3.5.8. Overall perspective on the student participation ladder

According to the adapted ladder on student participation, there are three broad categories wherein each of the levels are grouped; Klemenčič and Bergan (2015) refer to these as different levels of autonomy. The first level, low participation or passive, while it is likely to have members of the student body, does not have much influence. The symbolic level two involves students who are more involved, although limited to consultation without any final say, which Miller and Nadler (2006) refer to as tokenism. At the level of active participants, students are taken more seriously, with the university administration often making more efforts to incorporate them. The negotiation aspects show that both students and other stakeholders make more efforts to consider each other's views. The level of autonomy by students in governance would appear to be influenced by their experience and representation. Little (2009) asserts that student influence is largely based on the level of representation in governance structures, as depicted in the pyramid of higher education governance referred to in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5 shows the typical university governance structure, the bottom being the programme level and at the apex lying the structure of Council. In relation to the three levels of influence by students, this shows that student representatives would be least active at Council and Senate level, with very few representatives being included. At the school or Faculty committees and committees chaired by senior university officers, it is anticipated that more student representatives would be included; however, it is still not sufficient to yield any influence but rather a symbolic representation. It is expected that student representatives would be most active at the programme level based on the number of participants.
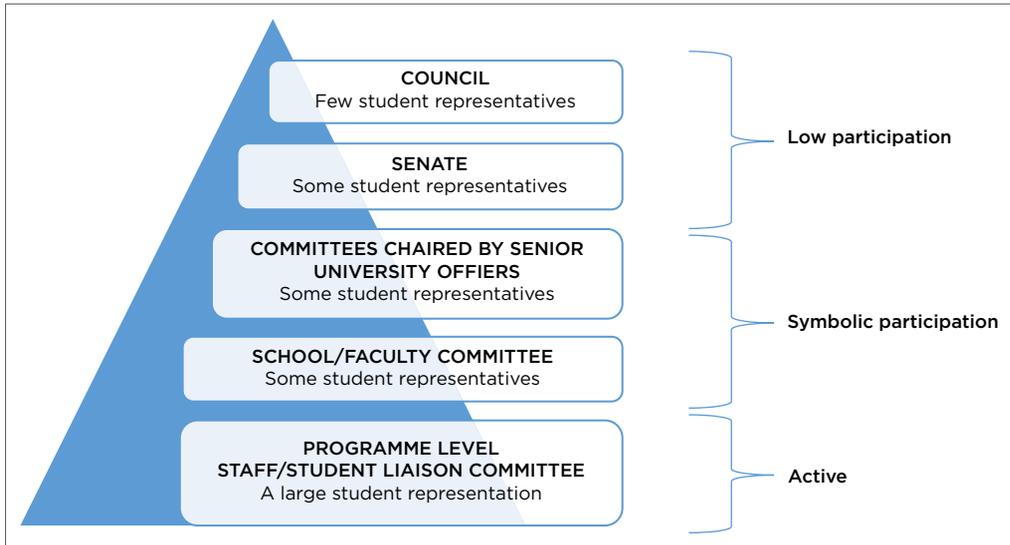
Source: Adapted from Little (2009).

FIGURE 3.5: Higher education governance structures.

■ 3.6. Conclusion

The theories of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1999) and Astin (1972, 1984, 1999) set out to correlate the extracurricular and academic activities of students to determine their academic experiences.

Whereas Tinto (1999) attributes the success of the student to their predisposition, expectations, support, assessment, involvement and feedback, Astin (1984) highlights the quality and quantity of time invested by students in their extracurricular and academic activities to support their learning and overall development. While these theories largely examine the retention of students in university through social and academic integration in general, the conceptual aspects of these theories are adapted to the integration of student involvement in governance (extracurricular activity) into their own academic experiences.

From Tinto's perspective, the background, personal goals, intentions and commitments of student leaders to their academic continuity are linked to their governance responsibilities. However, Tinto does not specifically refer to governance participation as part of the extracurricular aspects for students which could influence their academic achievements, this being the intention of this study. Mannan (2007) posits that:

> [*A*] negative relationship between academic and social integration, which indicates that less integration in the social domain of the university was compensated by higher academic integration leading to student persistence. Similarly, less academic integration might be compensated by higher social integration influencing students to continue to study. (p. 160)

Astin (1999, p. 525) claims 'being academically involved is strongly related with satisfaction with all aspects of college life.' This may be interpreted to mean that as student leaders engage with faculty and networking at decision-making structures, students should derive a positive spin-off to their academic pursuits, including an improved understanding of the institution and how they can influence the interests of students in general and their own. Within the context of this study, Astin's perspective is about the examination of the role of student governance, inter alia, their academic commitments hinging on both the time invested and quality of the exposure to governance structures.

In reviewing the role of students in governance within the participation typology, it would seem that the role of students does need to be more defined in the context of the academic objective. Furthermore, the specific contributions they are expected to make, as well as what they draw from their incorporation, would determine the rung in the ladder where they could be positioned. In understanding the benefits that students derive from representation in governance structure, this study draws on the lived experiences of the SRC. Views from ordinary students would also amplify the alignment between student governance and the academic pursuits that would be envisaged.

I intend to explore the views of the SRC members about their own academic experience while in governance. These theories, although not previously tested specifically on the SRC, are applicable in helping to understand the perspectives of the SRC on their academic experiences, as these are affected by their roles in university governance. Ultimately, student leaders can find their governance roles to be complementary through their engagement in decision-making and networking with academic staff to support their studies or a distraction to their academic pursuits, such as missing lectures in the course of pursuing governance activities.

Research methodology

'The link between your question, your answer, and your data and cases, are all in your hands.' (Hancké 2009)

◼ 4.1. Introduction

The empirical data related to this study were discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, with the latter chapter contextualising this to the South African institutional governance framework. Chapter 3 focused on the theories that underpinned the study.

This enquiry investigates the views of the SRC members about the effect of advocating for students on issues that impede their chances of academic experiences. Academic experience in this study encapsulates the students' academic interest, efforts and progress. However, as participants in the governance of the institutions wherein they are enrolled, the study explores their motivation for participation, their roles and activities and how they perceived the impact of their participation on their academic experiences. To delve deeper into the role of the SRC, an analysis of the constitutions that define how their participation is anticipated to be incorporated in the broader institutional governance framework of universities as defined in each institutional statute and the HEA are explored. These were further supplemented with campus brochures and minutes of meetings, as collected from the SRC interviewed at their respective campuses. Perspectives are

drawn from the SRC members themselves before and during the hashtag movements typically referred as #FMF and #BlackLivesMatter. I also further identified eight ordinary students who posted in this period about their knowledge on their academic experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and how much they felt the SRC was in support of their own academic needs during this period. The second process of interviewing helped to compare opinions from ordinary students on how they perceived the SRC and considered various institutional conditions, inter alia, social media advocacy and the devastation of the pandemic, both of which impacted the learning pedagogy and SRC governance effectiveness.

■ 4.2. Research strategy

In conducting any research, the philosophical position that guides the approach taken is important to inform the design, approach and data-collection methodologies. Creswell (2018) states that such a strategy in the research terminology is referred to as a paradigm. The three key components of paradigms: ontology (assumptions about reality), epistemology (knowledge) and methodology (process) (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007; Guba & Lincoln 1994), are applied differently for the type of research strategy employed.

Ormston et al. (2014) suggest that ontology concerns the question:

> [W]hether or not there is a social reality that exists independently from human conceptions and interpretations and closely related to this, whether there is a shared social reality or only multiple, context-specific ones. (p. 4)

Epistemology refers to the assumptions that the researcher will make about the knowledge in its nature and form, which would then influence how the research is conducted (Cohen et al. 2007). Based on this study objective, the social realities experienced by the participants were explored.

■ 4.3. Research methodology and design

Adopting the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell 2017; Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole 2013; Denzin & Lincoln 2011), this study utilised the qualitative approach to understanding the lived perspectives of the participants selected for the study to extract and unpack their experiences in relation to the academic objectives that they aspired to achieve. In contrast, the quantitative approach (positivist paradigm) would commence with a scientific assumption about the nature of governance or academic engagement and produce a trend on the effect of participation in governance by students; this would help to inform a more generalised positive or negative view from the respondents. The primary intention of this study was to establish how and why the involvement of the SRC in governance affected their studies. My interest when conceptualising

the study was to unravel the influence of SRC members' role in governance to their own academic pursuits. While there are various alternative research approaches that I could have used which would follow an objective process of obtaining the students' academic results from university records, my interest was to hear the views of students directly, largely the SRC members, while drawing on the opinions of some general students who were not in governance. My belief is that the issue of academic experience cannot be a *fait accompli* based on academic marks achieved, however; it should take cognisance of the process and experiences that were at the forefront in the outcome for students, which would determine students' persistence or dropout (Tinto's theory). I believe there are deeper issues relating to how the SRC members navigate their academic interests and those expected by their electorate to fulfil their governance roles. While in this realm of responsibilities, my intention was to understand from the student leaders their own personal commitment, obligation and tensions as a result of their studies; this was contextualised from their inclusion at universities as students. The interpretivist paradigm was adopted to place emphasis on the voice of the participants, the SRC members. In a similar study, Nhlapo (2011) investigated student leadership experiences by approaching the SRC to narrate their lived experiences. Nyundu, Naidoo and Chagonda (2015), on the other hand, focused on understanding how ordinary students identified with the SRC and their perceptions of how the SRC assisted them with their academic progress. The additional concern of the study relates to the impact of student governance on the academic experiences of ordinary students. To this extent, the study combined the views of the SRC and the ordinary students. I selected a cross-case study analysis to draw descriptive views from the target cohort on their situation and experiences in discharging their roles in governance while registered as students. The opinions of the student leadership in their advocacy quest was the main approach used to extract data that were relevant to the research objective. Comparative views from ordinary students who relied on the SRC for their improved academic conditions and experiences were also obtained. Herein I propose that the SRC ought to be role models as student leaders in their academic pursuit. However, the issue at hand is the perspectives of how they progress academically while in pursuit of improving the well-being of students to facilitate their academic success. I also explore factors that would help them or derail their academic experiences. With these goals in mind, it was clear that I could only obtain information directly from the source, for instance the SRC's experiences and the perceptions of students, on how they perceived they could benefit.

◼ 4.3.1. Case study

Simons (2009, p. 21) defines the case study as 'an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of complexities and uniqueness of a particular project,

policy, institution and/or system in a real-life context.' Yin (2014) recommends that the research design must be linked to the purpose and the critical questions in relation to the research intention. The case study sampling design is directly linked to the qualitative approach employed (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2013) to examine the lived experiences of students involved in decision-making within their natural setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and those who are anticipated to benefit from this involvement who were exposed to the defined environment (Yin 2014). While the focus is on the SRC members themselves in terms of their academic experiences, the exposure of the ordinary students to the SRC and student activism, expressed through the varied hashtag movements, assisted in clarifying their effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) in governance in advocating for improved students' academic experiences in general.

According to Stake (1994) and Yin (2003) one of the key reasons for using case studies in research is that the investigator obtains in-depth information about a particular issue within defined boundaries. Case studies are best used to answer the how and why questions, when the objective is to uncover the contextual conditions of the phenomenon and when the boundaries are not clear (Yin 2003). The use of purposive sampling for the initial data source was most appropriate in that I sought to establish the how and why question (Sharma 2017) directly from those who experienced being in university governance structures while registered as students.

The case study explores the lived experiences of people in the real world. Data would be collected through a narrative approach directly from the participants who have experience in the phenomenon under investigation. This differs from the generalisation usually established from statistical findings applied in quantitative research. A multicase study was selected to investigate the same phenomenon at different settings (Creswell 2018). The case, according to Stake (1995), was the unit of focus which, in this study, was the students who participated in governance. Merriam (2009) highlights the importance of setting the parameter (being governance) in the case study. Ultimately, a case study involves the unit of study, the research procedure and the outcome or product (Yin 2013).

The targeted research sample comprised members of the SRC who had participated in at least two governance structures and who, in terms of their entry requirements, would have already studied at the institution and progressed academically, as the obligatory requirement to qualify to be considered in the student governance structure. This means that the sample of participants could extend from the second year of studies to postgraduate levels.

I elected to explore the phenomenon from different universities (multiple cases) to provide a broader view and, where possible, make comparisons

between the participants which may be influenced by the specific institution wherefrom they were drawn. Given that the three institutions make up 50% of the total similar type of historically black universities (HBUs) in South Africa, this was representative to allow for generalisation of findings. Within the interpretivist philosophy, the qualitative investigation is normally used to observe the interpretation of the phenomena within the social context (Denzin & Lincoln 2011) which were the three campuses selected. I obtained first-hand views from 18 SRC members who were involved in governance (context) about their academic experience (phenomenon). The number of participants at each site represented one-third of the total population (the SRC) from where they were drawn.

■ 4.3.2. Snowball sample of student participants

The academic debate relating to the participation of the SRC in governance extends beyond the beneficiation to the student leaders. Crucial in the analysis of the SRC's own academic experience is the alignment of this to their effectiveness in governance. I argue that their role needs to be broadly understood from the vantage point of students who have voted them into office in the first place.

The extension of the research to students was decided upon for three reasons. Firstly, student governance has evolved tremendously since this study was initiated, including the digital evolution of student networking and most recently the forced evacuation of students from the campus to their homes as a result of the COVID-19 regulations and restrictions. The latter would have invariably impacted the SRC's advocacy role, given the state of solitude that all students were now placed in, which did not exempt the SRC. Secondly, the understanding of students' perspectives on how they perceived the SRC benefiting them as participants in university governance would enrich the study by allowing for cross-referencing. Thirdly, it would be interesting to establish, from the students, the veracity of issues that they dealt with and to what extent the SRC could advocate for them, especially given the changed circumstances and location wherefrom they were to continue with their studies.

The ordinary students who were not in the SRC were approached using the snowball sampling technique (Johnson 2014), which is a chain-referral technique normally used when the target sample cannot be easily reached. This was appropriate under the circumstances of my inability to access the students because of university closures during the lockdown period as a result of the unexpected *force majeure* imposed on all institutions. The interviews took place during the second wave of the delta variant in January 2021. Each participant from the snowball technique was obliged to confirm their student number as a condition to participate. This ensured that they were registered at one of the academic institutions as related to the study

focus. As these students had volunteered to take part in this study, I had to be flexible in considering the convenience and preferred time of the prospective participants. The WhatsApp mobile messaging technology was used to generate responses from the participants, recognising that this is a popular mode of communication (Kumar & Sharma 2017; Rosenfeld et al. 2018), especially amongst youth who are very familiar with and can navigate the platform easily (Bosch 2013; Gibson 2020). With the challenges of accessing prospective participants given their distance (not being on campus but at home) and considering the potential difficulties that some of them would have in relation to access to laptops and connectivity, I took the decision to carry out the interviews telephonically, utilising the WhatsApp platform for the convenience of the participants and to enable a quick turnaround (Ngalomba 2020). The uniqueness of WhatsApp as the ubiquitous application included its cost-effectiveness (Maphosa, Dube & Jita 2020) and Internet-based instant messaging (Mistar & Embi 2016). This differed from the short message services that are charged based on meters used; its reliability for sharing files, audio and video interaction; and personal and group registration that are done privately using one's phone number, without the need to join membership with other social platforms (Rosenfeld et al. 2018).

At the level of ordinary students, there are a variety of complex factors that impact their academic experiences, including socio-economic circumstances, financial limitations and level of preparedness for higher education. For the SRC member, further influences would include their political affiliations, their reasoning, suitability and preparedness to participate meaningfully in governance. I investigated 'detailed insights into mechanisms, motives of actors, and constraints they face at particular moments' (Hancké 2009, p. 61).

■ 4.4. Rapport with participants

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) posit that the establishment of a good rapport with the participants is an essential component of a semi-structured interview. This helps the researcher to gain the trust and confidence of the participants that enables them to willingly cooperate during the interview. I heeded this advice by creating a safe and comfortable space for each participant to be able to share their experiences. Rapport was established with the participants by allowing 5–10 minutes at the start of each interview to provide participants the background to the study, confirming the confidential nature of the study and the anonymity of their personal details and obtaining their consent to participate. Participants were also advised that they were at liberty to withdraw from the study at any time during the process of data collection, analysis and final reporting. The confirmed gatekeeper letters from their institutions were shown to them, and finally their approval was sought to record their interviews to ensure that the correct information was obtained.

I also advised them that I would be taking notes to support the recording. The interview was started with each participant providing their overview about themselves, their experience, their level of study and their roles. Most of the interviews were conducted over a four-week period before the second year of the hashtag movements, to avoid the envisaged disruptions as forewarned by the participants of the pilot exercise. Only one member of the initial targeted SRC member was interviewed during the national student strikes.

The same principles were applied for students interviewed telephonically; however, the initial introductory comments were made over the video facility on WhatsApp. Once the introduction was conducted with all protocols observed, participants were asked to switch off their videos to save on the data usage and ensure that connectivity was maintained for the balance of the interviews. In both modes of engagement with participants, the confirmed time allocation was adhered to.

◼ 4.5. Ethical considerations and reporting

According to Cohen et al. (2007), the ethical dilemma in research occurs through the potential conflict between the right to explore the study phenomenon while respecting the participants' own right to privacy, dignity and continued participation in the research. Smythe and Murray (2000) point out that the researcher has a moral obligation to strictly consider the rights of the participants before, during and after interviews. I considered it critical to the success of my research project that I establish trust and remain respectful of the rights of the participants who voluntarily agreed to contribute to this study. Consequently, I adhered to the ethical protocols that I had committed to with the participants at the commencement of each interview, as listed earlier.

◼ 4.5.1. Ethical clearances

Ethical clearance to conduct the study had been obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the university where I studied. With respect to the second cohort, consent was obtained directly from the participants. Given the selected snowball technique used, participants were drawn through the referral approach, and it was therefore difficult to ascertain beforehand which institutions they were registered at and obtain ethical clearance from these institutions.

◼ 4.5.2. Participants' consent

All face-to-face participants signed the informed consent to participate voluntarily in the semi-structured interviews. Participants interviewed telephonically during the lockdown period sent written messages via

WhatsApp before interviews could be scheduled, followed by their voice-recorded commitment to contribute to this study at the commencement of their interviews.

■ 4.5.3. Protection of participants

All participants were assured that the information given by them would not require the disclosure of their identities. Student Representative Council members interviewed physically at their institutions were protected by simply referring to each participant using an abbreviation of the role they played and coded according to the campus wherefrom they were drawn. The names of the students and the institutions, where they confirmed registration to participate in the secondary data source, were also protected by simply denoting the participants as #student1, for instance, referring to the first of eight participants and taking cognisance of the era of hashtags in relation to the time when the data were collected. This signified the students' strong reliance on tweets to communicate their plights during the COVID-19 lockdown when there were limited means of personal contact with each other. Further detail on the anonymity of participants and institutions drawn for this study is provided in the next chapter.

■ 4.6. Document analysis

A qualitative comparative document analysis was adopted to review the academic aspects included in the SRC constitutions at South African universities. This placed reliance on secondary data of approved SRC constitutions. Bowen (2009, p. 27) defined this as 'the systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents both printed and electronic materials.' The purpose of this approach is therefore twofold: to categorise the material to determine its content and segment the findings both central to the research question (Ritchie et. al. 2013). Five key advantages of this approach, as stressed by Bowen (2009), include: (1) the provision of context to the research framework; (2) the ability to identify the focus questions; (3) the provision of supplementary data to other research methods that may be used in the study; (4) documentary evidence may be used as a point of reference to track the changes and development; and (5) to verify and corroborate evidence. Other scholars (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006) have highlighted efficiency in that this is less time-consuming, there is accessibility from public domains, its cost-effectiveness, exactness of information in relation to the search conducted and broader coverage as additional benefits. In this study, access to the SRC constitutions was beneficial in providing further insights (Merriam 2009) into the framework based whereon the SRC are elected and understanding stipulations about their roles and responsibilities. This would assist in

triangulating with the other data sources and would become a reference guide on what would be expected of the students in university governance. While the interviews were the main data source used to provide information on the lived experiences in relation to the studied domain (the SRC) and those impacted by it (the students) to portray their stories, the document analysis of the constitutions provided an additional and complementary background in relation to the study. Yin (2003) suggests that this form of research is limited in that it is written for a specific purpose, cannot always be retrieved and is normally used to support other data sources.

The SRC constitutions at South African universities were accessed through an Internet search and by approaching some of these institutions directly. Firstly, a listing of all the universities in South Africa was obtained through a Google search on the Internet. From this source, individual university websites were captured and accessed. Of the websites reviewed, ten published SRC constitutions were accessed directly from the institutions' websites. Some websites, however, merely referred to the existence of the SRC whose roles were guided by approved SRC constitutions in their respective universities; this confirmed the view of information not always being accessible or being selectively available (Yin 2003).

In the second phase, a further six institutions were approached by email correspondences sent to their registrars and deans of students. Of the institutions approached, four responded positively by providing the constitutions after I had provided them with the letter of confirmation of the ethical clearances that I had obtained to conduct the study.

Because of the method used to access information in relation to the institutions reviewed, taking full account of the *Protection of Personal Information Act of 2020*, it was decided not to identify institutions by their names. Careful consideration had been made regarding protecting each institution, which would require some amendments or reconsideration of the configuration of their SRC structures. Coding was used for the purpose of analysis and discussion in relation to the SRC constitutions at each institution reviewed.

Reference is made to 14 SRC constitutions that were scrutinised on the academic provisions specified as part of the SRC obligations to participate in governance and the academic assistance they provided to students at their institutions. These institutions are referred to as Institutions 1–14.

The evaluation of the SRC constitutions was based on four focal areas: (1) the review of statements in the constitutions in relation to the SRC's objectives and principles articulated at the forefront of their constitutions; (2) the requirements for students to contest for SRC positions, including academic, year of study. or other considerations; (3) how the SRC members execute

their roles and associated time commitment to their governance roles in relation to their academic experiences; and (4) to evaluate the specific requirements of the SRC in relation to the academic objective of each institution.

◼ 4.7. Delimitations

The study was limited to students, with most of the participants drawn from the SRC at three HBUs. This related to the objective of the study to understand the specific academic experiences of particular students during their tenure in university governance. To enhance the research, the views of a few ordinary students were elicited about their exposure, understanding and expectation of the SRC in advancing their academic aspirations. The additional data source of students was limited, as I was unable to access them physically during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions. While this form of data-generation was confining, there was rich information from the students about their anticipation about the role of the SRC in respect of their needs and how this may have been realised by them during the lockdown period associated with the COVID-19 regulations to curb the spread of the pandemic. Information obtained from interviews helped to compare with the views that had been shared by SRC participants and with further review of the SRC constitutions that I had accessed through approaches made at numerous institutions, with a few obtained as published in their websites. This helped in further understanding the value of the role of SRC in governance to support their academic objective as students themselves. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) advise that the process utilises multiple data sources and is called triangulation.

Another study limitation was that the data collection for both cohorts took place during periods of disruptions associated with student movements (SRC participants in university governance) and havoc resulting from the pandemic (ordinary students not involved in governance). In both instances, the academic continuity was disturbed for some students and therefore their views would be directly influenced by their experiences during the interview period. From the discussions, I ascertained that there are many issues that must form part of the investigation on the impact of students' advocacy in governance while continuing with their studies. These include resources, infrastructure and family circumstances, for instance, all centred around the financial constraints experienced by students.

◼ 4.8. Reflexivity in research

Bourke (2014) posits that the researcher's personal values and motivations can influence the research and therefore must be cautioned to avoid this.

Reflexivity, therefore, is the process by which the researcher plans to properly guard against personal bias. For instance, I had to be guarded not to divulge my employment status as in the role that I occupied at the time, I was a senior member of staff who was indirectly responsible for student governance. This was to avoid any researcher or participant hierarchy that could impact on their comfort to participate in the study. It is worth noting that at the institution where I worked, which has the same status as the three sites selected for this study, I had initiated a benchmark project to advance student leaders' exposure to similar institutions in Africa (not including South Africa). The project aimed to expand the understanding of the SRC about their roles in governance, the academic learning processes and how they wove in their dual responsibilities in governance while continuing with their studies. The study therefore would have been most conveniently conducted within the institution where I worked. I opted against it because of caution for the sensitivity around personal biases or familiarity with the participants, and to safeguard any internal influences that could negatively affect my impartiality (Richards 2009) and the quality of my data. It was also important that I constantly reflect on my professional role in relation to the study participants. I systematically utilised a process of reflective journaling throughout the data-collection process (Tunningley 2017), that would assist me to record my own reflections to further avoid any bias.

■ 4.9. Conclusion

The research strategy, approach and data-collection processes that were selected for this study were reported in this chapter. Within this context, consideration of the ethical protocols was also included. In addition to the data collected, triangulation was done with relevant documents pertaining to the study.

Descriptive analysis of the study site and participants

'We have to influence the curriculum discussions, introduction of new courses, examination timetables.' (President of Campus 2 in present study, pers. comm., date unspecified)

■ 5.1. Introduction

Eighteen SRC participants were interviewed. At the onset, I had intended to interview participants holding similar positions across all institutions. However, given the voluntary nature of the study and my dependence on the interest, commitment and availability of the participants to the study, I was compelled to adjust the specific positions at Campus 1. What became apparent at Campus 1 was the clear tension between the SRC members, as spurred on by their political affiliations. I ensured this did not compromise the criteria for their selection, that being their participation in at least one legislated structure of university governance. I could not discount the possibility that the political influences would likely be a dynamic in the participants' understanding and experiences in governance.

In keeping with research's ethical requirements, the institutions selected to conduct the study, together with the participants, are anonymous. The three sites are referred to as Campus 1, Campus 2 and Campus 3. All participants in

the first cohort were referred to as a representative (hereinafter called Rep), focusing on each of them drawn from the SRC of each of the institutions selected for the study. Codes are utilised to identify the students based on the roles they occupied denoted as abbreviations of each portfolio, together with a number to identify the institution wherefrom the participants were drawn: president, deputy president (DP), campus premier (CP), secretary-general (SG), deputy secretary-general (DSG), treasurer (T), academic officer (AO), student services officer (SSO) and projects and internationalisation officer (PIO). The numbers inserted next to the abbreviation were used to locate the participant to the campus wherefrom they were drawn. By way of an example, the two president portfolios drawn from Campus 2 and Campus 3 would be referred to as Rep P2 and Rep P3, respectively. Similarly, the only PIO in the sample was drawn from Campus 3 and is therefore referred as Rep PIO3. As both campus premiers were drawn from Campus 1, the two are further distinguished with letters against their abbreviation and number, as Rep CP1(a) and Rep CP1(b). Therefore, each campus is represented by six participants. This is shown in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1: Study Student Representative Council participants.

Campus	SRC portfolio	Age	Gender	Level of study	Previous experience in the SRC	Political affiliation	Representative interview code
Campus 1	Campus premier	26	Male	Undergraduate	YES	DASO	Rep CP1 (a)
	Campus premier	25	Male	Undergraduate	YES	SASCO	Rep CP1 (b)
	Secretary-general	24	Male	Undergraduate	YES	DASO	Rep SG1
	Treasurer	23	Female	Undergraduate	NO	EFFSC	Rep T1
	Academic officer	22	Female	Undergraduate	NO	EFFSC	Rep AO1
	Student services officer	23	Male	Postgraduate	YES	SASCO	Rep SSO1
Campus 2	President	24	Female	Postgraduate	YES		Rep P2
	Deputy president	21	Female	Undergraduate	NO		Rep DP2
	Secretary-general	22	Male	Undergraduate	YES		Rep SG2
	Deputy secretary-general	23	Male	Postgraduate	YES	SASCO	Rep DSG2
	Treasurer	25	Male	Undergraduate	NO		Rep T2
	Academic officer	24	Male	Postgraduate	YES		Rep AO2
Campus 3	President	32	Male	Postgraduate	YES	SASCO	Rep P3
	Secretary-general	23	Female	Undergraduate	YES		Rep SG3
	Deputy secretary-general	22	Male	Undergraduate	NO	SADESMO	Rep DSG3
	Treasurer	21	Male	Undergraduate	YES	SASCO	Rep T3
	Academic officer	23	Male	Undergraduate	NO		Rep AO3
	Projects internationalisation officer	24	Male	Postgraduate	NO	SADESMO	Rep PIO3

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council; DASO, Democratic Alliance Students' Organisation; SASCO, South African Students' Congress; EFFSC, Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command; SADESMO, South African Democratic Students Movement; DSG, deputy secretaries-general; PIO, projects and internationalisation officer.

In Table 5.1, a breakdown of the SRC demographic profile of the participants from the three universities selected for this study is illustrated. These include their portfolios, gender, age, level of study, prior experience in the SRC and political affiliations. In the case of political affiliations, the majority of the participants (12 out of 18) were affiliated to SASCO, a student body of the ANC, with Campus 2 in particular, all students interviewed being members of SASCO. On the one hand, students who were at the undergraduate level of study were in the majority (12 out of 18), which was likely to affect their ability to navigate their responsibilities in governance which clashed with their obligation to be in class, given such meetings were taking place during the day. On the other hand, the fact that most of the participants (11 out of 19) had prior experience in governance should augur well for their better understanding of the systems and processes of decision-making; this presents a better opportunity for their autonomy and improved engagement with other stakeholders. Overall, the majority of the participants were male (13 out of 18). All participants were in the age category between 21–26-years-old, except one participant aged 32. While he was at the postgraduate level, his own reasoning for being still at university related to student strikes and, in some years, court interdict proceedings to which he had been central. All participants were identified by reference codes using their location and the roles they occupied as part of the research commitment not to disclose their names.

A descriptive analysis of the SRC participants is important to facilitate a deeper understanding of the nature of the roles each of them played and some salient features from their daily responsibilities. This perspective helped to better appreciate the extent of alignment or lack thereof between the governance roles and academic interests of the participants. Additionally, any nuances within each role as may be influenced by the site wherefrom they were drawn or political influences, for instance, could be identified. These elements are aspects that impact the ability of the SRC to navigate between their roles in governance and their academic pursuits.

■ 5.1.1. President

The two SRC presidents (referred to hereinafter as presidents) interviewed were drawn from Campus 2 and Campus 3. Both participants highlighted the fact that they are the SRC's primary accounting officers at their respective institutions. For instance, this entailed approving all SRC activities at their respective institutions and leading discussions with university administrators and during meetings with the study body to which they were accountable as the electorate. As confirmed by both participants, their roles were largely to participate in the university council (the apex decision-making structure), Senate (the highest decision-making in respect of academic issues) and other

institutional structures. The required obligations of the SRC presidents are stated in the SRC constitution of Campus 3:

> 'The President presides at all meetings of the SRC, the SRC Executive Committee, and mass meetings of the Student Body; The President may, in his absence or that of deputy president, delegate this duty to any other member of the SRC; be an ex-officio member of all SRC standing committees; represent students at Senate, Council, Faculty Boards, Senate Standing Committees, Institutional Forum and other structures of the University as provided for by those structures.' (Clause 18.1.1[1–3])

The two president participants confirmed their roles, stating:

> 'We receive the packs for Council a week in advance to enable us to prepare for the meeting. Council takes a whole day, and it is for myself and the secretary-general to raise with the management at these meetings on the issues concerning students. Other discussions, particularly in Council, that we express our opinion on include residency and food insecurity concerns by the students. I am part of the Council subcommittee on economic development.' (Rep P2, 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'I really wish to contribute at these meetings and make sure students are supported. We come from a poor background, with no means to get things like computers to help us with our work. One of the things I can say I achieved this year was to get laptops for final-year students – something that has never been done. What I believe, *emisebenzi yethu iyona eskhulumelayo* [*our work speaks for us*] – I am proud of my achievements.' (Rep P3, 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

These views are consistent with the clause in the SRC constitution of Campus 3, in that both narrated their contributions at council meetings, largely motivated by ensuring that they were the 'voice' for student concerns and challenges. In the case of one representative, this exposure extended to a role in the Economic Development Sub-Committee of Council. The other representative expressed satisfaction about the success in securing computers for students, stressing the importance of understanding the constituency he served. Reflecting on the three years with the unsettling COVID-19 State of Emergency that forced students off campuses, having computers was overwhelmingly significant, as students were compelled to continue their studies remotely through online connectivity. Both displayed a strong sense of commitment to their roles in governance, indicating that they were active in these roles to avoid any disturbances with their own academic activities and aspirations, which would be largely attributable to their level of study and prior experience in the SRC.

I was not successful in my quest to interview the third president from Campus 1, despite our prior email confirmations on the date and time. The overall schedule of interviews needed to be confirmed before I could plan my travel to the campus. As I later gathered, the participation of the president was very sensitive in that he was a SASCO member, while his DP was a DASO member.

He highlighted the fact that, as she had not been invited by the president to participate in the interviews, he took a decision to withdraw to avoid any tensions with his deputy who had not been included in the list. The influence of the political affiliations of each of the SRC members is discussed later in the chapter; participants use close allegiances and reliance from the political parties to support their election campaigns.

◼ 5.1.2. Deputy president

One DP participant was interviewed and drawn from Campus 2. In this portfolio, she confirmed being a member of the SRC executive and further as a proxy to the president when she was not available to attend governance meetings. The SRC constitution of Campus 2, Schedule B specifies the role of the DP:

> '[*T*]o be the deputy chief executive officer of the SRC; deputise for the president when he [*or*] she is unavailable or unable to perform his [*or*] her functions; be responsible for constitutional and policy affairs of the SRC; ensure compliance with university policies, procedures and guidelines; facilitate proposed amendments to the SRC constitution.' (Rep DP2, 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

This participant was expected to understand the institutional policies, procedures and politics to enable her to perform her duties. She advised that her inclusion in the SRC was because of her perceived strength of character, organisational skills and academic record, stating:

> 'I didn't want to be in the SRC. I wanted to be in the Central Housing Committee like last year, but they saw something bigger and more capabilities in me. The deployment committee decided I should be a candidate for the SRC. I am judged by my leadership, previous involvement in the housing committee and stepping up during the manifesto period sealed the deal for me. Before that, they didn't know me because I was a very quiet person.' (Rep DP2, 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Based on this comment, politics clearly played a significant role and had a significant influence on the participants. Elaborating further, she states:

> 'I do anything and everything that the president does. I have to contribute to ensuring that students comply with university policies, procedures and guidelines […] On a better day, like now, I can plan events with the rest of the team. For example, Dischem donated about 2000 sanitary towels for female students. You know, I have always had an issue with having to buy these, as we need to restore the dignity of women. We should not be compromised with our studies because of our feminine issues; we need to be supported to protect ourselves and continue as normal despite our condition each month.' (Rep DP2, 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Part of the SRC's responsibility includes ensuring students comply with the university policies and procedures. From this, I can assume a level of responsibility not only to students but to the university itself. The comment

is attributed to Laosebikan-Buggs (2006), that the SRC provides the communication link between university management and students and Menon (2003) concludes that this results in a positive university environment. Despite her description of her busy role, this participant identified cooling-off periods that she used to initiate new projects that would benefit students. Her intuition about the needs of students would help to improve their overall university experiences. These, she indicated, would ensure issues that disturb students from their academic focus would be addressed and resolved.

The role of the DP had been confirmed by all institutions. However, a clear distinction of Campus 1 from the other two campuses was threefold: firstly, the political tensions between the members of the SRC aligned with different political organisations as evident, made worse by the president and DP not being aligned with the same political party. This increased the tensions between them, including policy direction by this SRC and, as I observed, the change in interest to participate in this study. Secondly, this campus was structured as a federal system, where each of its campuses had their own SRC, which was likely to worsen the political tensions between them as each was led by a different student group who followed their own political policies. This would likely deter participation for the benefit of students and place a level of sacrifice on their own academic experience. This differed from the other two institutions that operated as a unitary system, meaning a single SRC structure. I noted that Campus 3, while operating as a unitary system, had two campuses, albeit the smaller location being seen as a satellite campus. At Campus 1, as linked with the federal system, there were two CPs, one in each of the two campuses. From the discussions with the participants at Campus 1, I observed that the role of the CP was similar to that of the DP in that they all would stand in for the president in the event they were not available.

◼ 5.1.3. Campus premiers

Two representatives elected as CPs in the SRC were interviewed for this study. Both participants were drawn from Campus 1 and were undergraduate male students. For Rep CP1(a), this role entailed being the most senior SRC representative at his campus and as a substitute for the SRC president in council meetings. The tensions between Rep CP1(a) and Rep CP1(b) from the same institution were likely to prevail, as they each came from different political affiliations. I posed the question of whether his role differed from the president, to which the response was:

> 'Not at all, in fact, they're the same [...] I am responsible for the policies and discussions of the SRC here. Nothing can be done by and with the SRC members here without my agreement. I sit in the campus leadership meetings with management and lead student issues.' (Rep CP1a, 26-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The leadership issues identified by two participants in their testimonies were similar to the perspectives raised by Rep DP2 (21-year-old female undergraduate, ex-SCR member). From the SRC constitution of Campus 1, the role of the campus premier was described as:

> [*T*]he Campus Premier (Campus Council Premier) shall be the chairperson of the Campus Council; shall be responsible for the management of the SRC office in a particular campus; shall deputise the President in his/her absence in the Central Executive Committee of the SRC; shall assume overall responsibility for ensuring the resolutions of the Campus Council are executed; and to implement decisions of the Executive where such decisions do not arise from resolutions of the Campus Council, until such decisions are ratified by the Campus Council. (Clause 28.1.1, subsections 1–4)

The conversations with the campus premiers pointed to a strong emphasis on their governance activities. The description of the CP's role implied that the DP at the same campus was likely to conflict with the CP. Given the political difference, with the campus being a stronghold of SASCO, the DP appeared to be side-lined. In the conversations with both campus premiers, the focus appeared to be on the political tension, with both noncommittal about their academic performance as linked to the seniority of their roles and, by implication, their participation in governance.

◼ 5.1.4. Secretary-general

The role of the SG was to note minutes of all meetings of the SRC, noting minutes of all their meetings, incorporating both the Executive Committee of the SRC and the general meetings. Clause 18.3.1 of Campus 3's SRC constitution confirmed the integrated administrative role of the SG to be:

> The chief operations and administration officer of the SRC; the chief custodian of all assets and documents of the SRC; Circulate on time, notices, agendas, and minutes to all members of the SRC with persons or bodies outside the SRC; responsible for the processing of all correspondence of the SRC with persons or bodies outside the SRC. (subsections 1–4)

Campus 1 is stipulated in Clause 27.4 of the constitution, where they:

> Shall be responsible for all Student Governance correspondence; shall take minutes of the meetings with the institution management and any other university stakeholder; shall work together with the campus secretary in terms of the campus correspondence issues and meetings; shall be an ex-officio member of the campus council; shall represent the SRC in Senate, Institutional Forum, Council and other statutory bodies with the institution. (subsections 1–5)

A review of the constitutional clauses above suggests that the SG in each institution is a busy portfolio. This involvement was likely to impact their academic lives, with added pressure for those pursuing undergraduate studies. The obligation to attend most of the statutory meetings, evidenced at Campus 2, meant that the SG would probably miss many classes, notably as

an undergraduate, to fulfil his role in governance. This reiterates the point made by the participants that the greater the number of statutory meetings attended, the greater the likelihood of a negative impact on class attendance, especially noting that the time to attend to such meetings coincided with their expected lecture commitments.

■ 5.1.5. Deputy secretary-general

Two deputy secretaries-general from Campus 2 and Campus 3 were interviewed for this study. Both participants informed me that their roles were largely to deputise for their secretaries-general. This necessitated the fact that they are updated about SRC activities as administrators to effectively perform their roles. Both participants further confirmed being members of the Executive Committee of their SRCs. Based on their level of study, the ability to navigate their roles in governance with their commitments would differ in that one of them was at undergraduate level (CP 3). The burden would appear to be less severe for the DSG from Campus 3, based on their level of study and the likelihood that previous SRC experience should place him with greater knowledge of the university operations.

Tension between the DSG and the SG was evident at Campus 3. The DSG admitted that this tension was linked to their different partisan affiliations. According to him, this impacted their academic experiences because they spent too much time arguing and debating their performance in the SRC, instead of getting on with their governance responsibilities. This would inevitably affect their individual academic performance. He commented:

> 'Sometimes there are internal squabbles, because based on political affiliation which delays our work while we carry on spending a lot of hours arguing [...] But sometimes we do put our differences aside and iron it for the better, to fully represent students. Like maybe if you are going to go to a mass meeting you are going to be united, because you want to represent students at the end of the day. Maybe if you are going to an SRC management meeting, obviously you must go with the interest of the students and put our personal differences aside.' (Rep DSG3, 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

These sentiments suggest an important commitment by the SRC members to set aside their personal differences, especially when publicly engaging with students.

At Campus 2, the DSG confirmed that he worked well with the SG, stating:

> 'When the SG is not there, I have to step in; he is a social work student and always in practicals, so most of the time I step in, for example, every Wednesday and Thursdays. He only comes here after hours if there is an urgent matter that he needs to attend.' (Rep DSG2, 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

From these comments, it is evident that the DSG, doing postgraduate and with prior SRC work, was at an advantage in understanding the

institutional issues that impact the role of the SRC. These comments show a coordinated partnership between the SG and DSG which was effective in ensuring the overall responsibilities of the secretarial portfolio were effectively managed.

5.1.6. Treasurer

The treasurers of all institutions selected responded affirmatively to participate in the study. Each treasurer participated in the institutional forum and subcommittee of student affairs. At Campus 2, the treasurer further participated in Senate. This involvement in these committees fitted appropriately with the set criteria for participation in the study. All participants attested that their roles as treasurers involved preparing the SRC budget, approving payments and monitoring the expenditure of the SRC closely. Rep T2 stated, 'I am expected to prepare a financial report on a quarterly basis.' According to the *Campus 2 constitution, Schedule B, subsection E (7–8)*, the treasurer is to 'compile and present a monthly financial statement to the SRC; prepare and present an audited financial statement annually to the annual general meeting (AGM).' This implied that more time was necessary to prepare these reports, which would have a negative consequence for their studies. This compromised this participant as an undergraduate student who was expected to attend lectures and seminars scheduled within the same period. This points to a serious tension that students faced when torn between their governance roles and their studies.

5.1.7. Academic officer

The roles of this office were described:

> 'This is the worst office, as you have registration, readmission, you have learners that did not apply, and I must go and negotiate for them with admissions. While I am busy with that, I will be doing re-admissions where I must see that people can be re-admitted and not expelled. On a day-to-day basis I am dealing with somebody who has a problem with their lecturer or maybe they have a query around their marks, I must assist them. I have cases every day; however, I schedule them properly, whereby I will email the person whose case I received today to schedule them for tomorrow or at the next available opportunity.' (Rep AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

This response demonstrates his attitude and keenness to juggle his responsibilities with his academic commitments as a postgraduate student, admitting to the difficulties experienced by those at the undergraduate level of study. A great deal of personal sacrifice on the academic side is confirmed:

> 'I am doing education. It is hectic. It is difficult, because now I'm having more baggage on my shoulders. Students don't understand, they want me to see to their needs before mine.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

■ 5.1.8. Additional participants interviewed

As a result of voluntary participation, not all members of the SRC approached for the study selected to participate. It was, however, important that each institution has equal representation. To this extent, I identified two additional members from Campus 1 and Campus 3 to replace those who chose not to participate. These were Rep SSO1 from Campus 1 and Rep PIO3 from Campus 3. Both participants were responsible for coordinating projects and services directed at international students as referred to in clause 18.7.1.3 of Campus 3's and clause 28.3.2. of Campus 1's SRC constitutions. These participants highlighted their roles:

> 'I have to represent mostly international students, the disabled students and short courses or workshops for the SRC are under my office [...] For me, I must review policy documents and check amendment gaps especially those that affect students that I am representing. All the complaints of international students, I must table them to the relevant stakeholders.' (Rep SSO1, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'I look after all the international students – in terms of their needs, their relationships with local students, their acceptances by both students and lecturers, their problems with their study permits.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

There are similarities between the above participants, who are largely responsible for all matters pertaining to international students. While both were not part of the SRC Executive Committee, both participated in Senate, a statutory committee. As such, both participants qualified to be incorporated in this study.

■ 5.2. Prior experience in governance

I established from the consent forms signed by participations at the start of their interview that most of the participants had previous experience. This is where I would understand each profile from the information they shared. A summation is listed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 illustrates the fact that ten out of 18 SRC members interviewed had prior experience in some form or another in student activities, although in the case of Reps AO1, SSO1, such experience was at entry-level in their view. In reading Table 5.2 in conjunction with Table 5.1 (which provides a summation of the level of study of each participant), it is clear that the SRC members who were at the postgraduate level of study coupled with their prior experiences in governance (Reps P2, P3, PIO3) had the maximum advantage, while those at the undergraduate level coupled with no experience in governance had the least advantage (Reps DSG3, T1, AO1, SSO1) in achieving the dual commitment to governance and their studies. Although Rep T1 and DP2 were undergraduates, what helped them cope was that the

TABLE 5.2: Previous governance participation.

Positions	Campus 1	Campus 2	Campus 3	Excerpts
President	–	👍	👍	'I was first treasurer, then reshuffled to monitoring and information officer, deputy SRC president before I became president.' (Rep P3)
Deputy president	–	👍	–	'With the experience of last year, my contribution to students is much better because I understand the system.' (Rep DP2)
Campus premier	👍👍	–	–	'Having been the SRC before, I know the politics of Council and how to challenge them.' (Rep CP[a])
Secretary-general	👍	👍	👍	'When I was in student parliament, this gave me an idea to contribute in governance.' (Rep SG2)
Deputy secretary-general		👎	👎	'It's very difficult to grasp some of the concepts without experience.' (Rep DSG2)
Treasurer	👎	👍	👎	'What helps is my studies, otherwise I would not cope.' (Rep T3)
Academic officer	👎	👎	👎	'I was helping in house committees, and I was a house tutor.' (Rep AO1)
Student services officer	👎	–	–	'This position and academic officer are entry-level for those who have not won politically.' (Rep SSO1)
Projects and internationalisation officer	–	–	👍	'Without the experience you cannot really be the "voice" for students. It is important to have been in the SRC before.' (Rep PIO3)

Source: Author's own work. The 'like' thumbs-up and 'dislike' thumbs-down vector icons by AdamStanislavpublished under the Creative Commons CC-0 public domain license from GoodFreePhotos, viewed 10 December 2022. <https://www.goodfreephotos.com/vector-images/thumbs-up-vector-art.png.php>
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council; Rep, representative; Organisation; P, president; DP, deputy president; CP, campus premier; SG, secretary-general; DSG, deputy secretary-general; T, treasurer; AO, academic officer; SSO, student services officer; PIO, projects and internationalisation officer.

courses they studied aligned well with the roles they occupied, and this was further supported by the fact that they were in their third years of study and had prior experience in governance.

Both treasurers at Campus 1 and Campus 3, had not held governance roles previously. According to Rep SSO1, the roles of the AO and student services officer were entry-level positions where students who occupied these roles were drawn from organisations that had not won the elections. For this reason, students who occupied these roles were unlikely to have previous governance experience. As previously highlighted (cf. Table 5.1), the underlying push to occupy seats in the SRC was from their political affiliations, which implies a lesser commitment to their studies, which would contradict their SRC constitutions that they are expected to commit to. It further suggests that the academic precondition for entry had no effect. Sometimes the SRC 'juniors' could be compelled to substitute for seniors in meetings, for example, in the case of the secretaries-general and treasurers from Campus 1 and Campus 3, whose roles were classified to be critical in the SRC structures, yet

they could face a challenge in fulfilling their study commitment as undergraduates because of the clash of these meetings with their anticipated class attendance. For students at undergraduate levels of study, their prior involvement in governance could assist them in balancing their responsibilities in governance with their studies. There was a clear contestation between energies required as seasoned SRC participants and the academic pressure for those who were undergraduates.

■ 5.3. Research sites

A brief description of the three campuses wherefrom the participants were drawn forms the basis of this section.

■ 5.3.1. Campus 1

The SRC offices of Campus 1 were small, mostly shared spaces between the SRC members. These offices were scattered in different corridors. Inside each office, a political poster of the ANC was stuck on the wall, with no visible noticeboard linked to the SRC. While I had been directed to the second floor of the student union, where the offices are located, I struggled to identify these offices as there was no signage placed on the doors to confirm that these were the SRC offices. Although I had prescheduled appointments with the SRC at Campus 1, the only participant who arrived, some three hours late, was Rep CP1(a). During my interview with Rep AO1, she attested to the lack of resources and organisation by the SRC at these premises, concluding that '[w]e are not given the tools to participate properly, yet the constitution says we must participate. But how we do this, who knows?' Importantly the environment was equally important for the success of achieving one's academic goals as expressed by this participant:

> 'Oh yes, I sit in Senate where they discuss academic issues. This is my portfolio, remember. However, for me, it is just to listen to the professors. It is very difficult, really, to participate as mostly all the senior members of the university are there, and it can be very scary. The other thing – if anyone from the SRC can voice an opinion there, it should be either the president or the secretary-general.' (Rep AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

The above sentiments depict some uneasiness about the spending of time at Senate and yet not being able to express their views in this forum where academic issues were central to the discussion. This is contrary to the requirements specified in clause 28.9.2 of the SRC constitution that the AO 'shall represent the SRC in the Senate,' and is therefore anticipated to advocate on student issues.

While the political affiliations were reported previously (cf. Table 5.1), a deeper analysis of the effect of this arrangement is conducted for Campus 1, where the prevalence of the tensions associated with these allegiances was evident.

TABLE 5.3: Campus 1 Student Representative Council political affiliations.

Representative	Code	Political affiliation
Campus premier	Rep CP1(a)	DASO
Campus premier	Rep CP1(b)	SASCO
Secretary-general	Rep SG1	SASCO
Treasurer	Rep T1	EFFSC
Academic officer	Rep AO1	EFFSC
Student services officer	Rep SSO1	SASCO

Source: Author's own work.
Key: DASO, Democratic Alliance Students' Organisation; SASCO, South African Students' Congress; EFFSC, Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command.

Table 5.3 provides the participants from Campus 1. From this list, it is observed that political contestation was rife, resulting in an almost even representation of members drawn from different political affiliations. This list had to be amended from the original list, as advised by Rep CP1(a), because of the high political tension. I was advised by Rep CP1(a) about each of the participants' political affiliations, further suggesting this to be the reason for the failure by some of the targeted participants to honour their scheduled interviews. He further confirmed that he had been asked by the president to attend an interview with me at short notice that same morning. This resulted in Rep CP1(a) as the only participant in my study from Campus 1 interviewed on the first day. Of the final list of participants, three from the original portfolios selected, namely the SG, treasurer and SSO, attended the interviews on the second day. Two campus premiers and an AO interviewed were approached using a snowball methodology where the SRC president convinced them to participate; highlighting that failure to do so would not be a good reflection on the SRC as a whole, particularly as I had travelled from another province specifically for these interviews that he had confirmed with me beforehand. Each of the participants volunteered their partisanship without any unethical probing from my side during their interviews, which clearly indicated its influence on their positionality in discharging their roles, as one participant confirmed:

> 'I am a SASCO deployee in good standing. If SASCO wins the SRC elections 100%, we would choose deployees completely. But unfortunately, this year there was a close contest with DASO members, and at this campus the campus premier is also there. I think the president will avoid you because of the political tension he has with the deputy president, who comes from DASO. Last year she was the president [...] its tough here. The SRC does not speak with one voice, as we all represent our own constituencies. At least the most important portfolios in the SRC executive are mostly SASCO members.' (Rep SSO2, a 23-year-old postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Arguably, partisanship interfered not only with daily activities but extended to their learning process. The political influence is further explained:

> 'There are four different political affiliated student organisations. There is SASCO, PASMA, EFFSC and DASO. For example, last year there was no progress in the SRC because we were fighting a lot of battles within the SRC. Last year the institutional

SRC was led by DASO, as the president was from that organisation. This affected my own studies, as I was not allowed to write a test I had missed due to attending one of these meetings where we were arguing about the university policy on residence allocation for students.' (Rep CP 1[b], a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

From the responses, it was evident that allegiance to political parties was strong, including post-elections, noting the continued influence of the political parties on the daily work of the SRC, often leading to infighting amongst them based on their affiliations, as communicated:

'I was initially the deputy secretary-general. Because of the fighting between SASCO and DASO representatives, the secretary-general who was deployed by DASO resigned. I then took over as the secretary-general about three months after this SRC had been inaugurated.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

It appears from these perspectives that politics was central to their lives. However, these comments were made in relation to their contestation and approach to their governance roles, without any specification on the likely impact on their academic progress.

■ 5.3.2. Campus 2

The first observation I made at Campus 2 was that all members of the Executive Committee, namely the president, DP, SG, treasurer and AO, had their own offices. In the case of the SG, however, this was shared with the DSG, largely, as they worked closely, and the one participant in deputising for the other expected to shadow him to keep abreast with all activities. A participant stated:

'We are given a computer to make sure our administration is up to date, each of the executives produce a report about their portfolios each quarter. We are also allowed to use these computers to catch up with our study assignments and communicate with students.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The SG shared an office with his deputy, which provided the advantage of sharing notes and supporting each other. For those not in governance structures but in the student body, they utilised a common room. At the time of my visit, two students were talking to the sports and recreational officer about a soccer fixture that had been planned for the week of my interviews. The referred officer printed a programme indicating the teams, date and time of matches. On the noticeboards, I observed a schedule of all the SRC members with the statutory committees each participated in. Table 5.4 summarises the statutory committees in which each of the participants in this study were involved. These arrangements clearly show that the SRC at Campus 2 was highly organised.

TABLE 5.4: Campus 2 Student Representative Council statutory committee participation.

Statutory committee	SRC representatives
Council	President; secretary-general
Executive Committee of Council	President
Tender Committee of Council	Deputy president
Honorary Degree Committee	President; academic officer
Student Development and Support Services	President; secretary-general
Senate	President; secretary-general; deputy president; deputy secretary-general; academic officer; student services officer; treasurer
Teaching and Learning Committee	Secretary-general, treasurer
Senate Academic Planning Committee	Academic officer, secretary-general
Executive Committee of Senate	Secretary-general
Senate International Relations Committee	Deputy president; student services officer
Senate Scholarships and Fellowship Committee	Deputy president
institutional forum	President; secretary-general; treasurer
Senior Appointment Committee of Council	Secretary-general

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

The extensive SRC activity at this campus was well recorded, given this schedule pasted on their notice board. From Table 5.4, it is glaring to see that the SG participated in the highest number of committees, totalling seven of the 13 committees, followed by the president with six committees. It appears that those who were largely involved in governance, especially those at the undergraduate level, would likely compromise their academic timetable. The concern was articulated by the president:

> 'For the past two terms I can see that it doesn't really work for an SRC member to be an undergraduate student. At the postgraduate level, you are at least able to manage it – for instance, at master's level, students are not attending lectures. When you are in undergrad, you attend a lot of lectures, tutorials, a lot of group assignments. Some are still experiencing a lot of changes, especially if in second year, having only been away from high school for a short time. There are a lot of things that you are still learning about the university itself, how to position yourself in order to pass your books but also be active in extracurricular activities such as the SRC.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The extensive pressure from participating in governance can have dire academic consequences for the students, as posited by Tinto's integration theory. In the case of the SG, the fact that he was at the undergraduate level of study and yet involved in the highest number of SRC committees was likely to affect his studies negatively. The difficulties of participation in governance while being an undergraduate student are evident:

> 'If I was doing honours or a postgraduate degree, it would be much easier for me to cope with my studies. With the pressure I have with my studies, I don't attend all the meetings. I think, though, if I did, it would be much easier to engage

with the professors. Now, in my class, we are 200 students, and so there's not much opportunity to interact with our lecturer.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

In the context of the academic pressure students experienced, the involvement in governance negated the intended academic success in terms of academic and social integration, as posited by Tinto (1987). Similarly, this disproves Astin's (1984) theory of involvement that decision-making should positively support academic development. Both theories are limited in not providing guidelines on the balance necessary between the two types of student engagement to achieve academic excellence. A distinctive feature at this institution, as noted in Table 5.4, is the high representation of SRC members in Senate. It would be expected that their presence should provide greater input and influence on the academic decisions in the highest governance authority on academic issues. This would address the concern raised by Bergan (2003) that where student representation in committees was small, their value and impact on their academic experience was diminished. This is documented as an objective of the SRC in their constitutions. Clause 3.1.10 of the SRC constitution of Campus 2 confirmed a critical objective of the SRC was to 'promote academic diligence and excellence among students.' However, for the students participating, it seemed their focus compromised their academic commitments. This is elaborated further in terms of what students hoped to gain from participating and specifically their views on its impact.

The SRC standing committees in Campus 2 are reported in their constitution:

- Secretariat Treasury
- Academic Affairs Committee
- Disciplinary Committee
- Public Relations and Media
- Policy and Transformation
- Constitution and Regulations
- Community Outreach
- Recreation and Culture
- Gender and Security
- And any other committee that might be deemed necessary. (clause 9.7)

Campus 2 displayed this list of committees on their noticeboards, without any dates stipulated. In our discussion, the DSG advised that members of the committees met as required, explaining:

'We set up different committees that are linked to our portfolios. It allows students to know where and when to address issues of concern. For example, we deal with the minutes of meetings. This committee will discuss minutes from the various meetings. Students are also invited to join any of the committees to address problems or

suggestions that are directly linked to that committee.' (Rep DSG2, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Various documents were shared with me during my interviews with Campus 2 representatives related to SRC activities that this participant had been involved in. In my opinion, Campus 2 shows that this SRC was efficient, with the timetable helping not only members of the SRC in covering for each other but also for student walk-ins to see when each representative was available for student consultations. A similar chart was displayed in one of the participants' offices, which she constantly referred to during her interview, noting:

> 'This year I have already been in three meetings each of Council, Exco of Council, Institutional Forum, Senate and the Student Development Subcommittee of Council and the Finance Committee of Council. Other members also participate in some of these committees; for instance, three SRC members sat in the weekly student development meetings at the level of the Student Affairs Department, which I am part of. At Senate there are about eight of us represented, which makes it easier for us to advocate for the students there. We are directly involved and live with students, and therefore it is important for us to participate in the decision-making process around student issues.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

This lengthy response affirms a hectic schedule envisaged for the SRC at Campus 2. At least eight SRC members participated in Senate, therefore implying that they would have a much stronger influence and probably have a say in decisions taken which would be directly linked to their academic experiences, this notably being the highest decision-making structure on academic matters. It would further be anticipated that these participants could learn and have a deeper understanding of various issues that impacted students' academic experiences from their close engagements with faculty representatives.

Some participants' choices of studies were linked with the portfolios they occupied in governance. For instance, as advised by a participant, the treasurer post would usually be occupied by someone in economic, management science, commercial or budgeting studies to fully discharge their roles. The SRC made efforts to connect with management, as highlighted:

> 'I have a prescheduled weekly meeting with the deputy vice-chancellor [*of*] academics, usually on Fridays. The objective of this meeting is to compare notes and make sure the student perspectives are considered in the university decisions about its operation, especially in matters related to student needs and support.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The weekly meetings that this participant had with the deputy vice-chancellor were used to clarify issues pertaining to students and seeking guidance, the latter of which resulted in her award of a scholarship to study overseas.

■ 5.3.3. Campus 3

The SRC offices at Campus 3 were positioned near the student union but on a separate university site. I observed that, similar to Campus 1, these offices were small. The SRC building was made up of a private office for the SRC president and a second office which any other member used on a first-come basis for meetings. The alternate venue for meetings, as the president confirmed, was their boardroom. This was where I ultimately met with the other five SRC members. The SRC offices at this campus were poorly resourced, with no visible books or files to indicate this to be an SRC boardroom, where I would have expected a hive of activity. As in the case of the other office pointed to me as an alternate meeting venue, there was also no computer or any form of resources that one could link to the SRC. The walls were dirty, with no sign of a notice board. In the SRC president's office I noticed a telephone which he pulled out of a drawer when we entered. He locked this to avoid abuse.

Despite the apparent disorder at Campus 3, I was impressed by the reliability of the students with whom I had prior agreements in honouring their appointments with me. Ironically, Rep P3, their leader, arrived late for his appointment, citing his priority being to assist students while committing to 45 minutes for the interview. This was despite our prior agreement for one hour. When our time had expired, I was pleasantly surprised by his suggestion to continue the discussion, clearly demonstrating his interest in narrating his own experiences in relation to students and their academic support. He expressed the importance of students to the university, stating:

> 'We are about making sure students all get the opportunity for education and are supported in the residences. After all, without students, there is no university.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

This comment implies that students are the most important stakeholders who, from this perspective, should be prioritised. Another strong feature, similar to Campus 1, was the political tensions between the SRC members. This is confirmed by this excerpt:

> 'We didn't have an SRC during 2014–2015 because it was revoked on the basis of law; there were so many contradictions in the constitution. Unfortunately, the issue ended up in court; I was so angry that I even wanted to leave the institution at some point. But members of SASCO insisted they wanted me to run for president. During that year there was an interim SRC, and this is when the students trusted me. Even though I had finished my studies, students pleaded that I find a way to stay on at the university. I then registered for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which is a course in education. As you know, one cannot be in the SRC if you are not a student. I literally registered to make sure I qualified to participate to serve the students.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

While recognising that students could contest for the SRC in their individual capacity as independent participants, it is commonly accepted that the

political tensions in the community around the university placed a great deal of focus on candidates from the political parties. Rep P3 further recognises the obligation to be a registered student, commenting that he registered for the PGCE only to ensure he qualified for the SRC. His comment implied governance activities take precedence over his academic interests. The significance of the political influence is further affirmed:

> 'I am not so interested in politics, really. But my friends who were pushing to put my name down for elections advised me that I had to join a political party; otherwise, I would not be voted. I then joined the IFP. Even though in the end, the elections were won by SASCO, we still could push our own mandate, though under very difficult circumstances.' (Rep T3, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Without a doubt, politics was central to participants at Campus 3. The infighting amongst the SRC members was likely to affect their academic progression negatively.

■ 5.4. Reasons students contest for the Student Representative Council

The incorporation of students in governance was formalised by the legislation of 1997. Scholars have averred that this legislation had culminated from discriminatory practices that limited many students from gaining access to higher education (Altbach 2006; Koen, Cele & Libhaber 2006a). The incorporation of students in governance was therefore primarily to provide opportunities for advocacy on the discriminatory experiences students faced and their challenges associated with the backgrounds that they came from. Given the history of activism that propelled their inclusion in governance, this appeared to persist even after their formalisation. Therefore, students who contest SRC positions still rely on their partisan alignment to support their campaigns (Klemenčič 2017). Beyond this, there is a consensus that students strive to participate in governance because they recognise themselves as the largest stakeholders at HEIs (Love & Miller 2003), who must consequently influence decisions that directly affect them (Lizzio & Wilson 2009).

■ 5.4.1. Major stakeholders

The most salient reason for student advocacy was the recognition that students were the main stakeholders. Participants were unequivocal about the reasons that they chose to avail themselves for office in the SRC and subsequently involvement in governance:

> 'We participate in governance to ensure that students' interests are protected at all times and advanced at all times. Sometimes it's about access, and other times we deal with transport, meals for students. So often we have to facilitate access to

learning support.' (Rep CP1(a), a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'We participate in governance solely as students are the main stakeholders in higher learning, and so it cannot be correct that as main stakeholders, students are not represented in governance. For the SRC to participate is to advance the interest of the students, as staff members may not necessarily be aware what is challenging the students on the ground.' (Rep T2, a 25-year-old male undergraduate, not an ex-SCR member)

The interest in the plight of ordinary students by those students elected to governance positions appeared to be more compelling in that they might have experienced the same challenges and understood the difficulties that students faced. This is corroborated by other views:

'If there is no legitimate structure for the students, then the voice of the students will never be heard.' (Rep T3, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'Universities are open and functional because of students. It is important that institutions of higher learning would work closely with the student organisation to provide an environment that is more open to us, so that we know we can fight things together.' (Rep SG1, a 24-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The likelihood of their commitment and being at the 'beck and call' of students would have a direct effect on the disruption of their own academic participation and management of their timetable. The need for students and the various stakeholders to share the educational platform was further opined on:

'We must hold them [*Faculties*] accountable in terms of helping students [...] in terms of implementing early warning signs where the faculties and lecturers are unable to track the performance of students [...] so that they can devise ways to help them. It is very important that we speak out for the students to improve their chances of success, provide more opportunity for their issues to be addressed and give them support.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

From this perspective, the strong feeling on advocacy was evident; however, the aim is to find effective ways to achieve cooperation and results from articulating these challenges:

'I am not motivated by the victories. The only thing that motivates me is the student. When I'm helping students and they appreciate this, I become more motivated [...] Because what I feel inside when someone has a problem, I sympathise with him. We are here to address problems that students face, rather than agreeing with the academics to avoid tensions. We must then sacrifice our academic studies to advocate for students. This is what my organisation deployed me to do at our Lekgotla.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Clearly this representative feels strongly about the importance of being in the SRC, with a sense of compassion towards students in distress. Yet the comment

suggests responding to a deployment by their partisan affiliation to the extent of compromising their own studies.

5.4.2. Transformation and change agents

Key to participating in governance, according to the participants, is that their quest to be agents of change is expressed thus:

> 'There are challenges that students face on a daily basis in higher education, whether it is in residence or university itself. The reason why I contested was primarily to be a change agent in trying to facilitate solutions towards the problems that students face.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'So many students struggle to adapt on campus with so many problems. For one, how can anyone concentrate if they have not eaten? Then there are transport challenges because the student accommodation is far.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

> 'Another student complained that she had not received results from last semester as her fees were not paid, and she didn't know what to do as her parents were both unemployed.' (Rep CP1[a], a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

These perspectives reflect the plight that students constantly face, which the SRC deals with daily, ranging from residence challenges to food insecurities and financial challenges. These challenges limit the prospects for academic success, and the SRC focuses on them to better support improved experiences for students. Notably, while in governance, they raise these issues which may often be seen to be peripheral and yet have a major impact. This is summarised aptly by another student saying, 'we are here to address problems that students face, rather than agreeing with the academics to avoid tensions' (Rep AO2), and by so doing sacrifice their own time to focus on their own studies. Menon (2003) advises that student representatives' participation in governance is to legitimise management decisions rather than challenging them or improving their advocacy for students. This points to the institutional adaptability referred by Tinto (1987), which would have an influence on the academic experience. Whether the SRC can successfully push for the prioritisation of the issues that prevent students' continuity will depend on their level of participation and influence.

5.4.3. Partisan affiliation

Another theme that emerged in the discussions with the SRC participants was their allegiances to political parties that aided their success in office. I captured several comments about partisan relationships:

> 'I am a SASCO deployee in good standing. The portfolios are chosen by the deployers, if I can put it like that. We have to lead protests often as a directive from

our partisanship, sometimes compromising ourselves for the benefit of students.' (Rep SSO1, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'It has been very tough for me emotionally and mentally because we came in during a tough year, which was never as tough before with the new #FeesMustFall thing. You can imagine here the election results being contested for about three weeks. We only got inaugurated in October on a Friday, and on Monday the protests started. I didn't know a thing about the protests. It's emotionally draining, waking up in the morning, taking your time to help students who in turn don't see how much you put in; it's really exhausting. Worst still, some of the students used the campaign to insist that discrimination was still happening at our institution. They argued that there is unfairness for black students. Another dilemma is that as student representatives, we come from different political parties, and the #FeesMustFall showed intense infighting amongst students pushed by political agendas.' (Rep DP2, a 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'When I push an agenda forward. I'm representing both the students and my political organisation. One day I wish to be in Parliament, and therefore this is good exposure to what I can expect then.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate, ex-SCR member)

Two of the comments point to a political interest that propelled participation rather than the claimed advocacy or anticipation from other stakeholders to consult related to academic-specific issues that impact students' persistence. The effects of partisan-aligned contestation appeared to be non-negotiable for consideration in the SRC:

'There was another student who attempted to join the SRC as an independent. This, however, did not work as they did not have the sufficient backup to advertise themselves and generally was not known by students. At least with the political parties, there are posters all over campus. I was not expecting to go in the SRC, but because I signed a form and I joined an organisation with some declarations, then the membership called me and also the leadership of that branch and said to me, "Chief, you are going to contest," and then I say, "No, I'm not available," and then they persuaded me.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

These statements show that the political influence was constantly infused in the discussions with the SRC. However, such influences often compromised the role of the SRC, particularly when leading student protests, as highlighted by an ex-SRC leader in previous research:

'[A] student leader's biography: traumatic experiences, a heavy burden of responsibility, experiences of violence during protests, and even the possibility of incriminating yourself while advocating for student issues.' (Interview with Jerome September, Luescher, Webbstock & Bhengu 2020)

There are parallels that can be drawn from the participants' perspectives to empirical evidence from other researchers, as demonstrated in relation to partisan influences and negative impact for student leadership.

A notable observation I made was that partisan affiliation appeared to not only compromise student leaders because of their infighting and continual political manoeuvring at Campus 2 and Campus 3, but this also resulted in a reduced period in office for some of the participants. This has further implications for their ability to sustain their studies and therefore prompts the question of whether participating in governance has any effect on their own academic experiences.

5.4.4. Personal promotion and financial interest

While a certain level of altruism can be inferred from the SRC members, evidence of self-interest was observed, as admitted by this participant:

'[*T*]o be honest with you, I come from a very poor background and experienced a lot of problems here, just getting to understand what some of the lecturers were saying in class. At home, I am the first person to come to university. We come from a history where our families were not given the opportunity for education.' (Rep DSG2, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The participant expressed a strong motivation to contest for the SRC as self-driven, being the first generation to attend university. Still, the historical effect of segregation on opportunities for education is articulated succinctly. Other verbatim accounts of the socio-economic backgrounds were reaffirmed:

'A student who comes from a home where the income cannot even feed all the mouths in the house, we expect this student to pay in the region of R4 000 for tuition. It is not only this R4 000 that the student must now find somewhere, but they must also eat and access the necessary books, as well as buy the necessary toiletries and other necessities.' (Rep DP2, a 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'I understand the need for this as I came from the background of not having finances and resources – this limiting my exposure. I didn't get a good foundation. This is why I still struggle.' (Rep DSG3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

Personal deprivation experienced by the participants motivated their entry into governance. Participants highlighted the fact that speaking from their own experiences would be more convincing, as they were best placed to advocate for students facing challenges. Added to the challenges experienced by the participants, joining the SRC was seen as an advantage for improving their employability, as stated by this participant:

'I was convinced by people about the experience that I would be getting, which I could add to my CV. I can only get experience in the SRC so that next year I can apply for a job, and they will accept me because of the evidence of doing something before.' (Rep SG3, a 23-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'Actually, last year I was so busy helping students, it was really hard. I surprised myself when I passed as I didn't think I was going to make it. I was too active in

the SRC in the residence committee, students used to come to me all the time with their problems. I wanted to find a job now but decided to come back to the university when my friend suggested I carry on this year again. Um, I needed the money.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

Participants demonstrated their own vulnerabilities regarding opportunities for employment, and being in the SRC became a plausible interim arrangement to support them financially. When the financial motivation was pursued in my enquiry, the participant backed down from this, suggesting that the trust element by students was the propelling force for participation in governance:

'As an SRC member, you are given an allowance that covers your tuition and residence fees. It means then I can study without worry how I am going to pay for my studies with unemployed parents. Here, if you are in the SRC, we don't have to worry about our tuition fees.' (Rep SG3, a 23-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'I have to compile a report and present this to the rebate committee, and they then deliberate about the work that I have done, before deciding how much rebate you can get. This can be 80% of your fees or less. They don't pay you monthly, but they will pay your 80% university fees at the end of the year once I have completed. There are various structures where if you are not satisfied, you can escalate the decision to student affairs and even the deputy vice-chancellor responsible for academic issues.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

While both participants confirmed financial rebates, for the second participant, this was not automatic but was conditional on being active in the SRC, although the criteria would be confined to the judgement by management. This perspective suggests that at Campus 2, the SRC qualification for financial rebates was evaluated based on their contributions in governance instead of their academic persistence while occupying these roles. Fortunately, at Campus 2, most of the SRC members were spurred on academically following the exemplary leadership of the SRC president (cf. s. 7.2.5); most participants took their academic commitments equally seriously while stressing the need for their advocacy roles on behalf of their constituency. In other campuses where other participants were interviewed, while stimulated by their own circumstances to join the SRC, the commitment to their studies once in the SRC was not consistent despite having received the funding for it.

■ 5.5. Telephonic participants' profiles

The research on the impact of student governance on academic experiences was extended beyond those who participated. Ordinary students not in governance would add a perspective to the intended value of involving students in university governance. Eight interviews were conducted via WhatsApp in January 2021, during the second spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. I promised these participants complete anonymity as necessary

TABLE 5.5: Profiles of students interviewed telephonically.

Student code	Year commenced at university	Status during interview	Age at time of interview
#Student1	2020	1st year (repeat)	20-years-old
#Student2	2019	2nd year (repeat)	21-years-old
#Student3	2017	3rd year (repeat)	24-years-old
#Student4	2020	2nd year	20-years-old
#Student5	2019	2nd year (repeat)	21-years-old
#Student6	2016	2nd year (repeat)	25-years-old
#Student7	2018	3rd year	21-years-old
#Student8	2019	2nd year	20-years-old

Source: Author's own work.

ethical conduct of this research. I capitalised on the commonly used hashtag symbol normally placed in front of a subject of common interest and decided to use it as a form of identification for the students interviewed. Therefore, ordinary students were identified with a hash (# symbol) in front of the word student, each given a number based on the sequence of their telephonic interviews. This was distinguished from the SRC participants in this study, referred to as Rep, and the initial abbreviating the roles they occupied and number to identify the campus from where each was drawn. Table 5.5 details the profiles of ordinary students not in governance who were interviewed telephonically.

Amongst the eight students interviewed early in 2021, five of them were repeating their studies at varying levels, while three appeared to have passed. The lived experiences in relation to their academic experiences, continuity and perceived learning outcomes are discussed in Chapters 7 and 9.

■ 5.6. Conclusion

Overall, in this chapter I provided the data sources for this study, with particular focus on the main aspects of the study objective, that being the SRC members from three institutions. A description of the SRC participants and where they were drawn from was provided. The reasons for students' contestation for seats in the SRC provided are varied, namely appreciation of students as the major stakeholders, to be agents of change, their partisan affiliations, the impact of their socio-economic backgrounds and their personal promotion and financial interests. A second cohort of students not in governance were interviewed during the disruptive period of COVID-19. The inclusion of this cohort helped to better understand the role of the SRC from the perspective of their constituency and the material issues that impact the overall academic experiences of students.

The academic conundrum

'Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education and to further education, which the state through reasonable measures must make progressively available and accessible.' (Republic of South Africa 1996, s. 29[1])

■ 6.1. Introduction

There is wide acceptance of the fact that students are the most important stakeholders at universities, and without them these establishments would not exist. Historically, however, evidence has shown that there has been very little if any consideration of how they could voice their needs to ultimately succeed academically. Across the world, efforts have been made to enhance the value and benefit of the academic discourse to students directly. It is against this background that the incorporation of students in university governance was examined to assist in understanding and addressing difficulties that they may face in achieving the common objective of academic success. This being said, the elected student representatives appear to have conflicting views related to the intent, eligibility, experience and time commitment to both their governance and study obligations. This chapter examines this conundrum from the constitutional framework that guides the objective, election and criteria for candidate election into office to the realisation of their progress academically as custodians for students in university governance.

◼ 6.2. Analysing the constitutional framework

The analysis of the SRC constitutions revealed three themes about the framework for student participation, namely: SRC objectives and principles, students' eligibility to contest for membership of the SRC and time commitment to governance responsibilities.

◼ 6.2.1. Student Representative Council constitutional objectives and principles

The first theme in the constitutions is about the objectives and principles that relate to the SRC participation in governance (Table 6.1). Each of the 14 institutions researched described these, although there does appear to be a common thread for an academic intention.

Table 6.1 presents the commitment of the SRC to the students in their institutions, indicating their primary objectives and principles. For the commitment of anonymity required for the research, the names of the

TABLE 6.1: Student representative council constitutional objectives and principles.

Institution code	Objectives and principles
Institution 1	To ensure that communication with all students occurs through a representative student body that pledges to uphold the pursuit of academic freedom at [the institution].
Institution 2	To provide leadership to students through exemplary leadership, serve their interests without partiality, bias, prejudice, discrimination or preference and promote academic excellence and a culture of learning, democracy and community service.
Institution 3	To promote the students' interests in the academic, social, cultural and sporting spheres.
Institution 4	To protect the interests and rights of registered and prospective students of [the institution] in so far as these interests and their protection are within the domain of the institutional SRC.
Institution 5	We, as the active voice of the student body, acknowledge our duty to maintain a key responsibility in the workings of the Institution.
Institution 6	The SRC is the highest policy-making and representative student body at the university and is under the authority of the university council.
Institution 7	To help promote and maintain an atmosphere of academic excellence and sensitivity to the norms and standards of the world of work, and to maintain professional academic standards.
Institution 8	To represent all students at [the institution], and their overall interests and social well-being.
Institution 9	To promote academic, social, intellectual and political development of students.
Institution 10	To represent students of the university in Council, Senate, institutional forums and all other university-wide governance structures.
Institution 11	To effectively and efficiently develop and implement policy relating to student affairs and student governance.
Institution 12	To promote, by example and leadership, academic excellence and a culture of learning, democracy and community service.
Institution 13	To promote the highest level of moral, spiritual, political and intellectual standards in our student community.
Institution 14	To promote an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning, research, development and community service.

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

institutions were replaced in the narrative of each institutional objective with (the institution). Each constitution will introduce upfront the principles by which its SRC functions, therefore indicating the key purposes and objectives of the SRC. Academic excellence is perhaps the founding pillar and commonly used phrase found in all SRC constitutions. The academic intentions highlighted in these constitutions, as randomly extracted from the selected constitutions, include these: *Institution 13* stipulates 'the promotion of the highest intellectual standards' while the SRC at *Institution 5* 'is founded by the students, for the students, with a developmental consideration of the functional needs of the University student population.' At *Institution 14*, student representatives recognise the importance of the academic objective, emphasising that their role would be to facilitate a 'conducive environment for teaching and learning, research, development and community service.' Similarly, *Institution 7* focuses on the environment, where their objective is 'to help promote and maintain an atmosphere of academic excellence and sensitivity to the norms and standards of the world of work, and to maintain professional academic standards.'

The above clauses illustrate that while different phrases may be used in the constitutions reviewed, they indicate that the core mandate opined by SRCs is to ensure educational access and advancement for students. Within this perspective, as Maseko (1994) suggests, the role of the SRC is therefore threefold: (1) representing students in key decision-making that affects their academic pursuits through Council and Senate, (2) channelling student grievances to administrative authorities and (3) acting on behalf of students in meetings of other campuses and/or institutions. Of the 14 constitutions reviewed, nine specify that their objective is to promote academic excellence as a core principle in terms of the SRC function. None of the constitutions, however, explicitly state how the SRC can promote academic excellence, nor are there any guidelines provided on areas of focus or methods by which such functions ought to be undertaken. Another intention of the SRC as stated in their objectives is to promote conditions that are conducive to students' academic pursuits. This clause could be highly contested in the context of the volatility of #FeesMustFallReloaded of 2016[1] at various universities in South Africa, where in some instances the SRCs, as reported in the media, have been central to damaging the facilities and resources provided for the academic advancement of students. Again, with a clause of this nature, given the historical student activism for equity in funding (Altbach & Cohen 1990; Reddy 2004), the constitution ought to provide some support mechanism for the preservation of the facilities specifically geared to equip students academically. The reported burning of the law library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2016[2] was arguably counterproductive to the intention of the SRC constitution.

1. Student unrest at the Universities of Witwatersrand, KwaZulu-Natal, Johannesburg as reported by News24, 26 September 2016.

2. News24, 07 September 2016.

■ 6.2.2. Eligibility of candidates for the Student Representative Council

The second theme emphasised in the student governance framework is the eligibility to contest for seats in the SRC. In terms of the rules associated with the students' point of entry into the SRC, all constitutions examined confirmed that a key qualifier would be that only registered students in each of the institutions could contest to be members. Most of the constitutions analysed broaden the requirement to an academic obligation, however, with varying criteria stipulated. Of the 14 universities, nine provide for a 60% and three for a 50% academic pass rate of subjects for students to be eligible for contestation. Additionally, *Institution 4* has extended the criteria for SRC qualification to a requirement that students must have passed at least 75% of their courses since first registering with this university. At first glance, the obligation seems well in line with the academic focus of the SRC in university governance. However, two missing puzzle pieces are evident in all the read constitutions, notably, (1) the absence of a provision for the SRC's obligation to their studies once elected in office and (2) the absence of any provisions to support the academic pursuits of the SRC and mitigate against distraction from the studies of SRC members as a consequence of their governance roles. Both these considerations ultimately pose a concern about the value of imposing such a threshold prior to entry and then completely ignoring it once elected, especially having determined their requirement to be registered students during the period in office. Further, the only restraint that all constitutions have as related to the academic level, as implied in the requirement nomination, would be that the candidates for SRC would not be first-year students. Students in second and third years qualified to be considered for membership of the SRC. However, none of the constitutions made any provision for students to continue with their studies while in office, particularly providing an alternate arrangement for their catch-up of lectures they had missed while in governance meetings. This provision would not be necessary if the SRC criteria were confined to postgraduate students with more research-focused academic commitments. There is no uniformity of academic determination. For instance, *Institution 5* underwrites their academic requirement with a clause that exempts students on academic probation from contestation for SRC. Although this is within the context of the university promotion of academic excellence, the full meaning is not clarified in these provisions. Incidentally, the provision for the president of the SRC to have completed three semesters to be elected is a consideration made only once the core SRC team has been elected prior to the specific allocation of portfolios. Moreover, the clause is silent on whether the candidates for SRC presidency (1) are merely required to have been registered, (2) the required level of academic achievement for the courses undertaken and (3) the consistency of the courses registered as related to their intended qualification having been considered during the three semesters referred.

Having observed the above limitations, Institution 1 is the only institution that specifies at least a three-year qualification as a requirement but makes provision for the elected SG's role and underscores this with clause 3.1.9.3 that 'the SG shall suspend their studies for the duration of the year in question and occupy the office full-time.' With this sabbatical, this institution allowed the SG to be solely focused on their governance role and not be concerned about the tension this would have with academic obligations. It should be noted that *Institution 1* is not one of the institutions where the SRC participants in the study were drawn, and therefore I could not probe this further with them. The nomination of the SG at *Institution 1* must be seconded by at least eight students who qualify to vote by their registration at the institution. Interestingly, no other institutions in South Africa have the same provision in their constitutions for any member of the SRC to occupy a portfolio on a full-time basis.

◼ 6.2.3. Time commitments

The third theme that features strongly in SRC constitutions is student representatives' time commitments. Table 6.2 provides a summary of the frequency of SRC meetings that were observed from the reviewed constitutions. While the constitutions omit any provision of guidelines or exemption for students to attend meetings during their academic pressures, there was no overall tally of the number of meetings attended.

On closer review, the SRCs at *Institution 1* and *Institution 2* on average are involved in various meetings as part of their weekly responsibilities; however, these were not inclusive of special meetings, mass meetings and the AGM. The records from Institution 12 show the obligatory attendance of three meetings within a six-week period. The least frequent meetings by the SRC, recorded once a month, are at *Institution 3*. Adding special meetings and mass meetings suggests that the SRC must set aside a great deal of time for meetings, often without affording them time to plan for their academic commitments, when some of these meetings provide notices as short as 12 hours.

A noticeable omission by all constitutions is the specifications of time that the SRC participate in Council, Senate and institutional forums. While recognising that the SRC president and SG participate in Council as the most senior SRC representatives, the time allocated for these engagements is not provided in the constitutions. Furthermore, when these portfolios are called to special meetings of Council at short notice, this would again likely impact their own academic timetable. Similarly, holders of other portfolios within the SRC, such as those responsible for the academic, sports and recreation aspects, will be expected to attend meetings associated with their portfolios both with students and within the institutional committees. On critical review, the SRC at the referred institutions in general would be required to commit to at least five

TABLE 6.2: Frequency of Student Representative Council meetings at select institutions.

Institutional code	Meeting of SRC executive	Normal SRC meetings	Urgent SRC meetings	Mass meetings	Other
Institution 1	Every two weeks	Once every 21 days (inclusive of weekends and public holidays but excluding holidays)	12-h written notice	At least one per semester, notice of seven days	AGM once a year
Institution 2	Once every two weeks	Once every 21 days (inclusive of weekends and public holidays but excluding holidays) must meet at least ten times during term of officeSRC executive to meet	-	Mass meetings take place at SRC discretions	AGM once a year
Institution 3	At least once a month but as frequent as deemed necessary by the president	Once a quarter	24-h notice	Called after five-day notice	AGM once a year
Institution 12	Once every two weeks	At least once every six weeks	Seven-day notice for special meetings	Mass meeting once a quarter	AGM once a year attendance of General Council once a month
Institution 14	Institutional SRC meeting once a month	Campus SRC meet twice a month	Seven-day notice for special meetings	Mass meeting once a quarter	Student parliament meetings once a semester Seven-day notice for special Institutional Students' Parliament

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council; AGM, annual general meeting.

formalised meetings before the additional special or emergency meetings. Additionally, the obligation by the SRC to spend undeterminable time attending to individual student concerns and queries at their offices is not accounted for in their constitutions. It is therefore uncontested that the time commitment to perform SRC duties and attend statutory meetings of their institutions would be likely to interfere in the academic programme of the members, particularly those at undergraduate levels of study. The net effect of this is that students must plan to 'catch up' on the academic arrangements in relation to their own academic progress, especially during the periods when they attend decision-making structures of their universities.

The reality of the SRC participant experiences in relation to the constitutions analysed above appears to confirm the fact that they spend extensive time fulfilling their responsibilities, even beyond the attendance of meetings. A typical day in the life of an average SRC member, as described by one of the

participants, often created conflictual prioritisation between their studies and governance commitments. Advocacy issues that participants usually spent their time on behalf of students include, amongst other concerns, financial exclusions, food security, accommodation, enrolment and examination results.

■ 6.3. The academic imperative

The salient feature of this study was the understanding of the academic experiences of students, with a particular focus on the SRC during their term in office. In essence, student representatives are incorporated in governance to influence and ultimately advance the academic mandate for students, including themselves. While the study's interest was particularly on the SRC's academic progress while in office, I explored deeper regarding how their role in governance supported the academic aspirations of the students they represented. Themes from the investigation that supported the objectives articulated in their constitutions in relation to the academic objective included the academic requirement to participate in the SRC, the specific academic influences of the SRC and the impact of their participation on the students they represented. The overall analysis is provided in Table 6.3.

The results of each theme and associated subthemes summarised in Table 6.3 are examined from the views expressed by the participants of the study.

■ 6.3.1. Academic objective

This theme focused on examining how the incorporation of the SRC in governance met with the academic objective. Three subthemes were drawn from the questions asked of the participants. The first subtheme of advocacy referred to the ability of the SRC to voice the student needs that impacted their academic experiences. The second subtheme referred to the SRC in governance as consumers of the teaching and learning offered by the institution rather than partners, as would have been anticipated by the

TABLE 6.3: Student Representative Council academic analysis.

Themes	Subthemes
1. Academic objective Purpose of incorporating the SRC in governance	1.1 Advocacy
	1.2 Consumerism role in governance
	1.3 Student influence
2. SRC academic obligation Passage of entry and experience	2.1 Requirement to join SRC
	2.2 Suitability of candidates for SRC
3. Academic benefit How participation in governance influences academic experiences	3.1 Representativeness of the SRC
	3.2 Credibility of participation to students

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

participation typology that anticipates their higher levels of autonomy as dual beneficiaries with the institution for academic continuity. Again, based on the third subtheme, I would anticipate a stronger influence by the SRC to contribute positively to the improved academic well-being of students. Table 6.4 shows the overall participant responses on the academic objective.

For all the SRC members interviewed, advocacy was the core basis for their existence. From the overall analysis of their comments, all SRC participants interviewed were unanimous about their responsibility to articulate the concerns raised by their constituency in relation to their academic experiences. Evidence from these discussions supported the views expressed in previous research that the greatest concerns included fee hikes, accommodation, transport and meal provisions.

To them, their mandate was mainly to address issues of concern that affected the academic opportunities for the students they represented. These included, inter alia, access to education, tuition fees, exclusions, accommodation and transport, amongst others, which would directly impact the academic experiences of students, as expressed by one SRC representative:

> 'Because students are the major stakeholders, they must have a say to ensure no student is disadvantaged or victimised by decisions that are taken.' (Rep DSG2, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, previously in SRC and member of SASCO)

This view was not aligned with the much lower observation made by students at 25% (*n* = 2). One of the SRC participants in this study expressed her frustration about the reception the SRC often received from students despite their efforts, saying 'some people don't even see the effort you make' (Rep AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member).

On further scrutiny, it appears that the views by students were reflective of the circumstances they experienced during the period of their interviews, notably under quarantine at the time of their interviews, as they commented:

> 'When we were still on campus, the SRC organised food parcels for us. Since COVID-19 forced us to be at home, we walk to the suburbs every Monday to pick up any food from dustbins before the refuse collectors come. I have not heard anything from the SRC since lockdown, and I cannot study well without eating.' (#student2, commenced studies in 2019, 21-years-old and repeating 2nd year)

TABLE 6.4: Student Representative Council response to academic objectives.

Subtheme	Description	SRC responses	Student responses
Advocacy	Ability to voice the needs of students to fulfil or access academic experiences	18	2
Consumerism role in governance	Students seen as consumers of the academic offering rather than contributors to its form	16	6
Student influence	Ability for the SRC to influence the decision-making process in relation to their academic objectives	7	3

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

> 'I have been struggling with my schoolwork the entire year. The only time I heard anything from the SRC was during elections when they were asking us to vote for them. Even now, I am still using my smartphone to access my schoolwork, as I have not received the laptop I was promised last year.' (#Student3, commenced studies in 2017, 24-years-old and repeating 3rd year)

While these views hint at the expectation or role the SRC may have played while on campus, it was clear that since the quarantine period, the SRC's advocacy dissipated following the the pandemic lockdown. It is clear from this view that students were forced to fend for themselves in whatever form possible. The crisis appeared to be one of survival before contemplating academic progress, which was evident from the demographic profile of the two students who were repeating the level of study, with worsened opportunity to continue. This experience was endorsed by other views, articulated thus:

> 'After we were forced to vacate our residence and go home, it has been extremely hard to survive. I have not studied at all because we don't have electricity at home, and I have not been given any data. When I called one SRC member, he told me that he was struggling to get hold of student services to request for data bundles to be provided to us.' (#Student8, commenced studies in 2019, 20-years-old and doing 2nd year)

> 'During orientation, the SRC told us about the different things they would do to help us with our studies. We experienced some help for the first two months, but when lockdown happened, my access to the university and especially the SRC stopped suddenly. I received no help at home for at least four months and I could not continue with my studies as I did not have a laptop or Wi-Fi.' (#Student1, commenced studies in 2020, 20-years-old and repeating 1st year)

There is no doubt that prior to the lockdown resulting from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRC vocalised the plight of the students on issues that directly impacted their academic progression. Since COVID-19, it appears that the prominence of the SRC was to disappear. This does not suggest that the value of the SRC was no longer there. The unplanned effect of the pandemic handicapped institutions to a state of paralysis, with meetings arranged often at short notice to deal with the emergency circumstances that beset these institutions. The resourcing of the SRC to be able to attend such meetings remotely took longer to re-establish.

On the SRC academic objective subtheme, there is a common agreement amongst most participants from the first cohort, where an indication of 88.8% ($n = 16$) to the second group of students interviews at 75% ($n = 6$), that students are seen as consumers to the educational provision. This view aligns with the hierarchical nature by which university governance is formed, with insufficient student representation (Bartley, Dimenäs & Hallnäs 2010) at the apex of governance to have any opportunity to disagree with decisions that affect students. This view can be corroborated with the results observed in relation to the perceived SRC influence, notably at 38.8% ($n = 7$) by the SRC and 37.5%

(*n* = 3) for the students. A few comments by the participants from both cohorts show agreement on this sentiment:

'I spend most of my week in these meetings that go on for hours, yet I cannot express my views, especially when I don't agree. I don't have any voting powers.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'For me, we are expected to join in these meetings to simply rubber-stamp the views of our lecturers and the administration of the university. We are never asked what our views are on the reasons they provide to oblige us to pay for education. Frankly, education is a right which they must honour without discrimination because of our backgrounds.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'When I first agreed to join the SRC, I thought we were genuinely being asked to discuss and agree on addressing issues that affect us academically. At Faculty Boards, we are simply told about the academic calendar and not even asked for our views how this can be better organised to assist students, especially those who require academic support.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

'I asked our representative in Senate for feedback on the new programme that we are told we need to complete our degree which most of us don't understand and he simply said that he had not received the documents before the meeting as other members. He was not clued up on the discussion and could not say much except that it was already included in our timetabling.' (#Student8, commenced studies in 2019, 20-years-old and doing 2nd year)

The overall impression by both the SRC and the students they represent is that there is limited ability to influence decisions that directly pertain to the academic arrangements for students. With few participants at the Apex structure (council), the SRC appear to have very little say in policies that affect the academic calendar and programmes. For those in Senate, the governance structure that deals directly with academic issues, they generally are not *au fait* with the discussion. This appeared to misalign with the very purpose articulated in all the SRC constitutions reviewed about the essence of the SRC to address challenges that students faced which impacted their academic success.

■ 6.3.2. Academic obligation

This theme focused on the academic obligations of the SRC prior and during their term in office in terms of the requirement to join the SRC, suitability of undergraduate candidates and persistence post while in office, as shown in Table 6.5. This helped to understand their own and student perspectives on acting as role models to support their stakeholders.

It was clear that all SRC participants interviewed (*n* = 18) understood and accepted the academic obligation required to contest for the SRC, which is about having demonstrable academic progress. Although this may be the

TABLE 6.5: Student Representative Council academic obligation analysis.

Subtheme	DescriptionSRC responses	Student responses (*n*)	Student responses
Requirement to join the SRC	Importance of academic threshold to join the SRC	18	No comments
Academic persistence	Ability to sustain academic obligation while in office is highly compromised	12	No comments

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

case, this reasoning was not consistent once in office, as confirmed by most of the SRC participants (*n* = 12). The SRC constitutions also make no further provision for academic continuity by the SRC. By their own admission, balancing their academic aspiration with their roles in governance was difficult, as some articulated:

> 'We are required to be in good standing academically when we contest for the SRC. It might be because we will have a lot of work in the SRC, and you are expected to manage your studies. If you didn't cope before, you cannot manage both studies and responsibilities in the SRC.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'I can't cope academically now. For the first semester I didn't pass anything because I didn't have time to study. You deal with lots of problems students come with.' (Rep CP 1[b], a 25-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'I have dropped a little bit. I am not an "A" student, but I perform normally around 65%, so I dropped. I didn't have enough time to study, so I crammed the night before the exam.' (Rep T3, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

While SRC participants expressed their goal to succeed academically, they were constrained by their roles in governance and the extended time to consult students:

> 'I am preparing for my thesis; I find it hard to, after a real long day at the SRC, I find it difficult to focus on my studies, and sometimes I am just so tired that I literally can't focus on my own academics. That's why I have shared the view that it is best for somebody to get into the SRC when they are in postgraduate, because it is very much time-consuming.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Within the context of the academic obligation, while some commitment was observed by the representatives, their constitutions did not make any further academic obligation beyond the point of entry into office. What is significant in the three universities compared is that only one made maintaining a good record of academic progress a requirement for eligibility to contest for the roles they occupied. In the others, there are no thresholds stated. *Institution 8* is the only South African exception that does not incorporate an academic obligation at all. However, students at *Institution 8* are obliged to have been registered for one full semester to qualify for consideration into the SRC.

From the benchmarked constitutions, there are no specific clauses associated with sustaining leadership responsibilities and their academic performance while in office, although the application thereof is left open. Interestingly, of the South African universities analysed, *Institution 12* had singularly recognised the importance for the SRC to persist with their studies, stating that the SRC must 'promote education through their exemplary leadership, academic excellence and a culture of learning, democracy and community service.' This may suggest that the constitution is framed for the SRC to be outwardly focused on representing and supporting students, including themselves as students, although how this is achieved is not stated in most constitutions. While all constitutions provide some framework for the various roles and responsibilities in governance, in South Africa, how they would cope academically while in office is not moderated.

■ 6.4. Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was on the SRC constitutions. Importantly, these form the basis for how students are elected to office and their roles. Specific to the interest of this study, I reviewed SRC constitutional clauses pertaining to the academic requirements, objectives and obligations set out for members of the SRC. While it was anticipated that these representatives would lead by example in their own academic performance, it was clear from their constitutions that this obligation was not sustained.

Boardroom experiences

'If there is no legitimate structure for students, then the voice of the students will never be heard.' (Rep T3, the SRC treasurer from Campus 3 in the present study)

■ 7.1. Introduction

Student Representative Council (SRC) participants expressed their frustration in meeting their study commitments because of their responsibilities in governance. These concerns differed among the participants based on their roles, responsibilities and time commitment. The SRCs expressed three broad areas in their advocacy: their lived experience in governance juxtaposed with their academic experiences, perceived consequences in relation to their roles in governance and their perspectives about balancing these roles with their academic pursuits.

■ 7.2. University governance link to academic experiences

Various issues impacted institutional governance and academic experiences. The most prevalent opinions from the discussion with the SRC participants include the link between governance roles and courses for which participants were registered, time allocated and level of involvement in

governance, participants' ability to balance their responsibilities and commitments, undergraduate and postgraduate participant experiences and lecturer support for SRC members. Each of these subthemes is discussed.

■ 7.2.1. Link between governance and studies

Based on the study imperative, a close examination of the link between the SRC governance roles and their enrolled courses is conducted. This is illustrated in Table 7.1.

While the highest concentration of the student representatives in the sample had enrolled in studies in the fields of education and law, followed by politics and administration, the rest were spread across other areas of specialisation. According to the seven participants, their portfolios matched their studies, as shown in the illustration. For two campus premiers, their studies in law, politics and administration were seen to be linked to their functions in the SRC, which according to them had to do with understanding the university operations, the legal requirements and the dynamics of varying stakeholders. Similarly, the SG, who usually participated in Council and had studied the subjects of politics and administration should assist with the ability to navigate in these meetings which dealt with the overarching policies on university processes. One treasurer studying accounting would gain from his role, which was fundamentally about the finances of the SRC and budget management. The economic studies for the other treasurer

TABLE 7.1: Student Representative Council portfolios and their enrolled course.

Role	Faculty								Totals
	Education	Law	Politics and Administration	Development Studies	Commerce	Accounting and Finance	Human Resources	Economics	
President	√			√					2
Deputy president					√				1
Campus premier		√	√						2
Secretary-general	√	√	√						3
Deputy secretary-general		√	√						2
Treasurer					√	√		√	3
Academic officer	√			√					2
Student services officer	√	√							2
Projects and internationalisation officer							√		1
Totals	4	4	3	2	2	1	1	1	18

Source: Author's own work.
Note: Positions identified as linked to studies by the participants.

referred would assist with the overarching understanding of the financial position and the economic circumstances in which the university operated. The third treasurer was registered for commerce, although specialising in marketing. Under this circumstance, the studies did not relate to the role. Talking about the disadvantage that his studies were not aligned with his role, this participant explained how he was able to adjust to the requirements of his role:

> 'When it comes to preparing budgets and analysing spreadsheets, I asked the student advisor in Student Affairs help me formulate the budget. After all, they tell us how to spend the money and must approve everything we do.' (Rep T3, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The comments made by this participant demonstrate the difficulty he faced in fulfilling his role which did not match to his studies. According to this participant, budgets were already allocated to the SRC, and they therefore did not have any opportunity to negotiate on how the money could be spent. From this perspective, there was very little need to prepare statements, except to purely keep receipts from their expenditure and report on these. This view was not shared by another participant having the same role:

> 'When it comes to identifying portfolios, the SRC agree on the strengths and weaknesses. Now with me, for example, I am studying BCom and am dealing with finance – it is important as a treasurer that you can prepare the financial statements; they must see the expenditure and what is left over. We look at one's capabilities before we decide what portfolio one is going to take.' (Rep T2, a 25-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

A very different perspective was shared by another participant who played the role of the AO, stating his views:

> 'For me, what is necessary to be an SRC member, you need someone who is like a nurse or a teacher, as they deal with a lot of people and their experience allows them to advise properly. I am saying this because you need someone with empathy to listen and help students in trouble. It means that the person must do well academically to be able to respond to students at any time.' (Rep AO3, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

Important in this perspective was to identify students with soft skills so that they could demonstrate empathy and support, particularly for students who were distressed by their circumstances which could impact their studies. From this perspective, key competencies for the SRC could be identified and included strong verbal communication skills and emotional intelligence. O'Leary, Bingham and Gerard (2006) point to governance being about the process of steering decision-making. In this context, the role of students' advocacy should shape the decisions that were made regarding their education and necessarily issues that inhibit their continuation and experience with the learning process.

While advocating for students' financial challenges, a participant shared his own experience about his financial exclusion resulting from his inability to persist with his studies, stating:

> 'My role is to fundraise money for poor students, students who are not able to register nor able to do anything for themselves because of their background. Students come in numbers during registration to tell us about their problems, that they are financially broke. I don't have money – I owe the university; I didn't pass, so now I face difficulties to register.' (Rep T1, a 23-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

From this view, it appears that SRC members, once elected, compromised their own studies. Further evidence from interviews shows that beyond simply fulfilling their academic objectives, the SRC were motivated by the financial difficulties of students, and therefore, their advocacy role was most important. In this instance, this participant would forgo his own academic progress because of the time spent addressing challenges faced by ordinary students in relation to registration without financial means. Another aspect of SRC positions was directed by their political affiliations, as indicated by some of the participants:

> 'SRC elections are largely driven by students' partisan membership, with few that contest as independent candidates or representing other interests.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'President roles were predetermined, because identified students would have chosen as the lead representative during the pre-election campaign. The final candidate appointed as the SRC president would be determined from the party that won the most votes in elections.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'Nomination and recommendation for other SRC positions were based on the political victory which determined the number of seats occupied, directly related to the number of votes each party received.' (Rep AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

> 'Previous governance experience or other student leadership position helped the deploying organisation as well as the individual candidates in the negotiation and concession-making process amongst the nominated candidates.' (Rep CP1[a], a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'It's our organisation that nominates us. First, though, they decide the person to lead our election manifesto; this would be the president, if we win. Other positions we sometimes choose or are asked; it all depends on who wants what or is strong in what area.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'When we won [the] election, they told me that I would excel in policy or student services because of doing my master's. They felt that my research skills and experience in academic writing would be suitable to help students directly. I would be able to investigate better how to address some of their needs.' (Rep SSO1, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The views expressed show the alliances students made with political parties, under which they contested for positions in the SRC. In the case of the SSO,

although the affiliation was there, it appeared that although this participant was selected by the partisan association, this was based on the level and area of study which was anticipated to influence decision-making. In this instance, there appeared to be little reference to the continuation of their studies but rather the use of the course for which they were enrolled to better position them in governance. Evidently, the university did not have any say on the nomination and election of SRC members. The only influence that would exist for the institution is in the case of disputes, for instance, as reported in Campus 3, where an interim student administrator had been appointed by the institution to deal with student challenges.

◼ 7.2.2. Time allocation for governance

A typical day for SRC members was described by one of the participants as starting at 06:00, often sleeping only after midnight. This time had to do with the day being largely occupied in governance consultation, student debriefing and general SRC administration requirements. Table 7.2 highlights the fact that this student spent only two hours during the day on their own academic activity, utilising the evenings to catch up.

From the schedule, it appears as though there is a balance between responsibilities in governance and school activities. The challenge, however, is that most of the schoolwork is done after day-long governance activities, which may be compromised because of fatigue:

'Sometimes I am in meetings until about 14:00 in the afternoon. Then I come back and consult students that are here. Then sometimes I still have other committees that commence at 16:30. From there I come back at 18:30 to see if part-time students are in the office that might be having challenges. Then I leave the SRC office, typically around 20:30.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

TABLE 7.2: A typical day in the Student Representative Council.

Time of day	Activity
06:00–08:00	Prepare for SRC-related duties and consult students at residence
08:00–10:00	Internal governance meetings and consultations
10:00–12:00	Classes, tutorials and other academic activities
12:00–14:00	Attend to student issues or problems
14:00–16:00	Other external stakeholder meetings or functions
16:00–18:00	SRC office administrative tasks
18:00–20:00	Catch up on missed lecturers or tutorials
20:00–22:00	Work on assignments
22:00–24:00	Prepare for exams or tests
24:00–02:00 02:00–04:00	Bedtime
04:00–06:00	Prepare for classes and SRC-related duties

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

Other perspectives shared about their academic experiences in relation to their roles in governance, were similar to the view expressed by Rep SG2. The following comments attest to an extremely packed diary involving multiple meetings:

> 'I sit in a lot of committees, which include three meetings of each in the Exco of Council, Institutional Forum, Senate, Student Development, Finance Committees. The disadvantage is that it takes a lot of time and is emotionally draining, as you spend a lot of time hearing peoples' problems, and sometimes you are devastated when you can't help after spending time listening to these problems. I think, though, the main problem is time.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'I sleep normally at past 01:00 in the morning, but I know I must wake up at around 06:00. Because I'm a committed leader, so if I am committed – maybe another thing, when I got into my office, I just wanted to make a difference. I wanted to show the other people that will follow me to say, "These are the trends that we have to follow to lead." So my commitment was very strong towards attending student matters.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

From these comments, students' advocacy was clearly of paramount importance, although the many challenges that both presidents had to deal with suggest huge sacrifices to their own academic plans because of the extended time spent. While Astin's (1984) theory implies that greater investment made in such activities could yield an academic benefit, this clearly needs to be balanced at two levels, again referred in this postulation, namely the continuum of involvement and psychological impact. Importantly, the theory needs to be considered holistically in relation to academic progression. Examining these comments, the emotional stress and lack of sufficient sleep implies that these participants placed much energy to the peril of both the quality and quantity aspects of the academic commitments.

Although time was a major challenge for most SRC members who appeared not to be able to balance their governance roles with their studies, Rep T2 had some advice for addressing both these obligations and succeed, saying:

> 'It's challenging – but what is important is to manage your time properly. You must not wait until the deadline but start as early as possible on the academic task so that you can finish it on time.' (Rep T2, a 25-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

This supports the argument made by Astin (1984) that proper planning was recommended. Having observed and being told by the participants from Campus 2, it seemed many efforts were made to collectively support each other academically while discharging their roles in governance. This was evident in the proper planning and timetabling which was posted on their notice boards and support of each other by way of preparing a roster for student walk-ins and, in the case of the SG and his deputy, working closely with each other. This level of organisation was not the case at the other two campuses.

■ 7.2.3. Level of involvement in governance

An important aspect of academic experience and ultimately success was how the participants experienced their governance involvement. Participants in this study admitted that while many hours were set aside to participate in governance, it appeared that their contribution would be minuscule because of their lack of experience and knowledge in governance processes. Other studies indicated that such knowledge and experience was important to contribute effectively to governance (Planas et al. 2013; Zuo & Ratsoy 1999). The lack of a robust induction programme and inability to have voting rights constrained their effective contribution. A major contention on the participants' capacity to participate would be the active inclusion in discussions that determined the decision, and therefore, where student representatives were not included, Sanseviro (2007) points to a resultant ineffectiveness. This points to participants likely to be limited to being co-opted, informed about institutional operations and consulted on matters without being seen to be active partners referred in Arnstein's participation typology. Participants were drawn to these meetings to act as messengers to students while anticipated to provide feedback from students, as explained by one participant:

> 'You see, most of the things and the decisions which are taken there affects the students. Whenever there is something they want to draft, for example, a document which is binding to students, as the SRC we are accountable to share these with students. Management will never go down to the students, as they rely on us to communicate with the students on their behalf.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

Participants appeared to be confined to a coordination role to provide students feedback rather than being actively involved. With little training, the effectiveness of their roles was questionable, as expressed by more participants in the study:

> 'We hardly have training to assist us in better understanding the governance process. Our learning is mainly by being involved and doing; it's trial and error and our willingness to take any challenge that we face along the way. Sometimes we get it right, other times not, but we have to stand up and pretend we are on the right path even when we are not.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'We are not given the tools to participate properly at meetings, yet the constitution says we must participate, but how, who knows? We don't have voting rights, yet we are the major stakeholder. Without us, there is no university, yet we are not experienced to participate well in meetings.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The restrictive nature of their roles was articulated by participants' admission of incapacity and lack of resources, despite representing an important stakeholder, students. Student representative council members were short-changed in that they sacrificed time in meetings where their contribution was limited yet sacrificing their studies in the process. An isolated case of

the inclusion of eight SRC members in Senate at Campus 2 indicates a chance that such a strong presence of the participants would enable them to express their disagreement with some of the decisions. In such a case, their involvement could be classified as one of consultation in terms of Arnstein's Participation Ladder, albeit not authorised to approve any decisions.

■ 7.2.4. Balancing responsibilities with commitment

While observing Tinto's (1975) proposition that extracurricular activity should yield academic success, ways by which academic performance could be improved were hardly mentioned by the participants. What was not evident, however, was the necessary balanced integration between academic and social (governance) responsibilities which would result in progressing and succeeding academically. Reg SG3 confirmed that certain academic sacrifices were inevitable, stating, 'This year I decided to only take my majors and leave those two courses for next year [...] I need to serve the students', and suggesting, 'I think when you become an SRC member it is may be a good idea that you must pause on the academic part.' Notwithstanding some of the limitations, participants did acknowledge their growth and learning as participants in governance, as referred to in Table 7.3.

From Table 7.3, three categories of benefits gained by participants are identified. In the first instance, participants improved their leadership, communication, problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills. The exposure at decision-making structures was anticipated to improve their own decisions in relation to their studies and be committed. The obligation to listen attentively could steer an improvement during attendance of their lectures. Participants advised on some of these skills from their involvement in governance:

TABLE 7.3: Skills acquisition, personal development and other ancillary benefits.

Skills acquisition	Personal development	Ancillary benefits
• Leadership	• Confidence	• Learning and appreciating university processes
• Communication	• Self-control	• Building networks
• Problem-solving	• Perseverance	• Earning monthly stipends
• Conflict-resolution	• Self-grooming	• Equipment (e.g. phones and laptops)
• Decision-making	• Discipline	• Partial payment of tuition fees
• Public speaking	• Patience	• Provision of accommodation
• Research skills		
• People skills		
• Listening attentively		

Source: Author's own work.

'I have developed as a person. I've learned so much. You know in Council, you sit with very experienced people, doctors, lawyers [...] I can say now I am a more confident person than I was when I was academic officer because as secretary-general, my role is much more demanding and challenging, as I am expected to stand firm and to be able to make decisions for the SRC.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'It's the experience; you get leadership skills, you are exposed to different challenges all the time and you are expected to think out of the box. At times even though it is difficult, there are rules, but you have to make a stand.' (Rep AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

'It is often a challenge to listen to the professors, but with attending more meetings, I have slowly got to listen carefully to what they say especially where this affects students. This way, I can respond with more confidence.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The levels of assertiveness were clearly improved from the leadership skills they learnt. The SRC president from Campus 2 did admit to the importance of listening attentively so that important discussions on student issues are heard and can be responded to. There is, however, a contradiction here in that their presence in these meetings was at the expense of the time they were anticipated to be in lectures, a particular concern for those at the undergraduate level of study.

Secondly, participants referred to their personal development from their engagement in governance, including confidence, self-control, patience and discipline. Participants admitted to feeling a sense of belonging, having developed numerous personal skills that could place them in better stead to secure employment as articulated by Rep PIO3 and, as admitted by an SRC participant from Campus 3, to add to his curriculum vitae, which could improve employability.

The third category identified by participants was the ancillary benefits. Importantly, the subsidisation of their studies while in office (Nyundu, Naidoo & Chagonda 2015) was intended to improve their chances for academic success. Whether this had the intended effect is questionable in that most participants, 12 out of 18, already indicated that they were pursuing their undergraduate studies (cf. s. 5.1); this meant that they would likely sacrifice their studies while in office, having established that their meetings take place during the time they are expected in class. The academic work was conducted during the evenings, leaving little time to recoup and therefore the fatigue would negatively compound their chance to perform academically. Other important resources gained by participants included free accommodation, computer equipment and data provisions, did not yield the intended benefit to their studies. While being involved in governance could help to build their networks to support their learning experiences, this was insufficient to translate to their own roles in persisting with their studies.

Participants in governance were given financial support to continue with their studies. However, the ability for this minority of students to influence and 'challenge the system' while in governance structures to advocate for other students, especially on the financial strain, was questionable. For this reason, some of the SRC members interviewed talked about re-igniting the #FMF campaign. According to them, the financial limitations were a hinderance for academic access to most students, even before they could be exposed to experience and improve their circumstances. This would counteract one of the reasons for including them in governance in the first place, as argued by Luescher-Mamashela (2010), to deter them from student protests. The parameters to advance the education aspirations of students were highlighted by Ntsala and Mahlaji (2016), although these activities were likely to disadvantage their own learning progress, as shown in Table 7.4.

An example of the strain between governance and academic experiences by participants was evident in the excerpt from a participant:

'I don't sleep. As I am in my final year, I am really scared and need to get through. I passed the first half of the year courses, but I still need to get through the second half, so I make sure I don't go to sleep without covering my books. Sometimes it's difficult and I use my weekend to catch up with the work that I have missed.' (Rep DP2, a 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Seeing the reality of her academic needs, did not, however, prevent Rep DP2 from her commitments to her role, as she admitted:

'I bunk a lot of my classes because of the responsibilities in the SRC. It is difficult to catch up, but I try to prioritise this. As I have reduced attending class means that most of what I learn is self-taught.' (Rep DP2, a 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

TABLE 7.4: Participant disadvantages.

Type of disadvantage	Description
Emotional and mental strain	• Feeling unappreciated despite effort and work done
	• Emotionally draining
	• Sleep deprivation
Negative social impact	• Limited time for socialising
	• Less time to visit family or friends
	• Delays pursuit of other personal objectives
Political interests	• Political grandstanding and point-scoring by some SRC members
	• Pushing of own political agenda ahead of student matters
	• Disagreements between SRC members, for example, on task-sharing
	• Pressure and influence on SRC by external organisations

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

While this participant referred to a reduction of her class attendance which forced her to self-learn, she equally developed her confidence and skills in her role in governance through her own efforts without any prior training or induction. Juggling between governance and her study commitment appeared to compromise both responsibilities. The emotional strain and lack of sleep would invariably negatively impact both areas and, according to Astin (1984), was likely to deplete her physical and psychological energy. Clearly, this was likely to compromise her intentions to succeed academically. Her role in governance did not also appear to help to improve or advantage her studies. This further brings to question the ability to integrate these aspects to ensure she passed, as contemplated by Tinto.

Most participants admitted that the extent of time spent in governance did not benefit them academically. Moreover, while in these meetings, their views were disregarded or ignored because they would be constantly reminded of their presence as limited to consultation and information-sharing, pointed out in the ladder of participation. This confirms that the participants were not viewed as partners in governance, confined to comment only on issues that other stakeholders would be interested in, for instance, what discussions may be taking place amongst students, without heeding to their specific cries about major challenges they faced. This suggests that the role of the SRC was that described as tokenism, particularly for information-sharing and selective consultation. This aligns with the view that the university management used the opportunity to inform student representatives as noted by Laosebikan-Buggs (2006); this communication was seen to be one-sided without providing students the opportunity to challenge decisions taken at these meetings (Miles, Miller & Nadler 2008; Planas et al. 2013).

■ 7.2.5. Differences between postgraduate and undergraduate governance participants

This study revealed a clear difference in governance participation between students at the undergraduate level compared to those pursuing their postgraduate studies. Undergraduate participants experienced difficulty in navigating between their advocacy roles while at the same time experiencing their own challenges, such as acclimatisation to the education environment while having to study on their own as a result of missing classes during their engagement in governance structures. Not all of them coped with the dual responsibilities. Self-directed learning appeared to be the order of the day for undergraduate students, having noted that they missed most of their classes while participating in governance. This was less material for students at the postgraduate level, as they were unlikely to have structured class but attended periodical seminars, tutorials or smaller group engagements in relation to their study commitments, largely research-based. It is noteworthy that these

students had already graduated, which meant at least that their academic progress was there, even though this would have been achieved for some before they became involved in governance. It also implied that despite challenges they may have faced before, they successfully adapted to the institutional culture (Tinto) and were perhaps in a better position to explain the challenges students faced and how these could be better improved. The ability to manage one's time was most fundamental to succeeding as highlighted by the president from Campus 2, who already was enrolled for a master's degree, and this implied she already had an advantage. She further ascribes her personal commitment to her studies to her experience, having been in governance and further having a better sense of her academic requirements and process. According to her, having graduated meant that she was not expected to be in class as her studies were now largely research-based, and therefore she was able to balance her efforts in governance with her commitment to her studies. This participant had taken advantage of her network and commitment in governance, commenting that as a result of this, the deputy vice-chancellor in academics had assisted her to obtain a scholarship to further her studies overseas. At the time of the interview, she indicated that she was not going to finish her term in office, as within a month she was to leave for her international studies. She confirmed that, because this affected her last month before her tenure was up, it had been agreed that the DP would step in and take over the reign for the remaining period of her tenure as president until the next SRC elections. This revelation fit well with the expected correlation between governance and the academic objective as envisaged by the incorporation of the SRC; however, this was an isolated example of such success.

Characterising the difference between undergraduate and postgraduate ability to cope with their academic life while in governance, participants indicated that the influence was largely affected by their academic calendar, level of maturity and prior exposure to governance. Undergraduates from all three campuses shared their observations about postgraduate when compared with their lived experiences as undergraduate students as confirmed by their statements:

'If I was doing my honours, it would be much easier for me to cope with my studies and my SRC duties, because I don't attend most of the time [...] You know you are used to engaging with professors and everything, but in undergraduate, we are in one class, and we are 200 students, so there's not much time to interact.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'There is no doubt in my mind that those in postgraduate studies would be far more efficient in helping students out and would have the ability to balance their time better. I think postgraduate is better because you have gone through the challenges from undergraduate. In undergraduate, you are still worried about getting a degree, whereas in postgraduate at least you have one and you are going for another one. At undergraduate they have a lot of modules in front of them, so it will be difficult

to cope.' (Rep AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

'It is different and difficult for undergraduates to achieve your own goals while in governance as you spend most of the time in meetings, and yet you have a high workload. Unlike the postgraduates, who at least have already graduated, they can continue without too much worry. It's even worse for some of us who were not in the SRC before, and we still have to understand how it all works.' (Rep T1, a 23-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'Definitely postgraduate. If I can say with my portfolio, it was a bit of a struggle, because mostly students expect you to be there for them all the time as they voted [*for*] you. I am battling to juggle my own timetable. At least once one is at postgraduate, you have something, and after that qualification, you determine your time really as you now don't attend lectures.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

'We need to have some strategy to have more postgrad in SRC so that they can take the load of the SRC work. For postgrads, their degrees are done through research and not attending much. During registration, for example, I am obliged to help students from 08:00 until 19:00 and still must do my studies. That's very challenging, and at that time I am mentally exhausted.' (Rep T3, a 21-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The common denominator between these comments was that all participants expressed tension about their ability to juggle their studies with their responsibilities in governance. They observed that the SRC at postgraduate levels were better able to manoeuvre their timetable largely because of the flexible nature of their studies and in most instances, that class attendance was not required. There is a clear realisation from these excerpts that, while they were committed to their roles in governance, the extent of such involvement would no doubt affect their mental health because of exhaustion from catch-up sessions in the evenings and cause a great deal of anxiety about neglecting what would have been expected to be their primary concern, their studies. For them, it was almost expected that they would shelve their own academic aspirations while in office. These views suggest that undergraduate students would not be able to align well with the requirement to balance their governance responsibilities with their studies (Tinto 1975) and allocated more time to governance at the peril of their studies, the latter time allocation being minimal (Astin 1984). Added to their frustrations related to their levels of study would be the experience in governance, which would further place them at a disadvantage if they did not have it and probably bring into question their genuine ability to penetrate through the governance discussion and have their voices heard. Specific to Campus 1, five out of six interviewed SRC participants were at the undergraduate level of study. While three of these members had prior governance experience, the other two did not have experience and therefore were obliged to learn on the job. There is a clear paradox of having to learn and be engrained in governance at the peril of their own studies.

The perspectives shared by the undergraduates were supported by postgraduates who drew from their own experiences clearly expressing their advantages:

'Currently I am doing [*a*] master's specialising in information systems. It's a research-based programme which therefore does not require any class attendance. We do have seminars, but these are mostly during the weekends where the academics help us conceptualise and develop our research activities. At least at postgrad, you have sort of found your feet and can manage your time better. At undergraduate, there are still a lot of changes, especially if you are coming from high school; there are still lots of things you are learning about the university itself and how to position yourself to pass but also be active in other extracurricular activities.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'It's harder at undergraduate to be flexible, as the lectures don't stop for you. At postgrad, your study group is much smaller, and you have flexibility to talk to the lecturer to ensure everything is OK and you are managing. There is also lots of debating and discussing, which helps in understanding the course information. When we think we have a meeting timetable, they schedule special meetings which just disrupt any plans you have.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

The major distinction between students at the undergraduate level and those already at the postgraduate level was the clash between lectures and governance commitment, further aggravated by students' level of maturity and exposure in governance. The distinction between undergraduate and postgraduate students was very distinct. The SRC participants' own perceptions about whether their roles negatively or positively impacted their academic performance is shown in Table 7.5.

The summation in Table 7.5 shows the different views expressed by the participants about their roles, as influenced by their level of study. Of the 11 students in undergraduate studies, 10 felt that their roles were not a positive influence on their studies, while one seemed to yield some benefit. Of the seven postgraduates interviewed, three expressed a negative impact, two suggesting that there was no impact to their studies and another two with a positive interface between governance and their academic performance. Clearly, the majority of the participants (13) in this study agreed that being involved in governance had a negative impact on their academic experiences. While in general, participating in governance was unlikely to yield academic

TABLE 7.5: Perceived governance impact on own academic performance.

Perceived impact on own academic performance	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	Total
👍 Positive	1	2	3
No difference	0	2	2
👎 Negative	10	3	13
Total	**11**	**7**	**18**

Source: Author's own work.

success, there were isolated examples of finding ways to cope with the academic obligation that had been instilled at the point of entry into these governance roles. Rep DP2 had established her own mechanism to cope academically, although she admitted the extent of governance commitment was excessive; however, she had managed to establish her own rhythm. saying, 'Yes, being at the undergraduate level means you have to teach yourself and demonstrate commitment to your studies, it's what you put in will be what you get out.'

The comments made by participants above, together with the overview on the impact of governance on their academic experiences, were dependent on the level of study of the participants. For postgraduate participants, it seemed easier to balance their roles in governance with their academic obligation. Furthermore, with better exposure to the university system, they ought to be at an advantage to be able to articulate issues that detrimentally affected students' academic persistence, having already been exposed to these for longer periods in the academic environment. On the other hand, for those at the undergraduate level, there was a clear disjuncture between their own intention to their advocacy role and the resultant negative impact associated with the strain of keeping up with their own studies. All participants, regardless of level of study, conceded that fulfilling their mandate from students would be far easier for those who had prior experience and, even more importantly, the advantage of having already graduated. Table 7.6 provides the summary of undergraduates and postgraduates by institution.

Table 7.6 shows that most of the participants from Campus 2 were at the postgraduate level of studies. At both Campus 1 and Campus 3, most of the participants were undergraduates. These revelations confirm the perceptions about their commitment to both governance and their academic experiences, where students who expressed frustration were mainly from Campus 1 and Campus 3. From my own observations, the SRC members from Campus 2 were likely to cope best compared to the other two campus. This was associated with the level of efficiency clearly visible at this institution and their own comments about assisting in each other. For example, the posting of all meetings on the noticeboard provided knowledge of their whereabouts for walk-in enquiries by ordinary students and further for proper planning and coordination amongst the SRC members. Another reason the Campus 2 SRC

TABLE 7.6: Undergraduates and postgraduates in each campus.

Campus	Undergraduates	Postgraduates
Campus 1	5	1
Campus 2	2	4
Campus 3	4	2
Total	**11**	**7**

Source: Author's own work.

as whole could cope better in balancing their time for governance with their studies was linked to most of the participants being at the postgraduate level of studies and thus able to better plan their time, with no disruption related to lecture attendance. Despite Rep SG2 being undergraduate, he was at the postgraduate level and therefore able to take over some of his responsibilities during his absence resulting from academic commitments.

The same type of order was not observed at the other two campuses. Challenges experienced were largely related to the time pressure and the expected accountability to students, these views expressed by participants from Campus 1 and Campus 3, where most of the participants were at the undergraduate level of study.

■ 7.2.6. Lecturer support

A critical aspect of the ability to cope in governance, is the level of support rendered and their relationships with the academic staff. Some participants stated that the support by the lecturers helped them cope in juggling their time between governance and their academic commitments, for instance, where a lecturer was prepared to provide them lecture notes from classes they missed or consultation time. According to the participants, lecturers who were willing to help them made it so much easier for them to cope. Amongst various interventions needed include engaging with lecturers to guide them through the classes missed, negotiating additional time with them for assignments or to prepare for tests, tutorial support and extensions to prepare for scheduled tests and any outstanding academic assignments. Good relations with lecturers would avoid punitive measures taken against the SRC members and further assisted in planning around their support. Another participant leveraged on the relationships he established with lecturers, stating:

> 'Academically, it's been challenging, because I've been missing classes because I have to attend meetings. I usually go to my lecturers, then they update me. Some have advised me to go to evening classes so that I can be updated.' (Rep SG1, a 24-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Similarly, the allegiance with a lecturer was confirmed:

> 'I did pass all my seven modules because I managed to attend some of the lectures. For those that I missed, I went to my lecturer to tell them I am committed to my studies. They understand that sometimes leading students, if you spend more time at lectures, the students will complain. If you communicate properly and establish a relationship with the lecturers, they will support you.' (Rep T1, a 23-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

The strategy to establish strong bonds with lecturers seemed to work well for these participants. The ability to negotiate with his lecturer to write his tests separately would ensure no marks were lost and, consequently, persistence.

The evening classes, while not clashing with meetings, had an effect of mental physical fatigue from the extended time and required commitment. Rep T1's statement suggests a prioritisation of governance over academic experiences, with the latter sacrificed in relation to the firm allegiance towards students. This aggravated the inability to establish a balance between governance and academic activities.

However, the symbiotic relationship with their lecturers did not apply to all participants as highlighted further:

'At Senate we can argue, then some lecturers fail to leave the agreement or disagreement of the meeting, they then take them to lecture hall and you end up being mistreated by your lecturer. Some lecturers have that picture that when you are an SRC person, surely academically you are limping [...] but seriously, we do limp because of attending these meetings and lecturers' unwillingness to compromise on the academic timetable.' (Rep SG2, a 22-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Without doubt, this statement suggests that governance activities are detrimental to academic performance; however, this participant was quick to externalise this challenge to the lack of consistent attendance at lectures, which may not always be the case as students are expected to be responsible for their own learning. Other participants, however, were of the view that more needed to be done about the attitude of lecturers towards SRC members, as demonstrated in the statements made:

'I think the university must communicate with the lecturers to respect us too and not treat us badly just because we are SRC. Lecturers must be willing to give us notes and guide us.' (Rep AO2, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

'I think generally academic staff tend to be offish with SRC members, so I think the minute you mention you are SRC, people already see enemy number one, as you are not supposed to challenge anything they say. The best then is for you to remain ignorant about what it is you are supposed to be doing, only to remain in name that you are involved in governance.' (Rep P2, a 24-year-old female postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

While the expectation is that lecturers will support these students, equally important is the recognition that the student ought to be at the forefront of their academic progress. Lecturers would likely be disgruntled by students who challenge their policy inputs at Senate, whereas they are guilty of dissenting those very policies by way of class absenteeism or failure to submit their assignments as consequential to their noncommitment to their own learning. I am reminded of one of the university governance models, highlighted by Luescher-Mamashela (2013), of the community of scholars, which indicates that academic staff should be the most influential decision-making stakeholder based on their responsibility to disseminate knowledge to students. This perspective indicates the likelihood for lecturers to resist students' governance participation. Without many options based on the legal compulsion for their

inclusion in governance, lecturers could hold students responsible for what Rep SG2 termed the 'limp', meaning the academic sacrifices they made in the process of fulfilling these duties. Consequently, lecturers held students accountable for their own academic demise as seen to be related to their failure to balance their governance and academic commitments.

■ 7.3. Academic consequences of governance participation

Overall, it seems that there were more negative experiences than positive ones for the SRC in governance. A major benefit related to skills acquisition, which was viewed as benefiting the students to discharge their roles in governance and gain skills that would place them in good stead beyond their student lives. Participants reported having developed self-esteem and confidence, with accompanying social benefits, such as building relations, establishing networks and attending social events. While acknowledging these benefits, the emphasis of this study was to examine the impact of SRC participation in governance on their academic experiences. Participants reported having acquired leadership, communication, problem-solving, conflict-resolution, decision-making, public speaking, research skills, people management and bargaining skills through their participation in governance. Benefits of a material kind tended to be downplayed but included part payment of tuition fees and accommodation.

Specific to the correlation with their studies, participants agreed that governance participation had a spin-off of having a platform to practise some of the theories they had learnt. It was, however, not always possible to match their SRC positions to their fields of study. Participation in governance also promoted a culture of reading and gaining awareness on a variety of cross-cutting issues.

Although regarded as necessary and important, and notwithstanding the above benefits, there was major consensus on the various disadvantages and challenges that participation in governance brought to the student representatives at the individual as well as collective levels.

The SRC exemplary leadership requirements are aptly described by another statement that:

> 'Leadership is about setting the example. *Kumele si Represente* [*we must represent*] students. If you do not pass, how can Faculty take you seriously when you bring student problems to them – they won't listen to you.' (AO1, a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member).

In my view, she faced difficulty in achieving her own academic goals, as her involvement in both meetings and student consultations were hugely time-consuming, having accepted being at the beck and call of students.

Lecturers retaliated by their unwillingness to provide support to her; as was the case with other SRC members, particularly at Campus 1, this was further complicated by the political tensions observed at this institution.

To a question about the effects of governance participation to his studies, another participant responded:

> 'You know, my schedule does not always work as I have planned. Very often my timetable is disturbed with a call from the office that students are waiting for me, and that's when I must change everything and attend to student problems' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

He further admits that he was constantly 'on call' for students; this is indicative of his promise during the SRC elections. With the SRC constitution silent on academic sustenance by the SRC, no wonder the participants seemed casual about their own academic progress. The prerequisite to be registered students to participate (Koen, Cele & Libhaber 2006b; Luescher 2008; Luescher-Mamashela 2010) and obligation to meet a threshold demonstrating academic progress seemed to be inconsequential to the evident drawback to their studies once the participants were in office.

Contrary to the views expressed by negative effects expressed by some representatives, there were some who were unapologetic about the importance of their academic achievements, as stressed:

> 'I think it is not only important to have academic criteria to get into the SRC, but even when you are in office, how do you represent something that you don't practise, academic excellence? How do other students take you seriously if you are failing? Do you think management will even listen to us if we can't prove that the free education during our term in office is in good use? Luckily this obligation is not stipulated in our constitution.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

I agree with this comment that the SRC ought to demonstrate exemplary leadership. However, his statement is contradictory. On the one hand, he appears to be uncompromising about the negative perceptions by both students and the university administration if SRC members failed their studies having been financially supported. On the other hand, Rep AO3 expressed relief that the clause obliging them to succeed academically while in the SRC was excluded from their constitution. This indicates his own noncommitment to 'academic excellence' that the SRC constitution specified to be their objective. Rep DP2 stressed:

> 'We are committed to setting an example to students. My academics are my priority all the time. Last semester as a strategy, I attended part-time classes so that I could keep up and not compromise my studies.' (Rep DP2, a 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Nevertheless, she remained conscious of her academic persistence. Her efforts to keep up with her studies outside her scheduled time show that she prioritised her governance activities over her studies. The flip side to the

apparent commitment to her studies could be the unintended ramifications, such as burnout.

In the case of Rep AO3, his statement suggests he was conscious that not only was there a contradiction in not having an obligation to practise what they preached (access and support for students) by not leading as an example to students. Clearly, there would be tensions in their ability to articulate the views of students, while they could not sustain their education having been provided at least the financial relief to do so through the remissions they received.

Reflecting on these negative effects, Rep AO1 responded that while there was a great deal of work done by the SRC, 'some people don't even see the effort you make.' These views reflect a desire for participants to fulfil their election commitments to serve students, honour their organisational deployment while enjoying personal benefits of being subsidised for their studies. However, the reality for most was the feeling of isolation and lack of support from the institutions and the students they represented likewise. The SRC were deprived of crucial time to pursue their academic activities and, inevitably, this had some negative impact on their academic performance. Academic performance suffered partly because the institutional systems did not provide adequate support for balancing governance tasks and academic activities.

One of the profound admissions by the participants was the constant pressure, especially at the undergraduate level, to keep constant with their studies despite their commitment to governance work. I agree with the general sentiment by participants that while they derived some benefits in participating, the impact on their academic development remained a concern. This concern was expressed aptly by another participant:

> 'Students here think we are employed by them, and we should not study. We are accountable to students; our focus should be less on our own academic work and instead we should be there when they need to consult with us on their problems. We are compromised. Students bring their problems to me about their marks or maybe not understanding a lecturer or checking their exam scores, and I take these issues up either with faculty, the registrar or examination officer. I sit at Senate but mostly to listen to the professors. At Senate, it's very difficult really to participate, as mostly all the senior members of the university are there and it can be very scary.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

While elected as the custodian to deal with students' direct academic challenges, by his own admission this participant lacked the confidence to raise these concerns brought to him. His consultation with students subsequently expected to raise their concerns at Senate meetings where she was intimidated, seemed time-consuming and futile. Worse still, this was likely to compromise his own academic plan. This situation highlighted the

concern about his capacity to represent students and therefore questioned the criteria used for choosing him as the student representative on academic issues.

What resonates strongly amongst the participants is the obligation to serve students, yet with no guideline or expressed understanding from them as to how this was to be done. Nyundu et al. (2015) observed that the essence of student participation in governance was to ensure that students are represented, have a voice in the decision-making process that affected their academic progress. I observed that the SRC members in this study were acutely conscious of the importance of this responsibility, stressing the pressure they felt from the student body. Participants continually reinforced their commitment as the student 'voice' while compromising their own studies, however, without fully comprehending how this was to be done.

While recognising the sentiments expressed by students who were in university governance, the views of ordinary students not in governance differed, especially with the surge of COVID-19 where all students were forced to quarantine during Levels 5 and 4 of the lockdown imposed by government as part of the state of emergency protocols:

> 'The SRC were no different to us as they had to drop their guard and quarantine to save themselves from the spread of the virus. We were all so confused as to what was happening as we were compelled to leave student residences. The sudden loss of Wi-Fi means that we basically lost communication, and it took four months before we heard anything from the SRC.' (#Student7, commenced studies in 2018, is 21-years-old and currently in 3rd year of study)

> 'I only heard about the SRC while we were on campus during registration and in res. You are asking about them now, well, I don't even know their names and have not seen any message about what they are doing to help us get computers.' (#Student1, commenced studies in 2020, is 20-years-old and currently repeating 1st year of study)

> 'In April last year, the Minister promised that NSFAS students would all receive laptops, but up to now I have not received mine and have spent eight months using my phone for classes. The SRC president told us that the university still has not received any confirmation about laptops. He simply said I should use the data bundles through my phone.' (#Student6, commenced studies in 2016, is 25-years-old and currently repeating 2nd year of study)

The negative feelings expressed by these ordinary students resonate with the external conditions brought on by COVID-19, which the SRC would have no control over because they too would have been destabilised and dysfunctional by the forced shutdown. This links to the low response by the students on SRC advocacy and influence to their studies that I observed in the preceding chapter when analysing the academic objective principle articulated in the SRC constitutions from the vantage of students.

Governance participation also brought with it some emotional strain, with negative attitudes developed against student leaders not helping either. Student leaders also found themselves under constant scrutiny in both the social and mainstream media spaces. There were a variety of other negative impacts on the social front, which included losing personal identity to the SRC identity, getting associated with negative SRC perceptions and invasion of personal and private space.

■ 7.4. Suggestions on balancing roles

Consistent with the largely negative environment that characterises membership of the SRC, various solutions were suggested by the student leaders. In line with concerns about the negative impact that governance participation was having on academic participation, many of the suggestions were around how best the two could be balanced.

■ 7.4.1. Suggestions for better academic participation

For most of the participants, the necessary academic support should be provided by the institutional administration rather than what they could do for themselves. Some suggestions about how their academic experiences could improve include:

- formalised academic support for the SRC
- formal additional time by academics to attend or make up for SRC members
- tutors for SRC members
- exam preparation workshops specifically for SRC members
- building more cordial relations with lecturers
- liaising and sharing the schedule of activities with lecturers
- scheduling meetings outside of lecture time
- having SRC members who are postgraduates
- deferring some meetings to give leeway to academic activities
- attending evening classes
- scheduling meetings for weekends
- attending part-time lectures as backup.

The list of suggestions for improving the participants' academic sustenance while performing their governance roles appeared to be one-sided. There does not appear to be any inward reflection by the participants on how they could better prepare themselves to cope with the dual responsibility of governance and academic commitments. In terms of both theoretical lenses through which I formulated this study, the perspectives and experiences of the SRC seem to contradict the scope of the theories. This could be directly linked to the attitude of the SRC in not internalising their

responsibility and preparedness to discharge their governance roles as supportive rather than to view governance as an alternative to their studies.

■ 7.4.2. Suggestions for better governance efficiency

Notably, there were also calls for support to ensure more efficient discharge of the SRC-related functions too. Apart from making the SRC members better administrators, enhancing efficiency in the discharge of SRC functions would also create more time and space for students to attend lectures. The interventions requested by the participants included:

- formal induction and training for SRC
- appointment of researchers to support SRC
- management addressing students directly and proactively
- appointment of a full-time SRC office administrator
- delegation of some of the SRC functions
- reducing the frequency of some meetings
- allowing proxy attendance at meetings
- scheduling meetings for weekends.

Against the background that participants are students first before being members of governance is the first issue that would probably require addressing. To the point of governance being an avenue by which to improve the academic circumstances of the participants, this ought not to be confined to financial remissions.

■ 7.5. Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the high value placed by the participants on their governance role. They, however, admitted to the adverse effect such participation had on their academic performance. Time was identified as the most obvious cause of the conflicting demands between their governance and academic commitments. While pointing out the financial benefit in terms of remissions for their studies, it appeared ironic that some, by their own admission, did not honour their own commitment to succeed academically. While some recognised their role in governance as temporary, most of the participants had prior experience in the SRC. Moreover, there were some participants that expressed willingness to extend their tenure, even beyond the two-year maximum period specified in their constitutions. I observed that those who intended to extend their tenure made use of the additional clause in their constitution that allowed contestation for the core roles in the SRC, namely the president and DP portfolios. Of significance for the participants of

this study was the marked difference between the experiences of those in undergraduate and those doing postgraduate studies. Interestingly, the senior portfolios in the SRC in this study were held by students who were pursuing their first degrees. This, by their admission, was a serious challenge to achieving coherence between their governance roles and their academic lives.

Hindering representatives' empowerment

'A re-enactment of the past seems to hinder the forward-moving process. While rehearsing the past is intended to educate subsequent generations, it also polarises and assists in keeping the past alive.' (Speckman 2015, pp. 66–67)

■ 8.1. Introduction

The obligation for governance participants to be students is a precondition that I stated in the preceding chapters. This confirms a correlation, as indicated by Miles, Miller and Nadler (2008), between learning and involvement. Taking a step back to scrutinise the relationship further, I am reminded of the objective of HEIs and how students fit in general. Acknowledging the fact that the primary goal for institutions of higher learning is to transmit knowledge to students, this suggests that their academic experiences should be central to the relationships that are established amongst university stakeholders. One of these interactions is the decision-making fora. The incorporation of students in governance as alluded to by various researchers is to provide access to decisions that directly impact the academic processes and activities that students face. To this extent, it is important that the SRC participate to intercede on pertinent issues that would induce students' academic persistence

and progress. In this regard, successful participation, at least to express issues of concern and make suggestions on improving the plight of students, means that this should have a positive knock-on effect on themselves. Student advocacy appears to have a major influence not only on how the participation of the SRC manifests, but importantly, ordinary students expect that those they have voted into office should lead the advocacy objective, failure of which is evidence that students will take this power upon themselves through activist movements. The speed of spreading the plan for such movements has accelerated with the Twitter age, amongst other social media platforms.

The intention of the study was to uncover whether students in governance benefitted academically from their participation. Importantly, the SRC's incorporation in governance is expected to advocate for student needs to be met to enable them to benefit academically. It would naturally be anticipated that, as the SRC has a direct interface at the governance levels, their own academic experiences would be enhanced. From data collected, the study has revealed various factors that are central to how governance participation connects with the academic objective that the SRC advocate for. This showed that such intersections did not always benefit the students involved in governance. Tensions were evident between the participants' conceptualisation of their governance roles through to the difficulties they experienced in persisting with their studies. These issues manifested through the political influence, their academic aspirations, their academic level at which the participants were registered, their expectations from lecturers, their socio-economic backgrounds and the tension or complementary advocacy approaches in the boardroom and activism. Further compounding the difficulty of the role the SRC carries out are the dire conditions that most of the students who they represent experience. These also had an impact on how they can genuinely address these conditions especially as the unprecedented COVID-19 has exacerbated these hardships.

This chapter examines the various issues that impact how the SRC advocate for students in governance and at the same time retain their academic commitment. The intersection between governance participation and academic experiences of the SRC forms the basis of the discussion, although additional data were obtained from ordinary students on their perception of the role of the SRC in facilitating their academic growth. While the SRC intercedes for students, the disruption of COVID-19 has aggravated the difficulties for students and made the role of the SRC more questionable, if not visible. I discuss the lightning analogy of COVID-19 in Figure 9.1 in the next section. I firstly highlight the central themes in the intersection, as referred to in Figure 8.1.

COVID-19

Governance
participation

Academic
experiences

1. Political accountability
2. Academic aspirations
3. Unrealistic expectations from the lecturers
4. Postgraduate and undergraduate capacity
5. Students propelled by socio-economic circumstance
6. Boardroom versus activism
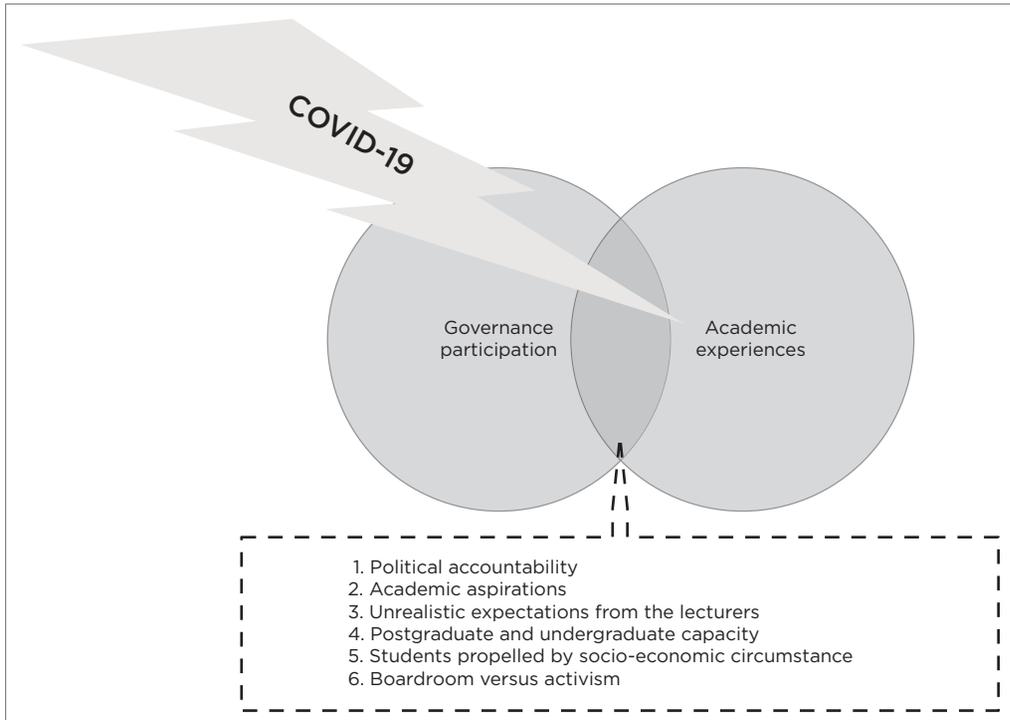
Source: Author's own work.
FIGURE 8.1: Student Representative Council intersection between governance participation and academic experiences.

■ 8.1.1. Political accountability

A major driving force to the relationship between students' governance participation and their studies was the political influence on the students. All SRC participants in this study confirmed that they entered the SRC terrain on a political ticket, as deployed by their respective student organisations that are directly linked to national politics. Therefore, while expected to perform their governance duties, it was evident that some accountability to their organisations was necessary. As some were identified for the SRC roles by their organisation, this meant that their actions once in governance would be directed from the same offices. Further, while discharging their duties, the infighting between the participants mirrored the contestation between parties at the national level.

Higher education institutions appear to be the natural turf to identify potential candidates for future political roles. The financial support they obtain for mobilising for SRC elections by way of posters, banners and leaflet distribution, according to Mazwai (2008), placed them at an advantage to win elections against those who contested as independent candidates. It emerged

from the data that the election manifesto by which students contested is anticipated to be followed through by the participants once elected. Invariably, this caused tension between participants representing different political interests, with a continuous grandstanding that occurred among them. This finding resonates with the view raised by Nyundu, Naidoo and Chagonda (2015) that:

> [*T*]he SRC leaders used participation in student politics, as a dress rehearsal for active political engagement in civil society organisations or even leading political parties such as the ANC, DA and EFFSC. (p. 158)

Similarly, Koen et al. (2006a) and Badat (2016) point to participation in governance as largely influenced by political accountability, which invariably could conflict with their primary objective to intercede on behalf of students on academic issues. In terms of the theoretical argument by Tinto, for instance, political meddling tended to complicate the issue of the governance objective intended to support students' academic success. In other words, the reciprocal relationship between governance and academic experiences, as postulated by Tinto (1987) and Astin (1984), was unlikely to be realised, given the intensified political interference and, as admitted by participants, their high contestation in preparation for their own political lobby efforts through their SRC membership.

In this study, all participants from Campus 2 and Campus 3, were members of South African Students' Congress (SASCO), the student organisation aligned with the ANC. This was not the case for participants from Campus 1 and Campus 3. Affiliation to SASCO and South African Democratic Students Movement were observed at Campus 3. At Campus 1 participants' political affiliations were split by campus, with two seats held by students representing the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFFSC). The issue at this campus was far more complicated as the president (not interviewed in this study) was from SASCO, this organisation having edged out both Democratic Alliance Students' Organisation (DASO) and EFFSC in the SRC elections. This allowed for a certain level of structural independence based on multiple campuses, a feature of the federal system, although political interference extended to university staff aligned with political organisations. The tensions between SASCO and DASO that emanated from the previous year's contestation, where DASO won the elections, were explained:

> 'We are always fighting about political affiliation, so you find that because last year the institution was DASO [...] but now it is SASCO. We have our own dynamics within SRC, and it depends on who is suggesting what and which organisation they come from. Even the lecturers are political. Everything here is political [...] If you want to proceed with your life and get your degree, you must just be a politician.' (Rep CP 1[b], a 25-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

These comments suggest a strong political motivation was necessary to be valued at this institution, indicating that without some allegiance, students

would not progress academically. This implies that academic success was manipulated through the strength of political affiliation and thus not achieved through one's own efforts or merit. Similarly, at Campus 3, the political influence was high in the way the SRC members performed their roles. Talking about the Branch General Meeting of SASCO, this is clarified:

> '[*Y*]ou have to be a member of the branch to be allowed to enter the venue for the BGM, you must sign a database, then there is a code of that structure. Only then can you nominate a member for the SRC.' (Rep AO3, a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

This was reflective of the election process directed by branch membership during the local and national political contestation in the country. At Campus 2, the SRC was SASCO-led. There is a clear consciousness about the political contestation that remained beyond elections, as indicated by the following participant:

> 'As much as we are a SASCO-led SRC, we need to understand that there are other political organisations who want to make sure that we don't succeed. It's a constant political battle to make our life a bit difficult, and students don't listen to us.' (Rep DP2, a 21-year-old female undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

This points to the SRC members remaining conscious not only about how they were appointed but other organisations to which students belonged, who could potentially sabotage any efforts made for the benefit of students. It further infers a continual jostling for power amongst the SRC members, which invariably would conflict with their primary objective to ensure academic continuity and success for students. Participants seemed to admit that political meddling took precedence over their academic commitments, which ultimately would be concerning.

From the interviews, it was clear that students preferred to contest under the banner of their political affiliations (Mpanza et al. 2019) instead of being independent contestants, to guarantee some financial support for election mobilisation and manifestos. At another level, contestation was influenced by the inability to secure employment and therefore financial stability. These views were expressed by the participants:

> 'I'm contesting out of EFF Student Command, and I want some of my national to support that. If I want to have maybe a manifesto where I invite people, have catering, I can do that. They pay for our posters and pamphlets, which students see everywhere. But if you're a society, for example, the LGB, you don't have a mother body to fund you. Joining the SRC now also gives me some experience for a future political position or Parliament.' (Rep T1, a 23-year-old female undergraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

> 'I could not find a job, and this opportunity presented itself to help me build by confidence. Maybe one day I can be a union official or a politician.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

> 'Politics and public administration are significant in the governance of this country, which will be questions key to taking part in student governance. I'm doing Public

Admin postgrad [...] I am also motivated by the past leaders of the SRC; some of them are leaders in politics, others in parliament. Zizi Kodwa, for example, is a former SRC. The Minister of Finance is an old student from here, so I am motivated by them.' (Rep SSO1, a 23-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'There are many examples of politicians who came from the youth organisations affiliated to the political parties that have made it big. With jobs not that many, why not join a party that will recognise your skills for Parliament?' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The above comments imply that students used their role in governance as precursors to achieve their career aspirations as politicians, unionists or parliamentarians. Participants hoped to replicate examples of SRC predecessors, who have subsequently been elected to ministerial government positions. As such, the positioning of candidates for the SRC together with some registering for compatible courses places them at an advantage for future political positions. Another SRC member, from Campus 1, responded in a similar way, linking his participation in governance to a future political position:

'Yes, as I am doing in public administration and my intended career, participating in governance does help, as ultimately, I want to be a public servant, so this assists me in understanding the governance exposure and experience, giving me the practical exposure.' (Rep DSG1)

The high interest in political positions by participants from Campus 1 signalled not only the influence they attained from their deploying organisations, but also the direct manifestation of the rife political tensions at this institution. This I had referred to previously about the need to readjust the scheduled appointments that had been preset at this campus (cf. s. 6.2.1). While tensions were not as evident at Campus 2 compared to the other two institutions, SRC participants agreed that tensions between them mostly happened during their partisan campaigns' run-up to the SRC elections, which in many instances placed the institutions at a standstill. This was confirmed by a few of the SRC participants:

'The political interests of SRC members can destabilise the work of the SRC, as each party will attempt to serve their own political interests.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

'During elections, you begin to see which student organisation has money in how they canvass for support. This is the time where political parties offer t-shirts, airtime and even meals to students to get their votes. We make all sorts of promises, exactly as the politicians do during municipal and other elections.' (Rep PIO3, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, not an ex-SCR member)

'The elections are contested highly. Last year, for example, there were student riots because DASO won the elections and SASCO was still confused, as it was the first time in the history of this university. The university had to stop lectures. This impacted on our preparation for our exams; some of SRC members did not write their exams. For us in the SRC, it was more difficult as we had to be involved

in meetings to resolve the tension amongst students.' (Rep CP1[a], a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

The view suggested that the political infighting amongst the SRC could be a serious deflection from their objectives to represent students in general (Sebake 2019) and, even more concerning, could derail them from their overall academic objectives with the different parties competing for their own party policies to dominate. The comments highlight how the SRC electioneering mirrors the government elections, with prospective voters drawn through incentives. These partisan tensions can cause challenges. A real challenge with the SRC elections on an annual basis is the potential disruption to the academic programme as tensions escalate between the contenders for SRC positions. As admitted by Rep CP1(b), this had a resultant negative impact on the academic continuity of some of the SRC members. Some universities were forced to adjust the academic calendar as a result of #FMF in 2015. This was the biggest movement by students, with students representing different political and interest movements that used this opportunity to garner their own political support while paralysing the academic continuity at some of the universities. As noted by Mavunga (2019), the damage to institutional property and resources would have a dire impact on the academic progression of students, including the SRC.

From the study, there is clear evidence that partisan influence for entry and continuation in office for the SRC remains intense. This has an effect of student leaders appearing to masquerade as representatives, although not achieving the main objective of their inclusion as firmly articulated in their constitutions: to progress the educational aspirations of their constituencies. While historically, the political impetus has led to the SRC incorporation in governance structures as articulated in the enacted legislation, the paradox is that the continued persistence with politics appears to constrain the very essence of their inclusion to promote academic access and improve the experiences of students, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds. From the perspectives of the participants in this study, it appeared that the political affiliations expressed during manifestos leading to SRC elections tended to interfere with the study objectives. Students desperately need to have a chance to redefine their lot in life. This resonates with the idea that education provided the gateway to improved livelihood and economic well-being.

■ 8.1.2. Academic aspirations

Tinto (1987) suggests that governance and academic experiences can be integrated to achieve the academic objective, which would align with the purpose for which student representation has been incorporated. Following this proposition, the opportunity to engage and understand the decisions associated with student experiences should provide an opportunity to utilise the learnt protocols to advance their education aspirations and help other

students in how best to manage the demands related to their studies. In terms of this theory, there ought to be a balance and alignment between governance activities and study commitments. However, the results reflect a different position in that in their deep engagement in governance structures, students tended to sacrifice their own commitment to their studies. Furthermore, by their admissions, the student body they represented appeared to place more pressure on them to be responsive to their needs at the peril of their own studies. Engaging with other stakeholders in governance is therefore expected to provide students the opportunity to learn about the institutional systems and protocols which would better prepare them academically from the point of view of understanding the policies that guide their academic programme. Further, in Tinto's (1999) revision, class activities play an important role in stimulating the academic growth and development of students. The findings of this study, however, showed that participants had less time for class, given the direct clash between their lectures and governance committee meetings. It appears that students willingly prioritised their participation in governance. Tinto further postulates that students' goals and aspirations would influence the extent to which their involvement in governance is integrated with the academic aspects for the student. This means that when the student is motivated and focused on their studies while coping with their roles in governance, this would lead to a positive academic outcome. The opposite effect of distraction would prevail where there is less integration, according to Tinto.

In Astin's (1984) view, the proposition about achieving balance is based on the time and quality of the involvement. In this case, where students contribute to governance activities while remaining consistent with their studies, this is likely to support their academic objectives. From some of the comments made, especially for those close to completing their undergraduate studies, the consciousness about their studies meant that whatever time was missed during the day, the evenings would be dedicated to their studies, including attending evening classes with part-time students. The alternative for some would be close synergy with lecturers (some of whom they interfaced with in Senate meetings), as postulated by Tinto (1999), or peer support. The social aspects identified by Tinto (1975) have shown to be important not only to the SRC but the ordinary students, who now experienced depression from not having the opportunity to network with their peers for academic support during COVID-19. The latter was profound, for students forced into isolation felt compromised academically because of the new mode of self-study without the support and sharing of notes with their peers.

Both theories therefore point to a consequence from the level of participation in governance to the academic activities that determine the outcome of their education. It appears from the study that the higher the involvement in governance, the lower would be the focus on studies, which would ultimately be detrimental not only to the SRC participants and students

in general but to institutional sustainability. Tinto's (1999) revised version posits that the attendance of class is a critical element to academic persistence, while Astin (1984) incorporates the value of the library to support academic aspiration. This was not the case in this study, as students tended to neglect their studies for governance, expressed as noting the reality as 'SRC by day and students by night.' This further exacerbated the psychological coping by the SRC beyond elements of fatigue that would naturally creep in. Some students further reduced the number of courses they attended to fulfil their governance commitments. This implies that their academic work would be pursued through self-study or hugely reliant on accessing notes and support from other students. The intended integration and balance, as proposed theoretically, was not achieved by the participants in this study. This drawback emanated from the extensive hours they spent attending meetings, consulting with students and trying to navigate the plethora of policies and documentation associated with their roles, this directly at the peril of their studies. Similarly, students interviewed during the pandemic shared their experiences, worsened by the nonvisibility (not by choice) of the SRC's advocacy for issues that stood in the way of their academic aspirations. Home-based distance study would be a terrain that the cohort interviewed was not only unfamiliar with but compounded by dire family circumstances that had a negative impact on their continuity, especially struggling to keep safe from the virus. Notwithstanding the drawbacks, there are pockets of evidence from the second student cohort that point to some alignment with the six stages of integration identified by Tinto (1987), including background, goals, social and academic experiences, the integration or departure, re-evaluation of goals and commitment and outcome. While it would be expected that the deprived backgrounds they faced should reduce their chances of continuity, this appeared to increase the level of resilience for some. Examples, such as the student being able to continue studying using their smartphone, and another walking kilometres daily to access the network, are remarkable efforts to continue against all odds, which aligns with Astin's point about psychological strength. I cannot, however, determine whether similar evidence could be there for the SRC during the pandemic, as the SRC was not represented in this data source.

Another element that emerged from data that appeared to create conflict was the tenure of the SRC in office. Indications are that the period in office of one year was too short, particularly for those without prior experience in the SRC, given the need to acclimatise and learn the protocols, with the burden of knowing that these activities clashed directly with their academic timetable. The data revealed that while some students had previous experience, those who did not have the experience battled to plan and balance their responsibilities in governance with their academic commitments.

Participants were of the view that they were not properly inducted into their roles and had little information to enable their effective influence on the

decisions taken at governance meetings. Some participants further explained that they were intimidated by having to participate in governance with their lecturers. In this regard, they opined that if they challenged the academic staff during such meetings, this was likely to jeopardise their own academic standing.

The findings of this study imply that to be able to cope academically, it is necessary that the type of student that joined the SRC be at a certain academic level, far beyond just passing, as the SRC constitutions appear to imply. Moreover, this could be supported by a further stipulation that students must remain consistent with their studies while being involved with governance responsibilities. Students could therefore be encouraged to succeed academically where their remissions are linked to their studies. More importantly, their own academic success would help the ordinary student to learn from the leaders about the need for academic persistence, notwithstanding the odds that they may face.

The results of the interviews with the second cohort of ordinary students not in the SRC appeared to be worsened by the pandemic. With most institutions not geared for distance learning, the quality of the educational provision would be compromised based not only on the readiness of the academic staff to switch to the new modality but also on the quality of their assessments, as pointed out by some of the students:

> 'Yes, we are online and doing our best to keep up. Some of our lecturers are very lazy. We are given an essay which is the same as what we got before during the year as the only thing to do for the exam and have three days to do it in our own time. With no one watching how you do it, [*that*] means we don't even have to learn. We must simply open our books and notes and really give them back what they gave us. We agreed with some of the SRC that if there is anything they could be doing is to ensure we can continue this way, so that we get our degrees and can find jobs.' (#Student3)

> 'I started university last year and am now doing second year. I have never seen an exam room before. I have not heard from the SRC since lockdown started and am wondering whether they still have our back. What I keep asking myself is why did we vote for them, when they cannot speak up for us. I am expected to read on my own and try to write what I don't even understand.' (#Student4)

In the case of the first student, the lockdown period presented an opportunity to do very little by way of proper learning but rather regurgitate what was in the books. This student who was repeating his third year was even prepared to use the SRC to take advantage of the mode of learning. On the other hand, the second student was deeply concerned about the value of her studies, especially having never seen an exam room since she commenced her studies in 2020, with clear concern about the value of the SRC. In both situations, the SRC did not appear to represent these students in the best way possible to achieve a quality outcome in their education.

■ 8.1.3. Participants' unrealistic expectations of their lecturers

It might be expected that governance would assist students in having access to their lecturers in governance structures to improve their academic experiences. However, the contrary was evident from this study, in that the discussions on policies did not translate to the actual course details that students were enrolled in but rather were strategic in nature. Students could not benefit from their close contacts at these meetings, nor were they given exemptions by their lecturers. It should be noted that if lecturers gave them preferential treatment, this may not augur well for the student body they represented, who expected them to address their challenges. Participants pointed out that they had anticipated special consideration from lecturers because of their commitment to serving students. For lecturers, it would appear unreasonable to be expected to provide the SRC special treatment, this being made worse by the large class sizes. Regardless of the time spent in governance, the only way to sustain their academic commitments were heavily reliant on their peers as opposed to lecturers. Expecting support from lecturers shows that the SRC members did not cope with their academic work and yet could not obtain preferential treatment, as this would place more pressure on extra time by lecturers outside of the normal periods and consultation times they had allocated for students in general.

By their own admission, their inclusion at Senate, for instance, did not yield the intended benefit to themselves or to students for various reasons: the academics appeared to be privy to information beforehand in that some discussions appeared to have been started elsewhere; limited documentation was provided to the SRC; while discussions related to their experiences, they were confined to consultation (which, in terms of Arnstein's ladder, was a symbolic role) without voting opportunities (Mthethwa 2021); and the SRC further had limited knowledge and skills to meaningfully participate in the discussions (Logue, Hutchens & Hector 2005). Little (2009) and Buettner et al. (2009) further emphasised that students were given the platform to voice their experiences and challenges, but the ratio of students to the other stakeholders limited their influence. This contradicts the views that student leaders could influence the improvement of the curriculum by their active engagement (Bergan 2003; Persson 2003). While students had the right to be involved in and improve academic experiences (Love & Miller 2003), with the SRC as the direct voice of students (Caridine 2019) to safeguard their interests (Lizzio & Wilson 2009), they were not seen as equal partners (Bergan 2003).

The study revealed that the SRC constitution did not suffice to support processes and active involvement by the SRC to achieve its advocacy objective. Little is said about how they are recognised, their rights and

limitations in governance, confining the narrative to describing their roles without much emphasis on the level of responsibility in governance. While this framework stated the criteria for their entry into office, it did not stipulate how they could be effective in realising their own academic goals and be visible role models for their constituency. For Klemenčič (2012), this includes the recognition that student leaders are an important data source that must be consulted, their autonomy as active participants (especially in teaching and learning decisions) must increase and that student-centred policies, research participation and pedagogies are critical to an improved mode of student engagement.

■ 8.1.4. Postgraduate and undergraduate capacity

Governance participation proved to compromise students' studies because of the long hours they spent in meetings, their consultations with students and, as indicated previously, their partisan accountability. Students at the undergraduate level of studies were likely to be compromised as the scheduled governance meetings occurred during the day when they were expected to be in class (Zuo & Ratsoy 1999). This challenge was further compounded by the volume of coursework usually associated with undergraduate studies because of the number of courses they were expected to take. To succeed academically, it is necessary that extensive commitment is made to class attendance, tutorials and time to complete the required assignments. Academic success could only be realised by undergraduate students who either had a close relationship with their lecturers for extra support, as highlighted by a participant from Campus 1 (cf. Section 'Lecturer support'), or leveraged on their peers to provide notes from class. For postgraduate students, it was easier to participate in governance considering various factors. Having already completed a degree meant that there was less pressure, and they had demonstrable experience in planning their timetable, which did not clash with the meeting times. At this level, it is anticipated that the class size would be much smaller and therefore study groups were easy to set up, allowing for closer engagement with academic staff. Postgraduate studies are largely research-based, and therefore class contact time was minimal. In general, most participants at the postgraduate level had prior governance experience and therefore were better acquainted with governance protocols and discussions to be able to meaningfully contribute to decision-making. Equally, other stakeholders in governance were more familiar with them. The ability to grasp and participate for undergraduate students with little or no experience in governance would be a challenge. For the undergraduate student, the amount of time spent at meetings did not yield any value to either their contribution to these structures (given the limited exposure and understanding) or their own academic commitments.

■ 8.1.5. Students propelled by socio-economic circumstances

It is suggested that students from lower-income backgrounds were likely to consider joining the SRC to directly address their own needs. This study confirmed that some participants were motivated to join the SRC as a way out of their poverty-stricken backgrounds, while others found it to be a stopgap when they could not secure employment after graduating. Prospects for free accommodation, meal provisions and cell phone allowances were sufficiently enticing to contest for the SRC. The political influences on student organisations were further compelling motivators to consider the SRC as a platform for future roles in government.

The proposition by Astin (1984) that psychosocial elements are relevant to the academic experiences of students was observed from the participants in this study. Participants emphasised that their socio-economic plight had propelled them to get involved, although their efforts at governance did not appear to add value to their studies (Mthethwa & Chikoko 2020). Academic aspirations of SRC members therefore appear to be constrained as they continue to address the socio-economic hardships of which, for themselves, they appear to have some relief without considering deeper the environments where they come from. Participants admitted that while there was financial beneficiation from their participation, their participation in the governance meetings compromised their persistence with their studies. That the SRC constitutions were silent on academic progress by the SRC in office appeared to further contradict the very academic objective they professed to fulfil, as they did not become role models to students by their own academic achievements.

Students taking up SRC positions simply because of not finding employment suggests that there may not be any interest in pursuing their academic work but rather in sustaining their livelihood. Another observation which resonates with the delink between academic progression and governance was the case of Campus 2, which determined that SRC remissions would be based on the level of participation in governance with no consideration of commitment and progress by participants in their studies.

■ 8.1.6. Boardroom versus activism

The collective movements of 2015 have questioned the effectiveness of the SRC as a small group to properly advocate for student needs. Student fee hikes have always formed part of the governance discussion each year; however, public attention around fee hikes resulted in the announcement of zero increase in student fees in 2016. The argument that students, when pushed against the wall, will resort to collective action is supported by

numerous scholars in their reflection on the 2015 movements. They argue that 2015 encapsulated the plight of student debt linked to economic inequalities, the call to decolonise universities and to draw attention to campus gender-based violence (Frassinelli 2018; Mavunga 2019). As highlighted, this was to be seen as the largest and most effective student revolt (Cloete 2016). The SRC participants interviewed during 2016 admitted to their power being drawn from the collective action, as captured by the following three comments:

> 'I have been in the SRC for years now, and we have been saying the same thing year after year. Students have been frustrated with many dropping out because of money. Last year, we followed the bigger institutions and went to the streets, and only then did we get reaction.' (Rep P3, a 32-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'Council just refused to listen to our plea to address the cost of university which affects our families. Now they learnt their lesson, as we put the university to a standstill. They will now start listening.' (Rep AO2, a 24-year-old male postgraduate student, ex-SCR member)

> 'Honestly, I am wondering what our value really is when there are so few of us at these meetings and we are shut down when we try to raise our concerns.' (Rep CP1[a], a 23-year-old male undergraduate student, ex-SCR member)

Interestingly, the views of the SRC participants tended to be outwardly focused on the problem being about not being recognised in the decision-making structures, without reflecting on their own roles and influence to successfully penetrate decision-making fora on behalf of those who elected them. While the movements may have achieved the no-increase outcome, this came at the cost of destroying infrastructure and resources needed for their educational attainment (Mavunga 2019). It is without doubt that student leadership could play an important role in achieving negotiated settlements, not only to curb extreme reactions, as witnessed in some institutions in 2015 (Page 2010). This necessitates the fact that the SRC is given much more autonomy than what appears to be the case as suggested by the students' ladder of participation (adapted from Arnstein 1969), where to a large extent they remain limited to the consultation role.

Perhaps there is greater opportunity to adjust the perception that students are consumers, instead recognising them as partners at universities (Level 7 of the participation typology). It may be that university management could determine which aspects of student participation in governance could be negotiated and which left for consultation, in a similar manner by which staff are represented by unions through recognition agreements.

The paradox of massification at tertiary institutions in South Africa would be that once entry is confirmed, students' lived realities must be carefully navigated to avoid the dropouts who do not reach the intended finish line. Using an analogy of a running marathon, having started the race and not completing it leaves one with no record of achievement.

■ 8.2. COVID-19 learning realities

The announcement of a state of emergency in South Africa in March 2020 forced universities to close their doors to 'flatten the curve', as stated repeatedly in media about how the spread of the virus could be contained. This study has revealed deeper challenges faced by students than may have been contemplated even by the SRC. A reality of COVID-19 is that it was indiscriminate in its effects on the SRC, students and staff at HEIs. Ordinary students not in the SRC were interviewed during this unprecedented period, which worsened the already compromised position of students in the various challenges they faced to achieve their academic pursuits.

Whereas a few of the interviewed students appeared to cope with online learning, others insist that COVID-19 coupled with physical distancing and quarantine protocols exposed greater difficulties in sustaining their academic commitments. The salient issues raised by the ordinary students interviewed include inadequate academic staff and student readiness, lack of appropriate spaces for learning, anxieties related to separation from their peers and access to the SRC, mental stress about surviving the virus and dire family conditions which would directly affect the prospects of not only continuity but their success. These stressors were, according to the students, heightened by their unfamiliarity or lack of exposure to remote learning, often as first-generation students in their families, which means that they would be unlikely to obtain home guidance. The lack of adequate Internet infrastructure and resources itself brought great challenges to students as they shared their experiences:

> 'I live in a rural area, and I have to walk about 20 km to reach a location with a steady Internet connectivity, as the tower is far. We don't have electricity at home as well. It was so hard that I decided to drop out because I was so behind, because of the Internet challenge.' (#Student1)

> 'Our home is not suitable for online education, as there are no computers here and I have to ask my mother to charge my phone at the clinic where she works. Sometimes I have to go with her to download some of the study material.' (#Student8)

> 'I used my smartphone to study the whole year, as we did not receive the computers that had been promised by the government. I struggled sometimes with connectivity during some of the lessons and could only use what I had downloaded. I am not sure yet what my results are from the last exam, but I tried my best.' (#Student 6)

The views expressed by these students not in the SRC were not surprising considering the capacity and access to Internet connectivity and the lack of digital resources for their studies. Not only were students ill-prepared for online learning, however; their challenging family circumstances were likely to reduce their chances of succeeding academically. Prominent in their experiences was the direct exposure to their family conditions with no water, electricity and other basic needs to accommodate a suitable environment

in which their studies could continue. Deepening these socio-economic conditions was the minimal exposure to technology. Students also expressed their frustration with the distance learning which they – and, it would appear, the lecturers themselves – had not adapted to. For students sitting at home, their financial plight was worsened by the fact that they struggled to pay for education, but it appeared to have less value with the obligation of self-regulated learning, and this was compounded by home experience and tensions that compelled their persistence.

To add more salt to the wound, the SRC could not, with little choices themselves, come to their rescue. Despite some students having the facilities at home to enable their continuity, they expressed concerns about teaching preparedness, saying that:

> '[L]ecturers have not made any efforts to help us. We are sent notes to read and write assignments. I am still waiting for my marks from an assignment I wrote 6 months ago.' (#Student4)

This highlighted the equally challenging strain for academic staff, who too must navigate the technical challenges of online teaching while themselves having to balance their own work obligations with family responsibilities during what would be unfamiliar territory for them at home. If the academic staff appear to not be timeously responsive to students, the difficulties for students would likely be worse, especially those in poorer situations where often they have the responsibilities of their siblings all confined in the one environment, having to cope with survival challenges and fears about contracting COVID-19.

Throwing light on their lived experiences, one of the students expressed frustration with having to adapt to the changed forced circumstances to be at home, where their reality was worsened by their family conditions. Clearly, having 'to fetch water and do the home chores' (#Student3) left little room to think about school, as observed by Xaba and Sayeed (in Sayeed 2020). In addition, the home was described as:

> '[C]ramped with seven people, and I have to look after my siblings while my parents stand in long queues at the post-office to get the social grant to buy food.' (#Student2)

The student added her fear for her safety, having witnessed the brutal abuse of her sister by an uncle, saying, 'I witnessed my sister being raped by *uMalume* [uncle].' The hardships of food insecurity and increased violence towards females during lockdown further weakened any chance of academic continuity, let alone focus. The quarantine to reduce the spread of COVID-19 had negative consequences with the surge in gender-based violence related to economic insecurities and alcohol abuse (Hussen 2018; Mittal & Singh 2020).

Where students are forced by circumstance to choose their education over the basic survival that their families struggle for, it would be unreasonable to

anticipate they would prioritise their studies. One participant aptly pointed this out, saying, 'how can I work on an empty stomach?' (#Student8), this stresses the reality of food insecurities (Van Den Berg & Raubenheimer 2015).

Even for students with better home environments, the isolation posed challenges to their continued studies. The strain of the inability to socialise and have physical contact with their peers added to the mental stress for two participants, despite the better family conditions they enjoyed compared to the other six participants interviewed:

> 'Studying alone is very hard. I used to study with my friend, but now I must find a way to study alone, with all the distractions around the house with other family members. Even though I struggled at the beginning, I have found a solution – to watch YouTube videos – as I don't want to spend hours reading from textbooks. Our lecturer was so surprised when I ended up teaching him about different ways to teach us, which most of us could relate to as we use social media a lot, instead of PowerPoint presentations. Sometimes students will find the solution for themselves rather than relying on lecturers, who hardly can use all the apps on their phones.' (#Student4)

> 'It is very bad now, and I am worried that I won't pass, as I don't have my friends to compare notes and share our understanding. The professor is also struggling to adapt to online teaching. Many students are complaining in our WhatsApp group that he does not answer our questions and complaints. It's the blind leading the blind'. (#Student3)

The examples of the experiences of the two ordinary students with better fortunes, in terms of facilities and home setup, yielded different results. #Student4, while highlighting the difficulties of self-study, found an alternate way to navigate their course by self-study through interactive videos that appeared to be academically beneficial, to the extent of exposing the technological limitations of their lecturers. For the other student in an affluent environment, the psychological readiness for the new online environment impacted their self-confidence and commitment, having been previously accustomed to peer support and a structured environment for their learning to thrive, such as regulated face-to-face classroom interaction. With the new modality of unregulated self-study, more distractions and difficulties in separating their comfort zone from study responsibilities posed a challenge, with the student externalising the problem to the lecturer. Participant #Student3 demonstrated a strong reliance on group influence, succumbing to the WhatsApp negative complaints which would not be likely to propel the study objective.

An external force of the pandemic has indeed pinched some of the strides that the SRC would have made while on campus, with less opportunity to intercede for students confined to varying circumstances. While it revolutionised the process of education, COVID-19 impaired opportunities for students from poorer backgrounds, glaringly posing the paradox of access without facilities.

■ 8.3. Conclusion

The lived academic experiences of students formed the basis of this chapter. I dealt with the SRC comprehensively, as the main focus of the study, in the way they experienced their study pursuit within the context of their roles in governance. The role of the SRC in governance in relation to their academic experiences was influenced by their aspirations, level of study and own circumstances. While the political affiliations were central to their roles in governance, this appeared to negatively impact their academic pursuits. To this extent, their activist roles appeared to have a greater effect on the institutional response in addressing student needs compared to their influence in governance structures. The experiences of ordinary students during the COVID-19 period demonstrated very little value derived from the SRC.

Reimagining the academic puzzle

'Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.' (Malcolm X)

■ 9.1. Introduction

The study revealed that the inclusion of student representation in university governance could benefit both students and universities; however, this necessitated a reconfiguration on the mechanism by which students are incorporated. Based on Boland's (2005) assertion that universities should educate and disseminate knowledge to students, it calls for the understanding and appreciation of the challenges that students face. Therefore, to achieve the educational objectives, it would be useful to have the necessary avenue for consultation and consensus-seeking between all stakeholders, particularly students. It also calls for some aspects of student governance to be adjusted to allow for deeper influence by the student representatives on the plight of this important stakeholder. University management would be encouraged to find ways to avoid a reactionist approach when pushed by student activism, as this as a destructive effect on institutions themselves, thereby diminishing the essence of education provisioning. This would imply that students in governance ought to be better recognised as critical stakeholders, beyond

being seen as clients to institutions of higher learning. It calls for a more structured way by which their inclusion is made, including a process to support their dual accountability to their roles in governance and their academic aspirations so that these are more effective and beneficial to them. The results of this study are consistent with prior research findings and the theoretical framework on the necessity for social and academic interaction (Tinto) to achieve the experience required to succeed. However, this dual influence would need to be better defined, especially on how this co-curricular can be more effective to students' academic success. In relation to the balancing of time (Astin) by the SRC, it was clear that postgraduate students were better placed to accommodate their responsibilities in governance and their commitment to their studies compared to undergraduate students. Further, with the advantage of longer exposure to institutions, postgraduates could easily understand and adapt to their governance responsibilities, having also already earned their stripes with at least some academic qualification. The study revealed, however, that even those at postgraduate levels would need to be more organised to yield the intended academic benefit while in office.

Student challenges regarding financial exclusions and the insufficiency of university-owned accommodation for the registered student population seemed to be the driving force for the SRC members. Most of the activities that participants engaged in were about student challenges, for example, the project initiated by the DP of the SRC for female students at Campus 2 (cf. s. 5.3.2, 'Deputy president'), as well as the transport and meals for students as confirmed by the CP at Campus 1 (cf. s. 5.3.1, Campus 1), which were important to students' campus needs. The advocacy appeared to be less focused directly on academic issues, such as students' ability to understand lectures during class or their interpretation of the material that they were exposed to for their learning.

Without a doubt, the study showed that the SRC were very busy, and they found difficulty in managing their time between their engagements in governance meetings, consultation with students with their own academic interests. The effects of their specific interventions at these meetings on academic persistence and success were unclear. They appeared to focus on the aspect of social integration, as postulated by Tinto (1975); however, not linking this directly with the necessary academic integration aspects required to succeed. It also did not support the five influences for academic success pointed out by Astin (1984). This does not imply that these theories are not relevant, but rather that greater efforts must be made in exploring academic-specific interventions. The SRC institutions need to ensure provisions for the SRC autonomy and the partnership level of Arnstein's participation typology (cf. s. 3.5.7) in matters that would directly impact students' throughput rates so that they can retain their recognition in being experts in knowledge creation and be sustainable. What was further evident was that for most of the SRC

participants, their own academic commitments were compromised. It was further unclear what academic gain they derived from being governance participants.

The chaos brought on by #FMF in 2015–2016 and, more profoundly, the standstill placed on institutions during the COVID-19 quarantine, suggest that there are broader extenuating issues that must be considered in determining what would be necessary to achieve the end goal as set out by the objectives articulated by students' representatives in their constitutions. The lack of visibility of the SRC during the lockdown, presumably also fending for their own academic opportunities and in a sense locked out with the limited connectivity, amidst the reactive approach by most institutions as the pandemic spread, clearly increased the very disadvantages that they advocated against.

Another profound aspect in relation to remote studying was the potential of compromising the very quality of the education that institutions are to provide for the betterment of students and their families. This relates to the inability of accurately testing the efficacy of their test approaches based on examinations not being properly moderated.

■ 9.1.1. Student governance in the new normal

Without a doubt, the role of the SRC in governance needs to be redefined after the disruption by COVID-19. This study demonstrated various realities about student governance, some of which predate the pandemic. The perspectives of both the SRC and student participants in this study were clear that the anticipated role of the SRC was that of advocacy. This extends beyond simply being incorporated through legislation; rather, it includes students as partners in the quest for a sustained academe. SRC participants admitted that while extensive time is spent at these meetings, their value is doubtful for reasons, such as short tenure in office. Those with prior experience were able to better connect with other stakeholders and understand the ropes better to navigate their way in governance and find some balance with their studies. Evidence provided by the SRC president from Campus 2 shows that it is indeed possible to capitalise on one's role in governance to achieve the academic objective that the SRCs represent and clearly articulate in their constitutions. What was missing in these guidelines was the encouragement for the SRC as role models to ordinary students to persist with their studies while in office.

Against the theoretical foundations referencing the relationship of extracurricular engagement with student academic development, a close look at how this can be achieved specifically as it relates to governance participation would be critical. This presents further opportunity for research to determine the link between the students' academic specialisations to the governance

roles they occupy. The governance framework for the SRC will have to be clearer on how 'academic excellence' is to be promoted. One approach would be to incorporate some clauses in the SRC constitutions that oblige members of the SRC to sustain their own academic progress. A further analysis on the role of SRC in academic excellence, both by way of examples set and their facilitation for students, would necessitate an empirical study on their experiences in balancing their governance role with their academic experience. Against this, a further examination on the entry level into the SRC by students to afford them better mechanisms by which to lead effectively, without compromising their own academic experiences, was conducted. The first is to recognise and affirm that the SRC leadership are primarily students, whose own academic persuasion will enable them to be better advocates and ambassadors to ensure that the very purpose of HEIs to progress learning is achieved. There may be an opportunity to match the governance roles to the specific chosen study of each member of the SRC. This allows for the governance role to be moderated and instrumental to achieving the 'academic excellence' objective set out.

■ 9.1.2. Advocacy in the realm of active participation

The role of the SRC has from the onset been that of advocacy regarding the challenges students face rather than negotiating or having the vote on matters that affect students. Where their views were not considered in the formal structures of decision-making, students used the external means of activism. The latter approach drew more attention, as more students could be part of the expression on issues of descent and discomfort in relation to their study progression. The pandemic has disrupted the means for a collective physical organisation by students. It has, however, accelerated the use of digital platforms to vocalise their needs and challenges they experience. This brings to the fore the need for the SRC to adjust its sails if it is to remain relevant to the broader student community. When examining deeper the experiences of students during the lockdown, clearly the place for student representation remains critical. However, deeper investigation would have to be conducted to inform the 'how' to govern and ensure students are assisted. Just as online teaching has continued as COVID-19 persisted, clearly a new approach to support students with their studies and lead by example would have to be on the firm agenda of the SRC.

The findings from the ordinary students not in governance, who were interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated the value of peer support, especially with the academic staff also finding their feet in adjusting and learning new teaching modalities that they have never used before. Without doubt, COVID-19 caused major disruptions and elevated the digital divide, inequalities in infrastructure, basic services that would separate students in

their quest and ability to continue with their studies and succeed. With the SRC ill-prepared and facing the same challenges that they professed to address, the pandemic has taken back the very strides that have been achieved, as expressed by students in 2015. Paradoxically, while fee concessions were granted to students because of the proliferation of activist movements of 2015, the pandemic has shown that the reality and variations of conditions wherefrom students are drawn remains a stumbling block for academic achievement. Examining this from a different perspective would suggest that it is the same conditions that would propel other students to strive to extricate themselves from their harsh environment, with the urge to improve their life chances. This implies that notwithstanding the poor backgrounds wherefrom some students came, they made all efforts to continue with their studies, albeit limited to using their smartphones to continue with their studies, including accessing study guides and participating in lectures, without the necessary resources, such as computers. There is still value for the SRC to persist in addressing the challenges that students face, even though often, as the study shows, there are areas that they could not penetrate, notably the family dynamics which differed for students at the individual level.

■ 9.2. Repositioning academic experience within the realm of institutional governance

This book has positioned the academic objective as critical to students' educational success and equally the sustenance of universities. Student protests, such as the #FMF in 2015–2016, showed that students have the potential to place institutions in a state of paralysis, especially driven by social media connectivity that stimulates fast mobilisation. The chaos caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, something unfamiliar to South Africa, for instance, has pointed to far broader principles that must be considered for academic institutions of learning to thrive and continue with their core business of knowledge expansion and the preparation of future generations for their economic opportunities, which are certainly not confined to employment but also include the creation of innovation. Technology has played a significant part in redefining teaching and learning and has a direct impact on re-looking at how the SRC's role can be properly aligned with change. A new model of the SRC leadership within the realm of educational objectives, must consider more elements beyond the theoretical provisions made by Tinto (1984) and Astin (1999). Importantly, a much broader educational ecosystem needs to interlock to achieve the academic objective sought by both students and the institutions requirement for sustenance and continuity. Barron (2006, p. 195) defined the learning ecosystem as 'the set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning.' From this study, I have learnt that beyond institutional governance, including the participation of the SRC, there are multiple considerations that shape the educational

experience and ultimate success for students, and within that group the SRC themselves. These include direct and indirect factors. Factors that directly impact students' learning trajectory include peers, family dynamics, infrastructure, academic staff, curriculum digitalisation and resources. Factors considered external and indirect, include socio-economic, political systems, pandemics, weather changes and technology. The SRC academic ecosystem that I have developed out of this study results is indicated in Figure 9.1.

The study has demonstrated that the academic objectives succinctly stated in most SRC constitutions are embedded within a broader educational ecosystem, beyond the university governance in which the SRC is positioned. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a much broader interface necessary for the academic objective to be realised. Directly linked with academic success at the micro-level are peers, family dynamics, infrastructure, curriculum digitalisation, staff and general resourcing for students. While all aspects are
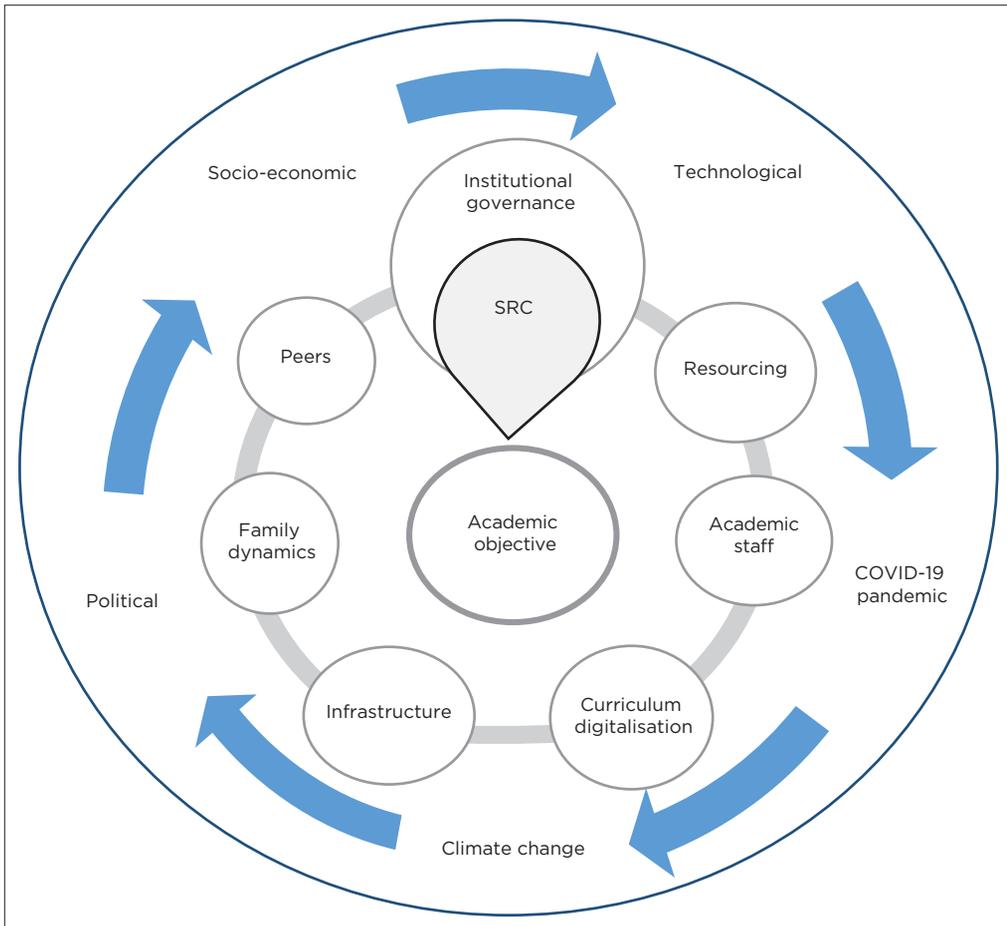
Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.
FIGURE 9.1: The Student Representative Council academic ecosystem.

crucial, the basis for policy and operational framework is institutional governance, within which the SRC must fulfil their advocacy mandate on behalf of students to reap the academic objective necessary.

Evidence from this study shows that peers play a crucial part for an individual who aspires to achieve their academic objective. What is drawn from the study is that peer socialisation, sharing of notes, support and friendships form an important role to a student's study journey. This supports both the theories by Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999). From Tinto's perspective, the integration of social and academic aspects results in success. While peers have a crucial role in the friendships and extramural aspects for a student, the study demonstrated that the peer's role is to incorporate aspects of the academic experience through peer-to-peer tutorship and mentorship, sharing of notes and competing for scores. Astin's theory is useful insofar as it draws the psychosocial balance that peers would share in experience and support to the academic experience sought. Participants in the study during COVID-19 highlighted the feelings of isolation, emotional strain and depression as a result of decreased interaction with their peers. Another aspect from Astin's theory which resonates with this study is the dependability of time invested to achieve the educational objective, wherein he argues that the more time invested in educational activities, the better would be the students' ability to cope while facilitating the learning outcome.

In terms of family dynamics, COVID-19 vividly amplified the varying circumstances, particularly for students from impoverished backgrounds. Prior to the spread of the pandemic, the very core of the SRC was advocacy about the challenges that students face that impact their academic experiences. The historical demonstrations of 2015 highlighted the unaffordability of education by students, as well as the improvement of the finances for staff who were employed by universities on in-sourced bases; the latter similarly sampled the deprived family backgrounds of students. Family dynamics includes parental involvement in supporting, guiding and motivating students to continue with their studies and succeed. For a student from an economically deprived background, this is about the student representing hope to pull themselves out of poverty expressed by youth-headed families, daily responsibilities, food insecurity and no running water and electricity.

With respect to infrastructure, whereas universities had increased student accommodation, all kitted out with Wi-Fi connectivity, it now appears that such infrastructure did not extend to their family homes, as the reality of online learning continues to manifest with no end in sight of the pandemic. The challenge of connectivity for students in poor communities is now about proximity to communication towers and electricity infrastructure to enable them to access the digital platforms for their studies. The SRC in this instance has no influence on the physical home infrastructural challenges that the students face and is limited to advocacy for computer resources and data provision.

Where a student must contend with the living conditions of no electricity, water and distances to network connectivity, this posed a huge challenge to their ability to succeed academically. This links to the digital aspect. The study revealed that the digital challenge was not only limited to the lack of laptops but was about the low digital efficacy of the student to grasp the new mode of learning quickly, while not having support from family (with no experience or knowledge on digitalisation) and withdrawn from their tutors to assist the expedient technological upskilling. The study places the urgency of a technology module as necessary consideration for all students, particularly where this new modality is likely to persist as the most used form of learning.

When it comes to academics, the study showed that the state of readiness for some academic staff was low. Universities were at pains to protect the academic calendar; however, they had not properly resourced the academics with their attitude and psychological well-being to transition from the customary classroom to technology platforms. The study showed that although universities' systems were available, the staff were not fully prepared to change, largely as many of them were from a different era with little exposure to technology. As observed by one participant in this study, in many instances, students were more techno-savvy than their teachers. From the perspective of the students, it appeared as though there was low live connectivity with staff, with most sending Microsoft PowerPoint presentations with voice recordings to students. This meant that students were left to their own ability to dedicate time and teach themselves. Where students reached out to their lecturers via WhatsApp, some experienced little response and would talk to their peers about their assignments taking months to be marked by the academics. The delayed responses from the academic staff would invariably stifle the opportunity for a meaningful experience. Students were further demotivated or anxious about the learning outcome from such poor access and support from academics. For the academic objective to be met, this study revealed that the role of the academic is critical, and the necessary capacitation to new teaching pedagogies would be required.

Resourcing, in the context of the academic objective, means that the student requires all sorts of support to have a chance of a meaningful academic experience. This includes wellness facilities to support the psychosocial aspects that the student faces in the form of call centres that could be made available, quick capacitation, and motivation provided to students through their familiar social media platforms and resources – for example, the WhatsApp technology that is commonly used and economical. Another form of resource necessary for students to continue with their studies is the data provisions. It is notable that early on during the lockdown, the government had partnered with service providers on the zero-rated capabilities (cf. 3.4 'Student integration and retention in South Africa') to ensure free access to learning materials for students.

Overall, the pandemic has demonstrated that there are macro issues that will always have an impact on teaching and learning and the survival of academe. The socio-economic and political arena will find expression with students' continual resistance to inequality in their education, while at the same time contributing to the longevity of these institutions to provide knowledge.

■ 9.3. Conclusion

The results of the study clearly demonstrate numerous broader factors for student academic success; importantly, the SRC are exemplary in their own academic pursuits while advocating for the continuity of students beyond access. I pose ten recommendations that can recentre the SRC advocacy for student academic success within the higher education ecosphere:

Firstly, the SRC are elected to advocate for a broader student body from all strata of society and by implication must address varying limitations, conditions and resources that would affect their chances for academic success. While acknowledging the diversity of students, this study, however, was limited from the point of view that the core data were drawn from HBUs and most of the participants in the second cohort were African, whose views were largely influenced by their own experiences.

Secondly, it is not sufficient that students are provided access to universities. This must undoubtedly be accompanied with the necessary and right support. The role of the SRC is much more profound in influencing academic decisions that will lead to academic success. This study took account of certain aspects of challenges that students face that impact their ability to succeed academically. It is clear that the life of a student at a tertiary institution is much more complex than simple entry acceptance. While we have seen that the SRC has historically focused on access, the challenge becomes much more about the ability to translate entry and experience into success in education. The SRC in turn must address the diversity of issues about student academic progression while themselves leading by example.

In the third instance, it appears that the nuances for student success hinges on intrinsic and extrinsic factors. From the intrinsic aspect, students' previous education exposure, family circumstances, resources and personal support, including peer dependability, would be among the considerations. The extrinsic aspects refer to the modalities of teaching, learning and research. Beyond qualifications, the teacher requires agility. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for lecturers to quickly adapt to the forced change, necessitating that they equip themselves and be adaptive to the required mode of teaching. This calls for a deepened sensitivity, empathy, care and commitment to students to achieve the common goal for academic success beyond simply ensuring its continuity.

Fourthly, the absence or limited access by the SRC in governance and management activities during the pandemic has short-changed students, as demonstrable articulation by the student participants of this study shows that decisions taken by the university administration were often not in line with the lived experiences of students, including their representatives.

In the fifth instance, the study revealed the need for a reconceptualisation of the SRC constitution. Beyond the articulation of the academic objective, there needs to be some guideline on how the SRC would sustain their own academic objectives and in what context their views would be more recognised, especially as stakeholders of the decision-making process and more especially in academically-related committees, such as Senate.

The sixth recommendation is an opportunity to rescope how student leaders are to be properly engaged in governance structures to enable their genuine participation. This necessitates a shift from purely viewing them as consumers but rather promoting this stakeholder to a partner in the decision-making processes, particularly on policies and procedures that directly impact their educational experiences.

The seventh point is that universities need to re-look at the period by which the SRC are in office. The considered extension of the period in governance structures will improve their impact through the learning, growth and confidence that they gain in discharging their role. This may further call for another look at the level of experience, maturity and academic exposure for the student discharged with this magnitude of advocacy. The differences between those who have graduated from those in the early stages of their academic development has exposed some of the tensions that would naturally exist for student leaders. The student in postgraduate studies would be in a better position to have already earned their stripes and can share their experiences regarding how best the improvement of student conditions can take shape.

In the eighth instance, the political influence on the SRC is likely to have been eroded by the experiences of COVID-19, with very little physical contact wherein the mobilisation takes effect. If the SRC by their approaches must demonstrate that they genuinely care about the facilitation of student academic development and success, in my view, the reduction in partisan activity must be considered.

The ninth recommendation is for better coherence between formal and informal modes of advocacy to be considered, as both represent an expression of student voices. Danvers and Gagnon (2014) suggest that activism ought not to be seen as a form of (dis)engagement. This is especially the case with the online pedagogies that will be more common, and therefore social media platforms could be used to network, communicate, educate and govern.

The tenth tenet is about the necessary partnership between the SRC and the institutions to support students, especially to find ways to address their living circumstances (referred by Tinto) that negatively impact their studies. This requires agility in adapting to forces that are external to the institutions, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic that brought about a forced change in the way the education pedagogies could be continued. All stakeholders must converge towards a common goal by complementary efforts that fit the completion of the academic puzzle. The role of the SRC must be seen as much more than simply entry contestation for themselves in governance and students' access to the institutions, and it ought to derive academic value for students as the primary concern.

As argued in the previous chapter, the space for student advocacy in the academic arena has been struck by the lightning of COVID-19. Notwithstanding the myriad challenges that the SRC may have as advocacy stewards in university governance, it is important to acknowledge that the storm will eventually pass. There is a need to bolster student academic success with deepened mechanisms to appreciate the context by which the SRC must advocate for students. The understanding of the impact of the SRC being undervalued in the sustenance of both the institution and students becomes an important area for further interrogation.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Research triangulation

Denzin (2009) explains that triangulations allows for the use of multiple data sources to interpret, review and synthesise the results of a study, resulting in improved reliability and validity resulting from the use of multiple data sources and analysis (Merriam 2009). When utilising multiple sources of data, the gain of triangulation includes the study of the phenomenon from different vantage points and is complementary to gain a fuller perspective of the research enquiry.

The study involved multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews with 18 SRC members from institutions identified as similar, observations of the three research sites, eight students from different universities and document analysis of 14 SRC constitutions. This allowed me to cross-examine similarities and incongruencies between the different data sources. This would improve the credibility and validity of the findings (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006) and interpretation by providing more precision and a better understanding of the phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Creswell 2017).

Multiple data sources assisted in in-depth understanding of the role of the SRC in governance and the effects this had on the overall academic objective, as defined in the SRC constitutions and drawing from the experiences of the students for whom they are to advocate. Triangulation also supported the consideration of the theoretical framework, against which the qualitative data sources could be analysed in greater depth and add to the possibilities of the creation of new knowledge (Flick 2002).

Appendix 2: Selection of participants

The selection criteria for participants in the SRC was that each member had to participate in at least one prescribed governance structure, that is, Council, Senate or the institutional forum, to qualify for selection. This is important to mention, as not all SRC members were in governance structures, for example, the sports and social cohesion officers, whose responsibilities were purely directed at supporting students in activities that are outside of the realm of their normal lectureship attendance. This criterion was important as it formed the central aspect of investigation on how such participation in governance impacted their own academic progression. Bryna (2008) referred to purposive sampling, indicating that the participants were purposefully selected to address the study phenomenon. An additional requirement was to ensure participants occupied similar portfolios across the three institutions to enable direct comparisons between their views about their roles and how they felt this impacted their academic experience. The sample size was confined based on the predetermined criteria, which limited the numbers selected.

Letters were written to the presidents wherein I provided a context of the study and motivation for specific portfolios required for the research. I requested upfront that these portfolios be replaced with members who participated in at least one of the prescribed governance structures. The introductory letter further indicated the planned process and duration of each interview. The ethical clearance obtained to conduct the study and the gatekeeper permission letter from their respective institutions accompanied the correspondence sent. The confirmation for the availability of participants was issued within a month of my initial correspondence, with the SRC presidents each sending the final schedule for their interviews.

Appendix 3: Research sites

Three research sites were selected and approached through their ethical clearance protocols. The research sites were referred to as Campus 1, Campus 2 and Campus 3, in line with the commitment of anonymity. While all participants were drawn from similar institutions, there were some variations in the titles and associated roles of the SRC, as determined by the different systems and associated constitutions, as indicated further.

■ A3.1. Federal system

The key feature of a federal system of governance was that this was based on a multiple campus and therefore a diversification of responsibilities. In terms of the SRC structure, there would be an overall institutional SRC located at the main campus, although other campuses would be headed by the CP. The CP would represent the institutional SRC president when absent.

Another feature of the federal system is the variation within the main campus which could have, on the one hand, the president affiliated with one organisation and other office bearers, such as the CP from another affiliation, which itself would cause tensions and would likely impact the functioning of the SRC.

■ A3.2. Unitary system

In the unitary system, the SRC structure was centralised, with students being represented by a single structure. Under this structure in a larger institution, the two key portfolios of president and SG would be supported by the DP and DSG, respectively. In many respects, the role of the DP was similar to the functions performed by the campus premiers under the federal system.

Appendix 4: Interview format

Semi-structured in-person interviews were selected as the primary data-generation method. I chose the interview method to (1) determine whether the academic experiences of students in the SRC is novel; (2) retain consistency in using a single source of resource, namely the interview guide; and (3) provide more flexibility of constructing the participants' views and my own interpretation, as opposed to their own dialogue about their experiences through storytelling (narrative inquiry). Making the interviews semi-structured provided flexibility to obtain personalised experiences of the participants within the scope of my targeted research area, allowing for lived experiences about the subject under review (Silverman 2011).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a total sample of 18 SRC members drawn from the three identified universities. All interviews were conducted at the offices of the SRC at each institution, because this was convenient for the participants. Additionally, eight telephonic interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic about their understanding of the role of the SRC and how this influenced their own and SRC members' academic experiences.

■ A4.1. Research setting for Student Representative Council members

For the onsite investigation, three institutions with similar identity (in that they were all classified as historically disadvantaged institutions) were selected for this study. Other similarities between the institutions were that they all predominantly enrolled students with similar backgrounds, including educational and family circumstances and financial limitations, and student representation had historically been banned at these institutions. I anticipated, therefore, that the SRC at all institutions would likely have similar mandates on student advocacy, which was mainly about educational access and affordability. All three institutions offered undergraduate and postgraduate studies and, with the enactment of the HEA, had fully functioning SRC structures.

■ A4.2. Interview guide

Each interview was guided by an interview schedule that I had prepared earlier. This was important to ensure that all areas necessary for the data collection were covered, despite the specific questions being open-ended.

The interview guide was very resourceful to ensure that all the critical areas of focus of the study were covered and helped to manage the time allocated for each interview. The study included their (1) personal background, (2) reasons for participating, (3) perceived governance effectiveness, (4) academic experiences and (5) articulation on how they weave their academic commitments in with their roles and responsibilities in university governance, as well as the effects of this integration.

The subsections of the study included the following questions:

1. Why did you choose to become involved in governance?
2. How were you eligible to be considered for the SRC?
3. Why is it necessary to include students in university decision-making?
4. How do you cope with your dual responsibilities of university governance and your studies?
5. How has your participation in governance added value to your studies?

Each interview commenced by allowing each participant to share their experiences in the SRC broadly, before asking them pertinent questions related to the research. This provided participants freedom to express themselves and become comfortable with my approach of allowing free conversation without discouraging them from self-expression. Rich data were obtained from each participant. I was able to use this information to cross-reference or amplify my line of questions based on the interview guide that I had prepared to ensure that I stuck to the study parameters.

■ A4.3. Observations

Another research instrument selected for this study was observation; this was limited to the SRC participants who were interviewed in-person at their offices. According to Gray (2014), this refers to the systematic process of recording the behaviour of participants, the context involving different senses other than hearing to gather data. As a qualitative researcher, observation could help me gain a deeper insight and understanding of the phenomenon of my study.

Observations were incorporated as a data-generation instrument in the planning of the fieldwork by agreeing to hold the interviews at the place of operation, the SRC offices. The decision to conduct the fieldwork at the social setting of the SRC meant that I had an opportunity to directly observe the surroundings, as well as relevant interaction, behavioural and environmental conditions. The purpose of observations was to witness, in practice, how the participants selected for this study understood and experienced their roles, picking up the nonverbal cues in their natural setting (Chenail 2011). Lewis and Ritchie (2003) opine that observations are instrumental in recording and

analysing behaviour and interaction in a social setting. The following aspects of the SRC office were incorporated in my observation plan:

- physical location and surroundings
- structure and physical planning of the offices and facilities
- noticeboards
- activities and student walk-ins
- relevant comments.

This list provided me with a framework and focus on the data I could anticipate from the setting, providing information about the climate and behaviour patterns in which they functioned (Creswell 2018; Silverman 2011). The structuring of the observation was important to ensure that I remained within the parameters of my study objectives and maintained consistency in my observations across all three institutions selected for the study.

■ A4.4. Telephonic interviews

Three years after the study was initiated, there have been new developments that changed the process of engagement in governance; these included the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which has had varying consequences in the mode and support for student learning. To this extent, it is important to reflect on these changes that may impact the SRC's continued advocacy and their academic progress during this period of uncertainty. The scope of the study was therefore expanded to students who would be beneficiaries of the interventions made by the SRC. The concern, given the pandemic, is whether the same modalities of the SRC function would be applicable in the circumstances that students faced with conditions outside of the setting or control of institutions where they registered.

While access to the participants was informal, it was mandatory that confirmation was provided by them that they were registered students at the time of interview. The new cohort of eight participants were further required to confirm the institutions where they were registered. Given that these secondary interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, reliance was placed on the permissions and agreements obtained directly from the students. I committed to nondisclosure of their names and institutions and confined the process to purely understanding their perceptions and experiences with their SRC about the academic progression of both the SRC members and themselves. It was anticipated that the additional data could amplify my understanding of the perceived advocacy expected and experienced by ordinary students from the SRC and how this particularly affected their academic objectives.

Eight students, obtained through the snowball technique, were approached to provide their understanding of the SRC in governance and how this benefitted both students and the SRC themselves. Specifically, this additional data source highlighted the effect of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic on the ability of the SRC to advocate for students during this period. Three key questions in relation to their perceived SRC advocacy role formed the basis of the telephonic interviews:

1. How does the SRC influence your academic aspirations at university?
2. How have you coped with your studies with the physical distancing protocols?
3. How has the SRC supported you during the lockdown?

The schedule of appointments was prepared beforehand, with each participant agreeing to a time most suitable for them to be interviewed telephonically. WhatsApp message reminders were further sent to these participants a day before their scheduled appointments. Once all the necessary protocols of reaffirming confidentiality and protection of their identity were followed, the videos were switched off to save on the data consumption.

Appendix 5: Data analysis

The overall data analysis summary, including the secondary data in relation to the pertinent questions, data source and data analytics applied, is recorded below.

TABLE A1: Data analysis summation.

Interview participants (year)	Key interview question	Data source(s)	Analytical technique
SRC participants (2016)	Why did you choose to become involved in the SRC?	Interviews Observations	Verbatim transcripts and thematic coding Theoretical framework Literature review
	How were you eligible to participate?	SRC constitutions Interviews	Verbatim transcripts and thematic coding
	Why, in your view, is it necessary for students to participate in university governance?	SRC constitutions Legislative framework Interviews	Verbatim transcripts and thematic coding Literature review
	How do you cope with your dual responsibilities in governance and your studies?	Interviews Notices and newsletters	Verbatim transcripts and thematic coding Literature review
	How has your participation added value to your studies?	Interviews	Verbatim transcripts and thematic coding Literature review Arnstein's model of participation Theoretical framework
Student participants (2021)	How does the SRC influence your academic aspirations?	Interviews	Verbatim transcripts and thematic coding Literature review Theoretical framework
	How have you coped with your studies with the physical distancing protocols?		
	How have you benefitted from the SRC during the lockdown?		

Source: Author's own work.
Key: SRC, Student Representative Council.

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What drives a South African university student to participate in university governance? How does such a student manage time for study and time for university governance, or do they? Does participating in university governance affect a student's academic performance? Vuyo Mthethwa, through empirical evidence in her book, *Students' participation in university governance in South Africa*, addresses these and other crucial questions. The advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 has provided a richer framework for student participation in university governance than ever before. Political parties have rooted themselves on university campuses as fertile grounds for recruitment to influence decision-making in those institutions. Universities are resource-intensive organisations, thus attracting stakeholders to jostle for power and influence. The university student is one such key stakeholder. Consistent with the South African culture in general, a nothing-about-us-without-us atmosphere prevails in every public university in the country. Vuyo Mthethwa's book could not have been born at a better time. The book reveals student representative council (SRC) members' experiences and views about their participation in university governance. It juxtaposes two critical dynamics: the political (participation in university governance) and the intellectual (academic performance), and examines the intersection thereof; thus, the book makes an important contribution in that regard.

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This book provides an excellent overview of the relationship between participating in student governance and academic success. Largely based on qualitative interviews with SRC members, the author masterfully complicates Tinto's and Astin's famous theories of persistence and involvement. Whereas Tinto and Astin both predict that greater involvement should predict academic success, Vuyo Mthethwa explores why student representatives often struggle academically, contextualising the findings within the tumultuous periods of #FeesMustFall and COVID-19. This book will be of great interest to scholars of student governance, student engagement, and higher education in South Africa. The book has three main sections. The first section, comprising Chapters 1 to 4, provides a contextual and theoretical overview of student governance in South Africa. The author is thorough in the review, capturing not only the formal structures of student participation in governance, as well as informal structures such as activism. The second section, Chapter 5, and partially Chapter 6, describes the research methodology. The remainder of the book analyses the interviews through the theoretical lenses presented in the first section, though still allowing for emergent themes from the interviews.

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