

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCILS IN NIGERIAN TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COLLEGE

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Abstract: The envisaged study aimed to investigate the perception of students towards Student Representative Councils (SRCs) at Tshwane North Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College. The study employed a qualitative approach and data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with thirty students from six different campuses. A thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data. The findings of the study revealed that the SRC's obscurity, insufficient communication, lack of impartiality, and ineptitude impede students' day-to-day cooperation with the SRC. To address student issues effectively, the study suggests that the SRC improve its communication, competence, synergy with class representatives, and visibility. The study identified various communication-related, service delivery-related, collaboration-related, and competency-related initiatives that could be implemented by the SRC. The study recommends that students should elect their SRC representatives carefully and that college administration should create a conducive environment for SRCs to engage with students. Finally, the study suggests that future research should focus on the obstacles faced by SRCs in the performance of their tasks.

Keywords: Perceptions, Students, Student Representative Council, and College

Introduction

Student representative councils (SRCs) are becoming increasingly important in institutions of higher learning worldwide. This is because SRCs are seen as a vital part of promoting school, college, or university spirit and leadership among the student body. SRCs play a crucial role in addressing students' concerns and championing their causes and rights through effective representation. As such, the ability of SRCs to represent and lead their fellow students elicits certain perceptions and opinions from their student electorate. The study investigated the perceptions of students towards the student representative council at Tshwane North TVET College (TNC). The main objective of the study was to assess the challenges faced by students in relation to their day-to-day cooperation with the SRC. The importance of studying students' perceptions is significant, as it is a reliable predictor of

whether students can present their opinions or problems before their leadership. Additionally, students' perceptions are vital in predicting whether students can cast their votes during future elections. Understanding students' perceptions can also help improve service delivery at colleges and other institutions of higher learning. Therefore, this paper seeks to derive lessons that can inform the discussion on the kind of SRC structures needed in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. These structures will ensure effective and optimal student leadership in colleges across the country. By understanding the challenges faced by TNC students in relation to their SRC, this study provides insights that may be useful for other institutions of higher learning facing similar issues.

Literature Review

This section delves into the existing literature on SRCs and explores the legal and regulatory framework that guides their establishment and operations in colleges. The review examines the constitutional provisions and legislative Acts that promote equal access to education and public services for all, emphasizing the significance of SRCs in ensuring the effective functioning of colleges and promoting student participation in decision-making processes. The review examines how SRCs can harness the leadership potential of students and promote their active engagement in college activities beyond the classroom.

The Legal Framework of the SRCs in South Africa

The establishment and legal framework of Student Representative Councils (SRCs) in South Africa are rooted in the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The SRCs are now considered statutory structures in accordance with Section 35 of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, which provides for the establishment of SRCs that have jurisdiction over student matters. The Constitution of South Africa ensures that everyone has equal access to education and public services provided by any state department or body. The Continuing Education and Training Act (CET Act 16 of 2006), formerly known as the Further Education and Training Colleges Act (FETC Act) of 2006, is also in line with the country's constitution and aims to regulate further education and training, create, control, and support public further education and training colleges, provide for transitional arrangements, and repeal or amend legislation, among other things. This legal framework is important in ensuring the effective functioning of SRCs in South African colleges and promoting equal access to education for all.

The Legality of SRC at Tshwane North TVET College

The Constitution of the Tshwane North TVET College Student Representative Council also connects with the Continuing Education and Training Act 16 of 2006 by ensuring that the SRC recognizes the Institutional SRC as the highest student representative body of the college with respect to student matters of common interest across all campuses of the college and the College Council as the highest body of authority, along with the Principal as Accounting Officer, as provided for in the CET Act 16 of 2006, as amended. The purpose of the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997) and the Further Education and Training Act (Act No. 98 of 1998) is to regulate all policies related to higher education and training in South Africa, including the TVET sector, which promotes quality standards by establishing a college council system in TVET colleges. The Act also regulates all FET

institutions, both public and private. These Acts govern all rules governing quality assurance and the promotion of quality in higher education and training.

Students' involvement in politics and leadership

Student involvement in politics has played a significant role throughout the modern history of higher education in Africa (Nicolson, 2017). African students have played a key role in both national and international politics, which are inextricably tied to developments in higher education in Africa. African students and student organizations have made significant contributions to the struggle for African independence during the colonial and post-colonial epochs. In the face of democracy, colleges and universities in sub-Saharan African countries have, fortunately, embraced the idea of student participation in the affairs of higher education institutions (Dunn, 2014). This is because colleges and universities provide fertile ground for students to cultivate and improve their leadership potential (Nicolson, 2017). If college student leaders are armed with positive language and the requisite skills, they have the potential to change individuals and mitigate academic and social ills (Godwin, 2016).

The SRC's participation in decision-making processes in institutions of higher learning

A thorough understanding of higher education policy, politics, and policy depends on student representation, which is widely seen as one of the most significant elements of higher education governance. These student groups share the trait of organizing, aggregating, articulating, and bridging the interests of students while also offering different services and planning student activities (Klemenčič et al., 2016). It is critical to understand that "participation" and its expansive definition refer to students' formal capacity to express their opinions and have an influence on choices made in the context of the administration of a university or college (Kouba, 2017). The student and the SRC are encouraged to participate in all activities taking place in their surroundings, whether they are on campus or off. The definition employed in the context of teaching and learning, where participation is characterized as students' active and engaged engagement in the classroom is the one that should be utilized (Bergmark & Westman, 2018). When we look at the two definitions, they complement each other. As much as the first definition deals more with the life of the student outside of the classroom, the other one deals with matters within the classroom. The duty of student leaders is to encourage students to be involved in the debate of current issues to be developed, as they will be sharing with one another in those discussions or debates. The student leaders also attract students to conversations and decisions about institutional rules and behavioural boundaries and expectations. Furthermore, they also ensure that students do participate in various discussions and decisions about teaching, learning, and assessment (Black et al., 2014). This is how students' leadership plays out in different settings. SRCs play various roles that are vital within the college by assisting the college in rendering services such as peer counselling, academic support, solving administrative problems, providing financial assistance for needy students, and contributing to study facilities and services; furthermore, they assist at the tuck shop, restaurant, and bookshop (Student Support Services Manual, 2020). Student representatives fall short of meeting the ostensible objectives of effectively providing optimal service to their students through good leadership and democratic representation. This paper empirically assesses the common challenges faced by the SRC in executing

their daily duties. This literature provides a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature on student representative councils (SRCs), the role of students in colleges, frameworks that make provision for SRCs, and student governance. The review explores the legal and regulatory framework that guides the establishment and operations of SRCs in colleges, with a focus on South Africa's context and the Tshwane North TVET College. It also examines the historical context of student involvement in politics and leadership, particularly in Africa, and how SRCs can harness students' leadership potential and promote their active engagement in college activities. Finally, the review highlights the significance of SRCs in ensuring the effective functioning of colleges and promoting equal access to education for all, emphasizing the critical role of student representation in higher education governance.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous studies have investigated leadership in higher education, resulting in the development of various theories to explain the intricacies involved in cultivating effective leaders in colleges and universities. One such theory is Astin Theory (2000), which emphasizes the need to re-evaluate leadership practices in academic institutions and advocates for principles of transformational leadership drawn primarily from the "Social Change Model of Leadership Development." Meanwhile, the formation of student leaders remains a subject of contention, with some positing that leadership is an innate trait, while others believe it can be learned. Several models of student representation have emerged, including the Student Democracy Model, the Liberal Democracy Model, and the Direct Democracy Model, each with its own approach. Familiarity with these models is essential for research, as it enables a theoretical departure from them. The following sections delve into the specifics of these theories to provide a context for further study.

Astin Theory

Astin Theory (2000) is a theory of students' leadership and developing quality leaders in colleges. At the heart of this classical theory is the need to rethink leadership practices in colleges. It provides principles of transformative leadership heavily drawn from the "Social Change Model of Leadership Development" provided by the Higher Education Research Institute in 1996. Astin theory focuses on distinct constituent groups including students, faculty, student affairs professionals, and presidents and other administrators. This theory goes further to provide an analysis of the roles and expectations of each group and suggest how members of that particular group can begin to practice the principles of transformative leadership both individually and collectively. Given the diverse roles and duties of each of the four distinct constituencies, the approach to applying these principles varies. Nevertheless, as much as transformative leadership, at its very core, is centered on human interactions, this theory encourages students and people, in general, to examine each constituent group regardless of how they perceive their campus "role." Astin theory concludes with a chapter entitled, "We Have the Power and Opportunity to Transform Our Institutions." This chapter transcends the thinking surrounding leadership in colleges and intends to encourage individual members of the academic community to develop specific plans of action for an effective exercise of transformative leadership on campus. Interestingly, Astin's theory also identifies some of the personal and institutional resources

that should be best utilized to capitalize on the multitude of opportunities that various campuses offer for student leaders to engage in this transformation process (Astin, 2000).

Contesting theories on the making of student leaders

Mustapha et al. (2013) stressed that there are two most prominent schools of thought regarding leadership. The basic premise of these two contesting theories is informed by people's basic assumptions regarding the making of a leader, as some people believe that a leader is born, while others believe that a leader could be taught. However, in the 21st century, there is a universal consensus among people that a leader could be trained. Likewise, Kouzes and Posner (2002) provided a leadership model that perceives leadership as something that can be simultaneously taught and learned, and everyone has an equal chance to become a leader. This model focuses on the development and sharing of vision and emphasizes leader integrity and openness. At the core of this theory is the notion that leadership is a set of perceptible behaviours that, with deliberate practice, can help everyone, including student leaders, be more effective and make a positive difference in their immediate environment (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Thus, to be a skilled leader is one thing, but to be accepted as a leader among colleges is clearly another.

Models of student representatives

There is a sense of uncertainty and lingering doubts surrounding the leadership competencies of student representatives in institutions of higher learning. The precarious leadership styles displayed by student leaders in colleges are partly a consequence of the lack of instrumental leadership models and research regarding student leadership in general. As future leaders, it is imperative for student leaders to comprehend different leadership styles and better understand a wide range of leadership development models that will essentially enhance their leadership skills, knowledge, competencies, and capabilities. Bukaliya and Rupande (2012) proposed three student leadership models that can possibly aid student leaders in becoming effective in their leadership roles: the Student Democracy Model (SDM), the Liberal Democracy Model (LDM), and the Direct Representation Model (DRM). According to the duo, SDM entails the selection of student representatives by the student electorates, democratically. The elected student representative body is called a democratic student body that is elected democratically, whereby the candidate with the majority of votes forms part of this student representative body. The LDM, on the other hand, assumes that a representative democracy is one in which the ability of the elected student representatives to exercise decision-making power is subject to a constitution incepted by the students, which serves as a blueprint that guides the operations, protects student rights and freedoms, and regulates the actions of leaders against making unpopular decisions. The DRM posits that in an organized institution, students personally participate in the decision-making of the organization as opposed to relying on intermediaries or representatives. The supporters of direct democracy argue that democracy is more than merely a procedural issue. The direct democracy model gives the voting student population the power to give binding orders to its elected representatives, such as recalling them before the expiration of their term in office. Kouzes and Posner developed the Student Leadership Challenge (SLC) in 2003, where they explained the common practices of typical student leadership and how they become influential to significant others, display the ability to make things come to reality, transform things, and become innovative by bringing something

new (Adams et al., 2019). Mozhgan Amirianzadeh (2011) proposed the hexagon theory of student leadership development with a comprehensive attitude and systematic view of the numerous factors affecting student leadership development from individual, group, and social aspects. His theory takes into account the many factors affecting the development of a student leader, which include his or her immediate environment (family, friends, self, university, or school, society), which explains the notion that it takes a community to build an effective leader. Thus, according to this model, it is essential to analyse all these factors at three levels: individual, social, and organizational, which paves the way for leadership development along with changing students' internal factors, namely, their attitude, knowledge, skills, and behaviour through education, training, and development.

Research Methodology

Choice and Rationale for Research Design

The study employed an explorative qualitative research design. According to Mohajan (2018), the origins of qualitative research methodologies can be traced back to anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology, with a primary emphasis on the methodical explanation and analysis of the phenomenon. Therefore, the students' perceptions were investigated on their respective campuses with the sole purpose of getting their perceptions of the SRC.

Population and Study Area

The study area is alternately known as the "study setting." According to Tarsi & Tuff (2012), population is a collection of members of the same species that live and reproduce together in a certain area. To survive throughout time, members of a population frequently rely on the same resources, are susceptible to the same environmental restrictions, and depend on the presence of other members. The study setting is Tshwane North TVET College (TNC). TNC is one of South Africa's fifty TVET colleges. TNC is geographically located in the greater Tshwane Metropolis, with six campuses across the city. The study population is alternatively known as the "universe" of the study (Etikan et al., 2004; Pandey & Pandey, 2015). According to Majid (2018), the population of interest is the population of inquiries. In most studies involving a large population, it is often not feasible or appropriate to recruit the entire population of interest. Instead, the researcher only recruited a manageable number of participants from the entire population of interest to include in the study. The study population consisted of the entire TNC student population. All the study participants were drawn from the six campuses, namely: Soshanguve South, Soshanguve North, Rosslyn, Mamelodi, Temba, and Pretoria (refer to tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Number of participants per campus

TNC Campus	Number of participants (n)
Mamelodi Campus	n=3
Pretoria Campus	n=7
Soshanguve South Campus	n=5
Soshanguve North Campus	n=5
Rosslyn Campus	n=4
Themba Campus	n=6
Total number of participants n=30	

Source (developed by authors)

Table 2: Number of participants per level of study Level

National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) (N)and National Certificate Vocational (NCV)	Number of participants (n)
NCV level 4	n=8
NCV level 3	n=2
NCV level 2	n=7
N4	n=3
N3	n=5
N2	n=2
N1	n=3
	Total number of participants n=30

Source (developed by authors)

Sampling and sampling

The feasibility and practicality of a study must be considered when conducting research. Practical considerations include costs, time, and other constraints that may prevent the researcher from studying the entire population. When the population being studied is too large for a census-based study, sampling is often employed to collect data from a representative subset of the population. This is the case with the study conducted on TNC, where the population consists of around 18,000 students attending on different schedules and some rotating. In order to investigate the research questions, the study limited its sample size to thirty (30) students, selected through convenience sampling. This method was chosen due to its affordability and convenience compared to probability sampling, as it enabled the researchers to quickly announce the study to available participants on campus. The participants then chose whether to participate in the study. Despite the limitations of convenience sampling, the sample was inclusive and covered a diverse range of students, including male and female students, first year and senior students, students from different levels (NCV and Nated students), and students of different ages.

Data Collection

To gather data for this study, semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted. According to Marczyk et al. (2010), interviews are a self-report method that is simple and can produce a wealth of information. In this study, the semi-structured interview approach was used to collect in-depth data from the participants, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2016), who suggest primarily conducting in-depth interviews with 10 or more individuals. Kumar (2011) notes that unstructured interviews give the researcher complete freedom in terms of content and structure, while Denscombe (2010) states that open-ended answers provide the respondent with the opportunity to elaborate on points of interest. A semi-structured interview instrument was used to individually interview the students, and the responses of the students were transcribed while they spoke freely. This method allowed the students to share their views, opinions, and attitudes in detail about their day-to-day cooperation with their SRC.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative researchers face a challenging task when it comes to analyzing text and multiple other forms of data. Tracy (2013) further

supports this statement by stating that qualitative data analysis is a demanding activity that requires a great deal of cognitive effort. Systematically organizing and preparing the data is a prerequisite for a more focused analysis stage. All interviews were documented using interview scripts and analyzed afterward. The analysis involved translating and transcribing the interview scripts manually. This process also included rereading the interview scripts and reflecting on them, as well as organizing them into common themes. The interviews were then summarized, considering that there could be more than one theme per interview. Once this was completed, the themes that appeared to be more prominent were written down, along with the other underlying themes. The data was analyzed "thematically." Thematic analysis enabled to systematically identify, organize, and offer insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Thematic analysis aided in seeing and making sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences across the data set, as emphasized by Brown and Clarke (2012).

Presentation of Research Findings

This section presents a summary of the key obstacles reported by TNC students concerning their daily collaboration with the SRC. These challenges were identified through in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Students highlighted various challenges that they encountered while working with the SRC, including the SRC's invisibility, inadequate communication with the students, partiality in their duties, and incompetence in carrying out their responsibilities.

The invisibility of the SRC

The research findings suggest that the invisibility of the Student Representative Council (SRC) on campus is a common challenge among the six campuses. The participants reported that the members of the SRC are often inactive and invisible on campus, except during election campaigns and first-year students' orientation. This challenge was raised more frequently by senior students with greater experience with the operations of the SRC than new entrants. The students expressed their concern over the invisibility of the SRC members on their respective campuses. For instance, one participant stated that "The SRC is not active at all; they were only active during the campaigns, and now they are nowhere to be found." Another participant reiterated this problem by pointing out that the SRC only emerged during the election campaign period and disappeared when they were in power. The participant further emphasised that "Once they are in the office, they no longer deliver what they promised us during the campaign and during the manifesto, they were all saying that they will be available for us all the time, but now is a different story." While on the other hand other participants contributed to this debate by emphasizing the invisibility of the SRC to the people who voted them into power. "They are always not visible on campus; I only saw them during new students' induction, where they were busy facilitating the students', attendance register for the event; since then, till now they are unknown to me."

Failure of the SRC to communicate effectively with the students.

The TNC student populace shares the same sentiments regarding the SRC's inability to communicate information effectively. Blaming the SRC for failing to communicate with their students. Across the campuses, the SRCs are often silent and shy away from convening mass meetings, informing students, or listening to their challenges.

Disappointingly, the SRC members do not even update students after attending meetings with campus management, as they prefer to keep the information amongst themselves and/or share it with their close associates. One student offered the following rejoinders regarding the failures of the SRC to communicate effectively with them: "The SRC does not communicate with their students; they have forgotten whom they are representing." They do not want to convene a mass meeting and speak to the students, or either hear their challenges".

The above was corroborated by another participant who reasoned that some of the challenges they are facing at the campus are a result of a lack of effective communication between the SRC and the learners. He had the following to say: "There is no proper communication between SRC and the students, many students do not know the SRC in the institution. In our institution, students are faced with long queues when they attempt to enter the campus because of the registers and temperature scanning at the main gate.

Another participant was also of the opinion that a lack of effective communication was the major challenge, making it difficult for the students to interact well with the SRC. Because of that, students were not able to get feedback on the meetings that the SRC held with the management. The participant further said: "The SRC does not give updates to students if they happen to attend a meeting with campus management." The SRC does not communicate more often with the students; they keep information to themselves.

Lack of impartiality among the SRC in the discharge of their duties

A significant number of students across all six TNC campuses expressed concern about the lack of impartiality among their SRC members when performing their duties. According to the students, the SRC tends to provide unequal service to students, showing favouritism to their close associates while neglecting the problems of the rest of the student population. They only respond to student challenges when it suits them and offers benefits to them. Two participants in separate interviews indicated that, "the SRC is not impartial, and they prioritize their friends and acquaintances over the rest of the students". Few participants in separate occasions stated that "the SRC members only help students when it benefits them, and they do not treat all students equally. They further indicated that the SRC is biased, and they only invite their friends and romantic partners, ignoring the needs of the general student body.

General incompetence of the SRC

Most participants confirmed the incompetence of the SRC and noted that there was a lack of unity of purpose among its members. They further indicated that the SRC gave conflicting responses when asked questions by students, causing confusion. Moreover, the SRC did not provide assistance to students with financial challenges, such as payment of tuition, books, accommodation, and allowances. It was further eluded that the SRC did not intervene even when students were rejected by NSFAS or when allowances were delayed. The SRC was also not active in student affairs, including sports, cultural, social activities, and academic support services, as reported by Precious.

Research Discussions and recommendations

Student Representative Councils provide students with a platform to display their leadership skills (Mustapha et al., 2013). However, Holzweiss et al. (2007) argue that some

students stay involved in their student leadership formations because of the pleasure it gives them, while others cite opportunities to improve their leadership skills as the primary reason to remain involved. The SRC members at TNC appear to be involved in Student Representative Councils merely for status and enjoyment, displaying an unwillingness to execute their leadership skills and lacking the political will to lead and manage student affairs. This is evident in the general sense of dissatisfaction experienced by their fellow students, originating from the myriad challenges they are facing against their SRC. To ameliorate these unsolicited conditions in our institutions of learning, Moreku (2014) suggested that it is vitally important for student representatives to benchmark on skills and knowledge in institutions of higher learning, as this will help to ensure that they are adequately equipped with relevant skills needed for best governance. To accomplish this, it is imperative to draft a constitution that will describe the roles, duties, and functions of the different portfolios.

An effective SRC is one that mainly exists to benefit students, assisting their fellow students in sharing ideas, interests, and concerns with administrative staff and building harmonious relationships with their students (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2012). Mustapha et al. (2013) state that the prime objective of the SRC is to produce outstanding student leaders in all aspects that will benefit the student population and the country in general. The existing SRC structures within TNC have somewhat deviated from the ideal SRC objective, as they fall short in many ways of becoming outstanding leaders that effectively execute student affairs on the six different campuses. To mitigate this, Wamukuru and Muthui (2019) suggested that it is paramount for institutions to organize forums designed to provide training, guidance, and counselling, as they will help equip student leaders with the relevant skills to enhance their leadership styles.

Poor communication and a lack of feedback are another serious constraint among student council members in colleges or universities (Moreku, 2014; Mboyanga, 2018). Ideally, the SRC should hold group meetings at regular intervals to discuss various aspects of the functioning of the student council, attended by all stakeholders, including the student council, college or university counsellors, and faculty members. To facilitate consultation, the SRC should raise student issues, engage in consultations, and provide advice on educational and other issues affecting students on campus. However, it appears that the student council members at TNC fail to effectively use their communication channels and mechanisms to disseminate important information to their fellow student electorates. Ineffective communication includes not updating their students frequently and regularly on burning issues and other important agendas, like informing their students after discussions or meetings with the management.

Poor communication by the student representatives in institutions of higher learning has serious implications for students' leaders and student relations. To mitigate poor communication and improve their communication channels with students, Wamukuru and Muthui (2019) recommend the use of suggestion boxes and encourage consultation without fear of intimidation. This may help them gather information from their constituents about the concerns brought up before meetings with the management as well as about any issues that their constituents have. They may also wish to host one or two meetings per semester to update students on issues that need to be addressed urgently. However, the TNC SRCs on all the different campuses rarely do this. An effective intervention to this, according to Mboyanga (2018), is through developing training and awareness programs within the

institution of learning, including for teachers, student representatives, lecturers, heads of departments, and management, on the value of students' voices in school governance. In summary, the SRC at TNC is ineffective in executing student affairs due to their unwillingness to execute their leadership skills and lack of political will. They fall short of becoming outstanding leaders who effectively execute student affairs on the six different campuses. They need to hold consultative and feedback meetings with students, raise student issues, engage in consultations, provide advice on educational and youth issues to institutional authorities, and report information to fellow students to become effective leaders.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the paper reflects the challenges that students encounter when dealing with the SRC. Some of the key challenges faced by students across all six campuses of TNC include the SRC members' invisibility in both campus and student affairs, ineffective communication with students, a lack of impartiality in fulfilling their responsibilities, and inadequate competencies. These factors together explain the negative perception that students have of their SRC on all campuses. To effectively address these challenges, major improvements are required in several areas of the SRC's operations.

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