

# The role of Students and Alumni in Higher Education Transformation

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**Plenary III Topic: Transformation in Higher Education/ The Student Experience: The influence of party politics in Student Leadership – How does it serve the transformation agenda of the University?**

## **1. Introduction**

Empirical studies conducted by Banerjee et al (2006: 14) conducted on behalf of the Harvard University Centre for International Development, "*higher education is correlated with better employment outcomes and greater labour market participation*". According to the study, "*it takes a completed university degree to mostly escape unemployment in South Africa*".

According to findings from studies by Borat and Leibbrandt (2001) on the estimated returns to education for unemployed Africans in the South African labour market, primary and secondary education did not significantly improve chances of increasing earnings or finding employment. Tertiary education on the other hand significantly improved chances of finding employment and increasing earnings. According to Moleke (2005:2), education opens doors to substantially higher-paying jobs and employability.

In discussing the role of students in higher education transformation, the strategic role of higher education in supporting sustainable economic growth and development should serve as guidance. Prof Saleem Badat, former Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Higher Education and current Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University said in a recent speech "*the attempt to transform higher education occurs within the context of a formidable overall challenge of pursuing economic development, social equity and the extension and deepening of democracy simultaneously. For good political and social reasons, one or other element of this triad cannot be eliminated or postponed and tackled sequentially. They have all to be pursued simultaneously.*"

Any discussion on the role of students within higher education transformation needs to take place within the context of higher education's commitment to a developmental state and creating a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist South Africa.

Whilst the Higher Education Transformation Network (HETN) is not suggesting that higher education become an extension of the democratic state, it is vital that higher education be in touch with the national priorities of the South African developmental state and contribute to the resolution of these developmental challenges in its learning delivery, its research output and community work.

According to findings by Luescher and Symes (2003:20) in their report on behalf of the Council for Higher Education (CHE), students *“act as agents of change in higher education, play a very active advocacy role and build programmatic relationships with communities surrounding the institutions”*.

Since the current higher education student corps are themselves products of Outcomes Based Education and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and thus ultimately products of a constructivist outcomes based educational system, there needs to be an increasing recognition of the central role of students as adult learners not only within their learning environments but also the manner in which higher education practitioners respond and allow students as adult learners to make positive contributions to the higher education transformation agenda.

Cognitive constructivist andragogical learning theories by Malcolm Knowles have paved the way for a more integrated understanding of the student as an adult learner and have identified key characteristics such as the desire by students to take responsibility for own learning and an increasing need for self-direction in order to take control of their own lives.

According to Knowles (1975:14), adult learner self-direction appears *“more in tune with adult learners’ natural process of psychological development”* and maturation processes leading to the increasing development of an *“ability and desire to take increasing responsibility for life”*.

In the same mindset that Wee (2005: 127) advocates, *“adults should be treated as adults”* within learning environments, the role of students and their organised formations in higher education transformation should not be curtailed or underemphasised.

According to Ferguson & Dickens (2000), one of the most important social responsibilities of educational institutions, in a developing country such as South Africa, is a commitment to support community development in a practical and workable way, aiming to provide some relief from the inequality, poverty and the social problems. Through its past and current student corps, tertiary institutions in South Africa could play a fundamental role in becoming involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community.

According to Ference and Vockell (1994:25) the characteristics of the adult learner can be described as:-

1. Active: Adult learners are usually willing to participate in the learning process. Given the opportunity and the proper incentives, they often prefer to be active rather than passive learners.

2. Experience based: Adult learners bring a wide variety of prior educational and life experiences to a new learning situation.
3. Expertise-based: Adult learners are capable of being more self-reliant. Adult learners operating as independent individuals tend to want to accomplish things for themselves. They are often inclined to draw and rely on their own personal experience and knowledge to seek answers to questions and to solve problems.
4. Hands-on Approach- based: Adult learners are typically faced with important matters in everyday life. As a result, adult learners tend to focus attention on real-world situations.
5. Task-Centred: Adult learners are typically more active in performing tasks directed toward reaching a goal or solving a problem.
6. Problem-Centred: Adult learners are more focused on dealing with problems they encounter in their particular life situation.
7. Solutions-driven: Adult learners operate in the real world, focus on real-life problems and often actively seek out solutions to their problems.
8. Value-driven: Adult learners *need to know* why they should learn something before undertaking to learn it. Given the rationale for learning something, they will often invest considerable energy in investigating the increased benefits gained from the learning experience and the consequences of not learning it.
9. Skill-seeking: Adult learners often actively seek out the attainment of new and improved skills in order to better meet and solve real-life problems.
10. Self-directed: Adult learners usually perceive themselves to be independent and responsible for their own actions and have a need to be directly involved in planning and directing their learning activities.
11. Externally Motivated: Adult learners are often motivated by external needs such as the need for better job prospects and increased promotional opportunities.
12. Internally Motivated: Adult learners are often internally motivated by such factors as self-esteem, recognition, confidence, career satisfaction, and the overall quality of life".

Through their involvement in student politics, students bring forth a rich source of ideas and perspectives due to their various social classes and backgrounds. The influence of party politics in student leadership is a positive phenomenon that is inevitable due to the higher education terrain being a microcosm of society in general. Further, students are influenced by many socio-political factors and thus cannot be expected to shy away from general societal influences which affect them.

The role of the student movement in higher education transformation has been in many instances limited to issues of access, establishment of broad transformation forums, financial exclusions, student funding and progress towards equity with regards to student, academic and non-academic staff composition at tertiary institutions.

According to the Soudien Report on Transformation, Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in the Higher Education Sector (DoE, 2008) students drop

out for a variety of non-academic reasons such as racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. Such practices contribute to failure and drop-out rates as do many other social reasons. Failures and drop-outs for any reason among students after they access universities or colleges is an enormous waste of both taxpayers and citizen resources.

Student organizations also has a potentially positive role in influencing education curriculum content to address key societal questions relating to, for instance causes of poverty, youth unemployment and the impact of globalization on SA and the African continent.

Strong, vibrant and progressive student organizations are needed for these matters to percolate through the Student Representative Councils, Faculties and University Councils and through national fora on Higher Education. Through involvement in student politics, students individually learn lessons of accountability, democratic practice, mandate and values of non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy.

Thus, participation by students in student politics not only leads to individual leadership development but also has greater societal benefits for the larger student body. The role of students in higher education transformation is also necessary due to the influencing role played by government policy decision-making and market forces on the career choices and salary prospects of students.

Student political formations such as NUSAS, SANSCO, AZASO have historically played a very important role by forging alliances with other higher education stakeholders in the form of trade unions and refocusing university management attention to pertinent transformational issues of the day which otherwise would not have been anywhere on the management radar screen.

It is common knowledge that it was the organized student formations (SASCO, PASO and AZASCO) who in 1993 allied and together coerced the apartheid government and the then Board of the Independent Development Trust (IDT) to provide seed funding for higher education finance through initially Kagiso Trust and subsequently TEFSA (now called NSFAS).

The key role of student politics in higher education transformation serves to also focus higher education institutional managers on issues relating to:-

1. Higher education support to registered students to ensure a higher throughput rate
2. Curriculum content issues by actively participating in student councils at Faculty Boards
3. Challenging the higher institution in extending budgets for community work
4. Supporting government efforts to introduce community service for students

5. Strengthening student organizations and the production of student leaders who will remain committed to transformation beyond landing their a fancy job
6. Being involved in freelance pro bono community work, literacy programmes and information transfer programmes aimed at community upliftment.

## **2. The Role of Alumni in Higher Education Transformation**

Beyond the positive role played by currently registered students, former students or alumni of an institution also fulfill an immensely positive role in higher education transformation. According to Godfrey & Godfrey (1999), the value that alumni can add to the successful functioning of an institution has been generally underestimated by the South African higher education sector.

Empirical studies by Stone (2001) acknowledge that alumni as a stakeholder group can, due to their contributions (whether financially or socially) increase the credibility and longevity of their alma mater. The potential for alumni to conduct fundraising, their right to institutional Council representation, their ability to build a skills- and knowledge-sharing network and their potential for actualizing lifelong learning responsibilities could make a meaningful difference in the way an institution is perceived by prospective and existing internal and external stakeholders.

It is therefore strategic for institutions of higher learning to establish and maintain good relations with its alumni by involving them in decision-making, network-building and development processes towards the overall advancement of that institution. In order to do so, however, it is pivotal that the institution have established open and direct communication channels with alumni and ensure that its alumni reasonably represents a true reflection of the alumni demographics without any form of over of under-representation of divergent alumni interests.

Brant (2002) asserts that in addition to alumni donations, alumni serve many other purposes such as developing institutional ambassadors and advocates, recruiting prospective students and mentoring current ones, assisting graduates with career advancement, helping alumni to stay connected with each other, and providing secular feedback to the institution. Godfrey and Godfrey (1999) state that the popular notion that an alumni association or convocation is solely a network for social interaction has cost institutions valuable financial and human resources. Increasingly, universities are turning to their alumni associations for fundraising.

According to Els (2003), the majority of tertiary institutions in South Africa receive more funding from individual donors (mostly in the form of alumni bequests) than from corporate donors. According to Baade & Sundberg (1996), unlike corporate donors former students act more out of loyalty towards the institution and out of concern for its survival.

Because of the high alumni membership profiles of universities, which indicate social standing, income and corporate status, these alumni networks could provide the

institutions with valuable financial, intellectual and human resources that could lead to differentiation within the overall business strategy of the institution.

Such strategic networking and utilization of resources emanating from an alumni network results in constructive social, political and economical positioning of an institution and the realisation of its strategic objectives in a much more cost- and time-effective manner (Barnard & Rensleigh, 2006).

According to Hung (2003), an efficient alumni network with external stakeholders assists the institution in positioning itself strategically in an often hostile external environment, as these stakeholders could act as brand ambassadors for the institution. In many ways, alumni are the real measure of a tertiary institution's brand. Fundamentally, an institution's reputation and prominence rest on the manifestations of its graduates: their knowledge and competence, successes, contributions, position and stature. These alumni reflect daily – in numerous situations, places and interactions – the core identity and values of the University.

According to Karlsbeck & Montgomery (2002), alumni are not only future donors of an institution but are also continuing learners and are as such, an institution's lifelong customers. Past students are also vital future corporate partners, student recruiters and employers, advocates, mentors and career advisers. Nielsen (2001) states that *“Alumni provides a way for organisations to get value from people even after they have left the organisation.”*

Aside from social and financial interaction, strategic interaction is another key benefit accruing to higher education institutions from alumni constituents. According to Nielsen (2001), alumni strategic interaction includes institutional council representation and community development through responsible citizenship.

According to the SA Standard Institutional Statute (SIS) for Higher education institutions (1997), the convocation of a state-subsidized tertiary institutions has automatic representation on the Council of that institution. Section 44(1) of the aforesaid statute refers to members of the convocation as consisting of the Principal, Vice-Principal, Registrars, academic employees and all persons who are or have become graduates of the institution.

According to Barnard (2005), it is clear that the alumni stakeholders of an institution automatically form part of the convocation of that institution. Barnard (2005) further states that a strong belief reigns within higher education circles that alumni involvement in the activities of their alma mater usually results from a strong sense of loyalty, participation in institutional institution's best interest.

From this perspective, the alumni of an institution can make a priceless contribution to the macro management of the university, since these representatives would be the mouthpiece of a crucial interest group of the institution, namely its graduandi.

In conclusion, the role of students in higher education transformation should not only be limited to submitting protest memoranda on student financial exclusion matters but should be deepened to include strategic level representation on Councils, participation in Faculty Boards, making inputs on curriculum content issues, extending the university's community work, strengthening the calibre and individual leadership quality of student leaders, community development and being involved in freelance pro bono community work aimed at community upliftment.

The role of former student graduates in higher education transformation should also be broadened to cover involvement in institutional council representation, network-building, recruitment as institutional ambassadors in the recruitment of prospective students and mentoring of current students, and as a source of loyal fundraising and institutional support.

The Higher Education Transformation Network (HETN) believes that this will go a long way in ensuring a common understanding and expectation from the student movement and higher education Administrators towards higher education transformation.

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