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# Student Voice: Embracing Student Activism as a Quality Improvement Tool in Higher Education

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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## Abstract

This chapter illustrates how student activism, taken in the context of the student voice, can be harnessed as a way of enhancing the quality of educational provision in higher education. Agenda 2063 of the African Commission recognizes equitable access to quality higher education as critical for national development. In the face of an increase in student protests and the resultant destruction of infrastructure and human life, it becomes imperative to find ways of creating positive and innovative teaching and learning environments that take full advantage of student activism. The chapter draws on existing literature on student activism and the value of student voice to inform the development of a model for incorporating the “student voice” as a way of harnessing the positive aspects of student activism.

**Keywords:** student voice, quality improvement, student activism, higher education

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## 1. Introduction

Agenda 2063, the African Union development blueprint, recognizes equitable access to quality higher education as a critical barometer for success in achieving socio-economic and technological development as well democracy and good citizenship. This is premised on the fact that higher education can contribute to social justice, socio-economic, and technological development as well democracy and good citizenship [1]. Several cases of student activism have been reported in African higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as HEIs in other countries, thereby threatening to derail the gains of higher education in terms of producing well-rounded human power ready for contributing to national development. A case in point is the one reported by Sesant, Kekana, and Nicolaides [2] describing an incident in 2015 when most of the 26 South African universities were brought to a standstill by students violently protesting against the proposed

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fee increases and demanding free education, in line with the government's earlier promises. This nationwide student activism was dubbed by its twitter handle hashtag #FeesMustFall and was preceded by the #RhodesMustFall protest, which successfully resulted in the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town within 1 month of the protests that occurred there. The students at the University of Cape Town were demanding the Africanization of the faculty and curriculum as well as the "decolonization" of the institution through the removal of colonial symbols of "white supremacy", which they considered offensive and oppressive, notably the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. The protest was covered extensively in newspapers, on television, and radio and sent out through electronic and social media sites, both at national and at international levels [2].

The #FeesMustFall protests resulted in government freezing fee increases for the year 2016 and increasing fiscal support to public universities [3]. Furthermore, university leadership made various concessions in response to other localized student concerns [4]. For example, authorities at the Rhodes University (identified by Cecil John Rhodes' name) agreed to begin the process of changing the name of the university in line with the students' demands. Management at the Universities of Pretoria and Stellenbosch conceded to demands for the adoption of English as the official language, replacing Afrikaans. The South African cases of student activism were characterized by violence, notably brutal clashes between student factions and clashes with security personnel and police; there was malicious destruction of property, including statues and artwork [5], with the damage estimated to be worth over R350 million [6].

In addition to South Africa, other African countries have had their share of student activism. In Zimbabwe, Zeilig provided a detailed account of the impact of student activism in higher education [7]. In Kenya, 47 cases of violent student activism were reported between 1990 and 2000, characterized by clashes with police and wanton damage to property, serious injuries, and deaths [8]. In its 2000 report, the Kenyan Vice Chancellor's Committee depicts the nature of the student unrests as characterized by demonstrations, boycott of classes, closure of institutions, fierce clashes with police, stone throwing, closure of statehouses, commandeering vehicles, paralyzing the central business district, looting, and damaging buildings and equipment [9]. In Nigeria, there were 21 and 36 major cases of student unrest for periods between 1948 and 1979 and 1980 and 1996, respectively. In the latter case, riot police massacred 100 university students while 1000 others were imprisoned [9]. In Egypt, students from 18 HEIs protested against the uncertainty of the political system, resulting in the arrest and expulsion of 1352 students [10].

In the face of an increase in violent student protests in higher education institutions [11, 12] and the resultant destruction of infrastructure and human life, particularly in developing countries [13, 14], this chapter posits that campus environments unsupportive to student involvement and engagement can result in protests, while fostering a positive campus climate for activism can inspire students to voice their concerns without open resistance [15]. Students, when properly engaged, can play a key role in enhancing the quality of higher education [16]. This concept has been dubbed "student voice," which covers the entire spectrum of initiatives that offer students a chance to participate as partners in all aspects of their higher education experience [17]. Paying attention to the "student voice" in various forms including

surveys, student representation, complaints, grievances, protests, and social media provides a useful quality assurance tool in the detection of shortcomings in the delivery of quality higher education [18]. This chapter illustrates the importance of incorporating the student voice by embracing student activism and recommends a model for incorporating the student voice in order to successfully harness the positive aspects of student activism and improve the quality of higher education. Advances in technology facilitate student activism through the use of email, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Viber, WeChat, YouTube, and text messaging to communicate causes to stakeholders and the public and to update each other about activities of different groups [19].

## 2. Student activism in the context of the student voice

### 2.1. Literature review

Student activism is defined as the involvement of individual students in group activities aimed at defending their interests and bringing about changes in systems, policies, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors regarding issues affecting university life or society at large [20–23]. Activism is a part of the spectrum of the student voice. Activism, for the most part, is no longer viewed as a radical challenge to educational hierarchies [24]. Students are viewed as consumers, producers, evaluators, partners, and critical HEI citizens. As such, their voice should be recognized, respected, and valued [25]. Literature on student activism covers many issues including the causes of the unrests, socio-economic background of student activists, values of the institution, and attitudes of students and leadership styles. Student activism occurs at different levels depending on the composition of the students, background of academic and non-academic staff, the inclusion of leadership and activism issues in curriculum, and the value that students place on group work [22]. However, very little research has been dedicated to studying the positive aspects of student activism; hence, this is the focus of this chapter. The chapter will address issues of nurturing positive student activism through paying attention to the student voice.

Activism is developmental in nature and enables students and HEIs to come up with useful solutions to problems [26]. Quaye [27] gives an account of how student activism addresses three critical learning outcomes: (a) the understanding of and respecting differences in opinions, cultures, orientations, and dispositions, (b) the ability of students to express their voice, and (c) the connection to the international community. In addition, students are often inspired to strive toward enhancing the quality of the educational experience for themselves and for their peers.

Although student activism represents an effective way of supporting critical thinking, collaboration, organizing, citizenship, identity consciousness, civic engagement, and leadership skills in students through a democratic process [22, 28–36], students are often excluded from influencing decision-making in HEIs [23]. This results from the fact that student activists are often viewed as troublemakers who are being manipulated by political figures [37]. For example, in Sénégal, students were referred to as the major stumbling block to educational reforms [38], noting that the recurrence of disruptive and counter-productive violent protests by students

was fueled by outside political interference and concerns regarding who was supposedly fueling the student protest? This negative perception of student activism especially in post-colonial countries in Africa is in sharp contrast with the positive and progressive view such protests have had in the past [37]. The role that student activism, however violent, plays in bringing about reforms and transformation has been acknowledged by scholars who have argued that activism is an acceptable feature of human nature [39].

Student activists are also viewed with scorn because they occasionally use unorthodox methods of bringing about change [22, 40]. Disruptive and sometimes violent tactics, including placard demonstrations, protests, rallies, vandalism, hostage taking, interruption of administrative, teaching, and learning activities, and threats of inflicting physical harm, are used [22, 41–44]. HEI authorities and state officials have labeled some student activists as “destabilizing” and “agitating” [45].

Currently, student activists predominantly employ non-violent tactics and social media platforms to organize their activities and make their voices heard. These tactics include volunteerism [19, 46–48], hunger strikes, sit-ins, parades, blockading roads and buildings, class boycotts, threats of legal action, and play-acting [43, 49, 50]. These tactics help students practice democracy and acquire citizenship skills, which are critical in today's society [51]. Furthermore, these desirable skills have been found to positively correlate to learning [52] by stimulating students' cognitive engagement including interest in learning how to make effective decisions. When students discuss issues affecting them and the society they live in, it increases their general knowledge. Students feel valued, have a sense of belonging, and are willing to give back to their institutions. Satisfied and well-adjusted students concentrate on their studies and are unlikely to engage in destructive behaviors [53, 54].

Harnessing the positive aspects of student activism has the potential to positively influence the quality of higher education by addressing issues of academic, social, political, and economic nature [23, 28, 55–57]. Embracing the student voice strengthens the quality of education students receive and has the potential to bring an end to the disruptive and violent student protests. Researchers found student protests can be a measure of the lack of responsiveness of the power bearers to the concerns and interests of students, thereby prompting confrontation by those affected [58, 59]. Students resort to attacking significant figures by protesting, demonstrating, and boycotting classes as a way of attracting attention to their concerns [60]. The contributions of students to educational reform have been acknowledged as key drivers in the improvement of the desired outcomes [22, 61, 62]. The significance of the “pedagogy of voice” in engaging students empowers students to appreciate their identity as important stakeholders in the learning process [63]. Even though the student voice is an important change agent in HEIs, studies have shown that in most cases students are not listened to; their views might be collected but is not addressed sufficiently [64, 65]. Authorities tend to concentrate on changing only those issues that are not challenging to confront.

Students who learn under optimal conditions that encourage social activism and who are given ample opportunities to make contributions that enable effective decision-making improve the learning environment during and after graduation. In addition, they are able to address pressing social concerns [66]. This arises from the fact that, collectively, students are a force

for influence and change. Students often benefit when given responsibilities and opportunities to participate in decision-making as it is preparation for their future leadership roles [60]. Involvement in the decision-making process inculcates critical thinking [36], self-direction skills, and commitment in students [29], thereby motivating them [67]. Student activism is a critical developmental aspect of the learning process [68]. Higher education managers need to understand that students become alumni the day they register at an institution and hence there is need to create conducive campus environments for them in order to cultivate a good relationship that will continue for life. Considering that many institutions rely on alumni for financial, moral, material, and other benefits, it makes sense to pay attention to student contributions, ensuring their higher education experience is enriching.

The current mechanisms used by institutions to capture the student voice involve surveys to harness the individual voice and the collective voice (through use of student representatives) [18]. The methods utilize questionnaires, focus group discussions, interviews, and other data collection instruments for obtaining feedback, including student representatives as members of HEI committees, holding consultative and discussion fora, including students in institutional strategic planning, projects, and in program reviews [17]. In some universities, students receive training to prepare them to effectively articulate their voice [69].

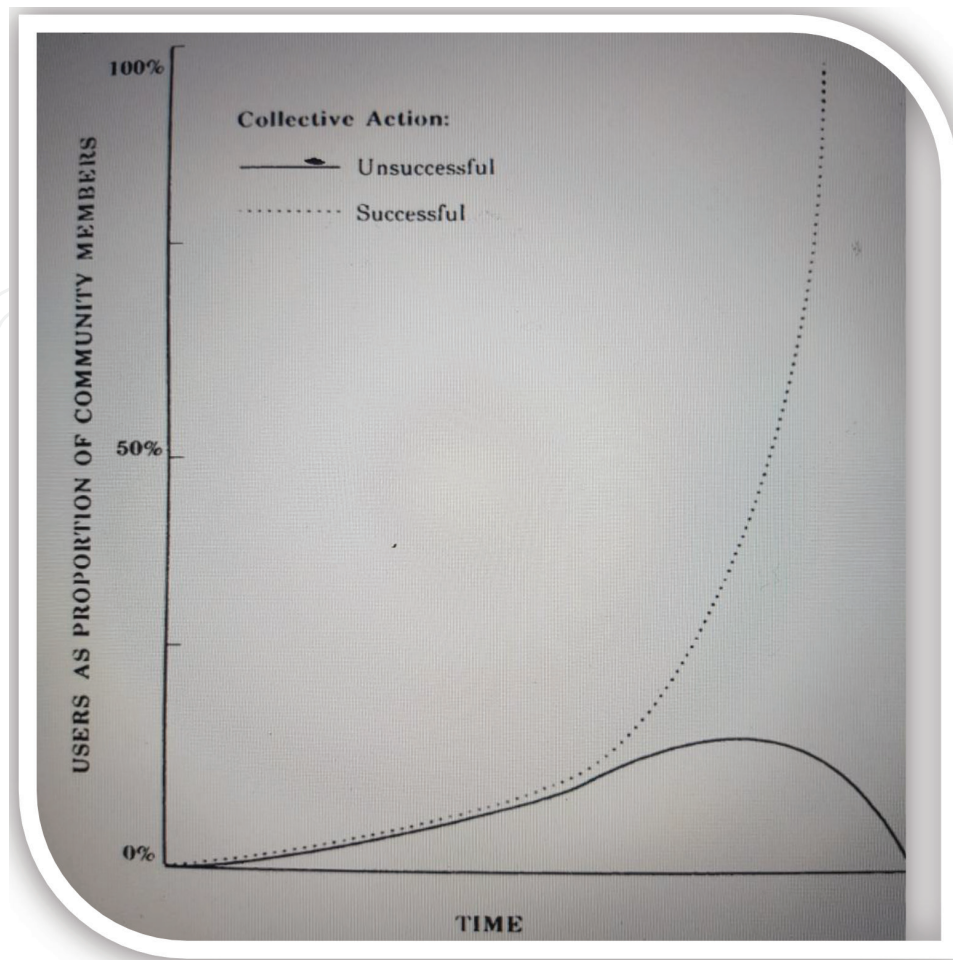
Although the literature supports the power of the student voice in facilitating a better approach to higher education management and practice [16, 70], most higher education leaders only pay lip service to it [71].

## 2.2. Theoretical framework

### 2.2.1. Critical mass theory

Student activism is better contextualized in the framework of the critical mass theory (CMT) [72]. CMT concerns itself with explaining how interdependent decisions by a sufficient number of people (critical mass) accumulate into collective action and contribute to public good (see **Figure 1**). The term “critical mass” derives its origins from nuclear physics, being the smallest quantity of fissile matter required to prop up a nuclear chain reaction [73]. Critical mass is loosely used in any context involving a group of people large enough to achieve the desired change.

A “critical mass” behaves differently from individual members of a group. It is possible for the critical mass to produce public good when some group members have not contributed anything (the “free-rider concept”), while sometimes, the critical mass initiates and is able to ignite widespread collective action. The CMT posits that unity and solidarity is more powerful in collective actions than organizational capacities [74]. The CMT theory professes that the magnitude of collective actions outcomes is dependent on two independent variables, namely marginal returns and heterogeneity. The marginal returns variable denotes the characteristics of the production function, which exemplify the way an individual’s contribution/input produces outputs of collective good. In the diminishing marginal returns scenario, the production function assumes the S-curve wherein the efforts of the first few contributors achieve the greatest effects while subsequent inputs achieve progressively less as compared to the initial inputs



**Figure 1.** A graphical representation of the critical mass theory (source: [77]).

(see **Figure 1**). The accelerating marginal returns reflect a situation where successive inputs by contributors achieve more toward public good than the few initiators (see **Figure 2**). The heterogeneity variable explains how a few keen and ingenious people who contribute to the initial phase of low returns lay the platform for widespread contributions for the public good.

The fundamental notion that collective action begets public good [72] makes CMT applicable to different scenarios where collective interests occur, for example, in political activism [75] and online activism [76]. The CMT is relevant to student activism since activists engage in collective action, which results in the desired changes (public good). Activists do not have official leadership and often come together through the use of social, print, and electronic media [76].

### 2.2.2. Student voice model

An improved model illustrating the potential of student voice to improve research and practice in higher education was developed [78] (see **Figure 3**). In the improved model, aspects of power, identity, and context were added to the four levels already existing in literature, namely:

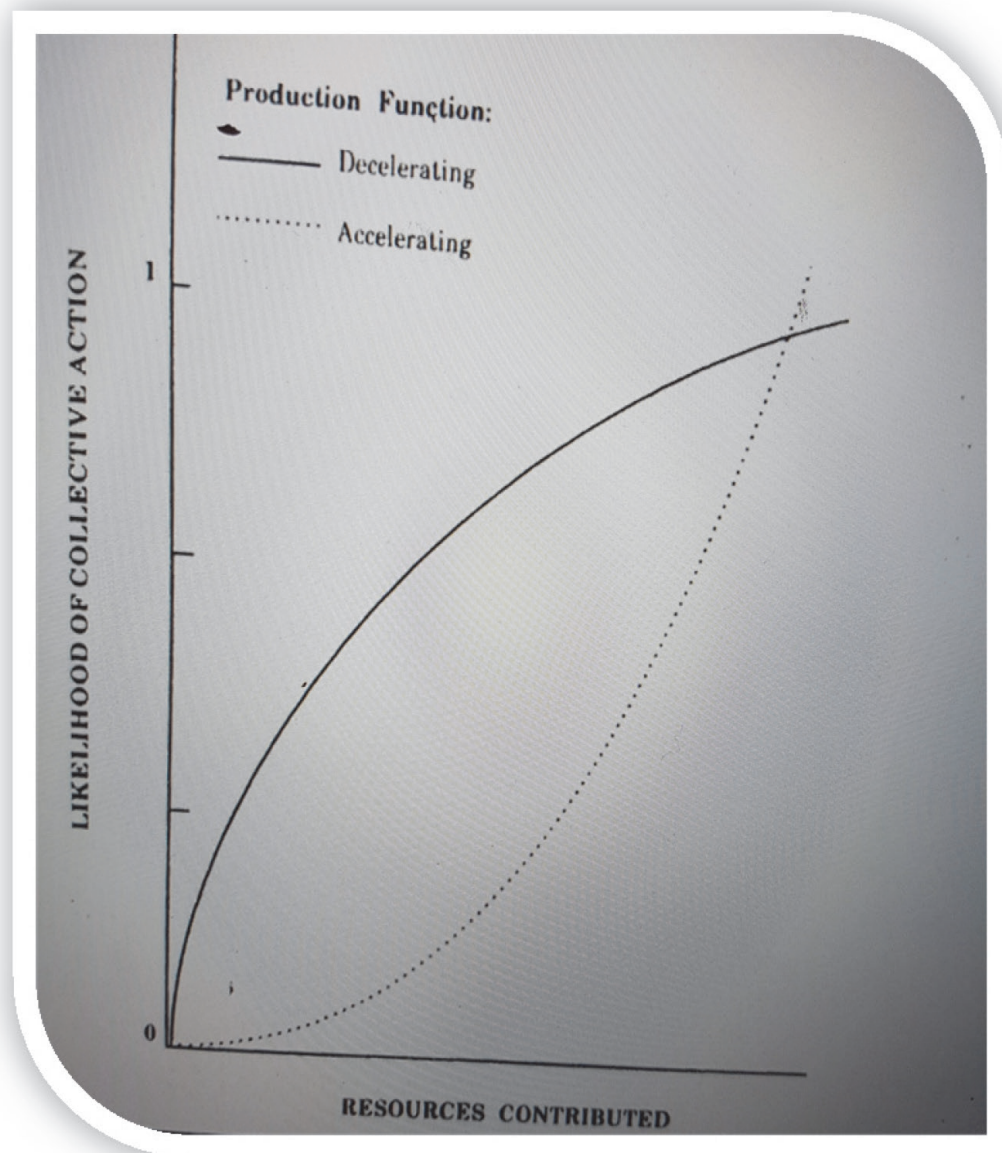
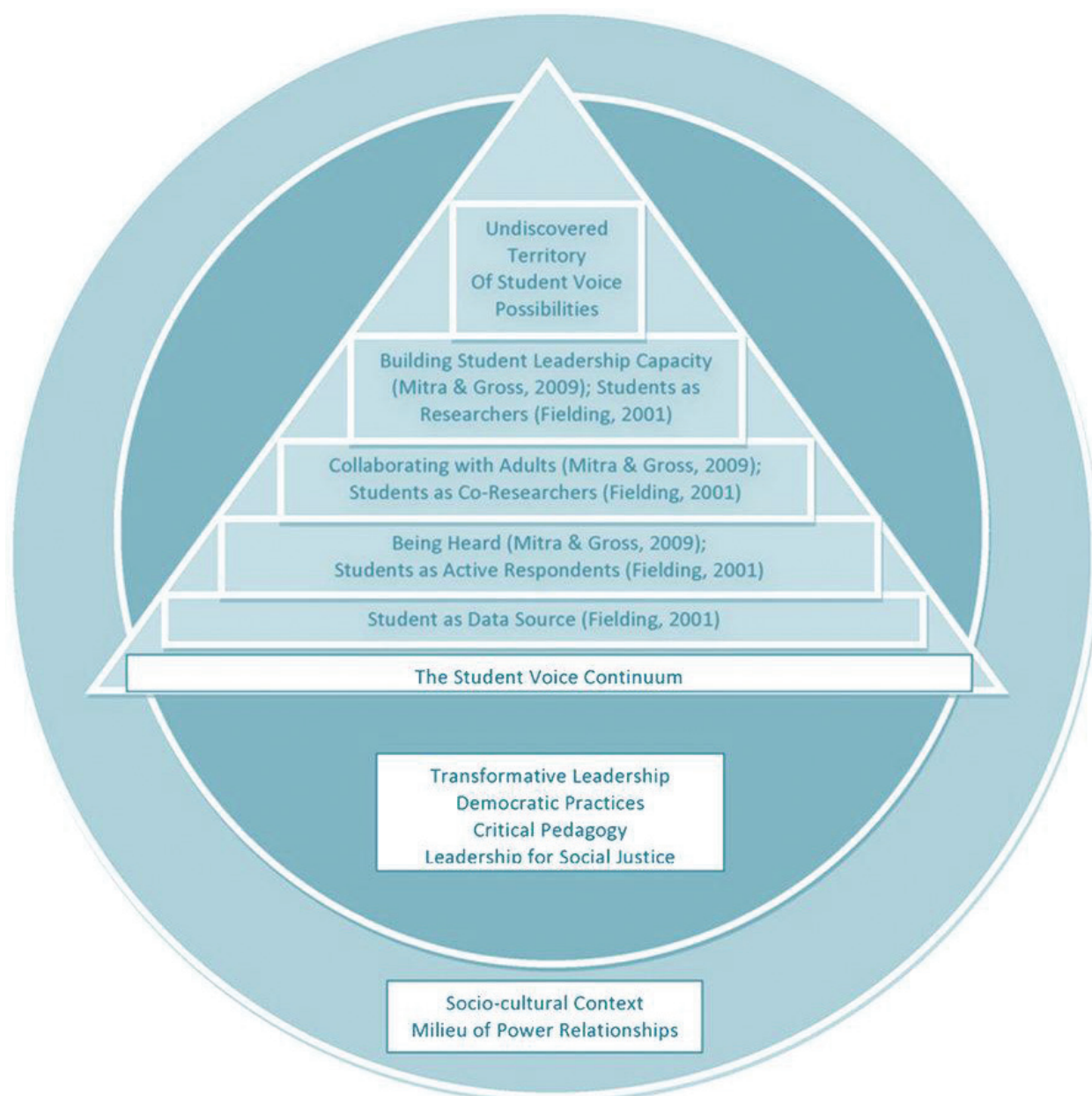


Figure 2. Production function showing decelerating and accelerating marginal returns (source: [77]).

- Students as information sources (lowest level of participation)
- Students striving to be heard
- Students as collaborators
- Students as researchers and involved in leadership (highest level of student involvement)

The revised model deliberately left room for input from new knowledge. The empirical study reported herein aimed at contributing new knowledge to the existing model by embracing aspects of student activism within the student voice context.





**Figure 3.** A model for student participation in higher education (source: [78]).

### 2.3. Objectives of the study

The study aimed at first establishing the issues of concern to students who are likely to participate in student activism. When these issues were brought to the attention of management, the ultimate aim was to investigate the university's response to the student voice and how this impacted student protests and quality of education.

### 2.4. Methodology

The study, performed as two consecutive surveys spanning over a period of 3 years, employed the qualitative approach premised on the use of primary data. The primary data collection

utilized facilitated focus group discussions as well as undertaking interviews with top management at HEIs. Primary data were based on a desk study on complaints and grievances of students as well as cases of student activism. The population of the study was made up of the 15 registered universities in Zimbabwe, nine were public and six were private. The study included 13 universities, eight of them public and five of them private. The other two registered universities, the Zimbabwe Open University (public) and the Reformed Church University (private), were excluded because their students were following the distance-learning mode and the block-release mode respectively. They were hence not available on campus for focus group discussions when the researchers were undertaking the study. During the first phase of the study (2011–2012), students from eight public and five private HEIs in Zimbabwe were interviewed on issues of concern to them emanating from various aspects of their experience and how these were being addressed. The second survey was performed in 2013 as a follow-up on issues raised during the first survey and to get recommendations on best practices regarding student activism. According to [79] surveys on student views, there are additional benefits resulting from longitudinal approaches as opposed to cross-sectional surveys that provide only a snapshot of student feedback. This view is consistent with those of other scholars [80, 81].

The stratified random samples of students were representative of gender, study discipline, year of study, and level of study (undergraduates and post-graduates). The overall population of students in the 13 universities was 69,000. The focus group discussions included 15–20 students and the number of focus groups per institution depended on institutional size. The researchers asked questions using a pilot-tested focus group discussion guide. Even though the students constituted the main target of the study, top management (pro vice chancellor, registrar, bursar, librarian, and dean of students) was interviewed in order to hear their views concerning student activism as well as to verify, seek explanations, and recommendations regarding issues raised by the students. Top management refers to people in top administrative positions responding officially on behalf of the HEIs and not on their own individual capacity. Hence, the focus here is not on the respondent per se but the power behind institutional speech acts [82], discourses that make claims about and on behalf of institutions and their members, and the factors which demonstrate the power of institutions to decide who and what gets legitimated.

A focus group is defined as a group discussion involving multiple participants and coordinated by a facilitator, performed to collect wide-ranging information on a particular subject [83]. The use of focus groups is recommended as a user-friendly way of creating an environment to discuss ideas, facts, opinions, thoughts, beliefs, and suggestions [84]. The procedure described by Gillespie et al. [85] was used to undertake focus-group discussions in this study. This involved researchers using a pilot-tested guide in order to improve the quality of information collected as well as to make sure all participants were given the opportunity to contribute to the discussions. The researchers commenced the discussions by asking general open-ended questions before delving into specific issues. As is recommended, this approach enables the collection of information that is driven by participants [85]. The facilitators would then explore deeper into the experiences of participants and probe further their perceptions. All the focus group discussions were recorded and completed within 1 h.

### 3. Results and discussion

The transcripts from the focus-group discussions with students and interviews with top management from HEIs were analyzed using discourse analysis wherein the issues raised were taken to be representative of the norms, experiences, reasons, and realistic practices [86]. Emerging patterns and themes were used to interpret and deduce the findings. The reasons for engaging in activism and the views about activism from students and top management were categorized and synthesized.

Focus-group discussions with students revealed that the key reasons for student protests in order of priority are lack of communication (presence) of administrators, “top administrators are invisible”, the need for more opportunities to discuss their concerns with administrators, administrators who do not address the substantive problems motivating protests, and administrators that do not interact with students on a routine basis in order to build better relations and trust. The findings are similar to those obtained in Ref. [87] wherein it was reported that failure of authorities to listen to concerns of students was the major cause of protests. However, these findings differ from those of similar studies that categorize the four major causes of student protests as national politics, academic discontents, welfare issues, as well as leadership inadequacies and resource allocation [59, 88]. While students agree that their concerns stem from academic, resource, and welfare issues, their argument is that the cause of protests has more to do with the response from management (or lack of it). Students explained that they are mature enough to understand that resources are limited; however, they believe that through dialogue with administrators and academic staff, most of their concerns can be addressed. Some administrators were described as “untouchable”, “pompous” while others were “fatherly” or “approachable” or had “human faces”.

When asked whether students would readily engage in protests, they agreed unanimously that it was something they would do as a last resort. They were always ready to discuss their issues with colleagues and representatives who had the capacity and positions that allow them to raise the issues with responsible authorities. The students explained that their parents, guardians, or the students themselves were responsible for paying fees and for their upkeep; therefore, they were not prepared to waste their time engaging in collective action that was not “beneficial.” However, students emphasized the need for management to communicate and mix with them to discuss concerns as one family.

The initial survey interviews with key administrators indicated that most of them did not tolerate student activism and would not hesitate to unleash punitive measures. When the advantages of encouraging student activism and students views about management attitudes and “unavailability” were put across to them by the researchers, they agreed to take heed of the student voice. The follow-up survey revealed that top management were taking student issues seriously. As such, there were various channels through which students were engaged. Most of them indicated that activism was actually encouraged since they went out of their way to make sure that student concerns and welfare were attended to. They attributed the embracing student activism and the student voice as the major reasons as to why cases of student unrest and violence were few ever since they started paying attention to the use of student-voice

strategies. In addition to fully resourced student affairs departments covering all possible areas of welfare needs inclusive of sports, counseling, health and well-being, accommodation, etc. some institutions had also employed dedicated student advocates whose duties were to continuously research issues of concern to students and bring them to the attention of the relevant authorities. Most HEIs built student centers offering all kinds of assistance to students. Some services were also outsourced from friendly social organizations interested in the health and welfare of students. Other researchers found that administrators in HEIs perceived activism to be incompatible with teaching and learning [89, 90]. In fact, activism is considered as a transgression [91]. While it might appear as if this position contradicts with results of this study, the viewpoints complement each other in that in both scenarios, violence is not tolerated. The new dimension brought forward by this study is that when positive forms of activism are encouraged, students are initiated into a culture of dialogue and engagement.

The major take-home message is that violent student protests point to a possible breakdown in university procedures for student engagement since they are usually a last resort when all other avenues have failed. HEIs should recognize that student protests are a legitimate form of communicating concerns and hence they should engage students in order to reach an agreed position.

The study used the findings to recommend a model for embracing student activism by incorporating the student voice (see **Figure 4**).

### **3.1. Dialogue with students**

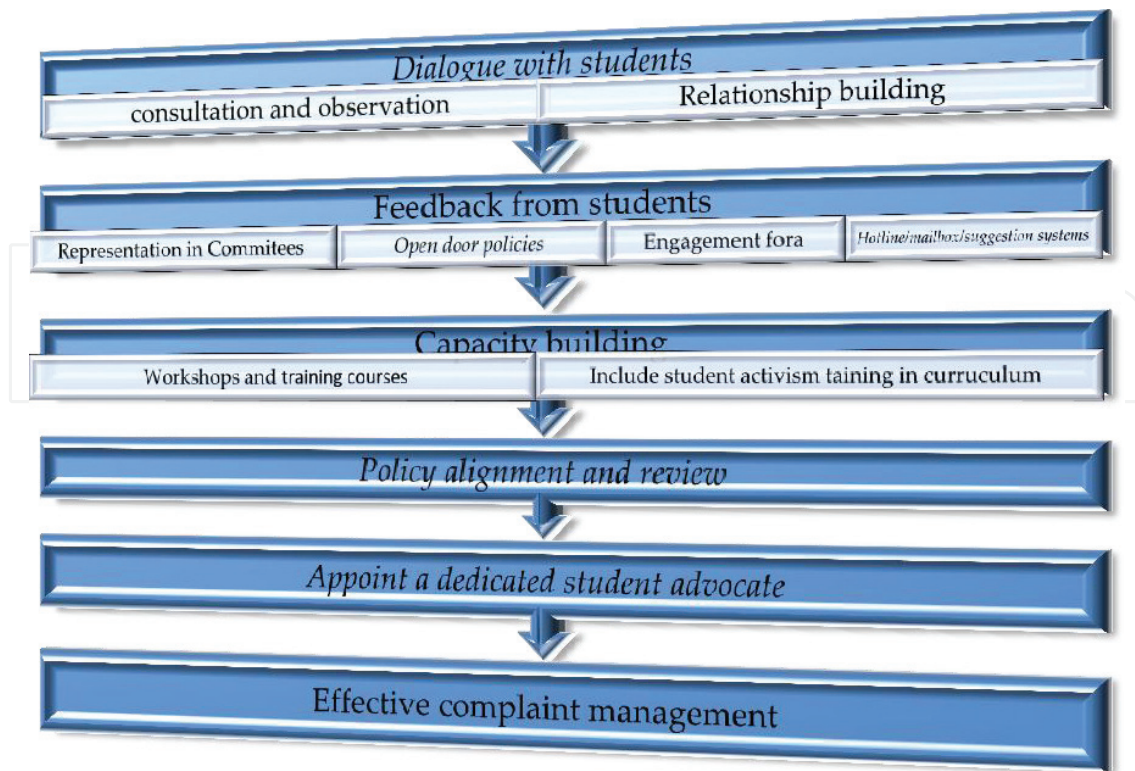
The use of the go-out-and-talk (GOAT) strategy, whereby staff at HEIs engage informally and often with student leaders and students in general, inculcates in students a mindset shift where they can learn to take responsibility for their actions and to understand protest-related rules as well as appreciate the negative impact of acts of civil disobedience. Through dialogue, higher education institutions can take the lead on creating true partnerships with students. The strategy of dialoguing with students includes consultation and observation as well as relationship building.

#### *3.1.1. Consultation and observation*

This includes the go-out-and-listen (GOAL) strategy whereby internal and/or external researchers carry out surveys/interviews/focus-group discussions to capture the feelings and opinions of students. This assists in building mutual trust through effective interpersonal relationships.

#### *3.1.2. Relationship building*

This involves improving understanding and trust among all the players in HEIs through the use of varying communication channels and methods. Most protests are avoidable if effective communication is practiced and there are opportunities to raise substantive concerns to administration and receive clear responses. It is important to create strong working relationships between security, students, and administrators with the goal of minimizing protests and use of force. Staff



**Figure 4.** A model for embracing student activism by incorporating the student voice.

should shelve the “managerial/professor” persona to enable meaningful and easy interaction with students. Senior administrators ought to periodically attend students meetings and functions.

### 3.2. Feedback from students

HEIs need to review procedures to incorporate feedback regarding problematic issues. Using the concept of “closing the feedback loop” ensures that all the players can see and celebrate the results of engaging students. HEIs should encourage staff to accommodate the perspectives of students and ensure that students enjoy the best learning experience. The student feedback management strategy includes student representation on committees, student engagement fora, open-door policies, and use of hotlines/mailbox/suggestion systems.

#### 3.2.1. Students’ representation in committees

The institution should incorporate a critical mass of student representatives into all committees of the institution, including those responsible for bringing changes to systems/structures/processes. Of note here is the finding that while most university councils have half representation from external and internal Councilors, only one student representative sits in council. This makes it almost impossible for the student voice to be listened to in a substantive way. In addition, the system of student representation should ensure that there is representation from all the different groups in the student body, inclusive of the often forgotten groups, for example, adult, disabled, part-time, and foreign students.

### *3.2.2. Student engagement fora*

Students should be availed with various platforms for engagement. These include orientation sessions, debates, clubs, student-staff interactions, hotlines, and counseling. The use of technology facilitates the engagement process. It is worth noting that engagement does not mean destruction of the barrier between staff and students; the barrier is simply made more permeable by increasing the bi-directional flow of information and ideas.

### *3.2.3. Open-door policies*

HEIs must encourage students to bring their suggestions even to top management in the university. Staff should be actively involved in students' union activities. There is a need to acknowledge and reward members of staff who would have exhibited high levels of commitment toward engaging students. HEIs must inculcate a culture of tolerance and understanding instead of compliance.

### *3.2.4. Hotline/mailbox/suggestion systems*

Students should be empowered to embrace technology to provide an opportunity for themselves to express their views publicly or anonymously. In addition, the curriculum can be used as the key tool for transforming student engagement.

## **3.3. Capacity building**

HEIs should introduce principles of non-violent resistance and train everyone in the institution. Students should be provided with adequate information as well as receive training formally and informally on issues of student activism and on how to effectively make their voices heard. HEIs should also encourage the use of constitutional rights of free speech to positively enact social change. They should also communicate information on the roles and shared responsibilities of campus stakeholders indicating clearly that the head of institution is ultimately accountable for institutional security and the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

## **3.4. Policy alignment and review**

HEIs should establish and document policies and practices regarding dissent and civil disobedience. Student partnerships and engagement should be prioritized through the alignment of favorable policies and procedures. HEIs should ensure consistent messages from senior management and staff and employ the right people exhibiting student-centered mentality.

## **3.5. Appoint a dedicated student advocate**

HEIs are encouraged to appoint a dedicated student advocate to continuously research issues of concern to students and bring them to the attention of the relevant authorities.

## **3.6. Complaints management**

It is important for HEIs to dedicate specific time periods for allowing students access to top administrators in order to raise their views and concerns. Establishing a framework where

students can submit their petitions and administrators can respond is important. HEIs should develop a process of mediation wherein appropriately trained staff can facilitate dialogue between students and the relevant HEI staff.

In addition to heeding the student voice, university management should:

- Ensure corruption-free, transparent, and fair management of the university
- Train students on issues of civility
- Be consistent on disciplinary action
- Explain why some requests cannot be met
- Create favorable campus environments that:
  - foster a culture of communication, openness, and civility
  - accommodate and respect different points of view
  - have well-documented and implemented policies on student engagement
  - respond when protests occur and see to it that intimidation, censorship, suspensions, arrests, shut down or violence are avoided.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings showed that the key reasons for student protests in order of priority are lack of communication (presence) of administrators, “top administrators are invisible”, the need for more opportunities to discuss their concerns with administrators, administrators who do not address the substantive problems motivating protests, and administrators who do not interact with students on a routine basis in order to build better relations and trust.

The recommended model suggests that institutions should heed the student voice through dialogue with students, consultation and observation, representation and engagement fora, dedicated student advocates, relationship building, open-door policies, feedback from students, capacity building, policy alignment and review, hotline/mailbox/suggestion systems, and complaints management. The study suggests the areas that HEIs should focus on in order to minimize violent student protests and uses the student voice to improve quality.

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