

## Factors that Contribute to Student Protests at a South African University

Keamogetse G. Morwe, Elisa Garcia-Espana and Thierry M. Luescher  
University of Malaga, Malaga, Spain

**Abstract:** No one could have foretold that the soiling of the Cecil John Rhodes statue with human excrement at the University of Cape Town (UCT) on March 9th, 2015 would spiral South African Universities and the general public into a state of confusion and frustration. Such an act was peculiar in the post-apartheid era. The cause of this calamity was that African student's expressed discontent relating to their exclusion and marginalisation within the higher education system. While this debate has been ongoing and often premised on fees, the authorities have shown little enthusiasm to its resolution. Hence, the UCT event inspired the formation of myriad student movements across all higher education institutions which ultimately morphed into the Fees Must Fall Movement (#FMM). Consequently, all concerned parties from the university Vice-Chancellors, the Minister of Higher Education and training and to the President had no other choice but to take decisive action to the fee plea that students had presented. The purpose of this study is to give an expose of the issues that triggered the country wide student uprising as gathered from interviews from one of the institutions in South Africa. The study relies on a phenomenological approach of conducting research and also archival research methodology relating to the phenomenon under study.

**Key words:** Born-free, protests, student activism, social justice, university, president

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### INTRODUCTION

The South African Higher Education system has had a long history of student protests which has its roots in colonialism and apartheid. The change in the political dispensation had done little to dampen protest actions at various institutions. Whereas in the past such were welcome as they signified that students were politically aware, there seem to be scepticism towards student protests. Such was witnessed in the national calls by academics and politicians, pleading and later urging students to abandon the national #FeesMustFall campaign (#FMM) which took centre stage in the South African body politic from 2015 to date. These calls went unnoticed as protest continued unabated across the 27 institutions of higher learning, thus, ceasing the business of the universities. Protests are low or high risk actions that a less powerful group engages to show their dissatisfaction at the status quo (Tilly, 2004). Often student protests include low risk actions such as writing a complaint to the university management. The lack of a desired response is often what leads to students opting for disruptive protest actions which attract the sanctioning of the authorities who include police officers. When protests have escalated to this point, the consequences for the students are often dire. The question that remains is what is it that makes students to join protests actions despite the risk of being arrested,

expelled from the campus or physical and psychological injury. Various researchers attribute student protests to the following reasons: firstly, that university education exposes them to social justice issues, making them aware of how collective action can secure their rights as part of the marginalised groups. Secondly, the majority of student's are idealistic, risk averse and less likely to compromise their values in cases they believe that such are just. Thirdly, HE brings together young people with different dispositions creating cross pollination of ideas on the desirable courses of action. Lastly, student's have extensive leisure time which allows them to engage in extramural activities including affiliation to youth wings of national political parties (Cloete and Maassen, 2015; Ervin, 2011; Kistner, 2008; Anonymous, 2015a). Though, the above reasons are valid, other contextual issues such as the disposition of the student-management relations, institutional culture and the socio-political climate are worth considering. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to discuss the reasons behind student protests including measures that might be taken to lessen their recurrence.

**The roots of the South African student's protests:** Higher education in South Africa has remained the bedrock of political activism and consciousness with the University of Fort Hare (UFH) a missionary established tertiary institution being the pioneer thereof. Though it preached

egalitarian values, the university was not receptive to political activism nor agency, as alluded (Beale, 1990). As a result of the political climate protests at the institution were common. At the level of society, this cohort of student's might have witnessed the impact of the Land Act 1913 which apportioned 87% of the arable and mineral rich land to the ownership of the white population of which Cecil John Rhodes became a benefactor. This act dispossessed black people of their land, relegating them to inhabitable locations. The coming to power of the National Party in 1948 which legislated systems and practices to uphold racial segregation and subjugation, further polarised race relations. Subsequently, in 1955 various political groups gathered to draw the Freedom Charter as a vision for a democratic South African society. Understandably, human rights and pluralism were the basic values permeating it, recognising that being a human being was primary to enjoying socio-political rights. Relating to education, the charter called that it will be afforded to all with the government ensuring that HE is accessible (Anonymous, 1955). Regrettably, the situation was not to be as the apartheid government established language, race and ethnic group differentiated universities and banned political participation. As a result, leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) were arrested or murdered. The ensuing political vacuum and the rejection of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) because of its non-responsiveness and unwillingness to challenge the system head on. From this split a new party the Black People's Convention (BPC) that advocated for Black Consciousness became prominent at the universities from the late 1960's until the 1990's. This group was critical of inclusive nature of the Freedom Charter because it was not responsive to the impact that colonialism has had on the black population. Accordingly, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) called for the self-determination of the black people and the rejection of capitalism, issues that are presently at the core of the #FEMF movement. Various reasons that can be advanced for this state of affairs include the ANC's adoption of neoliberal economic policies, rampant corruption that has fuelled poverty, inequality and discontentment as witnessed in the growing number of community protest.

Whereas protests on fee increases, the quality of education and poor services have been a norm at Historically Black Universities (HBUs), Historically White Universities (HWUs) were sheltered from such as their students were economically privileged and well conversant with the Eurocentric culture. These students

acted as ambassadors of the cultural hegemony as they discouraged their colleagues from engaging in protests. For example some Wits black students told their protesting peers to stop embarrassing them (Dawson, 2006). The continued maintenance of the status quo was also possible because of the presence of few black students and staff who agitated about their issues. Subsequently, when Qumani spilled faeces on the Cecil John Rhodes statue his actions centered the issues of black student's at all South African institutions. The rationale for his action was to show disdain for the system that continues to revere oppressors with little regard for the consequences of their actions on the oppressed. Of note the movement sought to challenge the systematic racial and patriarchal practices embedded in the institutions and society as whole. For the statue to be removed, student's engaged in various low risk protest actions like sit-ins and disruptions. Protests are common at universities because university education exposes students to social justice issues. Secondly, HE brings together young people with different dispositions, creating a cross pollination of ideas. Thirdly, the presence of national political wings at universities creates a platform for political consciousness and activism. Fourthly, student's are perceived to have less responsibilities as such they are likely to pursue extramural activities. Lastly, student's are the creative force required to ensure that institutions the values that they purportedly advocate. It is understandable that student's called for the removal of colonial and apartheid statues as an initial step to reformation of their institutions (Cloete and Maassen, 2015; Ervin, 2011; Kistner, 2008; Anonymous, 2015b).

Despite the history, Rhodes protagonists shared that the black students ought to be mindful of the contribution that Rhodes has made in the country and the history of the university because he donated the land on which UCT is built and has bequeathed his wealth to a scholarship, that Nelson Mandela endorsed (Rhodes-Nelson Mandela Scholarship). Some even watered down the debate citing that black people tend to celebrate Shaka, a warrior revered for making the Zulu nation world acclaimed but are averse to Rhodes. Debating along these lines is ill conceived as firstly the historical account of Shaka is Western and portrayed him as a war monger. Secondly, all the casualties of wars were never cast away but became an integral part of their communities. Lastly, the debate captures the tendency of some white people to impose and deny agency of the black people, forgetting that the

Jews, Iraqi and Ukrainians have removed the statues of their oppressors from prominence (Kros, 2015; Lowry, 2017; Seekings and Natrass, 2015).

The sit-ins became teachable moments where student's and progressive academics engaged on the failure of transformation at the institution and the various strategies required to challenge the system. Despite opposition even from the government the student's call for the removal of the statue was a success, cementing open debates on the need for transformation at universities. Later in the year, universities engaged student leaders on fee increases for 2016 as the 5% government subsidy was insufficient to cover operational costs of universities. Over the years university fees have increased more than the inflation rate. For example, Rhodes University (RU) required their student's to pay 50% or Rs 45000.00 upfront, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) required an 11.5% increase from a population whose minimum wage was set between Rs 3500.00 and 3900.00 (Calitz and Fourie, 2016; Reporter, 2017).

The call for the fee increment came at the time when there was ongoing protest action of outsourced service researchers, the proposed closure of a dilapidated hall of residence whose tenants were black students who could not afford any accommodation and the suspension of the SRC president and the resignation of his deputy. The former was suspended because of a case of assault and inciting hate speech, he later won the freedom of speech case that the institution levelled against him (Shange, 2015).

Most importantly, the growing discontentment with student politics erupted during the SRC student campaign where the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) an ANC youth alliance was accused of towing the "elitist" line instead of fighting for the student's. Different voices lent their opinions to the shut-down, most of which calling for student's to resume with their studies and blaming universities for charging exorbitant fees that exclude students. In this regard the call for fee increment came at a volatile period in the history of the democratic dispensation. On the occasion of the delivery of the national interim budget students marched to parliament hoping that their call for free education will be taken heed of. Regrettably, violence from the police marred this momentous occasion. Police fired rubber bullets and stun grenades to remove and prevent them from entering the parliamentary precincts. The use of force against unarmed students received worldwide condemnation, hence government machinery regrouped to decide a flat

rate which students rejected. With the ultimate march being at the Union Buildings, the president gave in to the demand of student's. His actions failed to salvage the situation as the protests continued. There are myriad reasons for the student's continued protest action. Firstly, students were holding the government to account as it had not done enough to realise the values of the Freedom Charter and the Mosia report that revealed that free education was feasible.

To this end students were labelled as misinformed, pseudo revolutionaries with universities urged to close in order to teach them a lesson (Anonymous, 2012). These disparaging statements were an attempt to dissuade students from questioning the government's ineptness to pursue a South Africa which not only recognises and upholds the rights of the marginalised groups. With the perceived failure of capitalism and unfulfilled promises of democracy, student's became attracted to the BCM. The attractiveness of this political ideology is based on its recognition of the capabilities of the black population and rejection of the subjugation. More importantly, student's adoption of black consciousness, illustrates their level of sophistication in interrogating and understanding the current social issues. These calls for emancipation were made in the in all African countries upon independence but failed to take off because African leaders allowed Western influences to meddle in their affairs with little regard on the fact that these country's development is rooted in their appreciation of what makes them unique.

In essence the students are using the university to bring to the fore the long standing social issues that the government has failed to address. Hence, they rejected the 6% fee increase cap and the 0% that the government came up with because these were piecemeal solutions that would keep the status quo. Indisputably, the ANC's negotiated settlement that prioritised equality and political rights with little regard on integral emancipation measures for the black people. For instance, whereas blacks can access tertiary institutions, only a few are able to access them because they are expensive and that the quality of basic education has remained pathetic despite the monies spent. From this vantage point students spoke about decolonising their institutions as this would foster a different mind-set to the trajectory of the country.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study presents the phenomenological results of a mixed methods approach investigating why students resort to violence when they have problems with the

university authorities. All but one of the 6 participants completed a questionnaire available at the institution from May and July, 2016. Whereas permission to conduct the survey meant that the university administered the survey, the researcher had to further request permission for direct contact with the participants, all of whom were student leaders in different organisations within the institution. Whereas three were part of the student leadership, the other three were more aligned apolitical #FMF, thus, the student leader and #FMF activist distinction. All of the participants were black, 5 were female and 1 male. In terms of their faculty, four were enrolled in management sciences, education and law and the last two in the humanities and the natural sciences, respectively. Of this group two participants were postgraduate students and the rest were either in the 3rd or 4th year levels. The study employed purposive sampling procedure to identify participants who were actively involved in the #FMF student movement. Semi structured, face to face interviews that lasted roughly 30-60 min were conducted with these student leaders at their consent and convenience. For verification purposes all the participants received transcripts and the audio recordings of the interviews and thus, far no one has questioned the material that they received. All the transcripts were uploaded into ATLAS.ti v 7.8 and both open and thematic coding engaged to make sense of what is it that drives student protests.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data gathered from the interviews revealed that the major reason behind the student's protests was the lack of transformation from which other challenges emanate. These challenges include exclusions, poor relations with student leaders and management's reaction to protests.

**Lack of transformation:** Transformation is a much-punted word in the South African nomenclature that gained traction in the 1990's when it was undeniable that the country was moving towards democracy. Transformation as a concept, attracts different meanings depending on one's perspective, despite its expansiveness, it means change (Hungwe, 2013). Transformation of HE is "part of the broader process of South Africa's political, social and economic transition which includes political democratisation, economic reconstruction and development and redistributive social policies aimed at equity" (Anonymous, 1997). Changes needed not be

tangible but non-tangible issues to be efficacious (Anonymous, 2008; Nasima and Wickham, 2013). Racially institutions have made an effort to increase black student's access to HE, though the same does not apply to the academic staff population (Govinder *et al.*, 2013; Sheehan, 2009). It seems that the increase in student numbers was perceived to foster a socio-cultural change with little input from the university management (Bozalek and Leibowitz, 2012; Hungwe, 2013). Such expectations are not unrealistic as historically blacks have found themselves to be minorities and compelled to adapt and assimilate the values of social institutions that they come across. Therefore, students were perceived to be in a familiar position with institution expecting their continued acceptance of the status quo while sanctioning those challenging it.

Whereas Historically Black Institutions (HBUs) are mono-racial still lag behind in terms of material and non-material infrastructure. The gradual approach of the management to addressing transformation signals the subtle manner in which the institution is oblivious to the challenges of black students who are compelled to commit cultural suicide in order to adapt and assimilate the culture of their institutions, thereby distancing themselves from their social structures (Kim and Irwin, 2013). However, their assimilation of the hegemonic culture has its shortcomings because despite their efforts, their low-income status makes it hard for them to earn the middle-class status because they lack "cultural, social and personal capital" (Lehmann, 2014). Transformation challenges cannot be blamed on the universities alone as "legitimate demands have become entangled and embroiled in party contestations and the struggle for access to resources and the maintenance of privilege" (Cloete, 2017) making the state also liable.

**Exclusions:** Compounding the issue was the finding of a qualitative study on transformation at a merged institution revealed that less than half of the university leaders were not aware of the transformation agenda at their institution (Ngcamu and Teferra, 2015). In light of the above, it is conceivable that the delegates at the 2015 Summit for Higher Education identified the lack of transformation as the main challenge that permeates the sectors. The roots thereof stemming from the perceived refusal of the institutions to dissociate with colonial and apartheid values (Anonymous, 2012, 2015c). Accordingly, the all six agree with the following statements:

“However, then the thing is all these organisations within the university had been engaged with the management about transformation; it seemed to be a process. But then obviously we believed that our institution is also run by capitalist and Jewish capitalist”. (#FMF male activist)

“You have intellectual con... debates. We have academic discussions about this stuff and when you speak transformation, we speak about these things. So, when you get here and suddenly when you speak about stuff you are being intimidated or you are being threatened. It really shows you how it further shows how really your life is cheap. I think it, particularly because if you speak about these injustices and inequalities issues, that you go through it”. (Female Student Leader 2)

The above statements reflect the frustrations of students about the prevalent dynamics within the institution. Students cite that they felt silenced because of the lack of response and the intimidation from the management. While the first statement is a bit forceful, the second is rather subdued, masking some form of resignation. Moreso, the responses indicate that tertiary institutions might be denying students the necessary skills to navigate the professional world. Academic exclusions have made a serious dent on the promotion of access to the previously marginalised groups. While there has been a growing trend to student's gaining access to tertiary education, a greater number is dropping out of the system, the lack of finance often cited as the primary cause. Various attempts to remedy the situation through bursaries and loans have proved insufficient to cover the ever-increasing number of students but also the inflation rate has rendered these futile. The following statistics bear testimony to the regression that black students face at HE institutions, across the country. “Only about one in four students in contact institution graduate in regulation time”; only 35% of the total intake and 48% of contact students graduate within 5 years” and that “it is estimated that some 55% of the intake will never graduate” (Anonymous, 2014). Staying longer in the system bears financial consequences, especially for the student who drops out of HE because the majority of students rely on the government student loan. Exclusion are not only applicable to the students from low income families but children of middle class professionals like teachers and nurses because they cannot afford fees and do not qualify for the study loans. This group of students are referred to as the “missing middle”. In this case, HE

sector in Africa continues to be a massification of the elites because it is accessible to only those who can afford to pay (Maassen and Cloete, 2016). The insufficiency of loans is in light of declining state subsidies, the South African HE sector greatly relies on tuition fees and third stream income for their operational costs (Anonymous, 2016; Anonymous, 2015a-c). Cost sharing reflects the decrease in government subsidies, the increase in student numbers and the unfavourable world economy (Klemencic, 2011). Unlike in some African countries where Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) eliminated free higher education, payment for fees has been the norm in the country. Hence, students, continue to oppose attempts to raise tuition fees and or levies in (Altbach and Salmi, 2011). The quotes below capture the student's sentiments about the demeanour of their institutions towards their lives experiences:

“I have found that universities are also run like business. They don't care when there is no longer that element of ‘we actually care’ because you are at the end of the day a person. It's just like they are going to kick you out and the next person that has money is going to come in. So, not because we want to fight the system and whatever. We are just saying implementation, we're not fighting, it's not a new thing that is why we have an inter-generational speak because you understand it. You can trace it that this has been going on. So, now you can't keep on talking about one thing over and over again”. (Female Student Leader 3):

“The June exams and the requirement to settle debt beforehand, created a crazy cocktail”. (Female Student Leader 1):

Literature reveals that fees and services are among the prevalent reasons behind students protests, though these occurred at HBUs more often than at HBUs possibly because of the lo (Cele, 2014; Omari and Mihyo, 1991; Zeilig and Dawson, 2008) had numerous their students protesting about the lack of accommodation whereas UWC students cited that the accommodation fees were unaffordable, calling for their reduction (Gasnolar, 2016). The statement below emphasises the point:

“The imminent closure of the residence, rather the demolishing of the Parktown residences to make way for a car park was what frustrated students. This is the only affordable university residence that accommodates the majority of black students”. (Female Student Leader 1)

Debt puts undue stresses on students and might hamper their ability to perform their academic tasks because they expend more of their energy trying to secure funding. Moreover, some of these students forego enjoying their studies as they spend their time in employment to cover their basics. A UK study focussing on the experiences of 1st year students revealed that they faced various challenges like going hungry, uninhabitable accommodation and long working hours (Yorke and Longden, 2008). These experiences might result in their dropping out or failing to perform academically. Fees are one of the burdens for student ability to succeed in the HE sector (Anonymous, 1997). Whereas fees do facilitate entry into HE institution, aptitude and capability to handle academic tasks are necessary. Studenthood is a stressful life path as revealed in a recent study in the UK found that university students were less happy and more anxious than the general population. Vulnerability to emotional distress included living away from home with strangers, preoccupations with their success, worry about increased debt and prospective employment opportunities (Brown, 2016). Accordingly, social connectedness and social capital are primary determinants of their mental and physical health (Jdaitawi, 2015). Students who connect to their institutions are less likely to revolt because they trust each other (Dolan and Connolly, 2014; Woodroffe, 2011). Most importantly social engagement increases academic performance (Lawson and Masyn, 2015).

**Poor communication:** Students cited that there was poor communication between them and the university authorities. This assertion contradicts the perceived efforts that the universities believe to have created spaces for student's expression and interaction. However, available means of communication seem inadequate as they are not actioned as revealed in the quotations below:

"We are tired of talking 'fees', for what? It doesn't help 'we have received your proposal comrades and we look into it actually we have opened a new commission". (Female Student leader 3):

"Even on numerous occasions, I've been to[...] we went there and on this occasion we actually spoke about where we volunteer at the food bank and we spoke about how there is no food and there are poor students who need food and we tried to keep the conversation going and i mean months went past before something actually happened and only when there was a strike at the [...] were those issues addressed". (#FMF Student Activist 1).

The above reveal that students do not necessarily seek to be combative to the authorities but collaborative. The student's repeated trips to the offices of the management reflects their sense of hope and belief in the management's ability to resolve student issues. However, also students are aware of their level of power, thus, the escalation. Despite this, the sense of frustration on the part of the student is palpable. Communication forms the basis for the smooth functioning institutions as it affords a voice to those involved within the institution. As a two-way process, communication is reliant on timeous a feedback. Meaning that for the communication process to be effective and efficient, there needs to be some form of consensus between the parties that are involved. Although, it is a process of engagement, communication and power dynamics are linked. Subsequently, various studies indicate that the long winded and secretive decision-making processes are sources of protests (Cele, 2014; Konings, 2009; Muya, 2014) that lead to some student leaders relying on personal connections to resolve student issues (Mugume, 2015). When students believe that the management is not giving them feedback at a reasonable time, relations between these two parties are likely to be negatively affected. Whereas the administration tries its best to involve the students and give them the necessary feedback, the crux of the matter lies in the attention that is given to the issue and its resolution. Poor communication creates a rift between the parties concerned breeds mistrust, escalates the conflict to violence causing irreparable to damage to the relationship of concerned parties.

**Poor relations with student leaders:** Student leadership plays a crucial role in the running of the university as they elevate the voices of the students. Whereas the original objective of this body is to advocate for the interests of students, this role appears to have been redefined. While still maintaining their combative nature, student politics have taken a different route as national party politics have polarised the efficacy of the student leaders. Various studies across the world have revealed how politicians have granted rewards to student leaders who upheld their directives. Apart from securing a lucrative career in politics, immediate rewards, the ability to function without interference from the university authorities and getting a greater chunk of the student budget (Giustozzi, 2012; Mugume, 2015; Omari and Mihyo, 1991; Tejada, 2015). Trust is valuable in relationships as it fosters belonging, identification and cohesion between stakeholders within the institution. When subordinates trust their

leaders, it becomes easy for them to relinquish their power as they believe that they would act in their best interests. Trust enhances the influence and power that those in authority can enjoy including how they can exercise such. Participants had the following to say about the SRC:

“The whole system should be relooked and sort of changed. Even your SRC, even your SRC should be more of just a student body, speaking on behalf of students, for students and i mean them. Not influenced by politics or even management”. (#FMF Female Activist 1):

“The protests at Wits were controlled but then again we need to understand that after that there was a break-away, the SRC from the whole fees must fall and the students were still determined to carry on because we felt after the announcement of no fee increment. I didn't know where it actually came from but then, so, you'll find that after the break-away from SRC there were sort of like party politics that were coming into play because now you know our SRC predominantly and PYA set-up will be uum, umm, controlled by Luthuli House who kept on saying “Go back to class you've attained 0% increment”. But then you had other students who were saying it's not even about that, we haven't even begun. So, from then one, you'll also get the Wits management playing on that, on the divisions. So, they play on the divisions and then obviously it just becomes more frustrating to the other students”. (#FMF Male Activist):

With the onset of the protests the student leadership were at the forefront of the protests, the situation changed when there were allegations that the leaders were having secretive meetings with the national political leadership, receiving a monetary donation allegedly from the President's significant other and urging the students to stop with the protest. Additionally, different VCs and the Minister of Higher Education accused the SRC leaders of dishonesty because they have on several occasions retracted on the agreements. Both are referring to “politics of duplicity and being thrown under the bus”. The student's responses and those of the authorities reveal the twin pressures inherent in a student leadership that is affiliated to a political party where one is caught between differing agendas of the party and students. As a result,

the students formed a leaderless non-partisan movement that representative and counter party hegemony. This movement rejected the fee increase freeze because they indicated that students will still be liable to pay for fees albeit on the 2015 rates, leading to the continuation of the protests.

Regrettably, while the countermovement was a unifying force, for the authorities perceived it was illegitimate because it did not follow the formally set processes to represent students. Under normal circumstances, student leaders are elected with the national electoral commission overseeing the process to ensure credibility, adherence to the law and accountability (Bonakele *et al.*, 2008; Nyundu *et al.*, 2015). Although, students argued that movements are organic, it took a while before the management engaged with them. Whether it was because of the fee increment or the mistrust of the SRC, it seems that the breakaway was inevitable. A case in point is that the 2015 student elections were postponed several times because of disruptions from dissatisfied students. These students claimed that the Jewish Student Association (JSA), an alliance partner of the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) was not in good standing because of it misappropriating funds (Sekhotho, 2015). Therefore, the environment was already tenuous and favourable to contesting the legitimacy of the PYA. Apart from the institutional political dynamics, students have shown a growing weariness with their SRCs across the country with more shunning the elections. The current state of affairs is not peculiar as in the apartheid years student leaders were not independent (Badat, 1999). One might deduce that the silencing of the voices of the students might be a sign of a government that is trying to maintain its grip on power as other parties in the continent had used students for this end. As a result, for the student leaders to regain trust from their constituency it is imperative that political affiliations be done away with (Moreku, 2014).

**Reaction to protest:** University students are not hesitant to express their dissent to the authorities. The methods they use often depend on the response of those in authority. Before the student shutting down the institution, the student leadership and other sectors of the institution raised issues with the management which cover broad transformation issues, namely student financial exclusion, exclusive institutional culture, lack of African academics and employment conditions of low earning staff. Whereas the institution has incrementally made progress to address the concerns raised, the

organizational culture prevailed. Subsequently, when the shut down the campus, the university perceived their protest illegal and cited that those engaging in such actions will attract sanctions. Below follows a narrative of the student's reactions to the measures that their campus employed.

"After the break, we came back to military barracks, there were police everywhere and all these private securities. I think obviously, these guys had gone back and really re-strategized. It shows again that they are not willing to listen, they are willing to spend this much of money on security but they are not willing to listen". (#FMF Male Activist):

"You are painting the school campus with security, it is so hostile [...] So obviously they respond to that but they respond in "aaaagh way that doesn't scare me, i am capable to go this far and this is how bad I want it as well and you cannot suppress me, you can't suppress how I feel". If you put a security guard there that is going to kick me or arrest me, i can also fight for myself". (Female Student Leader 2):

"We engaged in peaceful negotiations with the management four months prior to the #FMF". (Student Leader 1):

The above responses indicate that the strategies of the authorities oscillate between negotiation and threats, the latter a form of violence (Alence, 1999; Cele, 2014; Maseko, 1994). Despite their ineffectiveness, the authorities tend to use outdated strategies in their bid to curb the protests. To the students these actions illustrate that the university management is no longer willing to discuss but to end the protest. Such stances often occur because of the damage to the university infrastructure, for instance a day before the shutdown some lecture halls were vandalised. Ascertaining who the culprits were and their reasons is often a challenge. However, vandalism often makes the university to take a hard stance towards the students but for the students it escalates the tensions. Subsequently, the use of scare tactics to dissuade students from protesting is counteractive because it strengthens the student's resolve to continue with the protest (Porta and Diani, 2006; Duncan, 2016). The level of dissent is seen in the student's response about the perceived unwillingness of the authorities to listen and their resolve to continue with the protests, despite the danger that they might pose on them. Apart from safeguarding the resources, the university's justification

was that the desires of the majority to continue with academic activities cannot be subverted by a few students who were responsible for the protests. Emphasis on numbers served to isolate student and bring disunity in the movement. The argument about the number of participants who took part in the protests is based on the fact that such indicates the intensity of a grievance determine its efficacy. Numbers illustrate the worth, commitment and unity towards the movement. The larger the space a movement occupies, the more pertinent its issue (Mccosker and Johns, 2013; Tilly, 2004). Therefore, the university authorities thought it justified to take action against the protesting students. Apart from threats, isolating the movement leaders and reliance on security personnel, the university obtained interdict that applied an apartheid law to bar the students from protesting (Naidoo, 2016). The students continued with the action because they deemed the act null and void, leading to the police officers becoming heavy handed. For example on trying to approach the police officers for some conversation, a student leader was shot several times at close range with rubber bullets though her hands were raised to show her non violent demeanour. Although, the government has recognised the necessity for police officers to use less repressive styles of engagement (Wilson-Strydom, 2011) their demeanour has yet to change.

## CONCLUSION

Protests are integral to daily life, the mode of operation being the primary distinctive factor. Hence, they are unavoidable and require that the university authorities be responsive and proactive in dealing with students issues. Moreover, also determine those that are likely to cause conflicts with students. With South Africa, still undergoing a process of transformation, power struggles can not be over ruled. However, one cannot discount the role of the university authorities in the escalation of conflict with students. The basis of the assertion is that the issues that students are presenting are long standing as they were expressed more than four decades ago, regrettably with those at the fore front currently seen as acting like gate keepers. For instance, the 1976 national student protests issues were for quality free education, curriculum relevance and responsiveness (Heffernan, 2015; Hirson, 1979). In essence, the students are frustrated because of the perceived inaction on the part of the authorities. The bottom line is that the adults in general, need to realise that activism has moved beyond politics to community activism an all embracing term. Emphasis on student accountability and adhering to the



rule of law is essential to building trust within the institution with consideration to the role that external influences have in instigating student protests. In effect “South Africa urgently needs to rework its identity and recreate social networks but in the climate of neo-liberalism and capitalism, the state has become disempowered in driving this agenda” (Nkomo and Dolby, 2004). Consequently, it is the responsibility of the South African population to recreate their society.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The study findings implies the following: designing and offering compulsory modules on social cohesion and justice to all students and staff members. The teachings need to provide students opportunities to come up with suggestions to research on the challenges that arise from the lack of transformation and how to build institutional cohesion.

Creating platforms for communication at the institutions to amplify different voices across the student populace, particularly in light of the weakened SRC. Essentially, it is imperative that university management reduce the bureaucratic processes that students see as impediments of getting timely feedback.

Reconsidering decoupling student politics from national affiliation and influence to reduce student political party conflicts that seem to have escalated to violence over the years.

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