

The Emerging South African Model of Student Activism: A lesson for the Rest of Africa and Beyond

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Abstract

Student activism has been prevalent in South Africa to bring about transformative changes at institutional and national levels. That said, the manifestations of student activism have escalated recently and taken on new forms and flavor. These manifestations have previously been typically within the framework of a formal student representation as it has existed in university governance structures. The literature is rich in describing this phenomenon. And yet, recent manifestations have rendered the existing models largely irrelevant as they have failed to encapsulate the emerging traits and practices of student activism. A new and robust conceptual model, called Unbounded Student Activism, developed by these two authors, has been conceived to capture contemporary forms of student activism in the South African context. The paper foregrounds this model to discuss the South African lessons that could be drawn by others in the rest of Africa and beyond in anticipation of steering the student voices and energies to advance African agenda in the global marketplace of competing and complementing agendas and discourses.

Keywords: Student activism, student movements, university governance, Unbounded Student Activism Model, emerging model, South Africa, Africa

Introduction

Student activism refers to the mechanisms that students use to express political discontent in their environments. While it affects universities, student activism can also have disruptive implications for political systems (Altbach 1984; Fleet & Guzmán-Concha 2017). Though students are admitted at universities to study, they are also apt to take part in activism to make a significant contribution to the development of their communities (Teferra & Ntuli 2021). Teferra and Ntuli (2021) further note that universities are microcosms of the wider communities from where students are derived. Thus, universities are affected by societal dynamics. Student activism is referred to as ‘conscience of the nation’ to advance the societal and nation-wide development (Altbach 1998; Hayhoe, Zha & Fengqiao 2012). Furthermore, it is likened to a ‘canary in a coal mine in that it may signal a social explosion to come or a potential political crisis’ (Altbach 1999: 57). The African students voiced their concerns to protect their interests and benefits, and waged protests against the supposed injustices in the socio-economic, political and other spheres (Cele 2014; Teferra & Altbach 2004; Teferra & Ntuli 2021).

In the South Africa context, student activism is to a larger degree, not constrained by the policies, guidelines and norms that seek to govern it. While formal activism remains in the form of student involvement in formal university decision making processes, informal activism comprises

collective mobilisation in the form of protest movements using social media to garner support (Klotz 2018; Ntuli & Teferra 2021). The emerging conceptual model has been developed to capture contemporary forms of activism conducted by students as existing models were incapable of holistically describing this complex phenomenon. The emerging model called 'Unbounded Student Activism' developed by the two authors, seeks to provide a robust and more precise description of the new modalities in respect of the manifestations of student activism in contemporary South Africa. The term 'Unbounded' denotes student activism being increasingly unconstrained by the existing policies, guidelines and norms governing student activism (Ntuli & Teferra 2021).

The article is presented in four sections. The first section provides a literature review on the manifestation of student activism in post-apartheid South Africa with an emphasis on social media. Section two provides a literature review on the manifestation of student activism in the African continent and beyond. The third section presents the emerging model of student activism in South Africa. Section four provides analysis of the manifestation of student activism in the rest of Africa and beyond and provides a discussion on lessons that can be learned from the emerging model. The fifth section provides a conclusion.

Student Activism in Post-Apartheid South Africa

In post-apartheid South Africa, the manifestation of student activism took diverse modalities such as student involvement in university governance and mass demonstrations (Cele 2008; Glaser 2015; Ntuli 2020). A large number of drivers of student protests at South African universities included issues of academic exclusion, financial exclusion and inadequate student accommodation conducive to living and learning. Other issues encompassed shortage of student financial assistance as well as racism in the higher education institutions (Koen, Cele and Libhaber 2006; Ntuli and Teferra 2017). It has been noted that while universities were eager to negotiate with students to deal with their concerns, students tended to conceive protest actions as an effective method to produce change intended to achieve their goals (Koen et al 2006; Teferra & Ntuli 2021).

Numerous researchers noted that students adopted different strategies to express their concerns. Those ranged from positive engagements to more antagonistic tactics (Barkley & Major 2020; Klemenčič, Luescher & Mugume 2016). Generally, students endeavoured to address their concerns using formal and productive participation in the university governance the failure of which triggered protest actions when formal means did not bring about the desired results (Cele 2008; Klemenčič et al. 2016).

Two forms of student activism were observed: formal and informal. While the formal form, what we refer to as 'bounded', is institutionalised, and constrained one in the form of student representative in university governance, the informal forms include the student mobilisation to

participate in protest actions in collective way to exercise their power to bring about transformation (Klemenčič et al. 2016; Ntuli 2020).

The discord between participation to carve an apt place for students in a status quo and protest movements to change the existed situation was apparent (Ntuli 2020). However, Luescher (2008) observed that the two forms of activism complemented each other as student activists involved in formal decision-making settings may subversively require activist support from their constituencies to protect and probably extend the gains made by previous generations, whether they are legally recognised. Klemenčič et al. (2016) noted that, where formal mechanisms were not present, students were apt to express concerns and show their grievances through mass demonstrations and other methods of activism. Similarly, Cele (2014) noted that formal and informal expressions were signs of the effectiveness of different forms of activism and the reaction of the dominant policy maker to the student concerns.

Student Activism: Protest Movements

During 2015 and 2016, fierce protests broke out at most South African universities as students pursued a struggle for free education and decolonisation of the curriculum. Students brought up issues such as fees, accommodation, and instructional languages as symbols of colonisation (Fomunyan & Teferra 2017; Langa 2017; Oxlund 2016). The combination of these issues produced a tense atmosphere of conflict and insurgence reminiscent of student demonstrations during the struggle against apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s (Oxlund 2016). Student activists engaged in new modalities of activism in the form of protest movements utilizing social networking to mobilise and stir up support (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017; Oxlund 2016).

The emergence of protest movements started in the historically white institutions (HWIs), namely the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). However, student protests were not new in post-apartheid South Africa as the historically black institutions (HBIs) had previously experienced typically violent protests. The colonial legacy was cited as a reason for violent tactics, where black students in HWIs demanded to be treated with respect and dignity (Langa 2017). Oxlund's analysis of these manifestations revealed three directions. First, the violent protests associated with an institutional life of HBIs were becoming a common trait in HWIs. Second, digital networks were used to galvanise support within institutions and beyond. Third and last, these new methods took student activism beyond student representative bodies to strike a chord with the student masses looking for change (Oxlund 2016).

Social Media

Social networks brought about substantial reforms to all spheres of social life, particularly social movements (Chapman 2016). The literature shows that social media contributed to political engagement, civic involvement, and governance processes in a twenty-first century. Digital

infrastructure like e-government, on-line politics and others, are adopted to stimulate the involvement of citizens in democratic processes including e-voting (Bannister and Connolly 2012). Similarly, the global environmental movement that addresses ‘green’ issues, the ‘Arab Spring’ in north Africa, ‘Indignados’ in Madrid, ‘Occupy Wall Street’ in the United States, and rebellions in Europe to oppose austerity measures and cuts in social assistance, are existing forms of civic action (Della Porta & Diani 2006; Romero 2013; Van de Donk et al. 2004).

These social movements presented unique types of activism to mobilise for participation in the cause. They all used innovative digital platforms, such as digital campaigns, chatrooms as well as a virtual mobilisation through Facebook (now Meta) and Twitter. These were digital tools which culminated in the re-discovery of social activism (Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen 2020). Furthermore, these tools were important to reach many members and supporters of these social movements as they could be in different parts of the globe as they engaged in a political action at the same time around the world (Gerbaudo 2012).

A host of gadgets and resources are used in all sorts of activism. Mobile equipment used by these social movements offer high speed for communication and mobilisation. That enabled quicker coordination and organisation, and hence the term “mobil(e)isation” (Hands 2011; Ilunga 2015). Digital technologies created opportunities as individuals became members of pressure groups, joined organisations, contributed funds, received, and responded to emails, made proposals to authorities, intervened in ‘online’ discussions, circulated electronic petitions, exchanged views, circulated announcements or activities, and called for mass demonstrations (Appel et al 2020). For instance, Castells concluded that the Zapatistas (in Mexico), which he described as ‘the first informational guerrilla movement’ effectively used new technologies to instantly disseminate information throughout the world and developed a network of support groups whose efforts crystallised in a movement of international public opinion (Castells 2015).

Similarly, new technologies enabled hashtag movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements in South Africa to galvanise support across the country and beyond (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017; Ntuli & Teferra 2017). New social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook/ Meta offer unforeseen possibilities for the exchange of information on ongoing activism or campaigns (Appel et al 2020; Phillimore & McCabe 2015; Ntuli & Teferra 2017).

The phenomenon of social media and political involvement was not without its critics. Social media was accused of causing the so called ‘slacktivism’ in that even if the internet could trigger activism, it could be pointless since it might not have any impact on political outcomes realistically (Casas & Williams 2019; Morozov 2011; Ntuli 2020). Chapman (2016) noted that the socio-economic disparities could result in digital divides as the have-nots may lack adequate access to digital technologies and devices. Despite these critiques, social media outlets and platforms were

extensively utilised in social movements and became significant intermediaries through which student issues could be brokered (Jungherr 2015; Sandoval-Almazan, Gil-Garcia 2014).

Proponents of social media indicated that these platforms assisted to galvanize participation of large number of people including those who were not previously active. In addition, modern studies were generally more positive about the use of digital technologies (Jungherr 2015; Ntuli & Teferra 2017). Furthermore, such studies showed that the positive impact for effective mobilisation can increase over time. Thus, it could be concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that digital activism replaced traditional political participation. Rather, it helped to mobilise citizens by raising awareness of contemporary issues (Ntuli & Teferra 2017; Phillimore & McCabe 2015).

Student Activism and Social Networks

Castells conceptualised social movements and their mobilisation tactics using social networks as internet-age networked movements. This offered a new perspective to grasp the hashtag movement in South Africa (Luescher and Klemenčič 2017). #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall were examples (Luescher, Loader & Mugume 2017). These movements originated at two English HWIs, namely UCT and Wits respectively.

The #RhodesMustFall campaign arose because of the perception that there were not enough debates on the colonial history of South Africa and its associated symbols. The campaign resulted in students across the country being actively involved in a struggle to dismantle colonial and apartheid symbols. The campaign resonated in other countries such as the United States and raised the matter: ‘if at UCT it was the Rhodes statue that had to fall, what “must fall” in their respective contexts’ (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017).

Booyesen (2016) noted that the #FeesMustFall movement was in the form of a national uprising with its epicentre at Wits and that the united front formed by students assisted in forging changes in fees and improving access to higher education. Castells (2015) observed that the student movements in South Africa were digitally driven and used digital technologies for galvanisation, co-ordination and communication. Luescher et al. (2017) noted that student movements utilised platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube and others. Those platforms enabled the #FeesMustFall movement to secure a no-fee increase for the 2016 academic year, representing the largest and most effective win by South African students since the beginning of democracy in 1994 (Cloete 2015).

Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey (2009: 4) asserted that internet-age social movements tend to be ‘interactive and horizontal’. The assertion was in accordance with the observation by Badat (2016) that during #FeesMustFall movement at some universities, protesting students interrogated the stance assumed by SRCs, which were formally elected bodies to represent students’ interests. In addition, they examined how well SRCs represented student interests. Furthermore, references were made to protest movements as ‘leaderless’ or represented by ad hoc

committees that were unofficially established (Badat 2016: 95). Those conceptions borne implications for student movements negotiating with the government or university authorities since they perceived SRCs as somewhat ineffective and were not regarded as their representatives of students (Luescher et al. 2017). Luescher & Klemenčič (2017) noted that such conception culminated in the advent of informal activism that functioned as parallel unofficial entities to the institutionalised student participation in university decision making processes.

A clear distinction between formally and informally constituted representative student associations was observed (Badat 1999). In addition, while both served as platforms to collectively organise and shape student activism, they possessed distinct features. Thus, while formal student organisations were conceived as ‘membership organizations’ on one hand, student movements (informal mobilization) were conceived as ‘broader entities, typically consisting of individual persons, organizations or several organizations with no formal membership’ (Badat 1999: 22).

Student Activism in the African continent and beyond

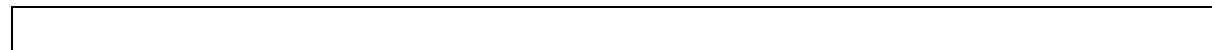
The prevalence of student activism throughout the African continent and the world brought about changes in the African nations and beyond (Warden, 2015). The African experience showed that the earliest rise of student activism paid a particular attention on national politics to achieve independence in colonised countries (Luescher and Mugume 2014). Post-independence, student movements engaged in a second liberation struggle for social justice and democratic systems. The Asian experience of student activism was marked by deliberate efforts by students, organised to topple authoritarian regimes in some countries and threatened governments in others (Weiss and Aspinall, 2012). Similarly, the Latin American students engaged in the 1918 Cordoba Reform protest movement that swept through the Latin America and intended to transform the university governance (Abba & Streck 2021; Altbach 1989). Subsequently, student inclusion in university governance in Africa and beyond was institutionalised in public universities. Nevertheless, student activism continued to prevail as activists organised students to defend and extend their gains (Levy 1986, Luescher and Mugume 2014).

The contemporary student activism in the African continent has been primarily marked by student involvement to address the African agenda, particularly to achieve equitable growth for sustainable development along the lines articulated in United Nations (UN), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), African Agenda 2063 and its extract CESA (African Union Commission, 2015). African students engaged in both discussions and protest actions to demand for expanded access to higher education, fee remission and better facilities. Students also participated in protest movements such as #ClimateAction worldwide to demand political leaders and governments to deliver to their commitments on climate issues and other matters (Warden 2015).

Students and the youth in general were conceived as the current generation that will pass the torch to next generation. Hence, they are required to utilise their creative ideas, technologies, and interconnectedness to bring innovative ideas to the fore to achieve the SDGs (UN 2015). African students participated in the African Student and Youth Summit 2018 (ASYS) that attracted thousands of students and youth to Rwanda, Kigali to contribute towards the SDGs and African union agenda 2063 (African Union Commission 2015). The theme of the summit was “Pan-Africanism: A paradigm towards achieving SDGs agenda 2030 and AU agenda, the role of youth counts”. According to the report by the Ministry of Education (2018), the Rwanda Minister of Education applauded that the summit demonstrated that students and youth in general can possess wonderful talents and ability to form a strong dialogues and networks in respect of the effort to achieve the SDGs and African union agenda 2063 (Ministry of Education 2018).

The Emerging Model of Student Activism

The contemporary student activism in South Africa was marked by new forms of protest movements, as student movements used social media to garner student support (Langa 2017; Oxlund 2016). These new forms were aligned to what Castells conceptualised as internet-age movements. Innovative methods of participating in student activism culminated in the advent of new groups, issues and events that could not be readily understood within the framework of existing theories and models. Hence, that called reassessment existing theories and models.



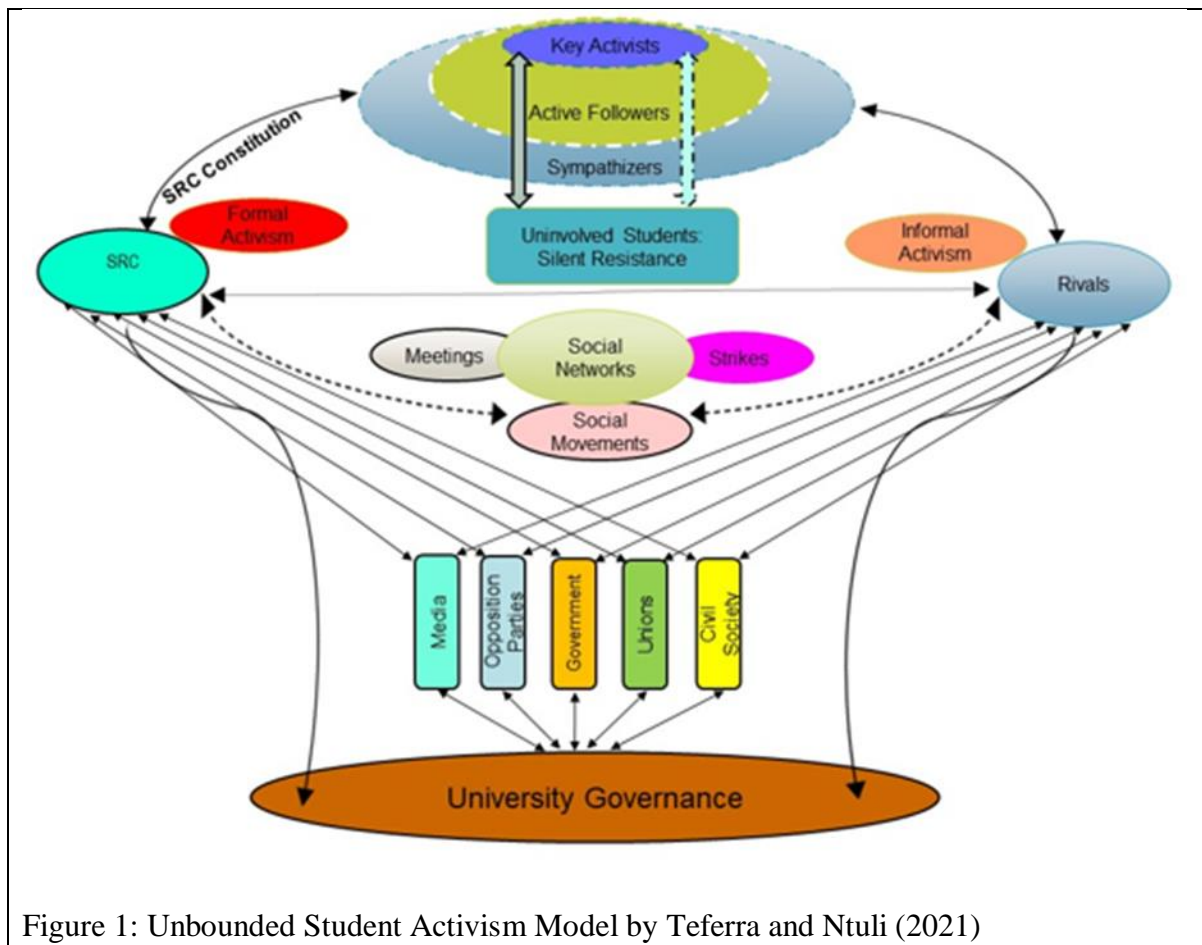


Figure 1: Unbounded Student Activism Model by Teferra and Ntuli (2021)

The emerging conceptual model is known as the ‘Unbounded Student Activism Model’ (Teferra & Ntuli 2021). It made endeavours of providing a holistic picture of all the vibrant forms and manifestations of student activism in contemporary South Africa into its conceptualisation, including both formal and informal as depicted in Fig 1.

The model depicts the existence of a variety of stakeholders, both internal and external, with vested interests in the university governance. Within the framework of university governance arrangements, students stand as one of the stakeholders in university decision-making processes. University governance is conceptualised as a constellation of both cooperative and competitive interests with both internal and external stakeholders considered to be important in collective decision making.

In the formal camp of activism, elected student representatives articulate and represent interests of students as a constituency group in the university decision making processes as per the applicable SRC constitution. Their activities are institutionalised and regulated in terms of the Higher Education Act 1997. However, members of the SRCs may also opt to form alliances and lobby with other like-minded stakeholders – in an (informal) arrangement – should they find that their

ability to secure certain concessions through formal university decision-making processes does not achieve the desired results.

Another set of students, dubbed as ‘rivals’, with alternative, and possibly contrary agendas and philosophies to those pursued by the formal camp, runs in parallel to the formal camp is presented on the extreme right of the model. This rival group may pursue alternative, if not contradictory, agendas through informal engagements that counter prevailing narratives in the formal camp. However, the intention is broader – to gain visibility and popularity to 1) position itself for formal SRC leadership positions; or 2) to establish itself as an alternative – a parallel – ‘extra-parliamentary’ force in an informal structure that seeks to influence decisions. These groupings may mobilise other stakeholders in university governance structures to advance their cause. We dubbed this form of competing activism that projects alternative, if not opposing, narratives, within an informal setting as ‘rival activism’. It is important to note that a rival camp may be composed of or even led by students from the formal camp who lost a power struggle or whose term of office came to an end. Similarly, the formal camp may trace its history to the rival camp.

At the centre of the model lies the social movements that involve individual students, different student organisations, rival activists, SRCs and other stakeholders that drive and draw students in and out of the formal (SRC) and informal (rival camp) settings. Both settings are susceptible to the dynamics of social and political upheavals that may shake both camps indicating the fluidity – and unboundedness – of student activism. The two-way traffic is depicted using broken arrows to indicate the movement of ideas, narratives and positions to and from both camps in and out of the crucible of a multitude of popular and marginal discourses driving social movements. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, catalysed by social media, are cases in point. It should be noted that once movements have pursued their causes to the point where their goal is attained, they may return to their original roles or states.

The model lays out three rings of activism to demonstrate the degree of activists’ participation and engagements: namely ‘key activists’, ‘active followers’ and ‘sympathisers’. The formal setting, as in SRCs, operate within the soft boundaries of these categories in a more ‘fluid’ and interactive manner with direct and indirect interaction with the communities outside of the shell that encompasses uninvolved and ‘silent’ students. In recognition of the formal and informal steering of activism, we opted for ‘key activists’ than ‘core leadership’ as the latter appears to imply formality. The model caters to the dynamics of movement to and from each category (ring) towards another in recognition of the ‘waning and waxing’ of latency (dormancy) and/ or action (passion) of roles and engagements. For instance, if ‘uninvolved students’ began to participate actively, this could turn them into sympathisers and then active members and eventually into key activists. The inverse is also possible as active members may become less active over time and go dormant.

It is worth noting the potential of apparently ‘uninvolved students’ to engage in silent resistance or to participate anonymously through the now ubiquitous social media channels. Apparently

‘uninvolved students’ may not be unconcerned or disengaged after all, they may simply be operating under the radar.

Lessons learnt by the rest of Africa and Beyond

Having foregrounded the South African model, this section discusses some lessons that could be drawn from the model by the rest of the African continent and beyond in anticipation of steering the student voices and energies to advance African agenda in the global marketplace of competing and complementing agendas and discourses.

Though, the UN adopted 17 SDGs that set the world’s development agenda until 2030, these goals are not legally binding to the nations. Each government decides how to implement the goals based on their own national contexts. Furthermore, review of a country’s progress toward the goals is strictly voluntary. Hence, the implementation of the SDGs can to a great extent be dependent on the willingness of political leaders and governments to deliver to their commitments. Similarly, the African union has set the 2063 agenda that is people driven highlighting the “Africa that we want”. The African Union is set to achieve this through the Pan African Vision of an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa.

The implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063 could be, to a considerable extent, dependent on student activism to hold their political leaders and governments to account and remind them of their commitments. The Unbounded Student Activism Model by Teferra and Ntuli (2021) provides a holistic picture of emerging and vibrant modalities and manifestations of student activism which could serve as a reference point by the African students to facilitate and fast track the achievements of the sustainable goals and the African agenda. Specific lessons that could be possibly drawn in the model include student formal involvement as a significant stakeholder in decision making processes that seek to achieve the agenda 2063 and SDGs. Students and youth in general are increasingly acknowledged as the future of their nations. Thus, it is paramount to draw them centrally in the pursuing the development agendas of the continent.

While students may hold different ideologies, backgrounds, values and beliefs and leadership ranks (in their campuses), the model, buttressed by digital technologies, is instructive in leveraging their rich diversity and capabilities to put pressure on their political leaders and governments to deliver on their promises. The #FeesMustFall and Rhodes are just two good examples. Thus, the model hints how African students should embrace their diversities and mobilize themselves to harness student forces in the national, regional and global development endeavours.

#FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall exhibited the ability of student movements to morph up, pursue and accomplish their goals swiftly as the Chairperson of Vice-Chancellors Association and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand – Prof Adam Habib during the hashtag movement in South Africa stated that what they have been pursuing for over 10 years was achieved

by students in just two weeks. This could hint in pacing up the achievement of the African Agenda and SDGs before the set times.

It is imperative to highlight in the model that once goals pursued by student movements have been achieved, students tended to return to their original role and run-of-the-mill engagements. While hashtag movements could be conceived as instruments to achieve the SDGs and Agenda 2063, a further lesson could be drawn by the institutional leaders and governments to understand these manifestations in shaping and guiding student activism to advance the African agenda.

Conclusion

The South African higher education institutions have been for a while racked by the prevalence of multiple forms of student activism and protest action. A new model, known as Unbounded Student Activism Model (Teferra and Ntuli 2021) attempted to encapsulate diverse forms of these student movements in South Africa as extant model and theories fell short of capturing the essence of these developments—substantially and appropriately. We hold that, this conceptual model of student activism systematically and adequately describes the phenomenon of contemporary student activism in South Africa.

The model presented three forms of student activism in the context of higher education: namely formal activism within the scope of formal student governments (SRCs), rival activism (informal) and student movements (informal and use of social media). The model demonstrates virtually all avenues and channels that catalyse student movements—formal and informal—increasingly riding on social media.

This article argues that lessons in student movement from South Africa could be drawn for the rest of Africa and beyond. The recently formulated conceptual framework of student activism, demonstrates that the emerging phenomena, mechanisms, processes, and tools governing student activism are increasingly inadequate to describe using bounded roles and engagements of student involvement in the governance of universities in South Africa.

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements, employed digital technologies to communicate with and mobilise a wider constituency of stakeholders around issues of fees and symbols of colonialism, respectively. In the process, they exposed the shortcomings of established models describing student activism.

We posit that a sound understanding of this emerging phenomenon—as captured in the model—would help push achieve the trailing development goals—SDGs and Agenda 2063—through the power, pressure and influence of student voices and actions on political leaders and governments. Furthermore, the model could help leaders of universities and governments to better understand

student activism and its manifestations so as to provide requisite guidance to channel the forces of student movement in meeting African Agenda and SDGs.

In conclusion, the South African Model of student activism, as captured by a model called, Unbounded Student Activism Model, could provide some lessons for the rest of Africa and beyond.

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