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Reconfiguring Student Governance in Institutions of Higher Learning a Case of a Tertiary Institution in the Eastern Cape

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Abstract. Institutions of higher learning rely on the Students' Representative Council (SRC) to serve as the primary voice of students and to advocate for their interests in university governance. However, this study revealed that despite their vital role, many SRC structures face challenges related to representation, communication, and capacity for effective governance. The paper aimed to assess the functionality and effectiveness of the SRC in addressing student needs and promoting inclusive decision-making. Using a mixed methods approach with a convergent design, data were collected from one public tertiary institution in the Eastern Cape province. Simple random sampling was used to select 120 participants, comprising 110 students who completed open-ended questionnaires and 10 current and former SRC members who participated in semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed that while most students believe the SRC advocates adequately for their rights, significant gaps remain in communication consistency, financial assistance outreach, and participation in policy development. The study recommended strengthening SRC advocacy and governance training, expanding financial support awareness, and developing integrated

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digital communication systems. Furthermore, it proposed a reconfiguration framework that clarifies roles, enhances accountability, and ensures inclusivity across all portfolios. Addressing the root causes of student protests, mainly financial exclusion and accommodation shortages, through proactive engagement and transparent dialogue, was also emphasised. The paper concluded that a transformative and participatory SRC model is necessary to build a student-centred governance system that is transparent, accountable and responsive to the evolving needs of students in higher education.

Keywords: Students' Representative Council; Institutions of Higher learning; Student governance; Reconfiguration

1. Introduction

The role of a Students' Representative Council (SRC) in an institution of higher learning such as a university or college, encompasses a variety of responsibilities aimed at representing and advocating for the student body. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) state that this student body is often recognised by the university council and management as the official representation body for all students within the institution. The SRC serves as the leadership of all students within a particular institution of higher learning. Nafissa (2022, p. 17) defines leadership as *"the process of influencing the activities of an organised group toward goal achievement."* The SRC, a body comprising elected student leaders, holds a unique position in this regard (Kgarose et al., 2023).

The leadership of the SRC in institutions of higher learning is often faced with numerous challenges which often lead to strikes. It is in this regard that this paper proposes the need to reconfigure student governance in institutions of higher learning. According to Klein and Watson-Manheim (2021), the notion of reconfiguring refers to the process of rearranging something into an altered form, figure, shape, or layout, to configure something again or in a new way. This process does not suggest that something must be abolished but rather it suggests that it must be rearranged or reshaped. Chamakiotis et al. (2021) observed that at certain times, to improve the efficiency of leadership, reconfiguration is necessary.

Higher Education Institutions play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic and personal development (Schaeper, 2020). In this dynamic environment, it is essential to have mechanisms in place that not only foster academic success but also ensure the overall well-being of students. According to Kgarose et.al. (2023), the SRC gives students a strong voice in addressing the various demands and issues that affect the student population, enabling them to actively shape their educational experience. In order to guarantee that students' opinions are heard and considered throughout decision-making processes, this student body offers a forum for transparent communication with the university management (Jones & Bubb, 2021). This democratic representation fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment among students, which is vital for their overall well-being.

The SRC usually takes a proactive stance when addressing pressing problems that affect students' well-being (Rose et al., 2024). Such campaigns might focus on promoting diversity and inclusion programmes, advocating for improved mental health services, or spearheading awareness efforts about various issues that affect students. According to Skalicky et al. (2020), by acting in this proactive manner, the SRC not only fixes current issues but also helps to foster an educational atmosphere that values students' overall growth. Planning extracurricular activities and events that improve students' social and emotional well-being is another important task for the SRC (Mbada, 2022).

These extracurricular programmes allow students the chance to explore their interests, form connections, and grow as leaders. The SRC cultivates a lively campus community that raises the standard of student life by planning sporting activities, cultural festivals, and volunteer opportunities (Odhav, 2020). In addition to advocating for student problems and organising events, the SRC often provides students with essential support (Kgarose et.al., 2023). This means setting up mentorship programmes, offering guidance and assistance to students experiencing academic difficulties, and supplying resources for personal development (Johnson, 2015). The wellbeing of students depends on the sense of security and assistance that these programmes offer (Baik et al., 2019).

2. Problem Statement

The SRC plays a pivotal role in advocating for student needs in the higher education space (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). However, there are problems with the SRC not being thoroughly equipped to govern and represent all students, hence the need for reconfiguration which this study sought to investigate. The problem of the SRC not being equipped has often led to unauthorised riots and strikes within the South African higher education sector, leading to many students being brutalised and arrested because of this problem.

3. Aim

The main aim of this paper was to assess the effectiveness of the SRC in representing the needs of the students.

3.1 Objectives of the study

- To identify the main cause of student dissatisfaction with student governance led by the Students' Representative Council
- To find alternative measures regarding how student governance in higher institutions of learning can be improved.

4. Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical framework connects the researcher to existing knowledge, guided by a relevant theory or theories for the study. It is in considering this aspect that this paper sought to adopt two theories to underpin and form the basis for this paper. The two theories that are embedded in this study are the contingency theory and the transactional theory. These theories are discussed in-depth below.

4.1 Contingency theory

The contingency theory was developed by Greenleaf (1977); it is based on the belief that there is no single right way to lead because the internal and external dimensions of the environment require the leader to adapt to that situation. Belayhun (2021) opined that the theory of contingency recommends that no leadership style is precise as a stand-alone as the leadership style used is reliant upon factors such as the quality, the situation of the followers or several other variables. To put it simply, the contingency theory is a subset of Behavioural theory that questions the idea that there is no single best method to lead or organise, and that a leadership approach that works well in one set of circumstances might not work as well in another (Nawaz & Khan, 2016).

Contingency theory proponents contend that these eventualities may be combined to produce circumstances that are either advantageous or disadvantageous for the leader (Gagai, 2022); for example, circumstances in which the leader can exert control over the subjects. High levels of task structure, leader-member interactions, and positional authority, and vice versa, create the best circumstances for influencing group members. Importantly, it has been confirmed that a task-oriented style is the most successful approach to use when the leader has either very little or substantial influence (Arredondo, 2018).

The situational theory, often known as contingency leadership theory, centres on the circumstances of the leader (Dinibutun, 2020). These ideas, according to Oreg and Berson (2019), examine the contextual implications of a leader's success or failure. According to Abid et al. (2021), a leader's environment and circumstances have a greater role in determining their success than their personality. Based on this view, good leaders can modify their style of leadership based on the circumstances. It also implies that it would be advisable to identify the ideal form of leader for a particular circumstance (Ciulla & Ciulla, 2020).

While situational theorists believe that the subordinates are crucial in defining the connection, contingency theorists believe that the leader is the centre of the leader-subordinate interaction (Fousiani & Wisse, 2022). Situational leadership emphasises the leader above all else, but it also highlights the importance of group dynamics (Seidel et al., 2019). According to Cole (2024), some of our current theories of group dynamics and leadership have their roots in the above-mentioned studies of the relationships between groups and their leaders. According to the principle of situational leadership, a leader's style should be determined by how mature their subordinates are.

Generally, there are different leadership styles or leadership philosophies which different leaders use to lead their various organisations or institutions; to mention a few, there is a charismatic leadership style, a laissez-faire leadership style or an autocratic leadership style. The basis of the contingency theory is that no particular leadership style fits or suits all environments, institutions or organisations. The contingency theory is suitable for this paper because it clarifies that leaders, such as the student leaders in the case of this study, should employ

different leadership methods when they govern or lead students in their various institutions of higher learning.

This theory suggests that methods that are used in some institutions are not necessarily likely to work in another institution, thus SRC leaders should use different approaches to lead their constituencies. The notion of no 'one size, fits all' on the contingency theory emphasises the fact that different leadership styles may be required to be used by SRC leaders. It is therefore important that this paper enquires whether SRC members use different leadership styles to govern their institutions.

4.2 Transactional theory

As already indicated, this paper also made use of transactional theory as a secondary or a supporting theory. The transactional theory was introduced by Shamir et al., (1993); these scholars described transactional leadership theory as one in which leader-follower associations are grounded upon a series of agreements between followers and leaders. The transactional theory is based on reciprocity where leaders not only influence followers but are receptive to followers' influence as well. Some studies revealed that transactional leadership shows a discrepancy regarding the level of leader's action and the nature of the relations with the followers.

Adogoh (2022, p. 21) observed transactional leadership "*as a type of contingent-reward leadership that had active and positive exchange between leaders and followers whereby followers were rewarded or recognized for accomplishing agreed upon objectives.*" From the leader, these rewards might implicate gratitude for merit increases, bonuses and work achievement. For good work, positive support could be exchanged, merit pay granted for promotions, increased performance and cooperation for collegiality (Bala & Gawuna, 2021). The leaders could, instead, focus on errors, avoid responses and delay decisions.

This attitude is stated as "*management-by-exception*" and could be categorised as passive or active transactions. According to Shamir et al., (1993), management-by-exception refers to a leadership approach in which leaders primarily monitor performance and intervene only when deviations, errors, or problems occur, rather than engaging continuously with followers. The difference between these two types of transactions is predicated on the timing of the leader's involvement. In the active form, the leader continuously monitors performance and attempts to intervene proactively (Lundmark et al., 2020). The transactional theory suggests that a leader must always be informed of what is happening in the organisation to proactively act and attend to emergent issues within the organisation. This form of leadership approach keeps the leaders actively involved and informed on issues that are happening in the organisation.

The notion of management by exception stresses the importance of leaders being in constant communication with their constituents. It raises the need for leaders to be informed and open to ideas shared by their subordinates as well as their constituents, and this enables them to proactively act whenever there is a crisis within their institution (Royal Society of Canada, 2021). This theory is related to

this study as it suggests a method or technique which leaders may use to govern their constituencies. It denotes that leaders must always be aware of what is happening within their organisations; in the case of this study, it means that SRC members should be aware of their surrounding environment and proactively attend to student grievances.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Representation and advocacy

The SRC serves as a formal channel through which students can express their concerns, needs and opinions to the university administration (Edward, Ni & Modupi, 2023). Mthethwa (2022) states that the SRC advocates on behalf of students on various issues such as academic policies, campus facilities, and student rights. This body stands as the main point of reference concerning student discrepancies. Iwara et al. (2019) add that the SRC acts as a link between the university management and students, as the SRC is the only official body which interacts and liaises with both the management of the institution and the students. It is in this regard that the paper sought to enquire whether the SRC effectively executes its role of representation and advocacy for the whole student populace.

In order to improve students' well-being and guarantee their financial stability in the event of unanticipated difficulty, the SRC advocates for emergency funding (Royal Society of Canada, 2021). Elder et al. (2020) argued that for students who have unanticipated financial difficulties due to family situations, unexpected medical expenses, or abrupt job loss, these funds act as a safety net. The SRC actively helps students in their pursuit of education and fosters a campus atmosphere where students feel cared for and supported by advocating for the formation and accessibility of emergency funding (Morrell, 2022). Apparently the SRC provides a conducive environment for its constituents (students), hence this study sought to investigate the level of satisfaction of the students from the representation and advocacy that they receive from their SRCs.

Relief from financial hardship is one important benefit of the SRC's support for emergency funding (Remy & Brathwaite, 2020). Defeyter et al. (2021) claim that unexpected financial difficulties might negatively impact students' academic performance and mental well-being. The guarantee that emergency funds are available helps students get through difficult times by relieving their concern about meeting their financial responsibilities and freeing them up to concentrate on their academics (Beam, 2020). This reduction in financial strain has a direct positive impact on students' general wellbeing by ensuring that their education stays a top priority even in the face of unforeseen financial difficulties (Plakhotnik et al., 2021). It is for this reason that the study sought to investigate the success of the financial relief programmes that are often organised by the SRC for financially struggling students.

The SRC's advocacy efforts for emergency funding help create a more inclusive and fair campus environment (Gredley & McMillan, 2024). Students from underprivileged families are more likely to experience financial problems, which exacerbates already-existing disparities (Davis et al., 2024). By ensuring that

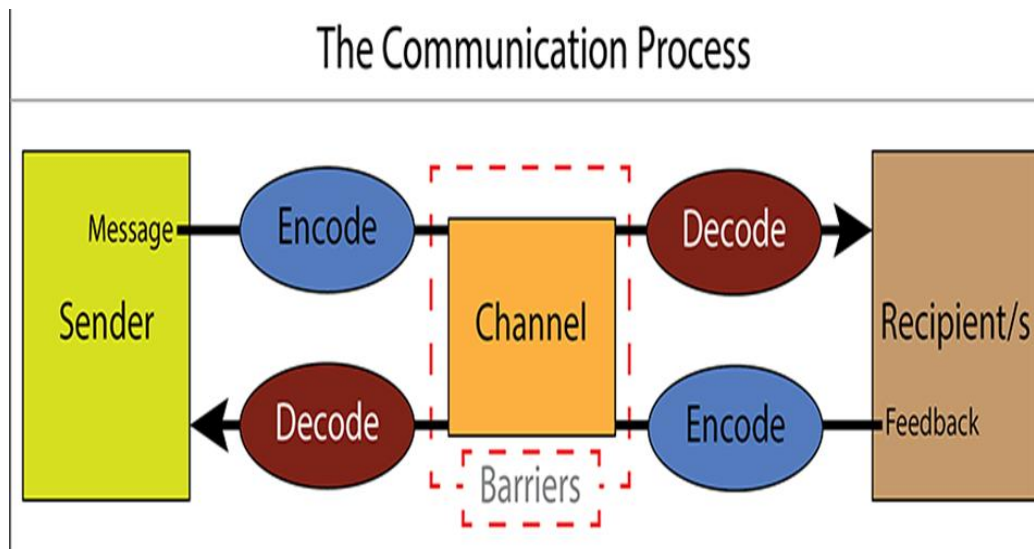
emergency funds are accessible to all students, the SRC promotes a sense of fairness and social support. This inclusivity sends a powerful message that the institution values the well-being of all its students and is committed to helping them overcome financial challenges that may otherwise hinder their academic progress (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021). These efforts made by the SRC prompted the paper to investigate the source of funds which the SRC uses to assist with the funding assistance.

5.2 Communication and Information sharing

The SRC communicates important information from the university management to the student body, ensuring that students are informed about policies, events and changes within the institution (Funjika, 2022). Tang and Bradshaw (2020) add that it collects feedback from students and communicates this back to the university management, fostering a two-way communication channel. The SRC is the official body of students which communicates directly with both internal and external stakeholders of the university (Bidandi et al., 2022).

The SRC is expected to intervene and act on behalf of the students. Mayes et al. (2019) claims that in representing and providing information to students, the SRC should be able to identify the needs and challenges of the students. Santos et al. (2020) state that for the SRC to provide quality information to students, it should be able to assess the quality of information and whether it addresses students' information needs. Moreover, Majid et al. (2020) opined that the SRC must obtain information from various sources so that they govern effectively. This implies that the information that comes from the SRC must be accurate; it is in this regard that this paper sought to investigate the accuracy of the information that comes from the SRC.

Mustafa and Al-Abdallah (2020) claim that for information to be clearly received by the respondents it must be sent through appropriate channels. Technological devices are seen as the best channel of communication often used these days (De Lima et al., 2021). The SRC often uses student emails and WhatsApp groups officially designated for students, Facebook pages and university notice boards to disseminate official information to their constituents (Mthethwa, 2022). Word of mouth and mass meetings often called by the SRC also serve as communication channels which the student body uses for sharing information. Waisbord (2019), however, claims that even though these communication channels may be used, communication breakdown may still occur. The communication process is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Communication process diagram
(Ekström, 2023)**

Figure 1 shows how the communication process occurs. The Figure demonstrates the transfer of encoded information through any chosen communication channel from the sender. However, the message may sometimes be hampered by communication barriers (Eke, 2020); the receiver of the message has to decode the message in order to receive and understand it, and encoded feedback in the form of a response or action is then made by the recipient to show that the message has been received.

Although a correct channel of communication may be used by the SRC to share information with the students, there may still be some barriers which may cause miscommunication. According to Akyildiz et al. (2019), communication barriers may still occur and disturb the flow of information. In this regard, Phillips et al. (2023) state that misinterpretation of a message caused by incorrect decoding of a message can be seen as a communication barrier. Altun and Anwar (2021), however, claim that the language used when communicating can also be a communication barrier, as some recipients may not understand it. It is important to use a language that is understood by all people when communicating (Sari & Aminatun, 2021).

5.3 Event and Programme Organisation

Kgarose et.al. (2023) mentioned that the SRC organises and supports social, cultural and recreational activities that enhance the student experience and foster a sense of community. Diverse students get to interact with one another in the social gatherings often organised by the SRC. First time entering students (Ftens) gain exposure to the university experience of their time through the opening and welcoming social programmes that are organised by the SRC (McMillon, 2022). Schunk (2023) mentioned that the SRC is not only limited to organising social events, but it may also organise academic support programmes.

Altermatt (2019) states that academic support programmes may include workshops, seminars, and other academic support related activities to help

students succeed academically. To enhance student support and ensure stability in student governance, the SRC often establishes structures such as faculty representatives as well as student parliamentary representatives. Gagro (2020) states that the support structures are tasked with the duty of assisting the SRC and holding it accountable for its decisions. These various structures often work hand-in-hand to ensure stability and unity among the students in liaison with the SRC; however, their composition varies from institution to institution (Cornelius-Bell, 2021).

5.4 Support and Welfare Services

The SRC provides support for student welfare issues, such as mental health, housing, and financial assistance. Khan (2019) states that it often provides temporary houses for students who are not allocated to residences, until their grievances are resolved. The student body also ensures that students are allocated decent facilities and residences, in accordance with the university guidelines and those of the higher education and training department (Simeh & Shakantu, 2020). It may also help mediate disputes between students and the university management or staff members.

5.5 Policy Development and Review

SRC members often sit on various university committees, contributing to the development and review of policies that affect students (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). The SRC can propose new policies or changes to existing ones to better meet the needs of students. Shahnaz et al. (2022) add that the student body serves as the voice of the students' official University meetings which decide on the policies and procedures of the university; an example of this is the development of the university prospectus as a policy. It is evident that the SRC is an influential body of student governance.

Enacted policies and procedures aim to guide the University's relationship with its stakeholders and the community. Policies are written declarations that, by clearly outlining the behaviours for which the university community will be held accountable, transform the institution's mission, values and commitments into day-to-day operations. Policies at universities are part of a larger legal framework (Connell, 2019). In this regard the SRC plays a pivotal role in engaging with the university management and making inputs in policy decisions on behalf of the students (Funjika, 2022); for example, SRC members represent students in faculty board meetings which normally decide the fate of students.

5.6 Challenges faced by the SRC

Promoting inclusivity within the higher education sector is often the most difficult thing to do and this challenge is often faced by the SRC as they serve a diverse population of students. The SRC works to ensure that all student voices are heard and that the needs of diverse student groups are met (Mayes et al., 2019); However, this is not an easy task as the needs of the students are different and the SRC is tasked with the duty to serve all students (Mthethwa & Chikoko, 2020). Providing support for the marginalised groups of students is also one of the most difficult tasks of the SRC. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) state that the SRC may

advocate for the interests of marginalised and under-represented student groups, promoting equity and inclusion within the university community.

The inequality that exists in the higher education space normally leads to protests over the distribution of resources as well as access to resources. The marginalised group often suffers because of this, and the SRC is expected to intervene and close the gap between the privileged students and the marginalised students (Khan, 2019). The disagreements over resource allocation between the University Management and the SRC may lead to protests such as the "*Fees-must-Fall*" protest in 2016 (Mashayamombe & Nomvete, 2021).

Strikes in institutions of higher learning often disturb the academic calendar and affect all stakeholders, whether they are privileged or not. Creating a balance in these issues is often difficult for the SRC as they often must sacrifice a certain group of students and serve the majority (Luescher et al., 2020). Findler et al. (2019) claim that it is important to note that some of these issues are not caused by the institutions of higher learning but rather are influenced by the external environment.

6. Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods approach with a convergent design to examine students' satisfaction with representation and advocacy provided by SRCs. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and integrated at the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Taherdoost, 2022).

The study population comprised approximately 12,000 registered students. The sample size was estimated using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where n = sample size, N = population size and e = margin of error (0.05 for 95% confidence level)

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{12000}{1 + 12000(0.05^2)} \\ n &= \frac{12000}{1 + 12000(0.0025)} \\ n &= \frac{12000}{1 + 30} \\ n &= \frac{12000}{31} \\ n &= 387 \end{aligned}$$

Although the formula yielded a recommended sample of 387 respondents, a final sample of 120 participants (1% of the population) was selected due to practical constraints related to voluntary participation, time, access, and resources.

For the quantitative component, simple random sampling was used to select 110 students who completed open-ended questionnaires (Rahman, 2023). For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to select 10 current and former SRC members for semi-structured interviews, based on their direct experience with student representation and advocacy.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo. Findings from both strands were integrated during interpretation to enhance analytical depth and credibility.

Ethical principles were strictly observed. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

7. Results and Findings

This part of the article presents the quantitative and qualitative data that is sequentially analysed and discussed using the instruments. Figure 2 below shows quantitative data on SRC advocacy.

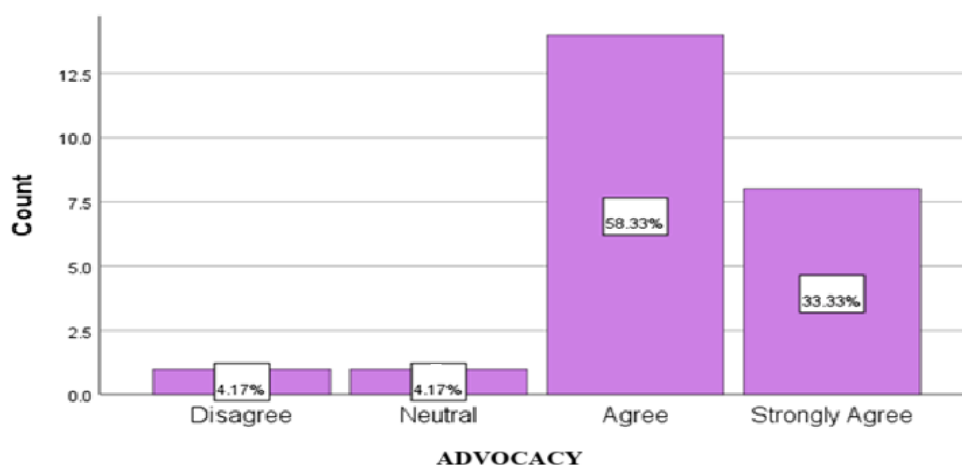


Figure 2: SRC Advocacy (Author's Own)

The students were asked whether they were satisfied with the level of advocacy that they receive from the SRC, and the results indicated that the majority of students believe the SRC adequately advocates for their rights. A combined 91.66% of respondents (58.33% agree and 33.33% strongly agree) expressed positive views, suggesting strong confidence in the SRC's role as a representative body. Only 4.17% disagreed and 4.17% remained neutral, reflecting minimal dissatisfaction. Overall, the data demonstrate that the SRC is widely perceived as effective in promoting and protecting student interests, although continued engagement and communication could further strengthen this positive perception. The following graph labelled figure 3 depicts quantitative data on SRC programs.

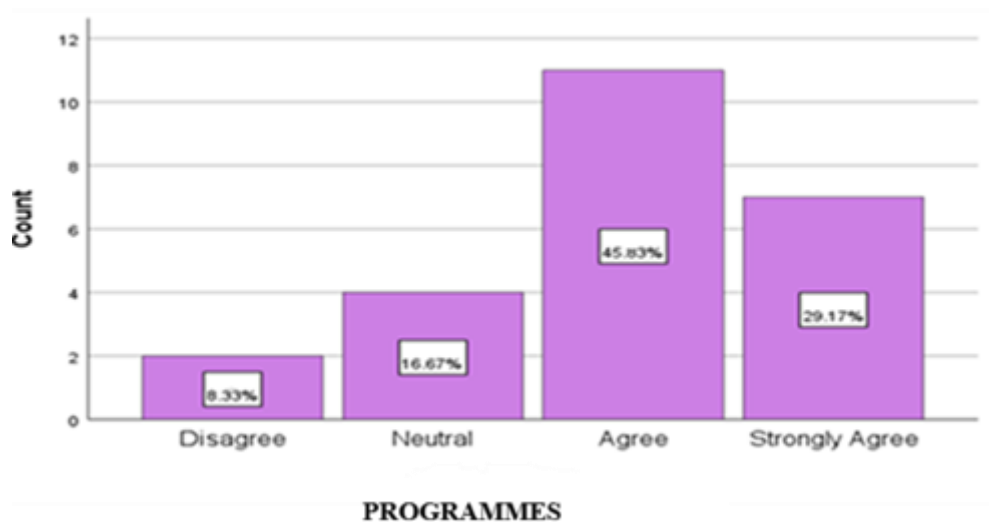


Figure 3: SRC Programmes (Author's Own)

The study also enquired whether the SRC financial support programmes were helpful, and the results indicated that the majority of respondents view the SRC's financial support programmes, such as special cases, as helpful to students. A combined 75% of participants (45.83% agree and 29.17% strongly agree) expressed positive views, suggesting that most students recognise the value and impact of these initiatives. Meanwhile, 16.67% of respondents remained neutral, possibly indicating limited awareness or indirect benefit from the programmes, while only 8.33% disagreed. Overall, the findings reflect a generally favourable perception of the SRC's financial assistance efforts, highlighting their role in easing students' financial challenges, although there remains room for improved accessibility and communication to reach all students effectively. The following graph, labelled Figure 4, depicts quantitative data on SRC Communication.

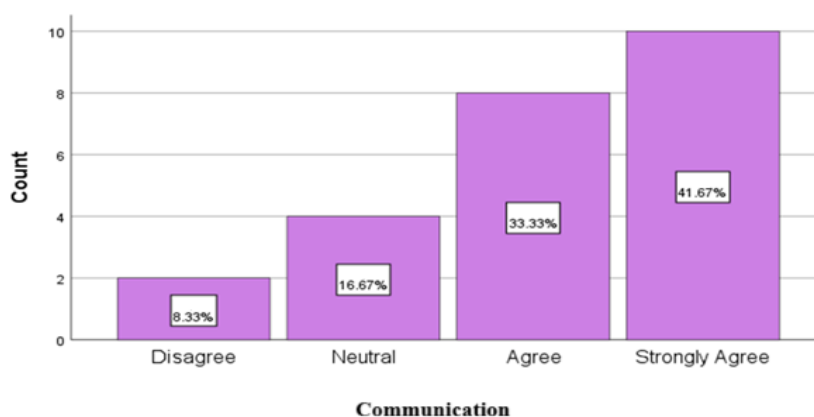


Figure 4: SRC Communication (Author's Own)

Based on the results, the high level of agreement (75%) indicates that the SRC's communication platform is largely effective in disseminating accurate

information and engaging with students, which has positive implications for transparency, trust, and student participation in institutional governance. However, the presence of neutral (16.67%) and dissatisfied (8.33%) respondents suggests a need for the SRC to diversify communication channels, improve consistency, and tailor messaging to reach less-engaged student groups. These findings imply that strengthening communication strategies could enhance overall student satisfaction, increase responsiveness to student concerns, and improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of SRC representation and advocacy.

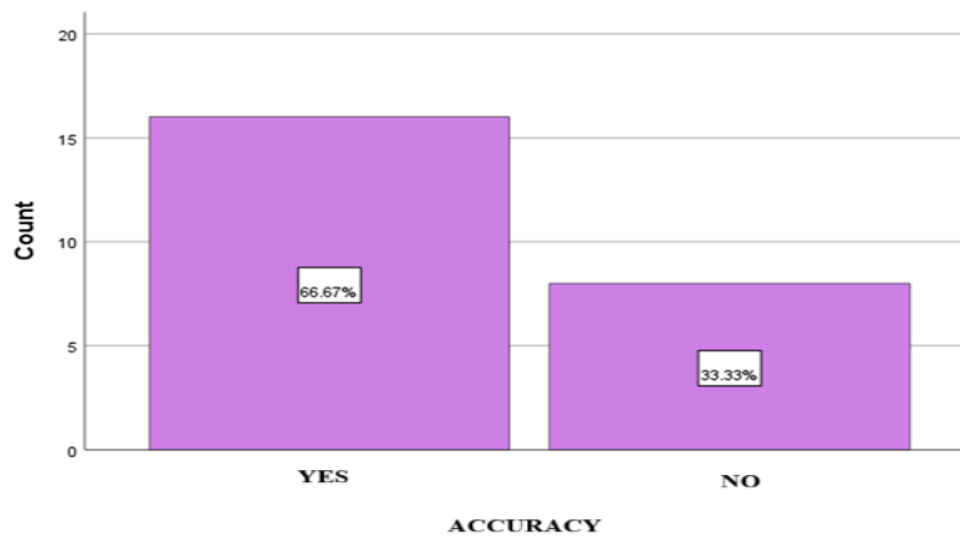


Figure 5: SRC Information Accuracy (Author's Own)

The findings revealed that a majority of respondents (66.67%) indicated trust in the accuracy of information provided by the SRC, while 33.33% expressed doubt. This suggests that most students view the SRC as a credible and reliable source of information. However, the notable proportion of respondents who lack full confidence pointed to a need for the SRC to strengthen its transparency, consistency, and information verification processes. Enhancing these aspects could help build greater trust and ensure that all students perceive SRC communications as accurate and dependable. The following graph, labelled figure 6, illustrates quantitative data on SRC events.

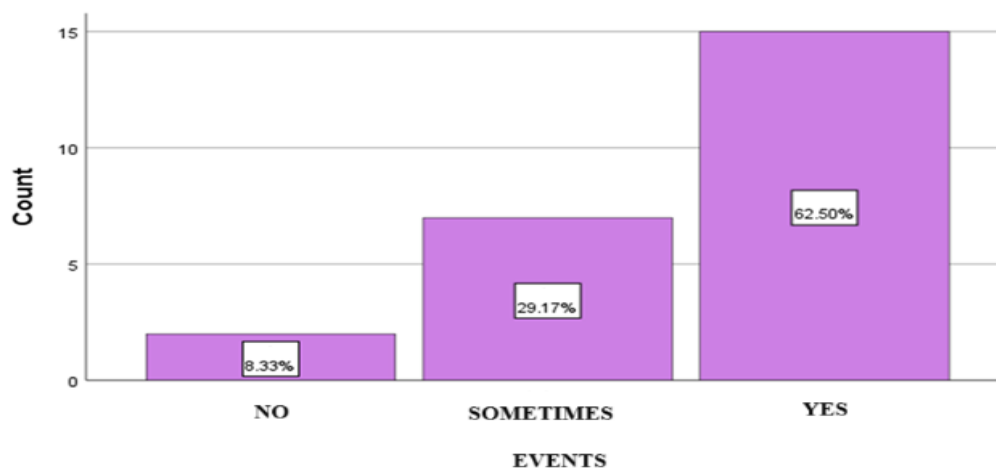


Figure 6: SRC Events (Author's Own)

The findings indicated that the majority of students perceive SRC-organised events as progressive. A total of 62.5% of respondents answered Yes, reflecting strong approval and recognition of the SRC's efforts to host impactful and forward-thinking activities. However, 29.17% responded Sometimes, suggesting that while the events are generally viewed positively, their relevance or impact may vary. Only 8.33% answered No, showing minimal disapproval. Overall, the results highlighted that SRC events are well-received and appreciated, although there is still potential to improve their consistency, inclusivity, and appeal across the broader student body. The following graph, labelled figure 7, shows quantitative data on SRC reconfiguration.

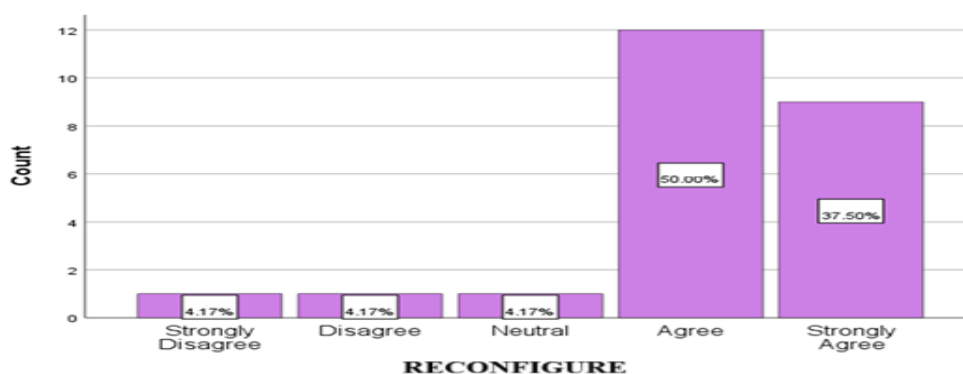


Figure 7: SRC Reconfiguration (Author's Own 2025)

The findings indicated overwhelming support among students for the reconfiguration of the SRC. A combined 87.5% of respondents (50% agree and 37.5% strongly agree) favoured the idea, reflecting a clear desire for change and improvement within the student governance structure. Only a small fraction (4.17% each) selected Strongly Disagree, Disagree, or Neutral, showing minimal resistance or uncertainty. Overall, these results suggest that students perceive

reconfiguration as a necessary step toward enhancing the SRC's effectiveness, representation, and responsiveness, providing a strong mandate for transformative action. The following graph, labelled figure 8, depicts quantitative data on SRC policies.

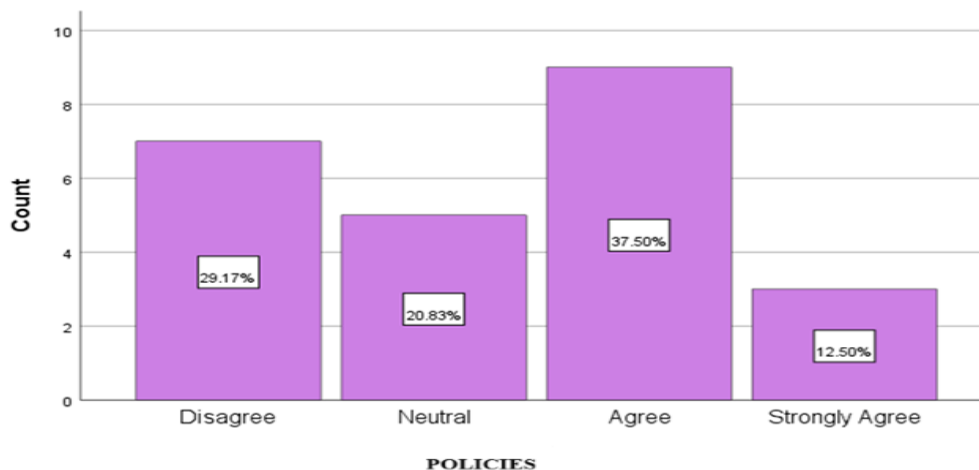


Figure 8: SRC influence and impact on policy development (Authors, 2025)

The results revealed a generally positive yet divided perception of the SRC's role in influencing university policy development and reviews. Overall, 50% of respondents (37.5% agree and 12.5% strongly agree) believed the SRC plays a meaningful part in shaping institutional decisions. However, 29.17% disagreed and 20.83% remained neutral, reflecting uncertainty or scepticism about the SRC's actual impact. This suggests that while many students acknowledge the SRC's policy influence, there is a clear need to enhance communication, transparency and visibility regarding its contributions to policy formulation and review processes.

The divergent views among respondents have important implications for both SRC practice and institutional governance. While positive perceptions suggest that the SRC is partially effective in influencing policy, the substantial levels of disagreement and neutrality indicate gaps in perceived legitimacy, visibility and accountability, which may undermine student trust and participation. The researcher's view is that these opposing views imply that the SRC's policy engagement may be occurring in limited or informal spaces that are not well communicated to the broader student body, highlighting the need for more transparent feedback mechanisms, clearer policy advocacy reporting, and institutionalised channels through which SRC contributions to policy development are made visible and verifiable.

7.1 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 current and former SRC members. The raw data from the participants were analysed using Nvivo qualitative data analysis tool and

Participant C said:

"Accommodation shortages and poor living conditions also contribute to unrest. To address this, the university needs to invest in more residences and improve maintenance while involving students in residence management discussions."

Participant F added:

"Delays in NSFAS funding and allowances are another major cause. Regular updates and transparent timelines from financial aid offices would help prevent frustration and uncertainty."

The responses provided make it clear that structural and administrative issues, not only dissatisfaction or disruptive conduct, are the main causes of student strikes. The researchers believe that the institution's structural governance and service delivery inadequacies are reflected in financial exclusion, accommodation shortages, and student financing delays, all of which have a direct impact on students' academic stability and well-being. These findings highlight the need for proactive financial management systems, better student accommodation planning, and transparent funding communication strategies in which the SRC plays a mediating and early-warning role. The findings also suggest that protest action serves as a form of reactive participation when formal communication and problem-resolution mechanisms fail.

The predominant themes that surfaced from the responses of the participants were, "students", "protests", "financial", "management", "regular", "communication" and "major" among others. The problem of student protests is also noted in the study by Mashayamombe and Nomvete (2021), who pointed out that the disagreements over resource allocation between the management and the SRC usually lead to protests. The study by Khan (2019) also indicates that inequalities in higher education are further contributing factors to student protests, hence the need for the SRC to intervene. This indicates that the causes of student protests are multifaceted, ranging from issues of accommodation, finances, academic exclusion and miscommunication to issues of inequality and unfavourable policies regarding students.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper investigated the role, effectiveness and challenges that the SRCs are faced with in institutions of higher learning. The paper revealed the need for the reconfiguration of the SRC to strengthen their duties and responsibilities, as well as responsiveness towards student issues. The paper showed that the SRC occupies a crucial role in the university as mediators between the students and the management, and represents the voice of students in decision-making processes, policy development, advocacy for student needs, and insurance of student welfare. Through the adopted theoretical foundations, contingency and transactional leadership theories, the paper showed that effective student leadership relies on the contextual adaptability and participative or progressive engagements between leaders and their constituents.

The findings of the study suggest that although the SRC plays an important role in student representation, advocacy, communication, event organisation and student support services, there are various failures that still exist. These failures, amongst others, include unequal representation, communication breakdown, inclusivity and diversity in the student population, as well as limited leadership capacity, hence the need for reconfiguration. The consequence of these failures leads to student protests, revealing a need for improving student governance mechanisms, for stronger accountability structures, and enhanced leadership training of SRC members.

The study also argues that a reconfigured SRC does not suggest dismantling the existing structures but rather reshaping and strengthening them to function more effectively within the complex dynamics of higher education governance. The reconfiguration process means redefining leadership approaches, improving communication channels, ensuring equitable representation of all student groups, and fostering proactive engagement between students and management. An established SRC, which embodies the values of both the adaptive contingency based and reciprocal transactional leadership principles, can better anticipate student needs, prevent possible conflicts and lead to institutional stability and transformation.

The study thus makes the following recommendations based on the findings to strengthen the functionality, representation, and impact of the SRC within the institutions of higher education. The study proposes that the SRC should enhance its advocacy and representation capacity through providing structured feedback methods; for example, digital suggestion platforms and conduct termly mass meetings to ensure that student grievances are continuously captured and addressed. The paper also recommends additional training programmes focused on advocacy, governance and leadership, to build the professional capacity of SRC members. As a means of increasing financial assistance and improved accessibility, the study recommends that the SRC should broaden its financial awareness and fundraising campaigns on available funding, support through social media, emails and notice boards, while strengthening partnerships with the university management, alumni and private donors, to create a sustainable financial assistance framework for unfunded students.

Establishing a verification process for outgoing information can improve transparency and trust among the students. The SRC should strive for inclusivity and consistency in events through adopting a participatory approach that caters for the inputs of student organisations and faculty representatives. The study further suggests that events must be aligned with academic and social developmental needs. A structured reconfiguration framework is also important, which will define the roles of SRC, enhance coordination among the different portfolios, and introduce mandatory leadership development and ethics training programmes to improve accountability.

The study further recommends that the SRC should strengthen its involvement in policy development by seeking formal representation in major university

committees such as senate and council, and by producing policy briefs that reflect student priorities. Addressing the root causes of strikes is also crucial, hence the study recommends the establishment of a Student Affairs Mediation Committee to proactively engage Management on issues such as financial exclusion, accommodation shortages, and National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) delays, which would help prevent unrests. Lastly, the study recommends that an improved communication between the SRC and university offices, such as residence offices and financial aid offices, will also promote transparency and trust.

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10. Declaration of Conflict

“The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.”

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