Involving Students in University Governance: Perceptions of Open and Distance Learning Students.

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Abstract: *The trend world over is to include students in the governance of higher education institutions. This approach is thought to democratize learning institutions and guard against student protests. This study interrogates the involvement of open and distance learning students in university governance. It adopted a qualitative methodology where data were generated from twenty four purposively sampled ODL students, through interviews. Findings indicate that students were aware of what it meant to be involved in university governance. However, there were mixed feelings regarding the extent to which students were involved as well as benefits derived from such involvement. A number of recommendations on enhancing student involvement in university governance in an ODL institution were suggested, among them adopting online voting for student representatives and conducting workshops for newly elected student representatives.*
Key terms: *students, university governance and open and distance learning.*

I.   Background To The Problem

In recent years, universities have created space for the participation of students in university governance in different capacities. This has been necessitated by the universities management' desire to democratize the universities. Student disturbances have in the past rocked many universities on the African continent, leading to distraction of property during violent demonstrations and running battles with police. In some cases, universities have been closed resulting in a loss of learning time. Involvement of students in university governance is thought to arrest such demonstrations and resultant consequences. This study, interrogates the involvement of students in the governance of an open and distant learning (ODL) university. The characteristics of ODL universities may mean that some of the challenges which precipitated the involvement of students in university governance in conventional institutions may not apply. However, I am cognizant of some challenges that are generic to conventional as well as ODL universities. In order to unpack the problem under investigation, this study was informed by the following research questions:

- What do ODL students understand by involvement of students in university governance?
- How are ODL students involved in university governance?
- How is the involvement of students in university governance benefiting ODL students?
- What are the challenges limiting the involvement of ODL students in university governance?
- What are the strategies that an ODL university can adopt so that students are effectively involved in university governance?

II.   Review Of Related Literature

2.1 The nature of student involvement in University Governance

Involvement of students in university governance is defined by Bergan (2004) as the provision for student representation on the governing bodies of higher education institutions. Luescher (2005) defines involvement of students in university governance as the participation of students as active agents in the governance of higher education. Involving students requires an acknowledgement of the multi-levelled nature of higher education governance; aspects of student self-governance on campus; and the various informal ways of students' intramural and extramural involvement in regime politics. Planas, Soler, Fullana, Pallisera and Vila (2011) argue that participation should be considered as a dimension of people's quality of life, which is closely related to social inclusion and identity. It is an educational and social process which should be taken into account at all stages of the education system. Therefore, universities could serve as participative spaces where students learn, through being actively involved, democratic principles and how these can be applied to different real life situations.

Meno (2014) states that student involvement in university governance is based on the notion of distributed leadership, a situation where governance of a university is not resident in one person. Luescher (2005:8) notes that:

Student governments are the officially recognized institutional executives of the student body.
. . . and go by the names like Student Representative Council (SRC) or cabinet. . . student governments

are typically structured along various functional spheres. This structure typically revolves around a central body – the SRC and substructures that organize student life in residencies, faculties, sports and recreation.

In addition, students can participate by serving as members in the following university committees: the students' disciplinary committee; security committee; electoral committee; ceremony committee; and protocol committee, among others (Akomolafe and Ibijola, 2011). Students can also be involved in national or institutional student organizations in higher education policy making (Luescher, 2005). However, Bergan (2004) puts it that in most countries, student voting rights are limited to issues that seem to be considered of most immediate concern to students, while they are not allowed to vote on issues that concern staff appointments, administrative finance issues, curricula or issues relating to the granting of doctoral degrees.

2.2 Benefits of involving students in University Governance

Luescher (2011) argues that the debate on student involvement in university governance has been influenced by various perspectives – in terms of its modern origins in student political activism; with respect to students' role and position in universities; in relation to democratic principles and the purposes of higher education in democratic societies; and on the grounds of the potential positive consequences of student participation. Using the above lens, Luescher (2011:17-19) states that student involvement satisfies the following:

- *Governance of teaching, learning and research:* The nature and extent of student involvement will vary with regard to the setting, the nature of issues under consideration and the seniority of students who are affected by the decision. Commitment to democratic and participatory pedagogies may also influence the extent to which students are involved in determining methods and content of teaching, learning and research.
- *Governance of student affairs:* Co- and extra-curricula student affairs governance dealing with matters of student government, student associations and recreation, student sport, residence, among others, offer extensive opportunity for student involvement in decision-making. Students' acceptance of, and support for decisions taken in this domain of governance is particularly crucial, and students' collective power to demand or reject certain decisions must be taken seriously into consideration by management of universities.
- *Institutional finance, policy and strategy:* Student involvement in this domain is curtailed by the increasingly dominant conception of students as transient users and consumers which means that such high level of participation can only be minimal. Planas et al (2012) allude that this consumer perspective is a challenge limiting the participation of students in university governance. As argued by Luescher (2005:4) "The different conceptions of the student by **university management** (emphasis mine) have very different governance implications".

Akomolafe and Ibijola (2011:232-233) are of the view that:
Participation in university governance makes the student body have a sense of belonging and most especially to see themselves as part of the decision-making process in the university system… gives participants greater feelings of self direction and has a positive relationship with motivation.

Students' input in decision making can facilitate the evaluation of curricula and teaching practices through the identification of deficiencies in higher education programmes and instruction (Menon, 2014). In the institution in which this study was conducted, students are given the opportunity to evaluate their tutors, programmes and the modules used in the programmes. Feedback from such evaluations is meant to improve service delivery. Student involvement can have an effect on immediate issues such as social issues, the learning environment, and educational content. Bergan (2004) advances three reasons why students should be involved in university governance. The first reason is that students are the main stakeholders in higher education institutions therefore they have to be in the picture regarding key decisions which affect them. The second reason is that as members of the academic community students share a responsibility for their education. The third and final reason according to Bergan is that if people believe that higher education has a role in developing the democratic culture without which democratic institutions cannot function and democratic societies cannot exist, then students must be encouraged to participate in governance, and they must feel that their participation has an impact. Bergan (2004:16) states that:
Governance issues are not a luxury or a concern of the few while the majority of staff and students get on with their work. Rather, they are part and parcel of the contribution of higher education to developing and maintaining the democratic culture without which democratic institutions cannot function, and they are crucial to ensuring that the academic community of scholars and students be not only an imagined community but a real and healthy one.

Student involvement in decision making creates an atmosphere of openness and trust in universities, leading to positive organizational climate, which can reduce the likelihood of conflict between university

management and students (Menon, 2014). This view is consistent with Kumalo's (2011:5) position that ". . . the political case for inclusion of students in the formal decision making process of universities is typically made with reference to students' potential and ability to disrupt academic life".

2.3 Challenges arising from involving students in University Governance
Planas et al. (2011) identify a number of challenges limiting the involvement of students in university governance. Frequently cited challenges are:
- Students do not know spaces and mechanisms for participation.
- Lack of time to participate. As argued by Bergan (2004), students find little time for institutional life – participating in and contributing to institutional life in general and institutional governance in particular does not seem to be a priority for most students.
- Students consider themselves as mere consumers of a public service.
- Students perceive the university as an institution which is not their own and one in which they are only passing through.
- Lack of information and communication leads to an ignorance of the university's actual organizational structure, of the representative and government bodies and their candidates and representatives, and a limited understanding of the electoral process, resulting in the negligible utility they award these.

Other challenges bedeviling involvement of students in university governance are: low voter turnout in student representative elections; lack of reliable and targeted information; and the perception that student politics is run by a small elite without much contact to normal students.

2.4 Strategies for bringing out the best from involving students in University Governance
The importance of involving students in university needs no over emphasis. Therefore efforts should be expended to ensure that students are meaningfully and effectively involved in university governance. Planas et al., (2011) suggest a number of strategies which universities can explore. First, universities should provide clear information with regard to the rules and regulations of all boards and governing bodies involved in the functioning of the university, and providing more and better information on the rights of students. Second, universities should cultivate a positive attitude at different organizational levels towards students' proposals and establishing of trusting working relationships with student representatives. Third, giving consideration to the provision of spaces and times for student representatives to be able to inform and consult students. Fourth, universities should maintain and improve formal spaces for participation, paying special attention to student electoral processes. Fifth, universities might consider giving more of a voice and vote to certain governing organs, particularly those closest to the academic and educational life of students, whilst also making the functioning and decision-making of bodies more transparent. Sixth, universities should offer specific training for student representatives, since certain skills and attitudes are required for fulfilling the duty of representation.

III.   Research Methodology And Design
The study was informed by the Constructivist philosophy since the purpose was to establish the students' views on their involvement in university governance. Guided by the Constructivist philosophy, I employed a qualitative research methodology. I used a case study design to generate data from a purposively sampled group of students at a regional centre of an ODL university in Zimbabwe. The sample consisted of twelve female students and the same number of male students. Data were generated from students through interviews. I settled for interviews since they created a non-threatening environment where students were free to open up on the issue without fear of having fingers pointed at them, in the event of them contributing sensitive information. I recorded interviews proceedings verbatim, transcribed the data, sent it to interviewees for member checking before data analysis. These activities also ensured the trustworthiness of the findings. Segmenting and coding preceded the thematic content analysis which I used as an analysis technique.

IV.   Findings And Discussion
4.1 Students' understanding of involvement in university governance
Most students' definitions of student involvement in university governance are similar to definitions found in literature on the subject. These are some of the definitions that were given by students:
My understanding is that students are given an ear on how their university is run. For example, how do the students want to see improved in the writing of modules. The input is solicited openly and considered.
Basically, it is a situation in which an established learning institute takes into consideration the input of students on how best the University can continue to improve on its administrative issues.
Is a way in which students have a fair share of say in which the university affairs are being operated. Thus inclusion of students into day to day running of the university.

Students' good understanding of what it means to include them in university governance meant that they were in a better position to effectively converse on various issues pertaining to the subject.

4,2 Ways in which students are involved in university governance

There were mixed views on how students are involved in the governance of their university. The dominant voices were that there is minimal involvement. For instance, one student pointed out that: "To be honest, not all is the frank answer. All I know is that I pay for my registration, get my modules, and start reading. Communication between the university and students is very poor. Maybe it's because we are a distant education facility, hence the distant relationship between the university and students. The SRC is not visible and its elections are a farce and not representative of the student body." Another dissenting student quipped "Not much. It would appear the University has no structures in place to involve students in university governance". This student's argument does not hold water since the university has the structures probably it is an issue of students not being aware of the structures. Researching on students' involvement in university governance in Nigeria, Akomolafe and Ibijola (2011) also concluded that students in Nigeria generally experience lack of participation.

However, students who acknowledged participation explained that they do so through their student representatives who take their views to the authorities, they might have problems or anything that they feel must come to the attention of university management. This view is consistent with Luescher's (2005) observation that SRCs are the official executives of student governance in universities.

4.3 How students are benefiting from involvement in university governance

Students were divided regarding how they were benefiting. Those who said they were benefiting forwarded the following sentiments:

Our problems are solved and we actually see some improvements towards what we would have raised. We are able to relate with the University management in a respectful manner.
We have an input in the governance of the university. This in turn makes our learning easier and enjoyable.
Respondents in a study by Miles, Miller and Nadler (2008) viewed using the student governance body as a form of conduit between the university management and the larger student population. This may reduce violent student protests which occur more frequently where formal channels of communication and consultation are absent (Kumalo, 2011).

On the other hand, an appreciable number of students stated that they were hardly benefiting from their involvement in university governance. One student pointed out that: " Involvement is very minimal, do not have the opportunity to air my grievances as well as giving suggestions or possible solutions, hence it is not beneficial". Yet another said: "If we were involved we could give suggestions on how the university could best run some of its programmes; identifying strengths and weaknesses". In my view, responses on how students were benefiting were influenced by the earlier question on the extent to which students felt were involved in university governance. Lack of tangible benefits could also be a result of lack of targeted information (Burden, 2004), which may result in students not knowing that certain improvements in their welfare could be a culmination of their SRC engaging with university management. Probably the SRC needs to improve its visibility by being more consultative – thinking with the student body, instead of thinking for the student body.

4.4 Challenges limiting the involvement of students in university governance

Most students pointed that they were not actively involved in university governance. They advanced a number of reasons why they were not involved. The frequently cited reasons were:

- Time factor – most students are working and there is very little or no time for students to meet on their own or the university administration. They also pointed out that the number of times when students meet for tutorials makes it difficult for students to focus on governance issues.
- It would appear the university itself has no proper structures in place to involve students in university governance issues. In my view this reason lacks substance because in each regional centre, there is Regional Student Management Advisor who liases with the Dean of Students who is resident at the University's National Centre. I think it is a question of lacking correct targeted information as suggested by Bergan (2004). As argued by Planas et al (2011), students may lack information and communication resulting to an ignorance of the university's actual organizational structure and how students can participate in university governance.
- The country's present economic turbulence makes it difficult for students' full participation. For example, if an SRC meeting is scheduled at the regional centre, very few students attend, since most may not have bus fare.
- Communication is poor, therefore participation is minimal. At times SRC elections are just a farce since a coterie of students will team up and take all the seats available. There is no dialogue between the corporate

structure and the students. Most students don't know who is who and who is responsible for what. All that there is, is to pay fees, get modules, write assignments and write examinations, simple. Students can't even contribute to fees structure, or to programme structure, can't contribute to anything in fact. This view is consistent with Luescher (2011) and Planas et al's (2011) arguments that students may shy away from involvement because they view themselves as consumers of a public service and see themselves as passersby.

• An inactive SRC which does not put much effort to get information from other students.

Challenges that were identified by students are corroborated in most articles on involvement of students in university governance. These challenges, raise serious questions on the democratization of learning institutions. Assuming that this scenario is the norm in most universities there is need for senior management through the offices of Deans of Student to level the playing field to enable all students to participate – especially through the election of Student Representative Councils.

4.5 Strategies that can enhance the involvement of students in university governance

I asked students to suggest strategies that their university can put in place in order to facilitate student involvement. A number of suggestions were forwarded and here I just present those that were frequently mentioned.

The university should come up with a newsletter at least twice a year which explains how the university is running its affairs.

The university should solicit information from students by means of questionnaires on how best university governance can be improved.

A suggestion box should be located at a visible place for students to drop in their queries, observations, concerns, questions and suggestions in a non-threatening way.

There should be leadership seminars that can empower student leaders.

SRC elections should be spontaneous and not a game of survival of the fittest where alliances are formed way before elections.

Information should be available to students now and again. Online platforms should be formed and be vibrant.

The university should create space and time where students meet regularly and discuss their concerns in the operation of the university.

A number of authors among them Bergan (2004), Planas et al (2011), Akomolafe and Ibijole (2011), and Luescher (2011) also suggested some of these strategies. Fortunately, none of these strategies calls for high financial outlay to have them implemented. In addition, I am of the view that there is need for students to address the problem of apathy and do away with this idea that student politics is meant for a certain crop of students.

V. Conclusions And Recommendations

Students know what it means to be involved in university governance. However, there was no consensus on two issues: the extent to which students were involved in university governance and the benefits derived from such involvement. Most of the students are not involved in university governance hence are ignorant of the benefits accruing from being involved in university governance. It can be concluded that those who said that there was no involvement and no benefits could be a result of lack of information on how they can be involved and of not being aware that some of the improvements in the university are a result of student involvement through the SRC activities. While these conclusions should not be generalized to all the other regional centres, they highlight the need for the university to revisit its policy on student involvement to ensure that information on university structures that accord students opportunities for involvement reaches all students. The university should consider online voting for SRC members, so that as many students as possible are offered the opportunity to elect their representatives. After being elected into office, SRC members should be inducted on how to engage the student body. Newly enrolled students should be encouraged to attend orientation sessions since involvement of students in university governance is usually part of the agenda during such occasions. Regional Student Management centres should create space and time for regional SRCs to constantly meet with students, consulting, discussing pertinent issues as well as giving feedback from university management. Regional centres should open more avenues of communication with students, for example placing suggestion boxes in convenient places such as the library, introducing regional newsletters, as well as engaging students using new media technology. Students should be encouraged to participate in the election of their SRC members, perhaps by even considering online voting, since this is an ODL institution. This study needs replication at a larger scale, triangulating sources of data – from Centre of Student Management at the National Centre and regional centres, regional SRC members, and students from all the regional centres.

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