



## HEHD RESEARCH BRIEF

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### **Social media activism: a case study of student voices and participation at a South**

### **African university**

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#### **About this Brief**

The expansion of students' political capabilities and functionings to pursue what they have reason to value can promote social change in a university and society, thus contributing to human development. A study was conducted between 2020 and 2022 to investigate both social media-based student activism and in-person activism for the development of specifically political capabilities to evaluate the extent to which there is or could be more justice within higher education. The research conceptualised student activism as a space for forming valued political capabilities that advance student well-being. This matters as a contribution to citizenship and democratic life and reduces or dismantles Bohman's (1996) concept of 'political poverty'.

This brief presents a summary of the key findings and recommendations of the research. It considers the significance of the university as a transformative democratic space for the development and enhancement of students' political capabilities. The brief is of particular relevance to higher education administrators, researchers, policymakers, and students who are concerned with expanding opportunities for social justice within the university space.

#### **Rationale**

The study considers how the higher education landscape has been characterised over recent years by student political engagement, often organised on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, WhatsApp, and other cloud-based services under the hashtag tool. Social media has also been regarded as promoting

political participation and deliberation, as it is able to overcome constraints of time and space. On the other hand, there is criticism of social media-based student activism as failing to influence real policy change. Following recent events in South African higher education institutions, which have seen a resurgence of student protests organised on social media, the study constructed an understanding of student perspectives on the role and use of social media in promoting social transformation.

### **Conceptual framing**

The research used the capability approach (CA) and human development as the conceptual framework. Making use of Sen's (1999, 2009) work, the research emphasis is placed on the freedoms that students need in order to live the lives they value. The framework assists in understanding the potential contribution of student activism to the broader agenda of transformational change in higher education. In doing so, the research highlights how the framework aids in conceptualising the changes that higher education in South Africa needs to take into consideration in the pursuit of justice and democracy.

### **Methods**

Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with two institutional staff members, eight members of the student governing body, five activist organisers, and fourteen student participants. Students' activism experiences were analysed alongside insights from institutional staff members with knowledge of student governance in order to achieve a better understanding of their struggles for democracy and justice.

### **Key findings**

#### **A space to fight for transformational change**

Empirical data across the three data sets indicated the importance of face-to-face activism as central in bringing about transformational change and promoting an enabling university space that enhances student development and agency. Data also pointed to students' understanding of activism and social media activism as efforts to promote or intervene in social, political, economic, and environmental reform, with the desire to effect transformational change. Given that the study has three data sets, findings from the three groups of students on social media activism were broadly the same, though slightly different. From a student governance perspective, social media plays a role in mobilising students in advancing activist activities, but on its own it is not enough, and face-to-face mobilisation remains crucial. For activist organisers, social media is effective in initiating grass-roots activities and executing activist activities in certain circumstances. For the student participants, social media allows them to struggle against injustices on two fronts – face-to-face and online. This acts in their favour, as it gives their voices the opportunity to be heard beyond the gates of the UFS.

#### **Conversion factors and processes**

Students identified both enabling and constraining factors. Enabling factors included legal representation when students were arrested during protests, political parties, the business community, and social media. These factors facilitated students' collective agency freedoms. SRC interviews demonstrated that students in governance relied on their interaction with aligned political parties, while organisers relied on the business community. Broadly, across all student groups, social media played an important role as an enabling information tool. Moreover, information is important in students' participation in activist activities and its availability cannot be taken for granted, hence greater emphasis was placed on social media as an enabling factor. Additionally, the SRC identified their one-year term limit as a barrier, while organisers simultaneously identified political party affiliation as a barrier to their activities. In a subtle way, the SRC's political party affiliation acts as a barrier to organisers' pursuit of what they value as enhancing student well-being.

### Valued capabilities and functionings for student activism

The study generated a common set of contextual capabilities and functionings that students value in political life. In some cases, there are capabilities and functionings that they are able to achieve, and others that they value but do not have the opportunities to form. Across the three groups of students, a similar set of political capabilities emerged as valuable, although formed in slightly different ways across the three groups.

**Table 1: Common set of political capabilities and functioning**

Capabilities	Functionings
<b>Participation</b>	Students participating in dialogue or protests aimed at bringing about transformational change.
<b>Public deliberation and dialogue</b>	Students initiating and engaging in debates and dialogue to form collective values.
<b>Voice</b>	Making use of dialogue and social media to raise their concerns, being listened to and having their contributions taken into account.
<b>Emotional expression</b>	Developing the ability to balance both activism and academic duties and being able to deal with disappointments.
<b>Contextual knowledge</b>	Sharing knowledge and information that assists in the formation of collective values through dialogue.
<b>Physical wellbeing</b>	Being able to participate in protests without risk of physical harm or ill-being.
<b>Practical reasoning</b>	Being able to make reasoned decisions on what students perceive to be valued states of wellbeing.

### **Higher education as a transformative democratic space**

Data highlighted that activist activities within higher education provide students with opportunities for developing political capabilities, although this is never guaranteed or taken for granted. The political capability set identified in this study can work multidimensionally for transformation within the university, which can contribute to more democracy and greater justice. In the context of this study, capabilities that emerge qualify as political capabilities as they relate to students' ability to participate, engage in dialogue, raise their concerns, and make them count during public dialogue and activist activities. These freedoms are important in how they enhance student experiences and student well-being within the university. Equally important – the value given to physical well-being by the students demonstrates the political nature of other capabilities that are formed during student collective resistance. As such, higher education spaces as social goods should serve democracy by enhancing critical democratic citizenship. This is facilitated by promoting freedoms that enable students to engage in dialogue and deliberate on the political problems associated with the university.

### **Recommendations**

To improve and enhance the university as a transformative democratic space, the following recommendations are based on the data:

- The SRC, activist organisers, and university management should consider emphasising the importance of peaceful demonstrations. While the university might justify the presence of private security and state police when students engage in protests, it may be necessary to engage with activist organisers and the SRC. Again, as activism is a space for them to potentially realise their capacity for voice, unfair university responses are likely to result in students who lack interest in participating in democratic citizenship. This has potentially negative implications in students' pursuit of doings and beings they have reason to value. As such, there is a need for the SRC, activist organisers, and university management to collaborate and to emphasise and enlighten students on the importance of how they conduct themselves during protests and other activism activities.
- Formal spaces for dialogue between the university and students ought to be set up and maintained. Even though the university provides the Student Kgotla, there is a need for university management to interact with ordinary students beyond official structures such as the SRC. Seminars and workshops might be useful spaces for university management and students to interact and reach consensus. Of significance is how such spaces might foster student participation in university management decision-making processes, thereby giving them a voice in matters to do with their well-being. This might also help in reducing what students characterised as information hegemony from both the university and the SRC. Such spaces have the potential to improve information flow between students and the university.

- The SRC and the university also need to intervene on the issue of political party affiliation. Evidence from the interview data suggests that student participation in activism is often marred by political party affiliation. Moreover, political party affiliation has resulted in what some students have referred to as online attacks on perceived opponents. The university ought to come up with a policy framework to address such issues so as to promote student participation in activism.

To conclude, higher education must create and promote equitable spaces that facilitate transformation through participation in decision-making processes and enable the realisation of the corresponding functioning of students expressing their voice.

### References and selected further reading

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