

INTERVIEW WITH THAMSANQHA LEDWABA

The contribution of student affairs: A student leader perspective

Thierry Luescher-Mamashela*

Ledwaba: I grew up in the ranks of the African National Congress Youth League and the South African Students Congress (SASCO). In the early years of my university career I got exposed to comrades on campus and became involved in student politics. In my second year I decided to run for the House Committee of my student residence and I made it in. I became aware of many issues in higher education and all the issues that surrounded being a student activist. It was the time post the mergers in higher education; it was a very charged atmosphere I think on both sides, on the management side and on the other side as a student leader. So I decided to run for Students' Representative Council (SRC). I got in as vice-president and in the second year I ran again. I was supposed to become the SRC president but "politics happen" and it happened and I stayed as Vice-President (VP).

Luescher-Mamashela: How did you get involved in the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as a student leader?

Ledwaba: I was a member of the extended national committee of the South African Union of Students. Over my two terms as VP, I attended and participated in a couple of symposiums and colloquia where academics, politicians and senior officials of the department of education and the council on higher education were there and I was a panelist on one of them. It was during my years of participation in these national structures and meetings that my nomination to serve on the HEQC came from. In my second term as VP the term of office of the board then came to an end, and I was nominated to form part of the incoming board. I have now served the Council four years and then at the end of 2012 my term of office was renewed.

It took me about two years to truly understand how our national quality assurance system works. It's really difficult, you can imagine, the various aspects of programme accreditation and things like that. I came from a political activist background and that does not really prepare you to go into the depth of

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quality assurance. We rarely deal deeply with national issues around funding, governance and planning per se, but it's all about quality assurance and it gets very technical and focused.

Luescher-Mamashela: Were you involved in quality assurance as a student leader at university level?

Ledwaba: Only on a policy level, because as SRC vice-president I sat on the Senate and some subcommittees of the Senate that deal with quality assurance and I also sat on the University Strategy Forum for two terms which was very key because we dealt with quality assurance but from a governance perspective. This was a disadvantage to be quite honest, because I was not necessarily involved in the institutional machinery itself, but I did grow because of having colleagues from the institution, such as the director of institutional planning who also served on the HEQC Board, who helped me to grow much quicker. I think being in the machinery would make my inputs a little more legitimate to a certain cohort of the board, but let's be honest, here you are a masters student among quality assurance professionals, ex-vice-chancellors and academics, professors. They are professionals and you have to respect them.

Luescher-Mamashela: In your interactions as a student leader with officials in the university's department of student affairs, did you get the same impression that you were dealing with professionals who commanded respect for their expertise?

Ledwaba: The first interaction I had as student leader with student affairs officials was when I was in student residence. In particular, it was the dean of students and the director of student housing. They were very professional. There were issues that had to be dealt with because University of Cape Town (UCT) over-allocates residence spaces every year. What do you do with students who were allocated residence but when they arrive on campus all the residences are full? How do we make sure that students are well taken care of when the academic calendar is about to start? I think at that time the director handled the situation very well. They know where the institution has gone wrong and they are doing their best to alleviate the problem. That was my first interaction.

I also had a lot of interaction with the Orientation Office because I was an orientation leader. And as SRCVP, I interacted with most student affairs officials in different capacities, in particular also the executive director of student affairs. We would disagree with Moonira Khan (the Executive Director: Student Affairs), but it was purely in terms of policy, not her operational work and where it mattered most I think she performed well. We inherited some politics from the previous SRC where she had gone wrong on a key issue that we cared about and as a result the relationship was difficult at some point. But as an SRC she supported our budget, our objectives, taking care of certain issues and delivered to the students.

Luescher-Mamashela: How did your SRC and the department of student affairs share responsibility for students and student life?

We must ensure that we are producing graduates who [...] have attributes that constitute them as whole citizens.

Ledwaba: UCT may be considered in many respects not a representative case because of the type of institution that it is and the type of student body it has. In other institutions, SRCs have a different role to play in relation to student affairs. Our focus on an institutional policy level was a lot about academic matters, such as ensuring that the academic calendar was not hostile to students; we had a focus on academic development programmes and academic support staff; and academic exclusion of students. Another, perhaps more generally applicable issue would be our engagement to ensure that fees don't necessarily go up.

There were many organisational issues around student life that we left the department of student affairs to handle because they did it well. And I guess for us we had an advantage at a political level, because there were a number of progressive members in the university management who could be trusted.

Luescher-Mamashela: How would you characterise the relationship between student leaders and student affairs officials?

Ledwaba: We had a collegial relationship with the officials, the professionals in student affairs at UCT. But their role is limited. I think the reach of student affairs at UCT does not actually go enough into academic affairs where I think it should go. I think the student affairs should actually have a working relationship with academic development because then you tie in the whole student experience.

Luescher-Mamashela: Considering that academics have a core role to play in the student experience, what do you see as the contribution to be made by student affairs professionals? Is that contribution part of the core function of the institution or rather an additional and perhaps peripheral matter?

Ledwaba: I think next to your core academic matters I think that students affairs is in that position to develop attributes which address the question of how students fit into the

society that they live in. What does it mean to be an accountant in Dar es Salaam? What does it mean to be a citizen for us in the developing world? This is what student affairs has a key role to play in because what you find is that we produce graduates who are academically competent but there are other personal and social developmental issues that need to be tackled. In addition, I think if one was to expand the role of student affairs it would be related to those functions at faculty level that are centred around academic support.

Luescher-Mamashela: If you look beyond UCT and at our flagship universities across the continent, how realistic is what you propose considering the current role and status of most student affairs departments?

Ledwaba: I think student affairs departments are given very little credit, very little recognition. Meanwhile there is a significant role they actually can and do play in relation

It all comes together from being exposed to, to be engaged at, various levels of student life and thus to learn how to translate classroom and academic experience and bring it together in your life on campus and beyond campus.

to student leaders, and those are the people who have involvement in the field of higher education, and the students in general.

Luescher-Mamashela: You earlier referred to student affairs officials as well as student affairs professionals. Is there a distinction between the two?

Ledwaba: I think you have the administrators who are mainly in clerical positions and then you have the professionals who apply themselves at many different levels to issues concerning students. It is, I think, more about and attached to rank one would say qualification and responsibilities. I think that's how I would divide it. But my perspective is also politically biased: I think you want student affairs to be professionalised because you want to legitimise, to entrench, a student focus within higher education, and one way you do it is to professionalise student affairs in a coherent way. I mean in our own focus at the Higher Education Quality Committee now with organising the lectures by Prof. Vincent Tinto; you can see the focus is shifting. It is not so much regulation and compliance; rather the discussion is quite forward looking. You see, at government level and in the labour market there is a high expectation on graduates.