

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The politics of student housing: Student activism and representation in the determination of the user-price of a public–private partnership residence on a public university campus in South Africa

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### *Abstract*

South African universities have been facing a critical shortage in the provision of student housing for several years now, and the establishment of public–private partnerships (PPPs) is seen as part of the solution to address the shortage (Rensburg, 2011). This article investigates the effectiveness of the Students' Representative Council (SRC) of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in representing student interests during its negotiations with university management to reduce the user-price per student for the new Kovacs Residence, a PPP student housing complex on the UWC campus. It thus highlights some of the complexities involved in public–private collaborations on student housing provision, including the tension between profitability, affordability and equity in the face of organised student power.

The article shows that, considering the various initiatives taken by the SRC to engage university management, and the resulting reduction of the user-price per annum, students' interests were effectively represented by the SRC, even if this view does not correspond with the perceptions of students. Our analysis uncovers many deficiencies in student representation processes both within student structures and university management. It is supported by data from in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. Interviews were conducted with SRC members and university management, and a focus group discussion was facilitated with students in residences.

### *Keywords*

*Higher education; university administration; student politics; student housing; activism; representation; social justice; public–private partnerships.*

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## *Introduction*

The subject of student representation in higher education institutions continues to be emphasised not only in South Africa but worldwide (Jungblut & Weber, 2012; Klemenčič, 2012; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014; Luescher, Klemenčič & Jowi, *forthcoming*). This article focuses on student representation within an important domain of student life and governance: student housing. In particular, we investigate the effectiveness of student representation at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) during the 'Kovacs crisis' of 2012 and the related process of negotiating the student user-price for the new Kovacs Residence which had been established as a public-private partnership (PPP). Our investigation deals with the student political challenges involved in addressing the shortage of student housing, in particular the negotiation of an affordable user-price between university and organised student power. In the process, we will address questions of representation, participation and accountability in student representation, and the effectiveness of student interest representation through the university's Students' Representative Council (SRC).

The process of resolving the 'Kovacs crisis' included the SRC taking the initiative in relation to university management, its mobilisation of students to protest against the lack of action by management on the high user-price, and, eventually, the way the SRC communicated with students about the outcomes of the meetings held with management. We find that, contrary to the perceptions of students, the SRC actually represented the interests of students effectively, which resulted in a significant reduction in the annual user-price from R30 000 (USD2 400) to R24 000 (USD1 900) – even if this falls short of the student demand of R 17 000 (USD1 400). Our analysis shows various typical characteristics and deficiencies in the manner of student representation, student participation, and communication with the student body on all sides. We conclude that the way the crisis was resolved highlights a need for universities such as the UWC, which have high levels of student activism, to stick to established mechanisms of student representation in the process of decision-making and resolving conflicts – even in the case of PPPs – and avoid retreating into 'closed spaces'. The latter negates the advantages of formal student representation in university decision-making and creates antagonistic relations between university management and organised student power. Moreover, our analysis shows how university managements routinely tend to undermine student representation – especially in their manner of communication – even if eventually they agree with the cause. We highlight two important matters frequently raised in studies on student representation: firstly, the argument that representation improves the quality and acceptability of discussions, and, secondly, that only transparent and inclusive decision-making processes involving students have the potential of inculcating democratic values and leadership skills as part of co-curricular learning outcomes. Finally, the article provides a cautious reminder to students, university management and private investors that PPPs may not be the panacea for addressing the shortage of affordable student housing in developing countries.

### *The Kovacs Residence project*

The provision of affordable student accommodation presents a challenge internationally, even if the challenges differ between developed regions and developing countries. A study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) shows that an increase in the need for universities to provide housing space for students is, *inter alia*, a result of international student mobility, whereby international students may find it more difficult to make private arrangements for accommodation than local students who may live at home, reside with relatives, or have easier access to local renting stock (UNESCO, 2015). In South Africa, as in many other developing countries, the shortage of affordable student accommodation is a function of the fast expansion of higher education, the enrolment of increasing numbers of students from poor and working-class backgrounds, critical shortages of privately owned rental stock conducive for student housing, and limitations of funding and capacity in the development and maintenance of university-owned student accommodation. In 2011, a ministerial committee reviewing the provision of student housing at public universities in South Africa found that there had been a backlog of almost 200 000 student beds in public higher education in 2010. Addressing this shortage over the next ten years would require an investment of R82.5 billion (USD6.6 billion) in addition to the costs for the refurbishment and modernisation of existing student housing infrastructure (Rensburg, 2011, p. 125). The ministerial committee identified PPPs as one of the different sources of funding available to address the shortage of student accommodation (Rensburg, 2011, p. 126; also see: Bond & Tait, 1997; Mafukidze & Hoosen, 2009; Phiri, 2012; Proscia, 2015).

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town, South Africa, is a public university that was originally established in 1960 as a university for coloured students<sup>1</sup> and is located on the outskirts of the urban core in the Bellville South area. It prides itself on being an emerging research university which continues to provide access to quality higher education for poor and working-class students; at the same time, the institution's commitment to social justice and its geographic location create a desperate need for student housing on campus. This is captured, for example, in the words of the former vice-chancellor of the UWC, Prof. Brian O'Connell:

The scale of the problem is desperate. We [UWC] have thrown open the doors of learning for nineteen thousand students, but we only have [student housing] place for three thousand two hundred. Local landlords demand high rentals, but NSFAS [the National Financial Aid Scheme] funding is totally inadequate; and this accommodation is often appalling. We can't have any campus programmes after four in the afternoon because of the dangers our students, many of whom are from the poorest of the poor communities of Khayelitsha and beyond, face while travelling. The nearest cinema is fifteen kilometres from campus. The past continues to linger with us. (O'Connell in Rensburg, 2011, p. 118)

Despite its commitments and the dire need for on-campus student accommodation, in 2010 the UWC was only able to provide housing for 20% of its student body (Rensburg, 2011, p. 32). Moreover, while the UWC was charging among the highest user-prices for

on-campus accommodation of any South African university, it recorded a deficit of almost R12 million in 2010 (almost USD1 million) in respect of its residence system (Rensburg, 2011, p. 98, Table 12, p. 103, Table 13).

According to Phiri (2012), it is in the context of these challenges that the institution went into a PPP with a private investor, Kovacs, to build a new complex of student residences on campus land known as the Kovacs UWC Student Housing Project (Kovacs, 2015). The first phase of construction of the Kovacs Residence complex started in 2011 and the first housing units were opened for student occupation in 2012. Upon its completion in 2014, the Kovacs Residence complex provided 1 100 new beds (UWC, 2013, p. 93).<sup>2</sup> When the first phase of residence blocks opened to students in January 2012, the annual user fee charged per student became an issue of contention. Phiri (2012) argues that part of the contention was the view of students that Kovacs as a privately owned company was profit-driven. The cost per single room was set at about R30 000 a year, while the user-price in the existing UWC residences was considerably lower. There was an (erroneous) view among students that the average price of residences at UWC was about R15 000 per bed and therefore that Kovacs was charging double the normal cost of student housing. Thus, immediately after the first blocks of Kovacs were completed and became available, students started protesting against occupying the blocks owing to their high user-price. Students argued that the Kovacs Residence would only accommodate students from wealthy families; that students from poor backgrounds would be disadvantaged in their access to on-campus housing when compared with students from affluent backgrounds; and that Kovacs was thus creating class divisions among students (Phiri, 2012).

It is at this point that the SRC had to step in. The SRC is the statutory governance structure established to represent students' interests in a South African higher education institution. It is established in terms of the Higher Education Act (1997), a university's institutional statute and the SRC constitution. In keeping with the notions of good and cooperative governance in South African higher education, an SRC ought to participate in the governance of its institution with respect to all institutional matters that affect student interests. Thus, section 3.3 of the *White Paper on Higher Education* (WPHE) of 1997 indicates:

Good governance must be based on a recognition of the existence of different interests and the inevitability of contestation among them and must therefore create structures and encourage processes which enable differences to be negotiated in participative and transparent ways. (WPHE, 1997)

It is against this understanding of the nature of university governance and the role of the SRC that the SRC intervened in the matter of Kovacs on behalf of students in order to challenge the user-price of the new residences through the structures of the university.

## *Conceptualising the study*

### **Representation**

Various scholars have articulated the reasons for representation, the various ways it could or actually does take place, and the advantages and disadvantages which may arise in the process of representation. Hannah Pitkin argues, firstly, that representation ‘means the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact’ (Pitkin, 1972, p. 9). Representation thus involves making present one who is absent. To what extent is it possible (or even desirable) for the representative to ‘replace’ an absent person? What leeway does the representative have in her or his role? In keeping with these questions, Lavalle, Houtzager and Castello (2005) note that the autonomy of the representative has to be considered along with her or his genuine commitment to the interests of the represented.

The effectiveness of representation can therefore not be discussed in isolation from, for example, levels of participation and accountability. In terms of this and other characteristics, a number of scholars have established different typologies of representation. Thus, Pitkin (1972) categorises representation in four ways: formalistic, descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Mansbridge (2003) also offers four categories of representation, namely promissory, gyroscopic, anticipatory and surrogate representation. Even though the two scholars use different concepts for their respective types of representation, a number of similarities emerge from the way they define and characterise them.

Formalistic representation is characteristic of a type of representation where ‘a representative is viewed as someone who has been authorized to act’ (Pitkin, 1972, p. 39). In this case, power is entrusted to the individual who takes over a specific office. This idea of representation relates to Mansbridge’s notion of promissory representation whereby a representative is authorised to represent, but, in this case, only after making certain promises to the represented, for example during an election campaign (2003, pp. 516–517).

Secondly, according to Pitkin (1972, pp. 39–40), descriptive representation refers to the case where a representative is elected to office because she or he somehow resembles a group that is to be represented. The relevant characteristics in this case may be demographic (e.g. based on class, race or gender). Mansbridge (2003, p. 520) refers to this type of representation as gyroscopic representation; while there are various differences in the characterisation of their respective types, both authors agree that ‘resemblance’ does not guarantee that the elected representative will actually act on behalf of the group that elected her or him to office.

Thirdly, Pitkin explains substantive representation as a form of representation which focuses on ‘what the representative does and how he/she does it’ (Pitkin, 1972, p. 143). In the context of student leadership, this form of representation would, for example, refer to the situation whereby an SRC member who made certain promises during an election campaign is assessed while in office as to the extent to which these promises have been given substance. The idea thus corresponds to Mansbridge’s notion of anticipatory

representation (2003, pp. 516–517) whereby voters reflect on the record of a candidate before making a decision to re-elect the candidate. Anticipatory representation is therefore also similar to promissory representation, given that the promises which may be made by a candidate during a campaign, for example, could be the indicators used by the electorate to anticipate her/his future performance.

Lastly, the notion of symbolic representation focuses on what the representative stands for (Pitkin, 1972, p. 42). An example would be someone who gets elected because he/she stands for the eradication of poverty. Mansbridge's fourth notion of surrogate representation, in contrast, refers to a form of representation that 'occurs when a legislator represents constituents outside of their district' (2003, p. 522). This category is also given and defended by Dovi (2006). In this case, there is no electoral relationship with the representative, because she/he was elected by a different constituency (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 522).

For the purposes of this study, the different categories of representation given by each of these authors can be seen as providing different reasons or rationales for electing an SRC into office and thus as dimensions for considering the effectiveness of representation. In this regard, the case for student representation has historically been made on a number of premises. Firstly, it is argued that the operation of an institution may be impaired by the exclusion of a very large number of those actively involved in, and affected by, the activities of the institution, especially if, as in the case of students, they may become politically organised or unionised to defend their interests; secondly, that as consumers, students have an interest in the quality of the service they receive; thirdly, that participation is a fundamental element of the education process, which cannot take place without the willing acceptance and support of those who are being educated; and, finally, that the inclusion of students in the processes of decision-making means decisions are made by inclusive bodies and thus may result in better decisions that are accepted with less resistance by the student community (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Not only can the nature of representation be characterised and analysed from various perspectives, and be justified on different grounds, but representation can also take various forms: it may occur in conventional settings or be informal. Moreover, it has been noted above that student representation cannot be discussed without considering the implications of participation and accountability. Attention will, therefore, be given to the question of political participation and, particularly, Ballard's distinction of different spaces of participation.

### **Spaces of participation**

According to Birch (1994, p. 80), 'participation' refers to taking part in an activity which, in this case, may be public, political or community-based. 'Community participation' refers to various ways in which members of a certain locality take part in collective decision-making processes, especially at a local-government level; 'political participation' refers to how citizens participate in the formal political process, for example in electing their parliamentary representatives, while 'public participation' generally refers to both community and political participation. Participation performs two main political purposes:

It can be used for information-gathering exercises in order to allow leaders to understand the needs of citizens or a community; it is also a way for citizens to engage the governing authority so as to ensure that the needs of the community or citizens are met (Ballard, 2008, p. 168).

Ballard (2008, pp. 173–182) distinguishes between two popular types of ‘spaces’ utilised in the process of participation. Firstly, he conceptualises ‘invited spaces’ as those spaces that are used by a governing authority to engage the community and gather information about the needs of citizens. In the context of a university, these would, for example, include meetings arranged by an SRC and meetings between management and students, as well as elections for the SRC and for other structures of student governance like a residence house committee, etc. Conversely, ‘invented spaces’ are those spaces created by citizens to engage the governing authority, for example on matters of policy. They are typically created to provide avenues of engagement *outside* the established processes; they may thus be considered unconventional and include various forms of protest. The way these different kinds of spaces are utilised is part of a continuous contestation of ideas and a shifting constellation of power. Gaventa adds to the conception of ‘invited’ and ‘invented’ spaces that of ‘closed spaces’ as the third space of participation. ‘Closed spaces’ are those where ‘decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretence of broadening the boundaries of inclusion’ (Gaventa, 2006, p. 26). Those included in closed spaces may try to create an invited space in order to legitimise decisions taken behind closed doors, thus seeking consent from excluded representatives to relieve any hostility that may have built up from taking decisions in closed spaces. It has been argued that student representation in many universities precisely originates in a politically-realist assessment of the political situation on campus; hence the ‘co-option’ of student representatives into formal or ‘invited spaces’ of university decision-making (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

### Accountability

In considering Pitkin’s type of formalistic representation, two key components of representation can be highlighted: authorisation and accountability (Pitkin, 1972). Authorisation entails a representative having the rightful power to speak on behalf of a constituency or electorate and thus to represent its interests. Accountability, in turn, involves the representative accounting for her or his use of this authority; thus, where a representative fails to represent the interests of the represented, he or she should be removed from office, for example by voting a new candidate into the position in the next election (Pitkin, 1972, pp. 55–57). Moncrieffe (1998, p. 393) posits that, during the term of office of a representative, political accountability can be measured first of all through openness and transparency in the process of representation. Thus, representatives ought to provide ‘timely information and opportunities of deliberation and debate’ (Moncrieffe, 1998, p. 393). Hence, representative democracies have constitutions which provide for checks and balances as measures of accounting to the public. In the case of the SRC of the University of the Western Cape, the SRC Constitution (2010) outlines the importance of annual general meetings for the SRC to report back to students. Conwell and Gaveta (2001)

highlight transparency and trust as the two main values of accountability. 'Trust' refers to the extent to which stakeholders believe in one another's agenda: The represented has trust in the representative, while the representative is transparent so as to ensure accountability to those who trusted him or her with public office.

### *Methodology*

In order to analyse and understand the processes of representing students' interests in the course of resolving the question of the pricing of Kovacs, a differentiated notion of student representation was used based on the foregoing conceptual outline. This basic framework presented the starting point for conducting in-depth interviews to extract detailed actor-relative accounts of the origins of the so-called 'Kovacs crisis' and how it was resolved (see Rule & John, 2011, p. 30). The sampling of respondents was purposive to ensure that they were well informed (Coyne, 1997, p. 623). Actors involved in the negotiations were therefore interviewed, including an official in the office of the deputy vice-chancellor: student affairs who is responsible for linking the student leadership (SRC) to university management and who attended the meetings in the process of resolving the 'crisis'. Other interviewees were the SRC president and a SRC cabinet member of the 2011/2012 SRC, both of whom were part of the SRC team that negotiated with the UWC management. In addition, a focus group discussion was conducted with six students who lived in different UWC residences at the time of the crisis, including three female and three male students, two of whom were specifically chosen because they had been involved in Kovacs-related student protests and had attended the report-back meetings organised by the SRC. In this manner, more detailed and richer, different perspectives could be gained on the problem and how it was resolved. Finally, one of the researchers was also a resident of a UWC student residence at the time and had some opportunity to observe public student activism. Thus, by means of these different methods of data collection and sources of data, the researchers were able to triangulate the observations and thus increase the validity of their findings and conclusions (compare Neuman, 1997, p. 421). The research is, however, limited by the fact that the researchers could neither conduct a focus group or interviews with any of the students who had occupied rooms in the Kovacs Residence during the time of the 'crisis', nor with member of senior management of the university other than the officer noted above. The data obtained from both the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion were coded and analysed to assess how effectively the SRC leadership represented students' interests. Below, we outline the steps that were taken to resolve the crisis and how the conceptual framework may assist in understanding the process.

### *The steps taken by the different actors*

#### **Representation**

The SRC of the UWC represents the interests of students in the various governance structures and committees of the institution, including the Council as the university's highest decision-making body, the Senate, the Institutional Forum, and many of their

respective committees, and in meetings directly with institutional management. In keeping with its role as the representative structure of student interests, the newly elected SRC of 2011/2012 called a meeting with university management immediately after being voted into office at the end of the 2011 academic year to discuss the pricing of the Kovacs Residence. According to the student affairs officer, the SRC argued that the proposed annual user-price of R30 000 for the new Kovacs Residence was much higher than the typical user-price at UWC residences. SRC members interviewed for the purpose of this study (2 April 2013 & 4 April 2013) recalled that management agreed to have a meeting if the SRC had suggestions to present. cursory research conducted by the SRC found that the most expensive residences at the UWC at the time were the Hector Petersen Residence (HPR) and DISA Residence, each supposedly costing about R15 000 (USD1 200) per annum; other public universities in or around the Cape Town Metropole charged considerably more: the University of Stellenbosch apparently had the most expensive residences costing about R23 000 (USD1 840), while the University of Cape Town charged approximately R20 000 (USD1 600) and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology approximately R18 000 (USD1 440) annually.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the first consultation meeting organised by the SRC for the student community about Kovacs, students demanded that the Kovacs Residence user-price be reduced to R17 000 (interview with the SRC president, 4 April 2013).

Following the consultation meeting with students, the SRC cabinet agreed in camera that the SRC should negotiate a reasonable price between R20 000 and R22 000 with the private contractor. This decision by the SRC cabinet to negotiate on behalf of students at a price higher than that suggested by the students they represent, illustrates Lavallo, Houtzager and Castello's (2005) argument that representatives assume autonomy in the making of decisions. In this case, the SRC clearly sought to improve its negotiating position by seeking to strike a balance between students' demand for affordability and what the SRC anticipated as the service provider's reasonable demand for profitability.

SRC members (interviews, 2 April 2013 & 4 April 2013) indicated that they had a number of meetings with university management and Kovacs. In order to get a price reduction, the SRC argued that 'the university should subsidize the residence'. The SRC further argued that it did not make sense paying R30 000 for Kovacs while faculties such as the Faculty of Arts did not even have a degree that cost as much annually. Moreover, the SRC reasoned that most UWC students were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which only offered a maximum of approximately R15 000 for accommodation (interviews, 2 April 2013 & 4 April 2013; Phiri, 2012). The SRC President noted that they discovered later in discussions with management that the university had actually informed the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) about the anticipated high user-price for Kovacs Residence and that the Department had released some funds to the institution to be used for subsidisation a year earlier. However, it was noted that:

UWC went back to the Department [and requested] to use the money for something else [arguing that they] will replace it at some other point. The Department [representatives] approved that request. (interview with SRC president, 4 April 2013)

According to both the student affairs officer (interview, 5 April 2013) and SRC members (interview, 2 April 2013 & 5 April 2013), the meetings between the SRC, Kovacs and university management deadlocked. Hence, the SRC, after holding a report-back meeting with the student body, decided to organise a protest on the UWC's main campus and deliver a memorandum to university management and the Kovacs board.

Throughout this phase in the 'Kovacs crisis', the SRC was acting as the formal representative body, negotiating on behalf of the student body, consulting students, organising protests on behalf of students, and drafting and delivering a memorandum to the managements (compare Pitkin, 1972). The change in the form of engagement from formal negotiations to protests following the deadlock highlights the SRC's ability to employ a diverse political repertoire in its pursuit of representing student interests, thus showing resolve as representatives not to accept a deal it thought was not in the interest of the student community.

The interview with the student affairs officer (interview, 5 April 2013) further indicates a different complexity in the Kovacs Residence PPP: Kovacs was a private entity on UWC land. Were the various problems raised in relation to the new Kovacs Residence by the students to be addressed by university management or by Kovacs? Eventually, after a series of meetings deadlocked, SRC protest actions, a unilateral management decision, and two open letters by the SRC to the DHET, a meeting was held with all the major actors involved in the PPP: the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), which had loaned the funds to the private investor (Kovacs); the DHET, which had provided funds and guarantees to the university; UWC management and Kovacs management; and the SRC. Through retreating to an 'invented space' in the form of protest, students had put sufficient pressure on university management to provide a new space to which to invite all stakeholders for discussion and negotiation (cf. Ballard, 2008, p. 186). However, according to interviews with participants, even this meeting did not produce the results the SRC was hoping for. According to the participating SRC members, the main player among all the actors, the DHET, asked for time to think about a better solution. By the time the 2011/2012 SRC left office in November 2012, it had not heard from the DHET (interviews, 2 April 2013; 4 April 2013 & 5 April 2013).

As much as it is clear here that the SRC tried to engage with other parties on behalf of students, there were hardships such as those suggested in the focus group (7 April 2013). For example, it was argued that the SRC could not win a battle against university management because student representatives were always outnumbered in these meetings. A focus group respondent went on to argue that the SRC's strategies were poor and that the SRC ought to caucus with sympathetic Council members rather than rush to protest. Accordingly, the student argued that students lost the battle against management (focus group, 7 April 2013).

## Participation and accountability

As shown above, students not only participated in formal meetings in order to put pressure on university management to reduce the user-price of Kovacs Residence, but also organised the protests that followed and which resulted in the temporary halting of construction work at the Kovacs site on the east campus and a sit-in/occupation of some rooms in the unit that was ready in 2012. The mobilisation of students was done using posters in public places informing students about upcoming protest marches and student mass meetings; mass emails were also sent out to inform all students of the goings-on. Students thus used both invited and invented spaces in the process of making their demands.

Despite the very public nature of the 'crisis', the focus group participants (7 April 2013) argued that there was insufficient consultation with the student body, both by university management and the SRC. One of the focus group respondents even argued that he knew nothing about Kovacs, and that as a student in a UWC residence, the protests could have affected him. The focus group participants further indicated that, in the report-back meetings organised by the SRC, there was less emphasis on student participation and that SRC members, it appeared, were not completely open with students about the discussions that were going on with university management. A focus group respondent argued:

I think they were hiding something. You know, when someone is hiding something, before they answer your question they consult each other. (focus group, 7 April 2013)

Transparency is very important in promoting trust between representatives and represented, as Conwell and Gaveta (2001) posit. In this case, the SRC seems to have been working against its own interests, since its manner of communication led students to doubt the trustworthiness of the SRC's engagement with management. Moreover, some students said that students were discouraged from attending the SRC's mass meetings because they tended to turn into party-political contests rather than focusing on trying to constructively resolve the 'Kovacs crisis'. Accordingly:

The thing is in those meetings its always SASCO and PASMA trying to win over the students. [Each] saying you know we actually have a better plan than this one, so they do not actually address the problem. (focus group, 7 April 2013)<sup>4</sup>

Another focus group respondent argued that propositions by students in mass meetings tended to be overlooked. Apparently, this was also particularly the case if a student was a PASMA member, because the SRC leaders were mostly from SASCO. As a result, fewer students participated in the mass meetings and, eventually, fewer knew about the protests. Moreover, because the protests were not well organised, some of the students were arrested for damaging university property.

Thus, the above suggests that the different spaces for participation created by the SRC were not always effectively used as a means to show itself accountable to students, build trust, and ensure broad-based participation. This negatively affected students' perceptions

of the effectiveness of student representation by the SRC. As noted, the SRC used various measures of reporting back: mass meetings, mass emails and posters in public places. Participation is indicated, for instance, by the fact that the decision to protest was reached in a meeting between the SRC and students in order to force university management back to the negotiating table after a deadlock had been reached. The SRC Facebook page and other online social networks also served as forums for discussion and information. Finally, reporting back also happened through the SRC constitutional General Council meeting which brings together all student leaders serving in student governance structures on campus. Nonetheless, attendance levels were reported as very low, which impaired the SRC's ability to account to the student body (focus group, 7 April 2013).

### *Resolving the 'Kovacs crisis'*

In March 2012, university management sent an email to all UWC students informing them that the cost of the Kovacs Residence had been reduced from R30 000 to R24 000 per annum. The SRC had been waiting for almost two weeks to receive a response to the memorandum it had delivered as part of the protest march; when it received the email from university management, it was taken aback, since it had not been part of this decision nor had it been informed of it before the general university community was informed. According to the student affairs officer, the latter was an administrative oversight; the SRC president was supposed to have been informed of the decision before it was made public:

The person who was supposed to have sent the letter did not add the SRC president as one of the recipients to inform him that this is what has been agreed to and to please share this with his fellow SRC members [before we make the decision public]. (5 April 2013)

However, some participants in the focus group doubted the ignorance of the SRC of university management's decision; they also alleged that some members of the SRC cabinet had been promised incentives so as to accept the resolution by management (focus group, 7 April 2013). These allegations were, however, vigorously denied by the SRC president and his cabinet. University management instituted an investigation to discover what exactly had happened about the lack of informing the SRC prior to sending out the public emails to inform students about management's decision (interview with student affairs officer, 5 April 2013). According to the student affairs officer, the investigation concluded that it had been an administrative oversight – a human error – that the SRC was not informed beforehand. For our purposes, such oversights and allegations epitomise a sense of mistrust between the represented and the representatives; allegations of this nature create a negative perception about the SRC which, eventually, affects student participation in SRC activities, as some participants in the focus group argued (focus group, 7 April 2013).

### *Concluding discussion*

University management's unilateral decision to subsidise the Kovacs Residence user-price came about undeniably as a result of the 'Kovacs crisis' created by the SRC and students

in 2012 for this purpose. Management's commitment to resolving the 'crisis' was limited and temporary: it only committed to subsidise the Kovacs price for one academic year (2012), and the reduction was limited to a new price of R24 000. In its annual report, university management considered the housing fee subsidy agreement a 'financial risk to the developer' and 'setback' in its efforts to develop campus infrastructure and address the student housing shortage, even though it recognised the need for 'equitable access' to student housing and 'affordability' (UWC, 2013, p. 23). It further reported:

Council ... approved that if needed, some university funds, of which a maximum amount was determined, could be redirected to the Kovacs student accommodation project, a public private partnership project. This decision has been taken as a sustainability measure to reduce the immediate financial burden on students by reducing the base fee charged by the developer, which will also impact on increases going forward. (UWC, 2013, pp. 6–7)

Nowhere in the annual report is there any mention of the SRC's role in initiating and arriving at the decision. Meanwhile, the SRC members interviewed argued that they had suggested subsidisation earlier in the discussions with management:

We said to the university they [should] subsidize; they were a bit reluctant to subsidize it. In the end, we succeeded. I think that's the argument that actually won the case. (interviews, 2 April 2013 & 4 April 2013)

Thus, not only was it the SRC's initiative to open talks on the Kovacs user-price (and eventually create a 'crisis'), but the SRC also claims to have suggested the solution. However, in the communication regarding the resolution of the 'crisis', university management failed to mention the role of the SRC. As with management's email to students, the manner in which university management communicated publicly about the Kovacs subsidisation decision in the UWC annual report undermined the role played by the student representatives. Did university management fear losing face and therefore deliberately refuse to involve the SRC in the final decision and inform it about its decision to subsidise Kovacs in order to avoid students claiming victory? The resolution of the 'crisis' could have provided an opportunity for a mature university management and SRC to showcase good and cooperative governance, as well as to reconcile and demonstrate their mutual solidarity and commitment to social justice at the UWC. However, management's actual action angered the SRC members, and students were unsure about the effectiveness of their SRC (interviews, 2 April 2013 & 4 April 2013).

Thus, while all respondents in the interviews and focus group discussion agreed (when prompted) that the SRC had represented the interests of students persistently, and that management's agreement to subsidise the residence in 2012 could be attributed to the SRC's representation of student interests, the level of effectiveness was considered highly debatable. The SRC's effectiveness was challenged by most focus group discussants who argued that the price of Kovacs was still high (and had returned to R30 000 in 2013). In addition, they argued that students had, after all, wanted the price down to R17 000, which

was not achieved. The Kovacs case thus raises the important question of how to include student representatives effectively when forging complex partnerships with external bodies, as in the case of PPPs for student housing, where students have an abiding interest in the kind of service to be provided.

Student involvement in university decision-making frequently leads to better decisions and decisions that are more readily accepted by students (cf. Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). The ‘Kovacs crisis’ of 2012 illustrates this – not only in its contemporaneous context but also when considering the sequel to the ‘Kovacs crisis’ in 2014. In March 2014, UWC management turned to the High Court to restrain the SRC from protesting, inter alia, about the fact that disadvantaged students needed accommodation on campus while Kovacs Residence had 200 empty (and unaffordable) beds (Fredericks & Mposo, 2014). It is at this point that the vice-chancellor of the UWC, Prof. O’Connell, conceded that the Kovacs PPP altogether turned out not to be the perfect solution to address the institution’s student housing challenge. According to Fredericks and Mposo (2014):

Asked if in hindsight he [i.e. the UWC vice-chancellor, Prof. O’Connell] thought the university should have entered the partnership, he said: “I don’t think so.”

In a broader perspective, the way the ‘Kovacs crisis’ was brought about and resolved emphasises the importance of formal student representation in higher education institutions and the problematic nature of using ‘closed spaces’ as mechanisms of decision-making. South Africa is a democracy which, by 2012, was still in its teens, and where these mechanisms of student representation put in place at university level were also seen as opportunities for grooming a new crop of democratic leaders. Outdated authoritarian and exclusive methods of decision-making and resolving institutional problems do not expose student leaders to democratic values and practices and thus do not effectively use the opportunity of student involvement in university governance as a *training ground* in democracy (see Mattes & Luescher-Mamashela, 2012).

### *Acknowledgements*

We are grateful to the respondents for their participation in the study; and to the reviewers of the journal for their fruitful and critical comments. SDG.

### *Endnotes*

1. Apartheid legislation in South Africa classified all inhabitants into four racial groups, variably called ‘native’ or ‘black’, ‘European’ or ‘white’, ‘coloured’, and ‘Indian’ or ‘Asian’. The population group ‘coloured’ included people of mixed descent and from various parts of the world.
2. The *UWC Annual Report* describes the Kovacs Student Housing Project as follows: ‘UWC has appointed Kovacs in terms of a financing agreement in a “Build Operate Transfer” (BOT) model whereby UWC leases land to KOVACS with a right to develop student residences exclusive to UWC students with a right to collect rentals at full risk. The financing agreement to UWC is regulated by a “Development Agreement”, Lease Agreement” and a “Management Agreement”. The salient points of the agreements are: 1) The terms of the lease [are] 25 years plus 3 years of development; 2) KOVACS takes full risk of the business model; 3) The design and development

of student accommodation stock is the responsibility of KOVACS with approval from UWC; 4) The total number of beds contracted amounts to 1100. The asset will be depreciated over its useful life. The obligation will be released to revenue on a straight-line basis over the term of the lease. The land rentals will need to be recognised on a straight-line basis. At the end of the lease term only the asset will remain on the statement of financial position and this will continue to depreciate over the remaining useful [life]. Phase 1 of the service concession agreement was completed with construction costs of R57,741,421 having been incurred. 334 beds were completed in this phase. Phase 2 consists of the construction of 3 accommodation blocks with actual cost incurred of R44,824,917. A total of 228 beds were available for use at beginning of 2013. Phase 3 comprises the balance of the development entailing the construction of 538 beds to be estimated at R76,573,940.' (UWC, 2013, p. 93)

3. When comparing this with Rensburg (2011, p. 103, Table 13), who provides the official weighted figures of average residence prices for 2010 by all the universities referred to by the SRC's 'research', it is clear that the SRC's figures were much too low and outdated, wrong or based on discounted residence prices.
4. SASCO and PASMA are two major student political organisations involved in student politics at the UWC. The South African Students Congress (SASCO) is formally aligned with the South African governing party, the African National Congress. The Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania (PASMA) is a student organisation born at the UWC and aligned to the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, a South African political party. The UWC SRC tends to be dominated by either one of the two organisations; the 2011/2012 SRC was a majority SASCO SRC.

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