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# TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR MOULDING STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS FOR A CHANGING AND DYNAMIC TERRAIN IN QUEST FOR CREATING SUSTAINABLE FUTURES IN ZIMBABWE

EVERNICE MUNANDO<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This study intends to develop and introduce a framework that can be used in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions in moulding student leadership that suit the changing dynamics of these institutions. In a bid to know how the terrain and dynamics are changing in higher education institutions, the role of student leadership, and the strategies being implemented to foster student leadership, this study therefore seeks to develop a framework that guides the development of student leadership and enforce it in a sustainable manner that leads to the fulfilment of the needs of students as well the good governance of higher education institutions. The adoption of a student leadership framework includes certain policies such as the Student Representative Council (SRC), which governs or regulates student leadership on campus. Moulding student leadership implies the introduction of a methodology or concept that can be employed to achieve the required results. Hence, the aim of this study is to proffer a leadership framework for higher education institutions. The study used desktop analysis to gather and analyse the qualitative information presented in this document. The results indicated that a framework is significant for strengthening student leadership in Zimbabwe. A framework proved important for the proper development of leadership skills in students as well as providing the legal foundation on how functional it can be through policies guiding it. It can be argued that though a framework can be drafted and introduced to these institutions, without enforcement, it is meaningless. It can be argued that the framework is the way to go towards the empowerment of student leaders in school governance and the expected leadership that will result in sustainability of higher education institutions regardless of the current changes. The study recommends enforcement of a leadership framework and the assessment of the success of the framework in moulding student leaders.

**Keywords:** leadership moulding, policy, university and representation, authority, policy

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<sup>1</sup> Female Students Network Trust, Harare, Zimbabwe; Department of Governance and Leadership, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study aims at developing a framework that can be used to mould student leadership in universities and colleges in Zimbabwe. Student leadership has proved to have little attention in addressing students' grievances due to lack of capacity and skills to confront the status quo. Hence, it is important to have a framework that will speak to the procedures and processes that inform effective student leadership in a bid to serve the students' body. This has led to the failure to adapt and solve the challenges emanating from the changing dynamics and terrain in higher education institutions. This is an important strategy to ensure that student leaders are equipped with certain skills that are critical for the fulfilment of their duties. They are protected and free to exercise their power and provide a guideline that suits the present changes occurring in higher education that needs to tie with leadership skills. Haber (2011) is of the view that in the past two decades, leadership development programmes have been proliferating across universities worldwide. Cáceres-Reche et al. (2021) argue that leadership is a great challenge to both societies and institutions that requires to be solved to achieve their goals, aspirations and objectives. It has been noted that there is an absence of student development techniques leading to inefficient moulding of effective leadership among students. More so, there are no supporting policies for the development and promotion of student leadership, hence this study seeks to develop a framework which takes into consideration the benefits of providing proper policy framework in support of student leadership development. Singh and Widen (2021) argue that leadership has been required among administrators and managerial positions in the past but with the rapid use of technology, leadership skills have become vital in the library and information science field and so as in higher education institutions.

Though universities have a mandate to develop student leaders, less consensus is noted on how they should do it in a way that produces the best leaders to help solve contemporary issues in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, hence the void which this study hopes to cover through the development of the leadership framework. Rasmussen and Hansen (2018) argue that the understanding of student leadership has varied in the last two decades, from the traditional concept to contemporary concepts of leadership development, hence the need for a leadership framework to guide the development of student leaders is vital in higher education institutions. Black et al. (2014) are of the view that the student leadership policy framework has been implemented both at different national levels and internationally and this has expressed the intent to encourage students to take greater ownership of their learning and participate in decision-making and change processes in their institutions.



Desktop review was used for the purpose of this research. Qualitative data was gathered, analysed and presented in this study as collected from different data sources such as articles, policies, books, journal and newsletters from different universities and research labs worldwide. The results show that the introduction of student leaders does not only lead to the development of leaders within the institution, but leaders that will transform the world and society. The results show that the framework proliferates the solutions that will lead to the sustainability of student leaders who contribute solutions towards the changing terrain and dynamics in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. The results indicate the need for a new paradigm shift that recognises student government as integral to effectiveness of student leadership for sustainability of student participation in decisionmaking processes. It can be argued that a student leadership framework is the solution towards student leadership development, as it will provide specific steps and measures that can lead to successful development of student leaders. Zimbabwe has a high record of drafting proper policies and frameworks for different kinds of development, but lack the implementation, hence lack of higher education framework implementation will lead to the failure of the framework. In conclusion, it can be said that the student leadership framework is key to the success of student leadership in higher education institutions, hence the need to be drafted and be implemented.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The notion of this study is to introduce a framework that is applicable in the contemporary student leadership scenario suiting the changing dynamics and terrains of higher education systems as a solution for promoting full engagement of students as main stakeholders of these institutions. Black et al. (2014) assert that traditional leadership models, for instance Student Representative Councils, had a tendency of benefiting only those directly involved in it, instead of building the skills and knowledge of students. It can be argued that traditional schools' hierarchy do not support student leadership that has become one of the most important and significant concepts for solving and embracing the changing dynamics in higher education institutions, raising the need for the introduction of a framework that governs the grabbing of student leaders into the systems. Hence, this framework aims at promoting student leadership in such a way that all students are represented rationally, and their voices are heard and responded to without failure, thus benefiting the whole institution. Besides, this framework ought to ensure that there is full representation of students at all levels of education, from the classroom, the school, the school systems and the community.



The University of Dayton (2019) is of the view that leadership is a collaborative and values-driven process that interrogates and challenges organisations and systemic dynamics to transform the community positively. Cáceres-Reche et al. (2021) describe leadership as a process, rather than a position that requires the designing and planning of series of real and practical strategies with alternative models of action and problem solving, hence the need for developing a framework that guides this leadership development process that allows one to have a clear vision of what a student leader requires to be. Black et al. (2014) put forward several student leadership moulding opportunities that can be adopted in higher education systems for effective leadership. It can be argued that the development of a leadership framework is based on different ideologies and beliefs that govern institutions, hence the need to structure a framework for student leadership in Zimbabwe based on the culture, customs and traditions of its higher education institutions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

On an international scale, a shift in education policy towards the incorporation of student leadership has been experienced over the past two decades (ibid.). This has been done after the realisation that schools are ideal institutions for the transmission of social norms, including civic leadership and participation, among others. Student leadership education is vital in improving students' values and their development of social core values among universities in Shanghai, China (Zhang and Chen, 2015). Student leadership in the United States of America is regarded as important in enhancing the national core values of education in the aspect of civic responsibility and community participation of young students (Wagner, 2009). In China, it has been discovered that there are no formal leadership development models among its universities, hence Weng and Yan (2019) suggest the development of formal leadership courses, mainly the valuebased leadership curriculum that aligns with the Chinese values, current leadership theories, philosophy and main national conditions (Abbott, 1996). According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2007), higher education's important learning goals are citizen participation and social responsibilities which American colleges and universities are trying to provide through the development of student leadership.

The idea of leadership development among students has been grabbed by school systems internationally and has been taken as higher education institutions' responsibility. International organisations have started to draft, introduce and implement some policies related to the development of student leadership and their participation in the governance of higher education institutions around the globe. Black et al. (2014) note that the United Nations, in its capacity, provides

an over-arching international policy context through the Convention on the Rights of the Child, aiming at coordinating and integrating student leadership into the education policy, providing a foundational direction for engaging students in decision-making and passing their views and ideas freely. The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) (2012) argues that there has been a shift in education policy in the European Union as they seek to coordinate different stakeholders, thus a shift from a student-based approach to a comprehensive approach. ETUCE (ibid.) discovered that several student leadership policies have been implemented in Europe among its higher education institutions, with Australia following suit. In Europe and the United Kingdom, several systems have been used to locate student leadership practice within the framework of citizen leadership (Black et al. 2014). ETUCE (2012) asserts that the participation of students at different levels has been central and of great importance to the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.

Hatlevick and Ernseth (2012) observe that the notion of citizenship is highly explored as part of the curriculum across the world as noted by a study conducted by the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study in 2009.

In Europe and Asia, leadership is being adopted in different forms which includes the introduction of several policies and curricula to guide the development of student leadership in higher education institutions. Black et al. (2014) understand student leadership as a document that upholds certain policy frameworks that encourages and support innovative student leadership practice by pampering the students with perfect skills and civics education in the curriculum, supporting the transfer of information and knowledge as well as practice models among students and many other intended leadership development tactics.

The education policy introduced in the United Kingdom is one of the proofs that democratic student leadership is being supported in that country and the national curriculum that identifies young people as the players of the most active roles in higher education institutions (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007). Apart from that, the UK Department of Education and Skills (2003) insists that the United Kingdom Education Act has been used as a legal framework which gives a mandate for governing bodies, education authorities to give heed to student perspectives and integrate them in processes of democratic decision-making in the education department. In Zhejiang University, leadership courses with the main focus on the improvement of student's leadership capability in communication, adaptation, innovation, influence and decision-making, are being developed to ensure that student leaders acquire all the necessary skills for

a sustainable future of higher education institutions (Hu, 2011). Weng and Yan (2019) note the rising need for young leaders around the world has led to the development and introduction of theoretical leadership models, leadership curriculum and leadership courses in colleges scattered around the United States of America. It can be argued that Zimbabwe, as one of the developing countries, should adopt such ideas and implement them in its own context, supported by new innovations and remodelling of such concepts as this leads to high quality student leadership development. In China, the leadership framework has been found to be more systematic, developing internal psychology and emphasizing the student's subjectivity, forming different leadership skills in a student (ibid.). In this sense, it can be argued that the introduction of a student leadership framework in Zimbabwe will lead to basic practices that facilitate individual growth and assist students with supportive skills, building them into the anticipated vision of a great leader. As a way of promoting leadership in Chinese universities, the introduced leadership courses done through project activities, designed and implemented by students, have managed to improve in them self-management, project management, communication skills and decision-making skills, among others (Chen, 2011).

Another leadership framework that has been discovered to be effective in producing quality student leaders is the Northwestern Leadership Framework that is grounded in the values and mission of Northwestern and the Division of Student Affairs connect and weave a coordinated and integrated cross campus approach to leadership development. The quest of the Northwestern Leadership Framework is to expand the student's capacity to provide change as world leaders (Northwestern Student Affairs, 2022). It is argued that the framework guides the work of the university staff in supporting student leadership development and their outcomes. This framework is guided by nine principles adapted from Shankman et al. (2015) which are: students are partners in this process; leadership can be learned and developed; leadership does not require a title, it is available to all; leadership is both an art and a science; leadership brings positive change; leadership is an interpersonal activity; no theory is the best theory; leadership requires inner work and self-care; and there is wisdom beyond the walls of our university. The leadership framework is meant to benefit the student and secondarily be used in the examination of leadership development among university staff. It can be argued that this framework is against the notion that leadership is an inborn skill in a person but, rather, it can be taught and developed in anyone and does not need a title for one to fulfil it.

In Zimbabwe, student leadership is perceived as a political game, generating polarisation of student leadership. Though there are SRC constitutions, student leaders are somehow imposed to serve the interests of the nominating board than

those of students. More so, SRCs are not a homogeneous group where individuals may be drawn from various unions, in this case there is the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Students Union (ZICOSU) as major unions who also purportedly are affiliated to major political parties in Zimbabwe (ibid.). This means that their activism is largely influenced by political ideologies of the day. However, it is also implicitly in stigmatising political arenas such as student governments where student leadership takes place to a realm of political stimulation and pedagogical exercises (Patrick, 2022). Upon the realisation that student activism is political, a game of power, students may have divergent views from that of the authorities, hence this may determine or influence the operating terrain.

The need for student leadership development has led to the discovery of the Residential Life Leadership Model at St Cloud State University. This model was developed to foster and develop leadership skills in student leaders in the Residential Life Community (St Cloud State University, 2016). The student leadership development has a number of tools that were used by both the student and their supervisors in the development process of leadership skills. The first of these tools is the initial leadership assessment which is used by students in assessing themselves at the beginning of their leadership position as a way of identifying the areas of potential growth and development, thus leading to the second tool, which is the formulation of a goal (PaperClip Communications, 2002). The third tool of this framework is the goal post, followed by the evaluation of goal and achievement tracking form and, lastly, leadership evaluation, whereby they evaluate themselves on the areas of focus that makes or breaks the leader. It can be noted that this is significant in the development of the student leadership skills as they have the opportunity to assess themselves and help them to continuously develop in the leadership field through the series of tools available for their growth. In order to promote student leadership, the development of the student leadership framework was done at the University of Tasmania to guide the development and implementation of student leaders in the university and four more universities, Curtin University, Otago University, Monash University and Wollongong University. Skalicky et al. (2018) note that in Australia, a number of universities were involved in the formulation of what is known as the Developing and Supporting Student Leadership Framework which was done through a multi-institutional research project funded by the Australian Government's Office for Learning and Teaching, with the University of Tasmania leading. Skalicky et al. (ibid.) argue that the Developing and Supporting Student Leadership Framework accommodates the diversity of leadership conceptualisations and at the same time gives principles and guidelines that support good practice and continued improvement.

This framework was developed to equip student leaders to be practitioners across a range of programmes and guide more comprehensive and international consideration of student leadership. Skalicky et al. (ibid.) note that there are five elements that constitute the student leadership framework: purpose, people, positioning, practice and progress. Besides these elements, there are four components that were designed to support program coordinators: a reflection tool and action plan; a set of good practice principles and guidelines; a series of case studies; and supporting resources. It can be argued that this framework has intentions of providing student leaders with experience and training as well as volunteering opportunities that later help them in fulfilling their leadership roles in their institutions and outside educational premises in their communities.

As a solution for the development of leadership to meet the increasing competition and need for young leaders, a model, known as the Four-stage Value-based Leadership Development Model (Weng and Yan, 2019), was developed in China. This resulted in the development of leadership courses in a few Chinese universities and colleges categorised into three forms, namely project-oriented leadership activities, skills-oriented leadership courses and leadership courses, focusing on theories and skills (ibid.). At the University of Dayton, the leadership framework was developed based on the lens of Catholic and Marianist identity through which six tenets were the basis of student leadership development. The awareness of one's identities and values has been vital for student leadership, followed by the sense of social responsibility that unites one with the needs of other people, which the leader ought to familiarise with. Another tenet is the relationship one shares with the community where commitment to the development of meaningful, inclusive and reciprocal relationship is required. Leaders intend to have a vision that promotes justice and positive social change and having this vision, they are expected to act to support the goal and, lastly, reflection and growth which emanate from the ability to reflect on and assess one's strengths and challenges with a focus on continuous improvement (University of Dayton, 2019).

Gore and Kanyangale (2022) proposed an integrative framework for strategic leadership in higher education in Zimbabwe, bringing up six components that are: organisational capabilities, inclusive envisioning of the future, leading self, sense-making of dynamic reality in a context of the university, and interfacing with key stakeholders to collectively shape and reshape. Literature, as noted, has a lot of information concerning the development and implementation of the student leadership framework meant to promote and be used in the leadership skills among students and its benefits have shown to increase the adaptation of the changes that are being noted in higher education institutions and a tunnel that leads to sustainability in the higher education sector. The development of the

leadership framework, as noted, being done in other regions and universities, is vital for higher education systems in Zimbabwe, hence the need to frame it, ensuring that all aspects of leadership are looked into and given enough consideration and attentions.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study used desktop analysis to gather and analyse the qualitative information presented in this document. Previous studies were reviewed so as to understand how the student leadership framework has been successful and useful in many higher education institutions around the world and also get clarity on how these frameworks are developed and what in particular they intend to address in relation to the development of sustainable student leadership in universities and colleges. Documents, including journals, reports, articles, legal frameworks and books were used as data sources for this study. The qualitative research design was used to gather, analyse and present data contained in this study as it gives an opportunity to the author to bring full explanations and debates related to the matter being studied by the research.

## **RESULTS**

The findings portray that a leadership framework for the development of student leadership skills is the way to go towards the proper enforcement of leadership roles of students in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. It provides opportunities and resources for students to gain leadership experience through the use of various strategies and systems. Student leadership is declared to be a purely leadership development and training for the future, rather than the present, hence the framework is the guideline of leadership of students to feature into the future dynamic and lead to sustainable development of education institutions in Zimbabwe. Muyambo et

al. (2022) is of the view that there have been rapid changes in the way humans live and work that has led to an outcry for global educational reforms with the consideration of student leadership leading to the development of a number of policies for its moulding and development. The development of student leadership among the students requires a common agenda where the vision of the institution and the student aim at the same goal of working towards the sustainability of these institutions, hence. the need for effective communication which is consistent and open so as to create more ground for interaction and sharing of leadership skills through mentorship and coaching.

Results have indicated student participation in community development as a strategy towards student leadership development. The framework insists on giving students chances and allows them in leading development in communities

and volunteerism as a solution that leads to the development of leadership skills. This has indicated to be productive as the students get a chance to interact with different leaders from the society where they get an opportunity to be coached and mentored into the expected leaders that will guide the governance and development of their institutions in adapting to the chances occurring in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Patrick (2020) argues that fostering student leadership is important not just political education, but student representation, activism and advocacy.

The results prove that student leadership development requires the moulding of oneself into the best vision of what a leader ought to be. The results indicate that leadership is something that can be developed in oneself, though others are born leaders. Leadership skills can be taught and learnt by individuals and become successful leaders of communities (Northwestern Student Affairs, 2019). Therefore, students should be introduced to leadership courses in their universities. Curricula should focus on the development of leadership as young leaders and the youth are regarded as the future of this planet and their participation in the planning and management of the universe has become one of the major priorities of the United Nations' Sustainable Goals. The lives of students on campus should help them learn leadership skills through their participation in student organisations, their interactions with roommates, collaboration on group projects in their classrooms, among other occasions where they are involved in certain projects with their lecturers and other students. In other words, the development of mutually reinforcing activities which promote coordination and activities with a range of interest to the students, results in leadership development at multiple stages of their training.

Leadership has proved to be one of the modes of student participation in higher education institutions and with the changing dynamic and terrains where student involvement has become a priority, ensuring that it is being met, is significant for growth and productivity of universities and colleges. Leadership in Zimbabwe has remained a traditional way of participation where the SRC and other student leaders are involved whilst student leadership is now being considered to be the participation of every student with leadership skills developed. The student leadership framework aims at compulsory leadership development in all students through a curriculum that persists on leadership courses, an essential tool for student leadership development in Zimbabwe. Patrick (2022) notes that most student leaders risk their lives trying to promote their thoughts in the management of higher education institutions which has resulted in imprisonment and harassment of these leaders, hence the need for a safe and secure environment for students to participate.



In this regard, this framework emphasizes on introducing ways in which students participate in the governance and decision-making processes at their institutions with no fear of being harassed. This eventually promotes the sense of belonging in students as they feel that they are a priority. Networking students and allowing them to act in different programmes and projects gives them opportunities to reflect on leadership and apply the knowledge and the skills learnt from leadership courses as well as think about how they are doing in leadership through self-assessment for their development.

The results indicate that there is lack of policy framework on how student leadership ought to be delivered, which is a constraint in the development of student leadership in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe (Muyambo et al., 2022). The framework should have strong supportive policies that are enforced to guide and monitor leadership development by ensuring that students are given enough opportunities to develop their leadership skills in their full capacity. Student leadership framework enables students to be integrated into the planning of the institution and leads to effective decisions in which everyone and all ideas are represented. The findings have demonstrated that the higher education sector of Zimbabwe is lacking structural organisation for the moulding of student leadership skills, hence the need for the development of such structures that will promote coaching and training of the students. Patrick (2022) notes that the lack of structure to foster effective leadership activities is a fundamental challenge to student leadership. The implementation of a leadership framework in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions is important as it maximises student participation in the decision-making process which ensures that the principles of equity and fairness are presented in every practice in these institutions.

## **DISCUSSION**

It can be argued that though a framework can be drafted and introduced to these institutions, without enforcement, it is meaningless. Lack of implementation of the framework will only increase the inefficiency of student leadership and the lagging behind of student participation in the governance of these institutions. Failure of the establishment and use of this framework limit the capacity of student leaders to solve the problems faced by the institutions that are calling for sustainability and proper measures to foster and manage the changing dynamics and terrain in higher education systems.

The influence of politics on the implementation of student leadership frameworks is a barrier to the development of student leadership in higher education institutions, as can be realised from the current involvement of the ruling and opposition parties in student politics, focusing more on state politics, causing

chaos and more harm than coordinating and developing student leaders who are effective and efficient in addressing the challenges of the institutions. The continued clash between different leadership parties in higher education institutions will eventually limit the effectiveness of this framework, thus there is need to address these issues for successful leadership development among the students and letting them contribute towards the result that is required among these institutions.

Lack of cooperation between higher education institutions governance and the students can be argued to be another challenge that might lower the success of the framework. Institutional governance authorities have lots of powers vested in them and the institutionalisation of this framework might be a threat to them losing power to rule these institutions, leading to them to discouraging student leadership involvement. In this regard, authorities should be ready to decentralise their powers and allow students to contribute in various forms. They should be ready to introduce various strategies of leadership development in students that will equip them with proper skills and knowledge on how to vest their power as institution leaders and student representatives that contribute to proper and efficient governance of their institutions for sustainable future.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, it can be argued that the framework is the way to go towards empowering student leaders in school governance and the expected leadership that will result in sustainability of higher education institutions regardless of current changes. The success of the leadership framework is key to the development of student leadership skills and the sustainable development of higher education institutions. It is argued that the student leadership framework has various benefits that boost student leadership development among students and govern its proper implementation for the productivity of their institutions through the contributions of young brains that work well towards the growth and sustainability of the institutions in dealing with current issues that affecting them. The framework will not only benefit the institutions, but the students themselves in shaping themselves into future leaders who will transform the world and their personal lives in managing different companies and organisations in Zimbabwe and all over the universe.

The study recommends enforcement of a leadership framework and the assessment of the success of the framework in moulding student leaders. The study persists that the implementation of the framework will lead to the acquirement of knowledge, development of skills and experience in leadership in students. The study recommends the introduction of programmes that support

student leadership development through involvement in the governance of institution or community development programmes that require their ideas and lead roles.

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