


# Addressing the underside of student unrest in South African universities using collegial leadership as approach

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Universities in South Africa are confronted with student unrest, which has hindered the effective university education process. They have faced various shortages of academic activities and teaching and learning because of protests and subsequent management responses that culminated in the closures of universities at most times. Student unrest has made it difficult to actualise the set predetermined goals and objectives of the university. These challenges have severally been linked to problems with tuition fees, financial support for students, adequate and conducive hostel accommodation, student socio-economic background and university management styles. Among the management styles, according to the literature and observation, is the decision-making process where the issues concerning students are decided upon. This study explores the potential of the collegial leadership approach to enhance the university decision-making process towards alleviating student unrest in universities. This study is located within a transformative paradigm to transform social unrest in the university system. Conceptual analysis was employed to make sense of the adopted approach as a veritable tool for managing the power differential between the students and the university management. The study found that collaboration and teamwork, consensus building and organisational relationships are the dimensions of managing student unrest in universities. The recommendation is that collaborative management style, teamwork, consensus building and organisational relationships are encouraged in the university management process.

**Contribution:** This article seeks to contribute to the higher education management system by providing a collegial leadership model. As an integral part of the university system, this model addresses student unrest and improves transformative prospects for the institution. By exploring new ways of managing internal conflict resolution, change is fostered, and improved conditions are cultivated. In this way, it directly responds to the journal's focus on the transformation of higher education, making it an essential read for scholars and practitioners specialising in this field.

**Keywords:** power differentials; student unrest; decision-making process; university management; collegial leadership.

## Introduction

Student unrest is a disruptive and often violent act committed by students against universities or colleges in order to force a change. This type of unrest usually arises out of frustration with the administration or faculty. Student unrest activities include: protests, strikes, riots and occupations. In recent years, student unrest has become an increasingly worrisome phenomenon in South Africa, with several universities being forced to close their doors because of student protests (Maringira & Gukurume 2016; Oxlund 2016). This type of unrest disrupts the education of those involved and puts the safety of both students and staff at risk (Maringira & Gukurume 2021; Mavunga 2019). This makes student unrest a scary reality in many universities across South Africa. The root causes of this unrest are complex and varied, but they often include frustration with inadequate resources, poor living conditions, a lack of institutional support, funding support and limited accommodation of student voices in the management process (Aluede et al. 2005; Amutabi 2002; Iwara, Kilonzo & Iwara 2018; Muswede 2017; Rhoads 1998). This issue has been extensively researched, and there is clear evidence that it is a real and pressing concern to prove its existence not just in South African institutions but also in other African institutions (Balsvik 1998; Czerniewicz, Trotter & Haupt 2019; Heffernan 2015; Hove & Dube 2022; Nkinyangi 1991). Unfortunately, it does not seem to be going away anytime soon as it continues unabated.

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South Africa has a long history of violence, even predating the apartheid regime. The country's experience with discrimination and oppression has led to a sense of powerlessness among many citizens (Maylam 2017; Modiri 2012). In 2012, the South African National Violence confirmed that South Africa was the most violent society in the world (Burton & Leoschut 2013). This may have sparked student unrest on campuses, as students come from all walks of life and are used to hostile ways of seeking justice. This is not to argue that the causes of student unrest are dependent on the socio-economic or socio-cultural background of the students, but the argument is to say that it may have led to the constant violent ways of agitation by South African students. To support this, the assertion echoed by Cornell et al. (2022) and Steinberg (2018) is that violence is rampant in communities. For example, political conflict, police brutality and financial exclusion of some university students are replicated in the university environment. That is, students, based on their experience, believe that university management is powerful and is in the position of power to attend to their needs. Here, students see themselves as powerless and marginalised and therefore need to raise their voices in violent ways.

Student unrest is a continuous issue on most South African campuses, and it has been fuelled by different factors. These factors include a hike in tuition fees, lack of financial support for students, inadequate and unconducive hostel accommodation, socio-economic background of the students and university management styles (Aluede et al. 2005; Calitz & Fourie 2016; Cini 2019; Greeff et al. 2021; Kulati 2003; Lawton-Misra 2019). Tuition fees have been escalating over the past few years, and this has made it difficult for students from poor socio-economic backgrounds to afford university education. In addition, universities have been struggling to provide adequate financial support for students, resulting in many students having to work part-time jobs in order to make ends meet. This has left them feeling exhausted and unable to focus on their studies. Furthermore, the quality of hostel accommodation has been declining, and many students have had to live in cramped and unsafe conditions (Wanie et al. 2017). In addition, university management styles have often been viewed as autocratic and unresponsive to student concerns, which has led to frustration and resentment among many students (Moodley 2019). One can say that there is a lack of or limited inclusive decision-making system in managing the university and its social occurrences. A lack of inclusive decision-making makes students feel deprived of being listened to by the institution's leadership and management. Consequently, these factors have all contributed to student unrest in South African communities, but this study is more interested in the lack or absence of inclusive decision-making as one of the major causes of student unrest in universities.

The finding of Carey (2013) confirms that university management in the United Kingdom is not inclusive enough to accommodate collaborative management, where students and their leaders have a say in the management process. To

support this, Garwe (2017) showed that student voices were not heard and this resulted in student protests on campuses. On another note, the lack of inclusive decision-making among the university stakeholders has created a wider disparity in the relationships that exist between students and university management (Gamede 2021), hence creating undue power deferential where the university authorities assumed the position of power over the students and the students also banked on the use of protest and violence to dismantle the assumed *powerfulness* of the university authorities. It is, therefore, imperative that university stakeholders engage in inclusive decision-making to create relationships of mutuality and respect. When one group assumes a position of power over another, it creates feelings of resentment and frustration that can lead to conflict. Inclusive decision-making ensures that all voices are heard and considered and that everyone feels a sense of ownership over the decisions that are made. This leads to a greater need for a collegial leadership model to ensure peaceful university operations that will ultimately lead to a positive and productive learning environment. Then the question such as 'how a collegial leadership model can be positioned as a tool to ensure an inclusive management style to reduce student unrest' was answered.

## Research objectives

Based on the above question and problem, the following research objectives were raised to guide the study. That is, the study explores:

- The assumptions of the collegial leadership approach towards managing student unrest in universities.
- The link between the assumptions of collegial leadership approach and management of students' unrest in universities.

## Methodological lens

The transformative paradigm is a worldview concept that emphasises change and transformation (Mertens 2007, 2016). It is based on the belief that social problems are caused by unequal power relationships (Mertens 2010). This paradigm aims to empower those facing social problems by helping them understand and change the power dynamics that are causing the problem. Therefore, the study is located within a transformative paradigm that aims to bring about social change by challenging and changing the existing power differentials between students and university authorities. The paradigm shift is based on the realisation that most social problems are caused by unequal power relations. In a traditional research paradigm, the researcher is seen as an objective observer who is detached from the people being studied. This detached researcher does not challenge the existing power relations but instead reports on what they observe. On the other hand, the transformative paradigm sees the researcher as an agent of change who works with the people facing the problem to challenge and change the existing power structures (Nyahodza 2019). The researcher in this study galvanises knowledge and expertise to provide

solutions capable of bridging the gap between the university stakeholders, students and university authorities towards transformational social change within the university system.

The collegial leadership model theory in this study stands as data. This theory was positioned to be analysed as a veritable tool for the effective management of student unrest in the university. The author employed concept analysis to make sense of the theory as a method of data analysis to allow intellectual argument towards meaning making. A concept analysis is an examination of a particular concept, which can be anything from a concrete object to an abstract idea (Laurence & Margolis 2003). The purpose of a concept analysis is to clarify the definition of the concept and to explore its implications (Najafi et al. 2021). The researcher used analytical tools such as definitions, logical induction and deductions and argument within the existing literature. This well-conducted analysis provides valuable insights into how the collegial leadership approach can help to ensure an inclusive decision-making management style in universities. This study was taken from a larger project ethically approved by the Walter Sisulu University, South Africa ethics committee, with ethical approval number FEDREC 03-11-21.

### Presentation of collegial leadership theory

The term 'collegial leadership' was first coined in the early 1970s by educational theorists and researchers who were seeking to create an alternative to the traditional and hierarchical model of leadership (Turner 1998). In contrast to the top-down approach of the traditional model, collegial leadership is based on the belief that all members of an organisation are equally capable of leading and that collective decision-making is more effective than relying on a single leader (Singh 2013; Singh, Manser & Mestry 2007). While the concept of collegial leadership has been around for several decades, it has only recently begun to gain mainstream attention. There has been a growing movement among educators and administrators in recent years to adopt a more collaborative, decentralised approach to leadership (Fahmi et al. 2016; Ibrahim, Akanbang & Laube 2020). This shift is largely because of the recognition that collegial leadership can promote creativity, innovation, collective decision-making and problem solving (Bezzina 2000; Timperley & Robinson 1998; Wijngaarden, Hitters & Bhansing 2020).

Collegial leadership theory posits that effective leaders are those who can build strong relationships with their colleagues (Hoy, Smith & Sweetland 2002). These relationships are based on trust, respect and mutual cooperation, and they allow leaders to effectively leverage the skills and expertise of their team members (Williams 2015). That is, the theory emphasises the importance of leaders working together with their colleagues rather than trying to exert their authority over them. In a collegial leadership environment, decisions are made through consensus-building and open dialogue, and both leaders and followers are committed to the success of the team (Ghamrawi 2010). This type of leadership has been shown to be especially effective in situations where

creativity and innovation are valued. By encouraging collaboration and nurturing a spirit of camaraderie and trust, collegial leaders create an atmosphere where new ideas can flourish (Unsworth & Parker 2003), boosting morale, improving performance and ensuring positive behaviours.

This approach is based on the belief that collective wisdom is greater than individual intelligence, and those diverse perspectives can lead to more creative and effective solutions. One of the benefits of collegial leadership is that it allows leaders to leverage the strengths of their team members (Bovbjerg 2006; Charner-Laird et al. 2016). By working together, leaders can identify and capitalise on each team member's unique talents and expertise, which leads to more efficient and effective decision-making and a deeper understanding of complex problems (Yu et al. 2010). In response to this trend, some experts have proposed the implementation of a collegial leadership model at universities. This approach would involve giving more power to subordinates, who would then make decisions through a process of collective deliberation. The hope is that it would lead to a more democratic and responsive form of management, which would be better equipped to deal with organisational conflict, including student unrest. While it is still unclear whether this model would be effective in practice, it represents an intriguing response to the challenges posed by campus protests. When applied to the context of universities, this theory suggests that university leaders should involve students in decision-making processes to foster greater ownership and buy-in for university policies. This approach is likely to result in improved management of student unrest, as students will feel more invested in the decisions made about their university experience. Additionally, by adopting a collegial leadership style, university leaders can build relationships of trust and mutual respect with students, which will also help to defuse tension and conflict.

### Assumptions of collegial leadership theory

Having conceptualised the collegial leadership theory, one can argue that it processes some unique assumptions that stand as its principles. They are collaboration and teamwork, consensus building and organisational relationships. These assumptions are discussed below.

#### Collaboration and teamwork

From the theoretical presentation above, one can argue that one of the major assumptions of collegial leadership theory is collaboration. The theory promotes collaboration among the people, colleagues and all organisational stakeholders (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling 2008; Singh 2005). This means that the theory promotes working together among colleagues and all organisational stakeholders who are responsible for actualising the organisation's predetermined goals. The theory believes that by working together, everyone can benefit with adequate consideration of the mutual ways of doing things. For example, by collaborating, colleagues can share ideas and resources which can lead to better outcomes for the organisation. Furthermore, all stakeholders can have

a say in decision-making which can help ensure that the organisation meets their needs. Ultimately, collegial leadership theory provides a framework for cooperation that can improve the effectiveness of an organisation (Shrifian 2011). Additionally, according to collegial leadership theory, teamwork is essential for an organisation to succeed with an argument that all stakeholders, including management, employees and shareholders, should work together collaboratively. Doing so, they can pool their knowledge and resources to achieve common goals.

### Consensus building

Based on the above presentation, one of the major assumptions of collegial leadership theory is consensus building, most peculiar to conflict management. Collegial leadership theory emphasises the importance of developing consensus among team members to make effective decisions. This approach is based on the belief that collective decision-making is more likely to result in successful outcomes than unilateral decision-making (Bates 2014). When team members are able to share their perspectives and reach an agreement on a course of action, they are more likely to be committed to implementing that plan and achieving the desired results. Additionally, collegial leadership theory suggests that conflict should be managed in a way that leads to consensus rather than confrontation (Mausethagen, Prøitz & Skedsmo 2019). By encouraging team members to discuss their differences and reach an agreement, collegial leaders can help minimise conflict and promote cooperation.

### Organisational relationships

Organisational relationships are one of the major assumptions of collegial leadership theory based on the above theoretical analysis. This theory values the deliberate creation of mutual and professional relationships among the stakeholders in organisations (Singh 2013). Collegial leadership places a high value on organisational relationships, assuming that mutual and professional relationships among the stakeholders in organisations are deliberately created. These relationships are thought to improve communication and cooperation among members of the organisation. They also provide a supportive network that can help individuals reach their full potential. In addition, collegial relationships are believed to foster creativity and innovation (Mathisen 2011). Encouraging the free exchange of ideas provides a fertile ground for new solutions to emerge. Ultimately, the goal of collegial leadership theory is to create an environment in which all members of the organisation can thrive.

### The links between the assumptions and management of student unrest

This section discusses and argues how collegial leadership theory could be positioned to address the issue of student unrest in the university system. These are discussed under the following sub-headings:

- collaboration and teamwork and management of student unrest,

- consensus building and management of student unrest,
- organisational relationships and management of student unrest.

### Collaboration and teamwork, and management of student unrest

As universities become increasingly diverse and globalised, the need for effective collaboration and teamwork among students, faculty and staff has never been greater. At the same time, the number of incidents of student unrest on campuses around the world is on the rise. While the relationship between collaboration and teamwork and the management of student unrest in universities has been widely studied, there is still much to learn. However, the literature does confirm that there is a connection between these two areas. For example, many studies have shown that collaborative approaches to managing student unrest are more effective than traditional hierarchical models (Omodan, Dube & Tsotetsi 2018). This is likely because collaboration encourages dialogue and understanding, while hierarchy often leads to frustration and resentment. Furthermore, team-based approaches have also been shown to be more successful in managing human capital (Govender 2011). This is likely because teams are better able to identify and address the root causes of dissatisfaction. Thus, collaboration and teamwork are essential for effectively managing university student unrest.

Therefore, to effectively manage student unrest, universities must first foster a culture of collaboration and teamwork in the university system. By promoting open communication and mutual respect among all university community members, universities can create an environment in which students feel free to express their views without fear of retribution. Additionally, universities must provide training and resources to help students learn how to work together effectively in teams. By investing in collaboration and teamwork, universities can help prevent student unrest and create a more positive learning environment for all.

### Consensus building and management of student unrest

In any educational institution, be it an elementary school, a high school or a university, one of the most important functions of the administration is to ensure the safety of the students. This becomes even more important when there is unrest among the student body. Student unrest can manifest itself in many forms, from protests and sit-ins to threats and violence. In such cases, it is essential for the administration to come up with a strategy for consensus building and to manage the unrest. This often involves creating a dialogue between the administration and the student body to understand the students' grievances and find a resolution that is acceptable to both parties. In some cases, outside mediators may also need to be brought in to help facilitate the process (Liu et al. 2021). The goal is to prevent the situation from spiralling out of control and to maintain a safe and orderly environment for all students.



This is expedient because it is widely accepted that there is a relationship between consensus building and the management of conflict (Donais 2012), including student unrest in universities. This view is supported by a number of studies, which have shown that organisations that are successful in managing conflicts make use of consensus-building techniques (Donais 2012; Macdonald et al. 2009; Susskind, McKearnen & Thomas-Lamar 1999). For example, one study found that universities that make use of student input when making decisions about university policy are more likely to be successful in managing student unrest (Aluede et al. 2005). This is because students feel that their concerns are being listened to and taken into account, and as a result, they are less likely to take part in disruptive behaviour. In addition, universities that encourage dialogue between students and staff are more likely to successfully manage student unrest (Onivehu 2021). This is because students feel that they have a voice in the decision-making process, and as a result, they are less likely to resort to violence or other forms of disruptive behaviour. These arguments suggest that there is a strong relationship between consensus building and the management of student unrest in universities.

### **Organisational relationships and management of student unrest**

In any organisation, there is always some relationship that management requires to maintain order and prevent chaos. This is especially true in an educational setting, where students of all ages and backgrounds must interact on a daily basis. However, by proactively establishing and maintaining positive relationships with students, university authorities can help to prevent or defuse these situations before they escalate. In addition, established relationships based on rules and procedures for handling conflict can also help to keep student unrest from spinning out of control. Being mindful of the potential for conflict and taking steps to address it proactively creates a calm and orderly learning environment for all students.

To further confirm the argument, the finding of Sebake (2019) suggests that there is a positive relationship between collegial relationships and the management of student unrest. Specifically, when university management has strong collegial relationships with other stakeholders, including students, they are more likely to be responsive to student concerns and to take proactive measures to prevent and address student unrest. In addition, collegial relationships among university stakeholders result in increased communication and cooperation, which can help to resolve disputes before they escalate into full-blown crises (Birya 2020). Moreover, this kind of relationship provides a sense of shared purpose and community that can help reduce the stress and anxiety students feel during periods of turbulence. Ultimately, Chemutai, Onkware and Iteyo (2020) confirm that there is a clear link between organisational relationships and the effective management of student unrest in universities.

## **Conclusion and recommendation**

The study found that the collegial leadership model can be positioned as a tool to ensure an inclusive management style to reduce student unrest in universities. The study indicated that collaboration and teamwork, consensus building and organisational relationships are the dimensions in which students could be adequately included in the process of making effective management decisions towards managing student unrest in universities. Therefore, the collegial leadership approach is likely to effectively reduce student unrest by ensuring that students are included in the decision-making process. This inclusion allows for a reduction in the feeling of disenfranchisement and isolation that often leads to unrest. That is, the study's major argument showed a close relationship between management style and social unrest in the university system. Hence, collaborative management style teamwork, consensus building and organisational relationships are effective in mitigating social unrest in the university system. The study recommends that university management and authorities should ensure collaborative management style teamwork, consensus building and organisational relationship in their management process to mitigate social unrest in the university system towards peace and tranquillity. Lastly, the recombination may not be effective in all situations, hence the limitation of this study. Therefore, further studies could be conducted to empirically test the recommendations' effectiveness.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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B.I.O is the sole author of this article.

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### **Data availability**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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