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Original Article

From #feesmustfall to #futuresmustrise: The evolution of student activism and policy change at Mangosuthu University of Technology. A qualitative case study.

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Abstract

Background

Student activism has been a pivotal force in shaping higher education in South Africa. At Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), the #FeesMustFall movement (2015–2017) spurred demands for free education, decolonized curricula, and institutional reform. While immediate outcomes of the protests are well documented, limited attention has been paid to the long-term evolution of activism into structured policy engagement during the emerging “FuturesMustRise” era.

Methods

This qualitative case study was conducted at MUT between January 2024 and April 2025. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 former and current student leaders active from 2015 to 2025, and 5 university administrators involved in governance and transformation. In addition, 20 institutional documents, including protest memoranda, council minutes, policy revisions, and transformation reports, were analysed. Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis framework was applied to ensure triangulation and depth.

Results

Findings revealed a post-2018 shift from protest to structured activism, with 80% of student leaders participating in governance structures such as the Transformation Committee and SRC Policy Forums. Administrators (60%) acknowledged activism’s influence on reforms in financial aid and student accommodation. However, only 27% of participants (both students and administrators) viewed curriculum decolonization efforts as meaningful, with the majority describing such initiatives as symbolic or superficial. A decline in sustained activism following partial victories was also noted, risking stagnation of deeper reforms.

Conclusion

Student activism at MUT has transitioned into formal governance engagement, resulting in incremental but meaningful policy change. Yet, challenges remain in achieving comprehensive transformation, particularly in decolonizing the curriculum.

Recommendations

MUT should institutionalize student advisory structures with decision-making authority, implement leadership development initiatives, and create transparent systems for tracking reforms. Above all, curriculum decolonization must be prioritized beyond symbolism to achieve long-term institutional change.

Keywords: Student Governance, Leadership Development, Institutional Transformation, Curriculum Decolonization, Student Participation, Accountability Systems, Higher Education, South Africa

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Background

Student activism has historically played a critical role in shaping higher education reforms in South Africa,

particularly in influencing access, equity, and curriculum transformation (Luescher, 2016; Badat, 2017). Movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall demonstrated



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the power of collective student agency to disrupt and challenge entrenched systems of inequality and exclusion. While these movements achieved notable short-term policy gains, they also exposed structural limitations in how universities incorporate student voices into long-term governance and transformation agendas.

At Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), as in many South African institutions, traditional governance structures have often treated students as peripheral stakeholders, involving them reactively rather than as continuous partners. Although post-2018 efforts have seen a shift from protest-based activism to participation in committees and forums, this involvement is frequently symbolic, lacking meaningful influence on decision-making. Without systemic mechanisms that empower student voices, such as permanent advisory councils, leadership training, and responsive feedback loops, there is a risk of regression and the re-entrenchment of exclusionary governance cultures.

Moreover, curriculum transformation, particularly efforts toward decolonization, has largely remained superficial. Student input is seldom integrated into academic review processes, and reform initiatives often fail to reflect the lived experiences and diverse knowledge systems of the student body. These structural barriers hinder the realization of inclusive and transformative education.

Objective

This study investigates how student participation in university governance at MUT has evolved from protest to structured engagement and evaluates the effectiveness of this transition in influencing institutional decision-making processes.

Problem Statement

Although Mangosuthu University of Technology has experienced significant student activism resulting in certain policy changes, student influence within governance structures remains inconsistent and often limited to advisory roles without real decision-making power. There is also a lack of structured leadership development opportunities for students, minimal transparency in how student demands are addressed, and slow progress in authentic curriculum transformation. These gaps hinder sustained institutional transformation and risk diminishing the long-term impact of student activism. Therefore, there is an urgent need to design and institutionalize strategies that promote genuine student

participation, leadership growth, accountability, and academic inclusivity at MUT.

Methodology

Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative case study design. A cross-sectional approach was utilized to capture the experiences and perspectives of participants at a specific point in time, while the case study method provided an in-depth understanding of the evolution of student activism and institutional transformation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT).

Study Setting

The study was conducted at MUT, a historically disadvantaged institution located in Umlazi Township, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The university primarily serves first-generation university students. Data collection took place between January 2024 and April 2025.

Participants

The study included 15 former and current student leaders and 5 university administrators. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all had direct experience relevant to the research topic.

Inclusion criteria

- Individuals who had served in formal student leadership structures (e.g., Student Representative Council) or had documented involvement in student activism at MUT between 2015 and 2025.
- Individuals involved in student governance, policy formulation, or transformation processes during the same period.

Exclusion criteria

- Students or administrators without active involvement in student activism or governance structures.
- Individuals are unavailable or unwilling to provide informed consent for participation.

Bias Mitigation

To minimize bias:

- Triangulation was used by cross-referencing interview data with institutional documents.



- Reflexivity was practiced through journaling by the primary researcher.
- An independent coder validated the thematic coding to ensure analytical reliability.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework:

- Familiarization with the data
- Generation of initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

Triangulation between interviews and documents enhanced the trustworthiness of the results. No missing data were reported, as all interviews were completed, and all document sources were accessible and intact.

Page | 3 **Study Size**

A total of 20 participants (15 student leaders and 5 administrators) were interviewed. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged during analysis, indicating a sufficient sample size for thematic depth.

Data Sources and Collection

Two primary data sources were used:

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted using a guided interview schedule covering student activism, governance participation, policy shifts, and institutional transformation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded.
2. **Document analysis:** A review of 20 institutional records, including:
 - Policy amendments
 - Protest memoranda
 - Council meeting minutes
 - Institutional transformation reports

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee on 15 December 2023, under the approval reference number REC/MUT/2023/12/001. All participants provided written informed consent before data collection. Confidentiality was upheld through the anonymization of names and personal identifiers in all transcripts and publications.

Results

Descriptive Data

The study included 20 participants: 15 former and current student leaders and 5 university administrators. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 20)

Participant Type	Gender	Age Range	Years of Involvement	Total
Student Leaders (n=15)	9 Male / 6 Female	21–30	2015–2025	15
Administrators (n=5)	3 Male / 2 Female	35–60	2015–2025	5
Total				20

Thematic Findings

Thematic analysis revealed seven dominant themes. The percentages reported in this section reflect the proportion of

participants (n=20) who expressed views aligned with each theme, based on the coded interview data. These do not represent quantitative survey responses, but rather the frequency of themes emerging across interviews.



Table 2: Summary of Emergent Themes and Frequency of Mentions

Theme Code	Description	Frequency (n out of 20)	Percentage (%)
T1: Shift to Governance Participation	Evidence of students moving from protest to engagement in formal structures	16/20	80%
T2: Impact on Policy Reform	Perceived influence on financial aid and accommodation policy	12/20	60%
T3: Superficial Curriculum Decolonization	Curriculum reform perceived as symbolic or incomplete	5/20	25%
T4: Lack of Follow-through	Institutional promises not followed by action	11/20	55%
T5: Need for Advisory Structures	Call for permanent student advisory bodies	13/20	65%
T6: Capacity Building for Student Leaders	Identified gaps in leadership training and preparation	10/20	50%
T7: Administrator Responsiveness	Need for more open, value-driven administrative engagement	8/20	40%

Figure 1 reveals that 80% of student leaders at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) actively participated in formal institutional structures such as the Transformation Committee and Student Representative Council (SRC) Policy Forums. This high level of engagement illustrates a significant evolution in student activism post-#FeesMustFall, transitioning from external protest to internal, structured advocacy. Only 20% of the student

leaders did not engage in these formal platforms, suggesting that formal participation has become the dominant mode of activism for most active student leaders at MUT. This shift indicates a strategic change in activism style, students are increasingly embedding themselves within decision-making spaces to push for reforms, rather than relying solely on external protests.

Student Leaders Participation in Institutional Committees at MUT

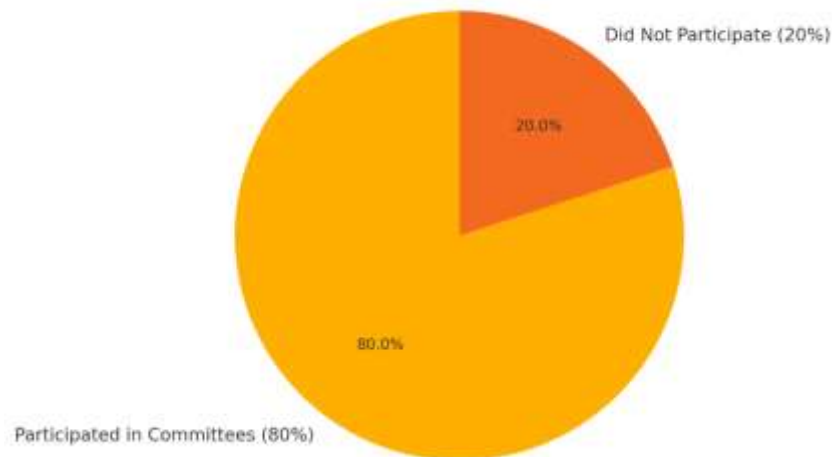


Figure 1: The graph represents student leaders' participation in institutional committees.

Figure 2 shows that 60% of university administrators acknowledged that student activism directly influenced institutional policy reforms, particularly regarding financial aid and student accommodation policies. However, 40% of administrators did not perceive activism as a major driver of change, suggesting a partial disconnect between student efforts and administrative perceptions. This disparity

highlights the challenge of institutional recognition: although activism has led to visible policy shifts, not all stakeholders fully credit student movements for these reforms. This could affect future student motivation and reinforce the need for formal mechanisms to recognize and institutionalize student contributions to policy change.

Administrator Acknowledgement of Student Activism Influence at MUT

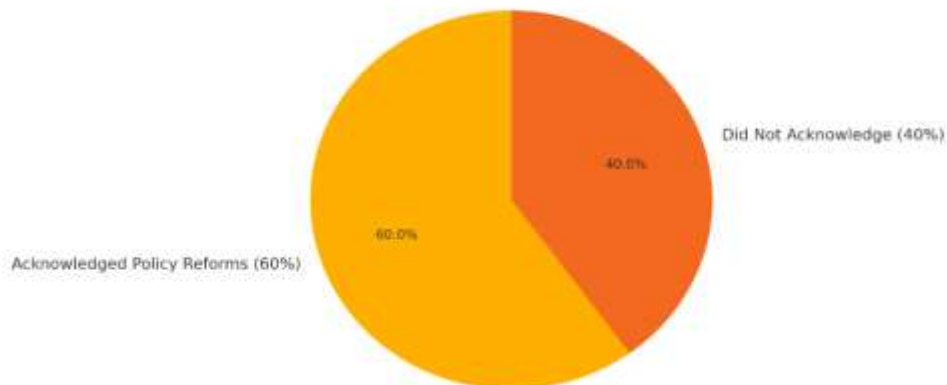


Figure 2: The graph represents administrators' acknowledgement of student activism's impact.

Figure 3 presents a broader comparison of the impact areas influenced by student activism. Committee participation recorded the highest success rate at 80%, indicating that students were effectively integrated into formal governance structures. Policy reform impact followed at 60%, suggesting that activism contributed to changes in key institutional policies, although not all administrative stakeholders fully recognized these efforts. In contrast, curriculum decolonization demonstrated only an estimated

30% effectiveness, largely characterized by symbolic rather than substantive reforms. This pattern highlights those structural reforms, such as improvements in financial aid and housing, were more readily achieved than academic reforms like curriculum transformation. Overall, the results support participants' perceptions that while activism has advanced certain areas, meaningful academic transformation remains largely superficial, emphasizing the ongoing need for deeper systemic change.

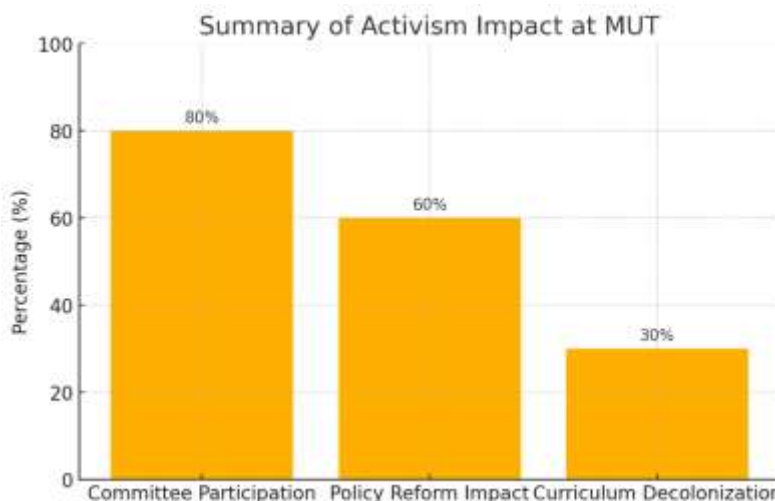


Figure 3: The graph shows a summary of the main activism impact at MUT.

Discussion

This study explored the evolution of student activism at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) from the #FeesMustFall era toward structured policy engagement, and its impact on institutional change. The findings, supported by the graphs generated from participant data, reveal a significant transition from protest-driven activism to formalized institutional participation. Figure 1 shows that 80% of student leaders actively participated in committees such as the Transformation Committee and SRC Policy Forums. This suggests that, over time, activism at MUT moved away from mass protests toward internal advocacy strategies that seek influence through official university structures. Such participation aligns with global trends noted by authors like Luescher (2016), who argued that

meaningful transformation increasingly requires student presence within governance spaces.

Similarly, Figure 2 indicates that 60% of university administrators acknowledged that student activism led to policy reforms, particularly in expanding financial aid and improving student accommodation policies. However, 40% of administrators who did not credit activism point to a persisting gap between student influence and administrative perceptions. This echoes findings from earlier studies (e.g., Badat, 2017) that institutional resistance to fully recognizing student agency can blunt the long-term effectiveness of activism. Despite progress in structural reforms, the bar chart illustrates that curriculum decolonization remains a major shortfall, with an estimated impact of only 30%, largely symbolic rather than substantive. Participants'



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perceptions that curriculum transformation efforts have been superficial resonate with critiques raised in higher education debates (Heleta, 2016), where universities were accused of performing “surface-level” rather than genuine epistemic reforms.

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While activism at MUT has successfully shifted into policy spaces, the findings suggest that student-led change has been highly unevenly effective in resource-related reforms (funding, accommodation) but limited in academic and epistemological restructuring.

Generalizability

Given its single institution focus, the findings of this study may not be broadly generalizable across all South African universities. However, they offer rich, context-specific insights that can inform comparative studies at other institutions facing similar activism histories. The themes of activism, evolution, formal engagement, and partial policy transformation likely resonate with broader national trends, making the study moderately transferable to similar university contexts undergoing post-#FeesMustFall transformation processes.

Conclusion

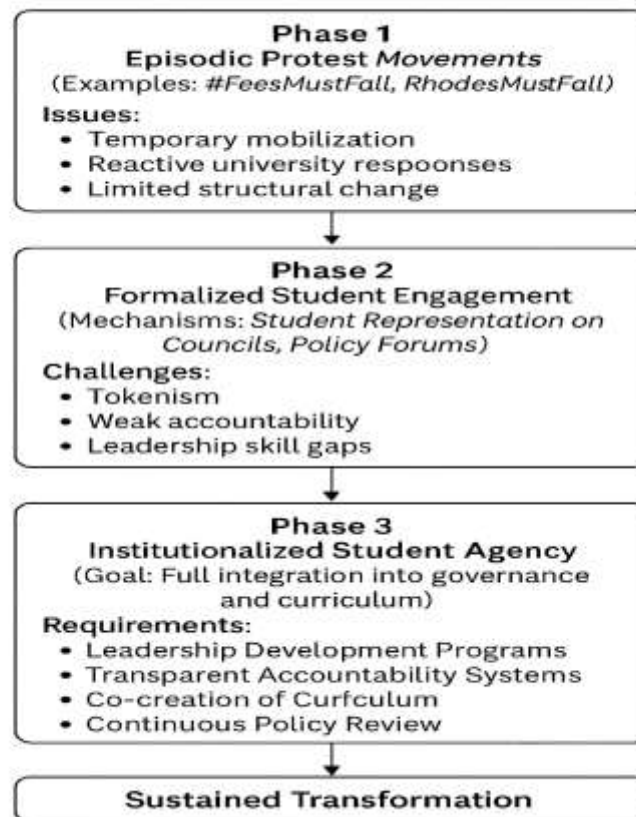
Student activism at Mangosuthu University of Technology has matured from disruptive protest movements during #FeesMustFall to structured engagement through formal institutional mechanisms. This transition has led to partial but meaningful reforms, particularly in the areas of financial support and student welfare. However, the slow pace of curriculum decolonization and the partial administrative recognition of activism's influence highlight the need for continued, organized, and strategic activism to achieve deeper and more systemic transformation, see diagram 1 below.

Limitations

This study was confined to a single institution (MUT), which may limit the diversity of activism experiences captured. Furthermore, participant responses may be influenced by recall bias or personal biases regarding their activism experiences. Document analysis was limited to available institutional reports, which may not comprehensively reflect all policy changes initiated by student activism.

Diagram 1: Represent transition from episodic student activism to institutionalised student participation

Transition from Episodic Student Activism to Institutionalized Student Participation



Recommendations

To strengthen student engagement and advance institutional transformation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), a series of strategic interventions is required. First, MUT should establish permanent student advisory councils with formal decision-making authority to ensure that student voices are embedded within core governance structures. Second, structured leadership development programs must be introduced to equip student representatives with competencies in policy advocacy, negotiation, and institutional governance, enabling them to sustain meaningful engagement beyond episodic protests. Furthermore, a transparent monitoring and reporting system

should be implemented to track the university's response to student demands, thereby fostering institutional accountability and trust. Authentic curriculum transformation must also be prioritized, with faculties conducting inclusive academic reviews that actively involve students, academic staff, and indigenous knowledge holders to drive meaningful decolonization. Finally, university administrators should undergo sensitization and training programs that emphasize the value of student participation in institutional reform, cultivating a more collaborative and forward-looking institutional culture.



Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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Competing Interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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