



From the University of the North to the University of Limpopo: A laboratory for manufacturing leadership

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical transformation of the University of the North into the University of Limpopo as a critical laboratory for the production and consolidation of political, social and intellectual leadership in South Africa. Situated in the broader context of apartheid and post-apartheid higher education, the article foregrounds student activism as a formative site through which leadership identities, organisational skills and political consciousness were cultivated. Methodologically, the article adopted a qualitative desktop research approach, drawing on archival materials, secondary literature, policy documents, and autobiographies to reconstruct patterns of student mobilisation and leadership formation. The analysis is underpinned by periodisation as a theoretical framework, enabling the article to trace continuities and ruptures across distinct historical phases, from the era of Black Consciousness and anti-apartheid mobilisation to post-1994 struggles over transformation, access and decolonisation. The findings demonstrate that the institution functioned not only as a site of academic training, but also as a dynamic political space that incubated leaders who later assumed prominent roles in national, provincial and institutional governance. By conceptualising the University of Limpopo as a “laboratory for manufacturing leadership,” the article contributes to scholarship on historically disadvantaged institutions, student politics and leadership formation, and argues for a re-centring of rural universities in narratives of South Africa’s liberation, transformation and democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Leadership, Laboratory, Student Activism, University of Limpopo, Manufacturing.

INTRODUCTION

Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) in South Africa occupy a deeply paradoxical position within the country’s higher education and political history. Conceived under apartheid as instruments of racial segregation, ideological containment and ethnic administration, these institutions were designed to reproduce compliance rather than critical thought. However, contrary to the intentions of the apartheid state, HDIs became fertile sites of resistance, political consciousness and leadership formation. Rather than functioning solely as academic spaces, they evolved into arenas of ideological contestation, political mobilisation and social transformation, particularly during moments of heightened repression and national crisis.¹

¹ Saleem Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990* (Routledge, 2016); Anne Heffernan, “Black Consciousness’s Lost Leader: Abraham Tiro, the University of the North, and the Seeds of South Africa’s Student Movement in the 1970s,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 173–86.

The University of the North (UNIN), later renamed the University of Limpopo (UL), exemplifies this contradiction with clarity. Established in 1960 within the Lebowa homeland system, the institution was intended to serve as a state-controlled university for specific ethnic groups, reflecting the apartheid regime's broader project of territorial fragmentation and intellectual containment.² Located at Turfloop, a rural site deliberately removed from urban political centres, UNIN was expected to function as a depoliticised training ground for bureaucrats loyal to the homeland system.³ Instead, the university rapidly emerged as one of the most politically vibrant historically Black universities in South Africa, earning a reputation as a centre of radical student activism and ideological ferment.⁴

This article examines the historical transformation of UNIN into UL by conceptualising the institution as a “laboratory for manufacturing leadership”. The metaphor of a laboratory is analytically significant: it foregrounds the idea that leadership at UNIN was not incidental or accidental, but systematically produced through sustained engagement with struggle, repression, organisation and ideological debate. Student activism is therefore treated not merely as episodic protest, but as a formative process through which leadership identities, organisational competencies, political discipline and ethical commitments were cultivated over time.⁵

From the late 1960s, UNIN became a focal point of Black student mobilisation at a national level.⁶ The decisive break occurred with the formation of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) in 1969 and was launched at Turfloop, an event that marked a fundamental rupture with liberal, multiracial student politics represented by organisations such as the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).⁷ SASO's emergence signalled the ascendancy of Black Consciousness as a guiding ideological framework, emphasising psychological liberation, self-definition, Black solidarity and political autonomy. This ideological shift transformed the university campus into a space of intense political education, where students were trained not only academically but politically, morally and organisationally.⁸

Throughout the 1970s, student activism at UNIN was closely intertwined with broader national struggles against apartheid. Events such as the expulsion of Onkgopotse Tiro in 1972 and the 1974 Viva Frelimo rally demonstrated how campus-based struggles resonated beyond the university, linking rural Limpopo to national and international currents of anti-colonial resistance.⁹ These moments were crucial to sharpening leadership abilities among students, as activists were compelled to navigate repression, state surveillance and institutional discipline while sustaining organisational coherence and political clarity.¹⁰

In the 1980s, student politics at UNIN further transformed as the ideological dominance of Black Consciousness intersected with the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Student organisations such as Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO) and later South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO) embedded campus struggles within a broader mass democratic movement that linked students, workers, civic organisations and religious formations.¹¹ Leadership during this period was marked by organisational maturity, collective decision-making and strategic coordination across

² A. Mawasha, “Where an Idea Was Expressed, Hijacked and Redeemed,” in *Within the Realm of Possibility: From Disadvantage to Development at the University of Fort Hare and the University of the North*, ed. S. Nkomo, D. Swartz, and B. Maja (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006).

³ Christopher White, *From Despair to Hope: The Turfloop Experience*, Sovenga: University Of (Sovenga: University of the North Press, 1997).

⁴ Gaongalelwe Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro* (Pan Macmillan South africa, 2019).

⁵ Chris Kanyane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams* (Trafford Publishing, 2010).

⁶ Heffernan, “Black Consciousness's Lost Leader: Abraham Tiro, the University of the North, and the Seeds of South Africa's Student Movement in the 1970s.”

⁷ Mabogo Percy More, “Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation,” 2017.

⁸ S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Heinemann, 1978); Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

⁹ Sethuthuthu Lucky Vuma, “The Role of University of the North Student Activism in the Struggle against Apartheid (1968–1994),” *African Renaissance* (1744-2532) 22, no. 2 (2025).

¹⁰ Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro*.

¹¹ Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

campuses and communities.¹² Therefore, the university functioned as a training ground for leaders who would later assume prominent roles in political parties, trade unions, civil society organisations and state institutions in the post-apartheid era.¹³ The democratic transition after 1994 introduced new contradictions for student activism and leadership formation at UL.¹⁴ While the defeat of apartheid opened avenues for institutional transformation and access, it also generated tensions between former activist identities and emerging governance roles.¹⁵

Student leaders increasingly confronted issues of financial exclusion, curriculum relevance, institutional culture and the slow pace of transformation.¹⁶ These struggles intensified in the post-2000 period and culminated in renewed waves of activism around access, decolonisation and social justice, reaffirming the university's enduring role as a site of leadership production rather than passive adaptation. By situating UNIN/UL within the broader history of apartheid and post-apartheid higher education, this article challenges urban-centric narratives that privilege institutions such as Wits or UCT as the primary sites of political and intellectual production. Instead, it recentres a rural university as a critical node in South Africa's liberation and transformation history. Understanding this phase is essential to appreciating how leadership in South Africa has been historically forged not only in formal political organisations or elite institutions, but within the lived experiences of struggle, sacrifice and collective action that defined student activism at historically disadvantaged universities.¹⁷

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Activism and Leadership Formation: Global Perspectives

Student activism is widely recognised in international scholarship as a recurring historical force closely associated with moments of political crisis, social transformation and generational contestation.¹⁸ From a global perspective, universities have rarely functioned as politically neutral spaces; rather, they have often acted as incubators of dissent, ideological innovation and leadership formation, particularly under conditions of authoritarianism, colonial domination or systemic inequality.¹⁹

Altbach's seminal work on student political activism establishes that students occupy a structurally unique position in society: they are simultaneously insiders within elite knowledge institutions and outsiders excluded from full political and economic power. This positionality enables students to articulate radical critiques of dominant social orders while experimenting with alternative forms of political organisation and leadership.²⁰ Globally, periods of intensified student activism such as the 1968 uprisings in France, Germany and the United States illustrate how campuses became spaces where new leadership styles were forged through protest, collective deliberation and confrontation with state authority.

The global literature further emphasises that leadership emerging from student activism is rarely formal or hierarchical in its early stages.²¹ Instead, it is shaped through informal pedagogical processes embedded in activism itself. Participation in demonstrations, underground organising, manifesto writing and coalition building exposes students to skills such as strategic planning, ideological articulation, negotiation and risk management.²² These experiences constitute what scholars increasingly describe as

¹² Chitja Twala, "Student Activism and Contestation for Political Space at the Former University of the North (Qwaqwa Branch), 1986-1996," *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 43, no. 1 (2018): 137-59.

¹³ Kanyane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*.

¹⁴ Mawasha, "Where an Idea Was Expressed, Hijacked and Redeemed."

¹⁵ Sonwabo Stuurman, "Student Activism in a Time of Crisis in South Africa: The Quest for 'Black Power,'" *South African Journal of Education* 38, no. 4 (2018): 1-8.

¹⁶ Vuma, "The Role of University of the North Student Activism in the Struggle against Apartheid (1968-1994)."

¹⁷ Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro*.

¹⁸ Thierry M Luescher, "Theorising Student Activism in and beyond the 20th Century: The Contribution of Philip G. Altbach," *Student Engagement in Europe: Society, Higher Education and Student Governance*, 2015.

¹⁹ Philip G Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism," *Comparative Education* 25, no. 1 (1989): 97-110; Mark Edelman Boren, *Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject* (Routledge, 2019).

²⁰ Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism."

²¹ Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism."

²² Boren, *Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject*.

“activist learning”, a form of political education that operates parallel to, and often in tension with, formal curricula.²³

Comparative studies from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe similarly demonstrate that student activism has functioned as a preparatory arena for future political, intellectual and civic leadership.²⁴ In colonial and postcolonial contexts, student movements often provided the earliest organisational platforms for nationalist elites, producing leaders who later transitioned into governance, diplomacy and state administration.²⁵ The global literature, therefore, positions student activism not as episodic unrest, but as a structurally embedded process through which societies reproduce political leadership across generations.²⁶ What is particularly relevant for this article is the growing recognition that leadership formation through student activism is historically contingent. Ideological climate, the character of the state, and the relationship between universities and broader social movements shape the nature of leadership produced. This insight provides a critical analytical lens for understanding how leadership at historically disadvantaged institutions such as the UNIN/UL emerged within specific apartheid and post-apartheid conditions.

Student Activism in Africa and South Africa

Within the African context, student activism has been inseparable from the history of anti-colonial and postcolonial struggle.²⁷ Universities established under colonial rule often became contradictory institutions: while designed to produce a small, compliant African elite, they simultaneously exposed students to global political ideas, anti-imperialist thought and nationalist ideologies. As a result, African universities became key sites where intellectual critique and political mobilisation intersected.²⁸

The literature consistently identifies student activists as central actors in Africa’s liberation movements.²⁹ Leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Amílcar Cabral developed their political consciousness within student networks that linked campuses to labour movements, diasporic organisations and anti-colonial fronts.³⁰ African student activism was therefore not confined to campus-based grievances, but was deeply embedded in broader struggles over sovereignty, identity and social justice.³¹ Leadership formation in this context was collective, ideological and explicitly oriented towards national liberation rather than individual advancement.³²

In South Africa, student activism formed an integral component of the wider struggle against apartheid.³³ Scholarship by Badat demonstrates that student organisations functioned as critical feeder structures for banned liberation movements during periods of intense repression.³⁴ Organisations, such as the SASO, the AZASO and the SANSCO were not merely representative bodies; they were political schools that trained cadres in ideological clarity, organisational discipline and mass mobilisation.³⁵

Historically Black universities (HBUs) occupied a particularly significant position within this landscape. Institutions such as Fort Hare, the University of the Western Cape, the University of Zululand and the University of the North emerged as sites where apartheid’s contradictions were most sharply

²³ Altbach, “Perspectives on Student Political Activism.”

²⁴ Altbach, “Perspectives on Student Political Activism”; Meredith Leigh Weiss and Edward Aspinall, *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Jungyun Gill and James DeFronzo, “A Comparative Framework for the Analysis of International Student Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 8, no. 3 (2009): 203–24.

²⁵ Luescher, “Theorising Student Activism in and beyond the 20th Century: The Contribution of Philip G. Altbach.”

²⁶ Gill and DeFronzo, “A Comparative Framework for the Analysis of International Student Movements.”

²⁷ Kanyane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*.

²⁸ Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

²⁹ Pascal Bianchini, “Student Movements in Sub-Saharan Africa: Key Socio-Political Stakeholders from Corporatist Mobilisations to Avant-Garde Positions,” *Journal of Civil Society* 18, no. 3 (2022): 263–85; Damtew Teferra and Mthokozisi Emmanuel Ntuli, “Towards a New Conceptual Framework of Student Activism in South Africa,” *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l’enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 19, no. 2 (2021): 57–76.

³⁰ Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

³¹ Vuma, “The Role of University of the North Student Activism in the Struggle against Apartheid (1968–1994).”

³² Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Tiro*.

³³ Sethuthuthu Lucky Vuma, “An Historical Examination of the Evolution of Student Activism at the University of Limpopo (Formerly Known as the University of the North), 1968 to 2015” (University of Limpopo, 2022).

³⁴ Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

³⁵ More, “Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation.”

experienced and contested.³⁶ While urban institutions have often dominated historiography, rural universities played an equally decisive role in producing political leadership rooted in community struggles and grassroots mobilisation.³⁷

Existing studies on student activism at the UNIN/UL have richly documented resistance, repression and ideological contestation, particularly during the period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s.³⁸ Detailed historical research shows how Turfloop became a focal point of Black Consciousness politics, hosting the launch of SASO in 1969 and producing a generation of student leaders shaped by psychological liberation, self-reliance and organisational autonomy.³⁹ Subsequent phases of activism at the university reflected broader national shifts, including the rise of the United Democratic Front in the 1980s and the complex transition to democracy after 1994.⁴⁰

However, much of the existing literature treats student activism at UNIN/UL primarily as resistance history, focusing on protest events, repression by the apartheid state and institutional conflict.⁴¹ While these contributions are invaluable, they often under-theorise the processes through which activism functioned as a sustained mechanism of leadership formation. Leadership appears in the literature largely as an outcome rather than as a process shaped within the everyday practices of student politics.

This article intervenes in this scholarly gap by reframing student activism at UNIN/UL as a structured “laboratory for manufacturing leadership”. Drawing on historical evidence from both the apartheid and post-apartheid periods, it foregrounds how participation in student movements produced leadership capacities that extended beyond resistance into governance, policy-making and institutional transformation. By doing so, the article aligns South African student activism scholarship with global debates on activism as an informal but powerful site of political education and leadership development, while simultaneously recentring a rural historically disadvantaged institution within national and continental narratives of political leadership formation.

The literature demonstrates that student activism globally and in Africa has consistently functioned as a crucible for leadership formation. What remains underexplored, and what this article seeks to address, is how historically disadvantaged rural universities such as the University of the North systematically produced leadership through successive historical phases, making them central rather than peripheral to South Africa’s liberation and post-apartheid political phase.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Periodisation

This article is underpinned by periodisation as a theoretical framework. Periodisation refers to the analytical division of historical processes into distinct temporal phases characterised by particular social, political and ideological dynamics (Hollander *et al.*, 2005). Rather than presenting history as a linear or homogeneous process, periodisation allows for the identification of continuities and ruptures over time. Applied to student activism at UNIN/UL, periodisation enables the analysis of leadership formation across different historical moments. The article identifies four broad periods:

- 1968-1980: The emergence of Black Consciousness-inspired student activism, marked by the formation of SASO and the politicisation of campus life.
- 1983-1989: Heightened repression and mass mobilisation characterised by the influence of the UDF and intensified state surveillance.
- 1990-2004: Transition and institutional transformation, as student leaders navigated the shift from resistance politics to governance.

³⁶ Vuma, “The Role of University of the North Student Activism in the Struggle against Apartheid (1968–1994).”

³⁷ Heffernan, “Black Consciousness’s Lost Leader: Abraham Tiro, the University of the North, and the Seeds of South Africa’s Student Movement in the 1970s.”

³⁸ Mawasha, “Where an Idea Was Expressed, Hijacked and Redeemed.”

³⁹ Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro*.

⁴⁰ Heffernan, “Black Consciousness’s Lost Leader: Abraham Tiro, the University of the North, and the Seeds of South Africa’s Student Movement in the 1970s.”

⁴¹ Kanyane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*.

- 2005-2015: post-apartheid contestations over access, transformation and decolonisation, culminating in renewed student activism.

Through this framework, leadership is understood as historically contingent, shaped by the specific challenges and opportunities of each period.

METHODOLOGY

The article adopted a qualitative desktop research methodology. Data were drawn exclusively from published and archival sources, including scholarly literature, policy documents, institutional reports, autobiographies, and memoirs. This approach is appropriate given the historical nature of the article and the availability of extensive documentary material on student activism at UNIN/UL. Data analysis involved thematic and historical interpretation, guided by the principles of periodisation. Sources were analysed to identify patterns of student mobilisation, leadership development and institutional change across different historical phases. Triangulation across multiple source types enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Black Consciousness and the Early Manufacturing of Leadership (1968–1980)

The late 1960s and 1970s constituted a foundational phase in the historical manufacturing of leadership at the UNIN. This period was marked by the ascendancy of Black Consciousness (BC) as both an ideological framework and a practical pedagogy of leadership.⁴² The formation of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), launched in 1969 at Turfloop, represented a decisive rupture with liberal paternalism and multiracial student politics, asserting Black autonomy, self-definition, and political self-reliance.⁴³ In this sense, UNIN functioned as an ideological laboratory in which leadership identities were consciously forged rather than passively inherited.

Black Consciousness redefined leadership as collective service to the oppressed rather than individual ambition.⁴⁴ Student activists were often trained informally but rigorously in ideological articulation, mass mobilisation, ethical discipline, and organisational coordination. Leadership emerged through political education, debates, protest organisation, and confrontation with institutional and state authority, reflecting what Altbach conceptualises as activist learning within higher education.⁴⁵

The expulsion of Onkgopotse Tiro in 1972 is a defining moment in this period. Tiro's politicised graduation speech and subsequent expulsion transformed him into a national symbol of principled resistance, illustrating how UNIN produced leaders capable of articulating local grievances in a language that resonated nationally.⁴⁶ Beyond Tiro, this period incubated a broader cadre of politically conscious leaders whose formative experiences at UNIN shaped later phases in politics, trade unionism, theology, education, and intellectual life.⁴⁷ The campus, thus, operated not only as a site of protest, but also as a training ground where leadership was honed through struggle, sacrifice, and sustained ideological engagement. Leadership at this stage was oppositional, morally grounded, and explicitly anti-systemic, an orientation that would profoundly shape the post-apartheid political elite.⁴⁸

Repression, Mass Mobilisation and Organisational Maturity (1983–1989)

The aftermath of the 1976 uprising ushered in a phase of intensified repression, during which apartheid security forces transformed UNIN into a heavily policed and surveilled space.⁴⁹ Paradoxically, this repression deepened political consciousness and organisational sophistication among students.

⁴² Biko, *I Write What I Like*; Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*; More, "Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation."

⁴³ Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*; Sethuthuthu Lucky Vuma, "The Role Played by the University of the North Student Activism in the Struggle against Apartheid from 1968 to 1994," *African Renaissance* (University of Limpopo, 2018).

⁴⁴ Biko, *I Write What I Like*.

⁴⁵ Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism."

⁴⁶ Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro*.

⁴⁷ Vuma, "The Role Played by the University of the North Student Activism in the Struggle against Apartheid from 1968 to 1994."

⁴⁸ Roger Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa* (Boydell and Brewer, 2013).

⁴⁹ Ann Heffernan et al., *Students Must Rise: Youth Struggle in South Africa before and beyond Soweto '76* (NYU Press, 2016).

Leadership during this period matured from spontaneous mobilisation to disciplined, collective, and strategically coordinated action.⁵⁰

The rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s embedded campus struggles within a wider mass democratic movement, linking student activists to civic organisations, labour unions, religious formations, and community structures.⁵¹ Student leaders at UNIN learned to operate within underground networks, to negotiate alliances, and to balance militancy with strategic restraint. Leadership was no longer charismatic alone; it was organisational, collective, and durable.⁵²

This period produced leaders who later transitioned into national political, trade union, and civil society leadership. Notably, Cyril Ramaphosa, who would later become President of South Africa, was shaped by the broader tradition of student and youth activism associated with UNIN-linked political networks.⁵³ His leadership style, marked by negotiation, organisational discipline, and institutional engagement, bears the imprint of activist training rooted in the political culture of historically Black universities.⁵⁴ Similarly, figures such as Frank Chikane emerged from this milieu, translating student activism into influential roles within religious and civil society leadership.⁵⁵ The UNIN experience thus served as a bridge between grassroots resistance and national leadership formation, confirming the university's role as a generator of politically adaptive and organisationally competent leaders.

Transition, Governance and Institutional Leadership (1990–2004)

The democratic transition fundamentally reconfigured the terrain of leadership production at UNIN/UL. As apartheid crumbled and former activists entered government, public administration, and institutional governance, leadership shifted from oppositional politics to managerial, policy-oriented, and institutional forms.⁵⁶ Student activism during this period increasingly focused on transformation, access, equity, and institutional culture.⁵⁷ Former student leaders assumed roles within university governance structures, political parties, and the state, drawing on skills acquired during earlier phases of activism. Leadership at UL thus evolved into a preparatory school for governance, equipping individuals with negotiation skills, policy literacy, and administrative competence.⁵⁸

The careers of leaders such as the late Tito Mboweni, who later served as Governor of the Reserve Bank and Minister of Finance, illustrate how intellectual and political training rooted in historically Black institutions translated into high-level economic and policy leadership.⁵⁹ Likewise, Mathews Phosa exemplifies the transition from activist leadership to provincial governance and legal practice. This phase confirms that UNIN/UL did not merely produce protest leaders but also cultivated individuals capable of navigating the complex demands of democratic governance, institutional reform, and national policymaking.

Post-Apartheid Contestations, Business Leadership and Renewed Activism (2005–2015)

Despite the formal end of apartheid, structural inequalities persisted within higher education, prompting renewed waves of student activism at UL.⁶⁰ Issues of financial exclusion, curriculum relevance, institutional culture, and decolonisation reasserted the university's role as a laboratory of leadership for

⁵⁰ Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (New Africa Books, 2000).

⁵¹ Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991*; Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

⁵² Kanyeane, *Turfloop a Conscious Pariah: How University of the North Brought in the Age of Barack Obama Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*.

⁵³ Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa*.

⁵⁴ Luescher, "Theorising Student Activism in and beyond the 20th Century: The Contribution of Philip G. Altbach."

⁵⁵ Vuma, "An Historical Examination of the Evolution of Student Activism at the University of Limpopo (Formerly Known as the University of the North), 1968 to 2015."

⁵⁶ Adam Habib, *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting On# FeesMustFall* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2019).

⁵⁷ Luescher, "Theorising Student Activism in and beyond the 20th Century: The Contribution of Philip G. Altbach."

⁵⁸ Vuma, "An Historical Examination of the Evolution of Student Activism at the University of Limpopo (Formerly Known as the University of the North), 1968 to 2015."

⁵⁹ Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa*.

⁶⁰ Habib, *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting On# FeesMustFall*.

a new generation confronting post-apartheid contradictions.⁶¹ Crucially, leadership production during this period extended beyond politics into business, intellectual, and social spheres. The emergence of figures such as Reuel Khoza, a prominent business leader and corporate intellectual, underlines the breadth of leadership nurtured through this institutional ecosystem. Khoza's trajectory illustrates how the intellectual discipline, ethical grounding, and critical thinking cultivated at UNIN/UL translated into leadership within corporate governance and public discourse.⁶² Simultaneously, cultural and intellectual leaders such as Lesego Rampolokeng demonstrate how the university produced critical voices in literature and cultural politics, expanding the meaning of leadership beyond formal authority to include intellectual and symbolic influence.⁶³

The resurgence of activism in this period reaffirmed the enduring role of UL as a site where leadership is continuously reproduced through contestation, critique, and engagement with unresolved historical injustices.

UL/UNIN as a Historical Laboratory of Leadership

Across successive historical phases, the UNIN/UL consistently functioned as a laboratory for manufacturing leadership. Leadership was produced through lived experience, ideological struggle, organisational discipline, and engagement with broader societal crises.⁶⁴ From Black Consciousness militants and anti-apartheid organisers to democratic governors, business leaders, intellectuals, and cultural figures, UL/UNIN has generated leaders whose influence extends across South African society and beyond.⁶⁵ The presence of the sitting President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, alongside business leaders such as Reuel Khoza and a wide array of political, religious, and intellectual figures, is not coincidental. It constitutes historical evidence that UL/UNIN occupies a central, though often under-acknowledged, place in South Africa's leadership ecology. This confirms the article's central argument that rural, historically disadvantaged universities must be re-centred in narratives of leadership formation, liberation, and democratic consolidation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge. First, there is a pressing need for further historical research that foregrounds the gendered dimensions of leadership formation within student activism. Although women were deeply involved in mobilisation, organisation and intellectual labour, their contributions remain under-documented and marginalised within dominant historiographies of student politics. Future studies should explicitly centre women's experiences, leadership practices and political roles to address this persistent lacuna.

Second, comparative historical studies across historically disadvantaged institutions, such as Fort Hare, the University of the Western Cape, Zululand and Durban-Westville, would significantly deepen understanding of how different institutional contexts shaped distinctive leadership cultures and phases. Such comparative work would move beyond institution-specific narratives to illuminate broader patterns of leadership formation within apartheid and post-apartheid higher education.

Third, the article underlines the importance of strengthening institutional memory and heritage projects at universities such as UL. Archival preservation, oral history initiatives and curriculum integration are essential for safeguarding the histories of student activism and leadership formation that have been systematically neglected or fragmented. Investing in institutional memory is not merely commemorative; it is a critical scholarly and pedagogical intervention that enables future generations to engage meaningfully with the university's historical role in shaping society.

⁶¹ Vuma, "An Historical Examination of the Evolution of Student Activism at the University of Limpopo (Formerly Known as the University of the North), 1968 to 2015."

⁶² Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa*.

⁶³ Vuma, "An Historical Examination of the Evolution of Student Activism at the University of Limpopo (Formerly Known as the University of the North), 1968 to 2015."

⁶⁴ Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism"; Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*.

⁶⁵ Vuma, "An Historical Examination of the Evolution of Student Activism at the University of Limpopo (Formerly Known as the University of the North), 1968 to 2015"; Southall, *Liberation Movements in Power: Party and State in Southern Africa*.

By conceptualising the UNIN/UL as a laboratory for manufacturing leadership, this article contributes to a rethinking of how leadership, activism and higher education are historically intertwined in South Africa. It calls for a re-centring of rural historically disadvantaged institutions within national narratives of liberation, transformation and democratic consolidation, and affirms student activism as a vital site of leadership production in both past and present.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the UNIN/UL functioned historically as a dynamic and enduring laboratory for the manufacturing of leadership in South Africa. Contrary to apartheid-era intentions that historically Black universities would operate as politically compliant and intellectually peripheral institutions, UNIN/UL emerged as a central site of ideological contestation, political mobilisation and leadership formation. Student activism at the institution was not episodic or incidental; rather, it constituted a sustained historical process through which political, social and intellectual leaders were produced across successive generations. By applying periodisation as a theoretical and methodological lens, the article has shown that leadership formation at UNIN/UL was neither static nor uniform but deeply shaped by shifting historical contexts and structural conditions. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Black Consciousness provided the ideological grammar through which leadership was articulated as collective service, moral responsibility and resistance to domination. In the 1980s, intensified repression and the rise of mass democratic formations fostered organisationally mature, strategically disciplined leaders capable of operating across campus, community and national terrains. The transition to democracy in the 1990s reconfigured the leadership phase towards governance, policy-making and institutional management, while post-apartheid contestations reactivated activism around access, decolonisation and social justice.

A central contribution of this article is its challenge to urban-centric historiographies that privilege elite metropolitan universities as the primary sites of political and intellectual production. By foregrounding a rural, historically disadvantaged institution, the article demonstrates that leadership central to South Africa's liberation, democratic consolidation and post-apartheid governance was also forged in marginalised spaces through struggle, sacrifice and sustained political education. The presence of nationally and internationally influential figures emerging from UNIN/UL underlines the institution's significance within South Africa's broader leadership ecology.

The findings further suggest that student activism should be understood not merely as protest politics, but as an informal pedagogical process that complements and at times contests formal academic training. Through participation in activism, students acquired organisational skills, ideological clarity, ethical discipline and political literacy that later translated into leadership roles in politics, civil society, business, religion and cultural production. In this sense, UNIN/UL functioned as a site of holistic leadership formation, producing leaders shaped by lived experience as much as by formal curricula.

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