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The dilemmas of student body diversity regarding social cohesion : a critical analysis of the student body diversity in post-1994 higher education transformation in South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analytically explores an alternative model of student body diversity that can facilitate social cohesion within the institutions of higher education in the post-1994 democratic South Africa. This exploration is done in the scope of higher education transformation that began at the end of the apartheid era. Within the broad agenda of transformation, there is a relationship between student body diversity and social cohesion. In the attempt to establish a model of student body diversity, the dilemmas that are associated with the process of social cohesion in higher education are examined.

There are many interpretations of the concept of transformation. However, in navigating towards a sustainable model of student body diversity regarding social cohesion, the focus of this dissertation is on the social transformation of higher education. Chapter three points out that social transformation can occur at two levels; the demographic or substantive. When emphasis is laid on the demographic level, then the process of social transformation is primarily concerned with the numerical composition of different races and language groups within an institution. On the other hand, substantive transformation aims at a change that occurs at the level of social norms, common values, practices and attitudes that are upheld by the students in their diverse races and language groups. The Universities of Johannesburg and Witwatersrand in their processes of socially transforming their institutions are discussed in this dissertation.

A critical analysis of the current framing of the student body diversity within post-1994 social transformation agenda provides an indication that that emphasis has been laid on demographic change. In this regard, social transformation is spelt out as an imperative that institutions must reflect the demographic realities of the broader society of South Africa (Department of Education, 1997). This in-depth exposition of the theme of student body diversity reveals that for social cohesion across race and language to be realized, there is a need to move beyond the demographic approach to social transformation. It is a movement towards establishing the substantive social norms, practices and common values that are necessary to build a new social order which has no racial and language discrimination.

However, it is in this movement towards the substantive level that political ideological dilemmas within institutions of higher education come to the fore.

Chapters five and six are an extensive discussion on the political ideological dilemmas that are associated with any movement towards the substantive transformation. The main question that informs these dilemmas is, do the common social values for social cohesion not mean the suppression of the individual values? The contest of these dilemmas is, therefore, between individual student and community as denoted by the institution. In this dissertation, these dilemmas are framed as political ideologies of comprehensive liberalism and political communitarianism. Comprehensive liberalism advances the thesis that individual students are independent in terms of their preferences to association. On the other hand, political communitarianism views an institution as a community where individual students are members. It is from the fact of membership that they have to tailor their values in accordance to the institution as a community. The merits and demerits in so far as they relate to social cohesion are discussed in this dissertation.

It is from the inadequacies of both comprehensive liberalism and political communitarianism that in this dissertation civic-republicanism is proposed as an alternative model of student body diversity. The argument for this model is that it gives a balance between the individual and the community values so that there is cooperation. Civic-republicanism advocates for an engaged student body diversity that actively participates in the social life of the institution. It does not impose the common good, but gives room to the student community to explore and establish binding norms. What should be recalled is that a new social order is an indispensable component of the post-1994 South Africa. In proposing a civic-republican model of student body diversity, this dissertation asserts that a new social order where the phenomenon of inter-group interaction is realized in the institutions of higher education. The summative conclusion is that it is only through civic-republicanism that social cohesion can be attained in institutions of higher education in South Africa.