

ABSTRACT

The common narrative of social movements and protest action in recent years, indicates that young people globally are dominating such movements. In South Africa, students' continued engagement in protests around politics and public issues at the local level, as well as their low levels of participation in formal democratic processes such as elections, calls for an assessment on whether students are knowledgeable and understand the role of local government, as well as local governance. This study looks at young South African students' (18-24 years) knowledge and understanding of local government, and local governance in the Johannesburg Metropolitan. For the purpose of this qualitative research study, 56 young students in two universities and two TVET colleges in the Johannesburg metropolitan were interviewed through 35 semi-structured in-depth, one-on-one interviews, and three focus group discussions. This study confirms that students present a very narrow knowledge and understanding of democratic governance and the political system at the local level. This, it is argued, is a key reason behind their lack of engagement and participation at the local level, as well as their identification of protests as the only effective form of political activism. This study also indicates that, despite students' awareness of traditional political platforms such as elections and taking part in community meetings, their perceptions of poor local leadership, eroding trust in traditional democratic institutions, patronage party politics and general disillusionment with the political future of the country, are hindering these students' participation in local governance.