

Report of the African Student Leaders Network Meeting (The Stanley Hotel, Nairobi, 16th Oct, 2004)

By Jowi James Otieno, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.

Participants

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| 1.Jowi James Otieno | - Coordinator, E.A.Region- Chairing Meeting |
| 2.Nico Cloete | - Director, ASLN & CHET, South Africa |
| 3.Dina Mwinzi | - Dean of Students, Moi University, Kenya. |
| 4.Gwantwa L.Mwakalundwa | - Herbert Kairuki University, Tanzania |
| 5.Juma Khauka | - Maseno University, Kenya |
| 6.Mathew Abongo | - Moi University, Kenya |
| 7.Robert Kinanga | - Moi University, Kenya |
| 8.David Okindo | - University of Nairobi, Kenya |
| 9.Chris Andendekisye | - University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania |
| 10.Paul Tamale | - Makerere University, Uganda |
| 11. Fred Ssengooba | - Makarere University, Uganda |
| 12.Mitchael Litakome | - Makerere University, Uganda |
| 13. Robert Omare | - Egerton University, Kenya |
| 14. Samson Obichwa | - Uganda Christian University, Uganda |
| 15.Michael Wanjala | - University of Nairobi, Kenya |
| 16.Margaret Sande | - C.U.E.A, Kenya. |

Introduction

The Africa Student Leaders Network (ASLN) held a meeting of the East African region node on 16th October 2004 at The Stanley Hotel, Nairobi. The main aim of the meeting was to officially launch the E.African node, introduce new members to the network, set a plan of activities and nominate the student representatives to form the coordination team for the region. Student leaders representing the three E.African countries i.e. Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania attended the meeting. Also present was Nico Cloete, Director CHET and ASLN, Jowi J.Otieno, ASLN Coordinator for E.Africa and Mrs. Dinah Mwinzi, Dean of Students, Moi University.

The meeting begun at 11.00 with all the participants introducing themselves and outlining how they got to know of the network. It was notable that most of the participants were already aware of the network and had already participated in its activities in one way or another.

The few who had not been fully introduced into the network appreciated the benefits that student leaders could obtain from such exchanges. The three East African countries were well represented in the meeting by student leaders who held various key positions of responsibility in their unions.

African Student Leaders Network- brief.

Nico Cloete gave a brief presentation of the African Student Leaders Network and explained what the network is supposed to do and achieve. He underscored the role of the network in enhancing institutional governance in African universities by creating a forum for student leaders in the different regions of Africa to exchange ideas and experiences.

The main aim of the network is to provide a means of communication between student leaders located in very different parts and contexts in Africa to enable them exchange ideas and information on activities and challenges they face in the students governance and leadership. The other aim of the network is to establish an expert group that could assist the student leaders with more information and “think pieces’ on governance and leadership both at national and institutional levels.

The Cairo Dream

In 2003, Ford Foundation organized a meeting for student leaders in Cairo which was attended by student leaders from most parts of Africa. One of the main outcomes of the meeting was the inadequate representation of students in the organs of university governance in most African institutions. By the end of the meeting, the students expressed a clear need to develop a clear and coherent platform through which they could exchange ideas on issues of governance in their universities. This was to enable them learn from one another’s experiences and have common input in university governance.

Four students who attended the Cairo meeting (Gwantwa, Juma, Makokha and Sande) were also invited to attend the Nairobi meeting and share their experiences with the others. Some of them have been actively participating in the network. From their experiences, the “Cairo dream” could have been of much impact if most of the recommendations were implemented. It was also noted that most of the students who attended the Cairo meeting had lost touch with one another.

Progress/ Current Status

Nico Cloete gave a presentation on the progress and current status of the network. Overall, the network is on course and still focused on its original objectives. To facilitate ease of exchanges, the network now operates in nodes of which the East African region is one. The South African node is also quite active but the North and West African nodes need to be revitalized.

The network had commissioned some papers on students leadership which were put on the website and form a basis for the discussions. It was also reported that more papers which will be of immense benefit to the network had been commissioned and would be ready by the end of the year. One of them will put together all the relevant literature on student leadership in Africa.

It was observed by the students that the website did not have so much for students to discuss. Apart from the long papers, the students expressed a need for short issues for discussions for which they could give quick answers and enhance communication

between them. Most students, especially those from Kenya indicated that the high costs for internet access was making it difficult for them to participate in the discussions. In response to this, the network has made it possible for students who utilize the ASLN website to be accorded some financial support for internet costs.

The IUCEA Meeting

It was noted that just two days ago (14th and 15th Oct), there was another student leaders meeting in the region (Arusha) organized under the auspices of the Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). Mrs. Dinah Mwinzi (Dean of Students, Moi University) who attended the meeting reported that the student leaders in the Arusha meeting raised a number of issues with respect to their role in university governance and management. Among other things, they observed that though they are one of the key stakeholders in the universities they are not adequately involved in most matters of university governance which have direct impacts on them. These ranged from matters of representation to student welfare. They expressed a need to be involved in policy decisions at institutional level, system level and in the Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). The other salient issues they raised included;

- Conflicts between students and university managements and how these could be resolved through a unified approach.
- Leadership training for student leaders before they take up office.
- Enhancement of student welfare services
- The role of student leaders/unions.
- The role of the government – they noted with concern that governments were moving out of university governance.

It was observed that the initiative of the IUCEA could be linked to the activities of the network so that the two work together for maximum outputs.

Emerging Issues & Wayforward

Before concluding the meeting and in putting the pieces together, the following key issues emerged;

- Governance Models- It was noted that the universities had different governance structures/models and thus the student unions were also governed differently. Most private universities had a lot of religious undertones guiding how they carried out their affairs though they had fewer student disturbances. In students' governance, the Makerere Model seemed more innovative, representative and inclusive. It was needful to see how it is done, the benefits and lessons that could be drawn from it by the other student unions especially in dealing with conflict situations. It was suggested that a paper be commissioned that would give explanations and details on how the Makerere model works.

- Management decisions on students' matters-It was an issue of concern that in most cases university management does not provide enough room for negotiation with student unions. However, whenever they did so, they always reneged on decisions made with the student unions. There was therefore need for follow up on management decisions with respect to students' matters.
- Tensions between radicalism and reform in student leadership- Most student leaders are viewed as radicals by the administration while there is also the reform perspective. Are student leaders radicals or reformists? It was agreed that a student leader be commissioned to write a paper on this issue.
- University management expectations from student leadership- The student leaders seemed to be not quite clear on what the university executives expected of them and this could be a possible cause of the misunderstandings or conflicts between their unions and the executives. It was agreed that a paper could be commissioned on this and be written by the Chair of the Board of the Inter University Council for East Africa on what university management expects from student leaders.
- Funding of Public and Privately Sponsored Students Programmes- There seemed to be some conflicts between these two groups of students in the public universities and also differences on how they are funded. It was found needful to understand how different institutions/countries deal with their public and private programmes/ students and whether there were any institutional and government policies towards it.
- Regionalism and Ethnicity in student politics- Most student leaders acknowledged that in most cases students are elected with respect to their ethnic/ regional inclinations and not on merit. This rendered student politics to at times be so much tribalised and also be infiltrated by external politics and bribery.
- Gender issues in student politics- Male students dominated student leadership in the universities. It was found needful to seek explanations to why there were few female students participating in student's leadership. This could be investigated and a paper could be commissioned to provide explanation.
- Image of student leaders - How do university administrators and students view student leaders? What are the roles of student leaders? Are they doing it rightly? Most of the student leaders were of the view that university management viewed them as being stubborn, uncooperative and troublemakers.
- Marginalized/ less privileged student groups- Universities are composed of different types of students of whom some are marginalized due to different

reasons. How are the interests and needs of these student groups (e.g. disabled) catered for? What roles can student unions play?

Liaison Group

For ease in coordination of activities and dissemination of information, student representatives were nominated as liaison persons of their respective countries to the network. They will now be the working committee for the East African node in the network which is coordinated by Mr. Jowi Otieno. Those nominated were;

- Chris Andendekisye - Tanzania
- Michael Lutakome - Uganda
- Margaret Sande - Kenya

After the meeting, the students engaged in different social activities. Generally the output, especially from the students was great.