

POLICY BRIEF

VENTURING INTO THE DOMAIN OF REPRESENTATION AT HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

MAPPING OUT POSSIBILITIES AND STRATEGIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bringing in more diverse voices in teacher unions and associations will ensure that different views and opinions are shared by members. Given the numerous problems in education in the twenty first century, workable solutions are needed to address the challenges besieging the education sector. This can happen if teacher unions harness the best possible people, particularly in the higher education sector since they are highly qualified and skilled. It is SADTU's wish to attract members with a variety of skills into its membership fold (SADTU vision 2030). The higher education sector plays a critical role in the development of education in any country. There is compelling evidence that higher education services in the form of training potential educators (and education officials) and research activities provide invaluable contribution towards the improvement and provision of quality education in schools.

Twenty years after the end of apartheid in South Africa, many challenges and opportunities still remain in education. The challenges need to be addressed while opportunities have to be tapped into, managed and negotiated effectively. It has become critical for teacher unions to identify and address these issues in order to make significant progress towards building a more knowledgeable and skilled nation. In its 2030 vision SADTU vows to continually develop tactics for any situation that it faces (SADTU vision 2030). This is a good thing that could be achieved through devising ways to improve education in South Africa. Education can be strengthened and improved through increased representation of members of the higher education sector in teacher unions and associations. All this is in-line with the SADTU 2030 vision whose objectives include "to constantly improve the organisation and to conscientise and mobilise members". To achieve this critical goal means that more members need to be persuaded to join the union ranks. Increasing representation of union membership in the higher education sector means that increased focus will be on (proven) better strategies and methods of providing quality educational service to the nation due to their research capacity.

The brief proposes the following strategies:

- Growing the SADTU family tent
- Securing a seat at the higher education table.
- Drawing a strategic partner in the fight for an equitable and just education at all levels

- Ensuring that members go through all levels of the higher education systems degrees (Bed, Honours, Masters and PhD).
- Selling ourselves to the broader public to avoid misinformation about SADTU activities

CONTEXT

Since its formation in the 1990s SADTU's main focus has been on access and equity in education hence its focus on attracting membership specifically from schools. Their organising principle has been one where members in schools and their needs come first. Their emphasis has been on the importance of education as a means for realising human potential. SADTU insists that education is there to serve society-with the main goals of equality, opportunity and democratic development. The union's role has been to protect members and to ensure that opportunities benefit those who support and use public education, students and the community. SADTU sees education as a right, not a commodity hence its emphasis is on collective benefits of education.

After focussing for so long on issues of reforming the South African schooling given the legacy of apartheid in term of access, participation and success (understandably so) the time has come now for SADTU to infiltrate the field of higher education. Higher education is where knowledge is generated; it is where the battle of ideas takes place. There is a space that could be tapped into in higher education that SADTU has not actively lobbied for. It has become imperative for SADTU to dominate that space, have a say in terms of how it wishes education to be like in South Africa. This could allow for SADTU to organize with academics/professors who can buy into the ideas of SADTU, help do research into issues that SADTU cares about and help the union to realise its latest vision by 2030.

There are benefits for members of the higher education sector in joining unions as a way to enhance collegiality (DeCew, 2003) by protecting their employment rights and to guard against unfair treatment and exploitation by the university administration. This is more so because of their autonomous status which gives such institutions the mandate to set workers' employment terms. In the past, higher education institutions like universities functioned mainly to provide social change and to protect the rights of those who were marginalized by the system (Cain, 2013). Of late proponents of collective bargaining have increasingly been calling for more protection around the jobs they do. For example, workers want protection of academic freedom, systems in place for airing grievances, leveraging the power of their numbers to seek work-placed based solutions and defense in cases of retrenchment (Cain, 2013) among other things. Workers have to have tools like collective bargaining in order to systematically put across their concerns in a manner that guarantees attention. The best way to make that happen is through joining trade unions, specifically well established unions like SADTU with a proven record of standing for workers' rights. Through collective bargaining there is potential for workers workplace conditions to be improved.

Assumptions

The law is a shield that protects all. The law is meant to ensure social justice in the face of unjust practices. These laws extend to all workers in any working environment. The laws prohibit discrimination by (i) race (ii) Ethnicity (iii) religion and (iv) gender. However how these rights are protected depends on individual organizations. However, just because there are laws that guarantees equal protection for all citizens, not everyone enjoys equal opportunity in the country.

Teacher unions are collective bargaining movement for schools. There is a general belief that since teacher unions and associations started as movements in schools, organizing around school issues these are the only areas that matter. Not that school issues have been solved but unions need to find ways of bringing in diverse voices to help advance their course.

Teacher unions have a bad image. Unions are considered by most as trouble-making organisations that likes to bargain through strikes. At a time when unions are competing for membership given declining union participation, it is important that union's project an image can attract new members. Teacher unions undertake numerous activities on behalf of their members. At times members are involved directly in some of these activities like during strikes. There is need for better communication mechanisms that effectively tell workers side of the story as to why there was a need to go on strike in order to draw public sympathy.

Active university transformation is just for universities. To transform universities, many believe is better left to those in the higher education sector. There is need for unions to have a say on the transformation of universities. Generally, this can be done on two levels: At the level of teaching and learning (through the teaching and learning committees and the senatorial level, a university (highest level) decision making body where membership is by academics who are professors. Having representation on such committees will surely move SADTU mission forward.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VENTURING INTO THE DOMAIN OF REPRESENTATION AT THE HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

SADTU needs to readjust their strategies and examine where they can best influence where decisions are made. There is need for all education providers to work together nationally to make positive impact on education, with emphasis on the use of members' collective strength to protect and strengthen teaching and learning. To this end, some policy recommendations are suggested.

- *Growing the SADTU family tent.* Effective organising needs to extend to all levels of the education system. SADTU recognises the importance of organising in the higher education sector. There are specific benefits to be harnessed from the

higher education sector and the specific challenges that such lobbying may help address.

- *Securing a seat at the table.* SADTU needs to tap into the unexplored market of higher education. This would involve identifying with people in the higher education sector who share our values and believes. By convincing them to join hands with SADTU, to share in our goals, would help bring them into our ideological position and vision as they are the drivers in their field which would further advance the SADTU mission and vision. If SADTU wants to influence decision at the higher education level, it is important to rope in professors. We need them on our side, to inform, guide and advise us. By attracting professors who have decision making powers in institutions of higher learning, would allow SADTU to advance their agenda within the sector. This could perhaps help influence policy the way SADTU wants.
- *Drawing a strategic partner in the fight for an equitable and just education at all levels.* In collaboration with members of the higher education sector the union could undertake transformative projects to investigate education challenges and to seek the best solutions to these challenges. Through these partnerships members could undertake research on key challenges with the goal of mapping out key solutions instead of outsourcing such services at considerable financial costs to the union.
- *Ensuring that members go through all levels of the higher education systems degrees (Bed, Honours, Masters and PhD).* There is need to cultivate a new crop of leaders and teaching professionals by devising the most effective ways of training members. By creating a learning nation (through new approaches to teacher development), is, how we would get the best service out of our members by equipping them with the best skills and knowledge to advance the country forward hence produce learners who are competitive in the region and elsewhere.
- *Selling ourselves to the broader public to avoid misinformation about SADTU activities.* There is need for SADTU to get in front of every national story that is about the education and wellbeing of our citizens. This will give us the opportunity to tout our accomplishments, present the challenges we still face and outline how best we intend to continue the work of representing our members and the nation in general on issues affecting education in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

SADTU needs to increase its membership beyond schools to include universities. They need to be creative and strategic in bringing this untapped sector into their fold. Their contribution to the advancement of union priorities will improve the quality of teaching and learning in South Africa. But all this should be done with a longer goal of benefitting the learners, teachers and schools and the education sector in general.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnold, G.B. (2000). *The politics of faculty unionization: The experiences of three New England Universities*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Harvey.

Cain, T. (2013). *The research on faculty unions*. Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities. Illinois.

DeCew, J. W. (2003). *Unionization in the Academy: Visions and realities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Hutcheson, P. A. (2000). *A professional professoriate: Unionization, bureaucratization and the AAUP*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Klein, M. W. (2012). Ten years after *Managed Professionals*: Who owns intellectual property now? *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy* 2. <http://thekeep.eiu.edu/jeba/vol2/iss1/2>

SADTU 2030 vision, September 29 2010.

DRAFT