

Student representation in European higher education governance: principles and practice, roles and benefits

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This article considers the state of student representation and student participation in institutional governance in Europe. (1) It reviews the formal provisions for – and good practices in – student representation. The underlying assumption here is that good governance of representative student organisations is a necessary but not sufficient condition for active and effective participation in institutional governance. (2) Next, the article addresses the conditions for an “enabling environment” for student participation. It discusses the formal provisions in place, as well as principles of good practice. (3) Finally it discusses the reasons for the notable differences in actual practices and modes of participation in institutional governance. It links these differences to different (and changing) conceptions of students held by the HEIs: as “members of the community”; as “constituency” or “stakeholders”; as “citizens” and “future elite”; and as “consumers”/“clients”/“users”; applying the typology developed by Luescher (2010a, 2010b) to the European context. The underlying aim of the article is to assist the future development of this area of governance through clarifying the concepts and contexts pertaining to the relationships between student representation and institutional governing bodies.

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Structures, actors and roles

1. Introduction¹

Student representation and participation in Europe among the most developed in the world

Student representation and student participation in higher education [HE] governance within the European Higher Education Area [EHEA] is arguably among the most developed in the world.² Students' right to organise has been incorporated into almost all HE laws in Europe. Elected student representatives participate in governing bodies of most European higher education institutions [HEIs]. Nevertheless, representative student organisations continue to argue the case for student participation.

Terms of student participation changing with governance reforms

While the basic formal provisions guaranteeing students' participation are in place, the actual terms and extent of student participation vary considerably across Europe (Bergan 2004; Persson 2004). Furthermore, the terms of participation continue to change with the on-going HE governance reforms. The major trends that have defined European (and global) HE since 1990s and that have so profoundly shaped governance reforms have also not left student representative organisations – their politics and culture – unaffected.

New managerialism

Globalisation of HE, i.e. the increased global competition for students, faculty and resources, has led to reconsideration of HE governance models and to their reforms in the direction of “new managerialism” (Scott 1995). As Luescher (forthcoming) argues, such governance regimes tend to develop a distinct organisational culture which conceives students as “customers” or “clients” and solicits student participation for the purposes of feedback for improved quality performance. The underlying model of student representation tends to be characterised by a de-politicised student government which concentrates on providing student services that complement the institutional quality agenda. Such models of student participation are common in private, for-profit HEIs. With new managerialism in HE governance they may be entering also the public sector.

More external stakeholders

Further incentives for the new managerialism come from the increasing and ever more precise demands on HEI's from the “knowledge economy” and society at large. HEIs are facing an explosion in the number of external stakeholders and in the variety of their demands. This raises the question of the interface between higher education and its stakeholders – both the external and the internal constituencies (Jongbloed 2007, p.55): ‘In particular, how does the university prioritise its different functions and stakeholders and their de-

¹ I thank the editors and Thierry Luescher for their most helpful comments and suggestions on this article.

² There are – as far as I know – no comparative studies of student participation across different regions of the world.

mands/expectations? What are the functional and structural additions to handle the growing complexity of stakeholders?’ Relevant to the present investigation is the specific question: how do these changes affect student participation as such, and students’ influence in respect to other stakeholders?

Next, the massification of HE has not only expanded the student body, but also led to an increasingly diverse constituency of student representative organisations. The growing importance of adult and continuing education has increased the share of mature students within the student body. These come with distinct interests and expectations quite different to those of the typical student cohort of 18-24 year olds. The increasing popularity of the web-based programmes too has increased student numbers with virtual students – again a group with distinct expectations and study styles. A diverse student body is welcoming and enriching to the HE community in many ways. In view of student representation, however, diversity poses a challenge: a more fragmented student body with weaker common bonds has more difficulties to come to consensus on common interests and speak with a united voice. Non-traditional students not only have major obligations outside the academic environment (i.e. work and family), but also tend to have a stronger vocational orientation. Thus, larger share of these students potentially adds to the de-politicisation of the student body and its representative organisations.

Massification and diversity of student body

Given these trends and underlying reforms in European HE, a quest for further reflection on student participation as ‘an aspect of the broader area of university governance’ (Bergan 2004, p. 27) is justified. This article considers the state of student representation and student participation in institutional governance in Europe. The underlying aim is to assist the future development of this area of governance through clarifying the concepts and contexts pertaining to the relationships between student representation and institutional governing bodies.

The first section (1) reviews the formal provisions for – and good practices in – student representation. As a starting point, it is assumed that good governance of representative student organisations is a necessary but not sufficient condition for active and effective participation in institutional governance. The following section (2) then addresses the conditions for an “enabling environment” for student participation. It discusses the formal provisions in place, as well as principles of good practice. The final section (3) seeks to unravel the reasons for the notable differences in actual practices and modes of participation in institutional governance. It links these differences to different (and changing) conceptions of students held by the HEIs: as “members of the academic community”; as “constituency” or “stakeholders”; as “consumers”/“clients”/“users”; and as “citizens” and “fu-

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ture elite". It applies the typology developed by Luescher (2010a, 2010b) to the European context.

2. Student representation in Europe

Multitude of student groups – what is distinct about representative student organisations?

The norm promoted by European Students' Union [ESU] is that representative student organisations are necessarily controlled and run by students, hold democratic elections and are run democratically, and are autonomous and independent in their decision-making.³ While there is a multitude of student groups – discipline-specific, political, religious and other interest student groups – the representative student organisations are distinct in terms of their openness to and representation of *all* students. As such they are formally and/or effectively recognised as representative government by the student body and by other stakeholders, especially national governments and other actors in higher education.

Differences in student representation

The models of student representation across Europe vary according to:

- structure (student parliaments, e.g. Poland and Austria; council-like structures, e.g. Netherlands; trade union-like models, e.g. France, Italy (Bienefeld and Almqvist 2004)),
- membership (compulsory/automatic or voluntary),
- sources of financing (continuous and secured administrative funding or fluctuating with membership fees or other sources),
- ideological orientations (i.e. according to *the political agenda*, i.e. salient issues defended and types of goals pursued, and *practices*, i.e. the means they employ to pursue goals).

The “activists”

The key dichotomy that emerges if we consider especially the differences in ideological orientations is that of the “activists” versus the “professionals” (Klemenčič 2007).⁴ The student governments that have predominantly “activist” orientations tend to be ‘oppositional in nature’, ‘opposing established authority’, ‘on the left in terms of ideology and politics’ (Altbach 2006, p.335). The salient issues advocated would most often revolve around:

³ The same norm is stated also in statutes of most ESU member national unions of students.

⁴ Luescher (2010a) presents a similar dichotomy of “emancipatory” versus “entrepreneurial or business-like” activism.

- solidarity,
- student (and broadly human) rights,
- social justice,
- egalitarian values,
- democratisation,
- anti-globalisation.

Such student organisations are more likely to use revolutionary language and confrontational activism and resort to mass action, i.e. demonstrations as opposed to direct lobby and advocacy. They tend to be loosely organised with volunteers rather than permanent staff, lack substantial secured financing, and have often more or less explicit linkages to leftist political movements.

In contrast, the political agenda of the “professionals” will often mirror the institutional and government salient issues directly affecting students. Their policies and activities thus revolve around:

**The “professionals”:
political and service-
oriented**

- organisation, substance and processes of education,
- student social welfare.

In their participatory mode they most often use dialogue and partnership. Their organisational structure tends to be characterised by highly-developed institutional structures backed up by extensive formal provisions and often significant funding mechanism. Within “professionals” we can find student governments that are more political and those that are more service-oriented. The former seek full participation in decision-making and extensively pursue political activities. The interests of the latter revolve around accruing non-political and privatised benefits to students. A predominant part of their operations is to cater student facilities, organise activities for students and provide student services. Their participatory mode is predominantly consultative and student representatives often receive remuneration for their “services”.

Most of the representative student organisations fall somewhere in the range between these extreme categories while displaying more characteristics of one or the other type. Their orientations may be changing with the changes in HE regulations on student representation, institutional governance reforms, and general political and social circumstances.

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Rights of students in national legislation

Primary HE legislation across Europe tends to describe in general terms the rights of students (and staff) to organise, i.e. the right to elect student representatives to some form of student representation: e.g. student council, student parliament, student body, student (self)government. For example, the Norwegian HE Act includes a whole chapter on “student bodies” whose purpose it is ‘to safeguard the interests of students and present their views to the board and council of the institution [and faculties and departments]’ (Norwegian HE Act 2003, Chapter 7, Section 27 (1)). It further stipulates the election procedures to student bodies (Section 27(2)) and dictates that institutions ‘shall provide conditions in which student bodies are able to perform their functions in a satisfactory manner’ and that ‘the extent of such arrangements shall be specified in an agreement between the institution and the highest student body’ (Section 27 (3)). The HEIs’ statutes consequently tend to replicate and/or further expand these provisions.

From individual to European student representation

In a majority of cases the line of organizing student representation goes from individual students who elect their representatives – directly or via faculty – to institutional representative student organisations. These are organised into a national representative student organisation which is recognised to represent student interests on the national level, either through legal provisions or informally by the government and other major actors (e.g. associations of HEIs, trade unions, etc.).⁵

National unions of students

National student representation reflects the differentiation of national higher education systems and the division of competences over higher education within these systems. In some countries there are two national unions of students: one for universities and one for other HEIs, reflecting a binary HE system. National unions of students [NUSes] can also be divided according to whether they represent public or private HEIs. In some countries, such as for example Belgium, there is not one but two national representative student unions, reflecting the deep historical and linguistic divide in that country (ESU BWSE 2007, p. 23ff).

The European Students’ Union

At European level, the national student representative organisations are linked through the European Students’ Union, which is an umbrella organisation of 44 National Unions of Students from 37 countries, and in this way represents over 11 million students.⁶ The aim of ESU

⁵ There are, however, several exceptions to this rule (see ESU SUDH 2009). In Austria, for example, all students are organized in the national union of students, which then forms local unions at HEIs (see The Students’ Union Act HSG 1998). In some countries, institutional student representative organisations are not organised nationally or they form external committees that form national organisation.

⁶ This data is as of August 2010. See <http://www.esu-online.org>.

is to articulate and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level. It is both a political and service organisation. It is involved in political decision-making – most notably within the Bologna Process – and it represents the interests and views of students towards the other stakeholders in higher education (Klemenčič 2007). It provides services to its members (also when solicited by other stakeholders) through disseminating information, capacity-building and training, and providing opportunities for cooperation and networking among its members.

Good practices of student representation

Good governance of representative student organisations is a necessary – even though not sufficient – condition for active and effective participation in institutional governance. A student representative organisation is considered to have a legitimate mandate to represent student interests if it was elected by the students in democratic elections and if it adheres to the “**common principles of student representation**” as developed by ESU (ESU Ljubljana Declaration 2008). These principles are:

1. Openness to all students independent of socio-economical background, race, sexual or political orientation, gender, or religious beliefs;
2. Representation of all students and of all their interests;
3. A decision-making process democratically run and controlled by students;
4. Independence in the decision-making process vis-à-vis universities, government, and party politics.

To uphold these principles is challenging for student organisations across Europe as for those in the rest of the world. One cannot claim that all European representative student organisations perfectly adhere to all of these principles.⁷ Most common criticism of the legitimacy of student organisations comes from the very low turnout rates in student elections. Elections of student representatives are nearly universal in Europe. A major (and pioneering) cross-national survey of student participation in university governance in Europe conducted by the

Common principles of student representation

Low turn-out rates

⁷ With purpose of strengthening good governance and legitimacy of student unions in Europe, ESU published “The Student Union Development Handbook: For a Stronger Student Movement” (ESU SUDH 2009), and created a new Student Union Development Committee within its structures. For more information and contact see <http://www.esu-online.org/index.php/Structures/sudc>.

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Council of Europe suggests that only in a small minority of countries student representatives are appointed rather than elected, and that these appointments are nearly always made by the student union (Bergan 2004, Persson 2004). The Survey also shows that motivation to run for a representative position is higher on institutional than on departmental or faculty level. Furthermore, the candidates on departmental level tend to run as individuals, whereas on institutional level a majority of candidates run on a ticket representing an organization (ibid.). Finally, although voter turnout in student elections varies considerably across Europe, it tends to be low: most of the time, less than half the student population elects those representing the whole student body, and in most cases voter turnout is actually one in three or less (ibid.).

Low mobilization

The reasons for such a low mobilisation of student body and political disaffection with student politics are several:

- increasing career orientation of students (i.e. vocationalism),
- overwhelming study duties preventing participation in institutional life (Bergan 2004),
- a culture of individualism (i.e. the pre-eminence of self-interest over concerns for the common good),
- lack of trust in and respect for (and increasingly also knowledge of) democratic political processes and political institutions,
- lack of a sense of “ownership” of the institution (Fried 2004, p. 97), etc.

Further challenges arise from a potential interference in the student organisations’ policies and/or politics from:

- HEIs administration,
- government institutions,
- political parties, and
- identity politics.

Administrative autonomy

One precondition for safeguarding the independence of student representation is through ensuring administrative autonomy. An important part of this is deciding autonomously (and, of course, transparently and accountably) for what purposes and how they will use their resources. Moreover, continuous and secured funding (from governments, HEIs, fees or any other source) leads to student bodies that are ‘far better organized, developed, structured and recognized by students in their country’ (Stojanović 2009, p. 50).

The relationship of elected representatives to political parties has been a source of contention with student representative governments for a long time. While the principle defended in ESU is that NUSes should be open to and represent the interest of all students – regardless of their political orientations –, it is also true that many of the elected student representatives have some political party association or come from political student groups. While cooperating with any societal actor on shared student interests is an expected political process, safeguarding the independence of student representation is paramount not only as a value in itself, but also since perceived political bias leads to mistrust of students and thus to further political apathy. Safeguarding independence is important not only during the elected mandate, but also during student elections. Making it more likely for candidates with certain party association to gain a representative seat and get promoted within the structures of student representation, or, in contrast, make it more difficult to gain a position for a candidate without such an affiliation is unacceptable. It not only jeopardises legitimacy of the organisation, it also leads to further loss of trust in and thus disaffection with student politics by the student body.

Political parties

Furthermore, mature, virtual, and “extension programs” students are less likely to become student representatives due to difficulties in balancing work-family-study and/or limited physical presence on institutional grounds. To fully adhere to the principle of openness, appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that the student representatives reflect the diversity of the student body. It is, thus, important, as stated in the ESU Ljubljana Declaration (ESU 2008), that student representative organisations address ‘new groups of students, in the three-cycled structure of [...] curricula, as well as a diversifying student body, in order to become truly representative of all students and their interests’.

Including mature students and minority student groups

In an increasingly diverse student body – according to religion, language/ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientations – challenges of accommodating identity politics within student politics accelerate.⁸ Involving minority student groups in student representation requires special effort as it does accommodation of diverse and often conflicting interests of these groups. To preserve openness, it is paramount that representative student organisations have rules and regulations that are ‘exhaustive open and robust’ in terms of representation of all student societies, including minority political and religious student groups (Quilliam 2010). Involving these groups may moderate potentially negative effects of such groups on the cohesive nature of the university environment (ibid.) Quilliam briefing paper (2010, p.37) on radicalisation at British campuses further reiterates that ‘[t]he representation of students should be through universities’ democratic struc-

Identity politics

⁸ I thank Thierry Luescher for reminding me to consider the impact of identity politics on student representation.

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tures [...] [as] too often universities incorrectly assume that [student] societies are representative of specific religious, political and cultural groups – for example, that Islamic Societies speak on behalf of all Muslim students’.⁹

Reaching to the student body

Given these trends in attitudes – which are not common only to the HE sector but are present in society at large – the tasks of reaching out to and connecting with the student body are considerable. Maintaining good governance and legitimacy is crucial. Maintaining an effective two-way communication flow can also be helpful. Here student bodies should complement the traditional methods (newsletters, public events, office hours, etc.) with diversified, accessible and affordable ICT tools which are widely (if not universally) used by students. Public forums – regular and institutionalised – organised by representative student organisations addressing policies and issues of immediate concern to students are of utmost importance for establishing a connection between the representative student government and students. Again, these might not reach all students or necessarily alter their attitudes towards student representation, but they will at least give the opportunity for the student electorate to be informed and involved.

Legitimacy

The mentioned principles of good governance are important for upholding the legitimacy of student representative government. Legitimacy presupposes active student participation and lack of apathy, and this in turn presupposes that students perceive that their participation in student politics makes a difference and that student representative organisations have genuine influence. Despite the near-universal legislation on student participation across Europe, the overall perception of student representatives still is that students are ‘not regarded as equal partners by HEIs and other stakeholders’ and that this is ‘a major obstacle to greater, and meaningful, student participation’ (ESU BWSE 2009).

3. Student participation in HE governance

Students as a collective body are in some way represented in the governance of HEIs in basically every European country, and this is secured in almost in all countries through formal provisions (Bergan 2004; Persson 2004). These provisions are either included in the primary legislation on higher education (e.g. the HE Law, the Law on

Legal provisions
student participation

⁹ The briefing paper also suggests that student unions may have an important role to play in preventing extremism on campuses by providing a point of contact for students to report any concerns regarding issues which involve political or religious extremism, including intolerant literature or prayer sermons, homophobia, gender or religious discrimination (Quilliam 2010, p. 37f).

Student Organizations, the Law on Universities) and replicated (and possibly further elaborated) in secondary legislation, i.e. in the statutes of the HEIs, or they only exist in secondary legislation.

However, visible differences exist between countries in terms of:

- student representation at different sub-levels of institutional governance,
- the proportion of students within the overall composition of governing bodies,
- whether students are represented in consultative and decision-making bodies,
- whether student representatives have full voting rights on all issues,
- student representation in university vs. non-university HEIs,
- student representation in public vs. profit, for-profit HEIs.

Differences between countries

The Council of Europe survey on student representation shows that while student representation on the governing bodies of institutions is legally guaranteed, such representation on the departmental, faculty and national levels varies noticeably among the different European countries and is in general more tenuous (Bergan 2004; Persson 2004). The same conclusion was reached by surveys conducted by ESU for the consequent *Bologna with Student Eyes* publications: 'In general it seems as if the students are best represented at the highest level in the HEI, with fewer possibilities both at the national level and the programme, course or faculty level' (ESU BSWE 2007, p. 23, 26). The reason offered to explain the weaker position on the sub-institutional level is that: 'at the lower levels (programme, course, and faculty) students are working in the same academic community in which they are pursuing their studies. This means that students are working with the academics that may have direct influence over their studies' (ibid.). Furthermore, secondary legislation regulating student participation on sub-institutional levels of governance is frequently absent.

Student representation at sub-institutional levels

The survey by ESU shows that there is a clear trend towards having a fixed percentage or a range of student representatives in the different governance bodies (ESU BSWE 2009). On this issue, for example, the Norwegian HE Act specifies that the Board, which is the highest governing body of an institution, shall be composed of two out of eleven members who are elected from among the students (1993, Section 6 (1)). Furthermore, unless the delegating body unanimously decides otherwise, the students must have at least 20 per cent and never less than two of the representatives on all collegiate bodies which are giv-

Composition in governing bodies – consultative vs. decision-making terms of participation

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en decision-making powers (1993, Section 19(2)). In most countries, however, primary legislation only specifies the composition of governing bodies on the institutional level. Other levels may or may not be regulated in secondary legislation. The most common range reported for all levels is 10-30 % (Bergan 2004, Persson 2004). Legal provisions vary also in terms of whether students' participation is granted in purely consultative or also decision-making bodies. Moreover, when students participate in decision-making bodies they may enjoy full voting rights on all issues, or their voting rights are limited to issues which are considered to be of immediate concern to the students, such as for example budget, faculty appointments or student admissions.

Differences between HEIs

Finally, differences exist also between HEIs. ESU's survey (BWSE 2009, p. 36ff) reports that student participation in governance (and student representation as such) tends to be weaker – formally and actually – in the non-university HE sector, i.e. institutions of applied science, due to less binding legislation and weaker traditions of student representation. Perhaps something similar could be observed for the private HEIs. In both cases, however, we should perhaps qualify this observation in the sense that in these institutions student participation still exists but adopts a lesser intensity.

Enabling environment for student participation

Good practice of student participation in institutional governance

The basic conditions of an enabling environment for student representation include:

- institution's adherence to fundamental democratic principles,
- clear and extensive formal provisions defining the terms of student participation for all levels and domains of institutional governance,
- full and continuous recognition of student representation as free and independent with respect to aims, decisions and activities,
- long-term institutional support and resources for a sustainable student representation,
- political will for actual (not only formalistic) continuous student involvement.

There needs to be awareness that there are different levels of intensity of participation – either formally regulated or granted by political will. In order of increasing intensity these levels of participation include:¹⁰

Degrees of intensity
of participation

¹⁰ Adopted from Code of good practice for civil participation in the decision-making by Conference of INGOs of Council of Europe (2009).

1. **Access to information:** This is the basis for all subsequent levels of participation. It implies a one-way provision of information from the institutional administration to representative student bodies. The administration should ensure that there is open and free access to documents related to relevant institutional policies and decisions. This availability of information is especially important during student elections to give all candidates equal access to such information.
2. **Consultation:** At this level the administration solicits student representatives' opinion on specific issues. The administration provides information and then asks for comments, views and feedback.
3. **Dialogue:** Student representative body and administration hold a regular (formal or informal) exchange of views built on mutual interests and potentially shared objectives. Practically this means that student representatives are involved in various consultative committees where they perform advisory functions, or are informally consulted on a regular basis (e.g. through meetings). They also have opportunities to launch their own agenda issues. They do not, however, have formal decision-making powers, i.e. voting or veto rights.
4. **Partnership:** A partnership implies shared responsibilities in each step of the institutional decision-making process: agenda setting, drafting, decision-taking, implementation and monitoring of institutional decisions. It is the highest form of participation. At this level, representative student bodies and the administration cooperate closely and broadly while respecting the independence of student representation. Student representatives participate in decision-making bodies typically with full voting rights. They are also delegated particular implementation activities.

HEIs tend to be complex organisations with multiple governance levels and various channels of interaction within and between these levels as well as with external stakeholders. Within such a fragmented structure and diffused interactions, different intensities of student participation can occur. Some stages in the process will be more, others less, suited to student involvement. Decisions which have an impact on governance outcomes involve a much wider range of processes than that of simply voting within the highest governing body. The agenda-setting stage is as important for student participation as is decision-taking, implementation and monitoring. The participation of students (and other stakeholders) therefore has to be considered – formally regulated and established in practice – also in these different stages of decision-making. Similarly, some domains of governance will be more conducive to active student involvement than others. For example, while students may be less or not at all involved in the operational

Different intensities of participation within institutional structure

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administrative affairs, their participation in decisions regarding teaching, research and public service is indispensable.

Political socialisation of student representatives

Finally, governance cultures also have important implications for the political socialisation of students (Luescher 2010a). Internal governance practices and relationships with different stakeholders and communities all transmit norms, values and attitudes, and these influence how students see themselves: their role and status and leverage within the institutional environment. Principles of student participation and the autonomy of student representation should, therefore, be defined with as much clarity as possible so as to ensure that they are transmitted throughout the structures of governance, embedded in processes and procedures, and communicated to all stakeholders invested in the institution.

4. Arguments against and in favour of student participation¹¹

While the basic rights and responsibilities of students tend to be broadly homogeneous across European HE system, there are notable differences in actual practices of participation in institutional governance, as well as of mode of student representation more broadly. Luescher (2010b) points out that these differences reflect different (and changing) conceptions of students by the HEIs:

- as “members of the academic community”;
- as “constituency” or “stakeholders”;
- as “citizens” and “future elite”; and
- as “consumers”/“clients”/“users”.

These conceptions of students fall within the broader institutional vision and accord with its specific governance regime. They are transmitted throughout the institutional processes and procedures, and permeate the various relationships within the institution. Each of these ideal conceptions of students entails a distinct discourse justifying or refuting or qualifying student participation in governance.

¹¹ This section is adopted from the insightful paper by Luescher (2010b) and applied to the European context.

4.1 Students as “members of the academic community”

In the communitarian conception of HEIs, all members of the academic community – including students – share a common commitment to the institution and feel responsible for it. As Bergan puts it (2004, p.23, see also Persson 2004, p.33), ‘[a]s members of the academic community, students share a responsibility for their education and for the institution which provides the framework for this education. Participation of all members of the community in governance is thus seen as beneficial since they all are genuinely committed to institutional development and improvements. Furthermore, Bergan (2004, p. 24) reminds us that ‘[t]he idea of community does not exclude the possibility of conflicting opinions about the purpose and standard of education, but it sees the students as participants rather than as receivers or buyers of a final product’. Within EHEA, this view has been politically affirmed by the Ministers who stated in unambiguous terms that ‘students are full members of the higher education community’ and ‘should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions’ (Bologna Process 2001).¹²

**Communitarian
conception**

There are two lines of counter arguments to the conception of students as full members of the academic community and thus their full participation in governance. The first is based on the notion of students as “transient members”, implying that the range of their visions on institutional development is often limited by their immediate short-term interests (Luescher 2010b). Thus, their contribution to decision-making is tainted by their parochial perspective and as such unhelpful – if not disruptive – to the long-term decision-making within governing bodies.

**Students as “transient
members”**

While it is true that students spend only few years in HE, and that mandates of individual student representatives are limited to only a year or two, student representative organisations carry with them their own “institutional memory”. This institutional memory entails principles, policies and practices concerning student representation and participation developed over the years. The more formalised and institutionalised – indeed professionalized – the student representation is, the more likely it is that this institutional memory is passed over from one generation of student representatives to the next.¹³ In many student

Counter argument

¹² Inclusion of this point clearly points to the responsiveness of Ministers to two major (, however not exclusive) advocates of this point: ESU and Council of Europe.

¹³ Several student representatives from institutionally highly-developed student unions within ESU confirmed that the permanent staff within their unions play an important role ensuring that record of past policies and activities are

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unions practices of formal handover and training of new student representatives are well established.

Students as “junior members”

The other argument against full student participation is based on the conception of students as “junior members” with limited knowledge and experience as compared to the competencies of other groups within the university, in particular those of the faculty, administration, and management (Luescher 2010b). Corresponding to this conception is the type of governance known as “The Community of Scholars”, with authority being based on academic rank and term within the institution. Formal student participation in decision-making is limited, although informal consultations are common. This regime is not conducive to student political activism. Within the European context the perhaps closest manifestations of such a type of governance are within (at least some) of the Oxbridge colleges where the student JCR (Junior Common Room) and MCR (Middle Common Room) play an almost exclusively consultative and student-service role.

Counter argument

It may be argued against this view that (i) students often have a keener awareness of issues and problems that affect them than do faculty and administrators; (ii) faculty and administrators themselves often rely on outside expert advice and there is little reason to exclude students from sharing in the deliberations on such advice; (iii) faculty members are often by temperament quite narrowly focused on their academic fields and the assumption that they have a better sense of university administration and practical institutional matters than students is highly questionable; and (iv) if the same logic is followed, junior academic staff or recent staff recruits should also be excluded from these processes, since their experience is obviously less complete than that of the older generation in that university.¹⁴

4.2 Students as “constituency” or “stakeholders”

The conception of students as “constituency” or “stakeholders” is a result of the student revolts in the late 1960s and early 1970s leading to the democratisation of European HEIs displayed by stronger staff and student participation. The underlying argument is that HEIs – as public institution and/or institutions in the domain of public good – ought to be governed democratically, and that this involves the participation of all politically significant constituencies, including – and especially – students. The modern governance-theory further rein-

Democratic/po
conce

kept and that knowledge, expertise, and network of contacts are passed on to newly elected representatives. This is especially important when candidates on a ticket from a different student group win elections.

¹⁴ I thank Lewis Purser for reminding me of the final argument here.

forced this principle by pointing out that no single actor has all the knowledge and information required to solve complex, dynamic and diversified problems pertaining to HEI, that no single actor has an overview sufficient to make the application of needed instruments effective, and that no single actor has the sufficient action potential to dominate unilaterally in a particular governing model (Kooiman 1993). Thus, seeking divergent views from different stakeholders enriches deliberation and improves decision-making. Furthermore, involving student representatives is not only beneficial for the institutional atmosphere, i.e. the sense of openness, trust and cooperation, but also as a way to giving students a “voice” and thus deter mass action (Luescher 2010b).

The counter arguments revolve around the weakening efficiency of decision-making that results from adding more participants. In the words of Rojas and Bernasconi (2010, p.39), ‘the benefits of adding voices of the non-faculty members of the university [...] need to be carefully weighed against the vulnerabilities of the governance system based on constituency representation’. Students are assumed or expected to hold adversary positions, and thus potentially disrupt or at least stall the decision-making process which is essentially consensual.

Weakening efficiency of decision-making

A further argument is that student participation is in any case just a formality. Students do not hold real influence on most decisions since they do not hold sufficient expertise/information to be in position to challenge the default decisions taken by the institutional authorities (Mason, 1978: 310 quoted in Luescher 2010b). According to this view it may still be useful to consult students, but their involvement in decision-making is unnecessary.

Participation – just a formality

Luescher (2010b, p. 8f) also points out that institutional leadership often accepts student participation in principle but does not allow it to an extent that may compromise faculty control over the governing bodies. Acceptance in principle is problematic since it ad hoc deters any further attempts for student representatives to actualise or further their effective involvement. In his words, ‘[t]o the extent that student participation in university governance is legally provided for, it no longer needs to be a cause for political struggle’ (ibid.). Thus, the institutional leadership might try to dismiss student representatives’ claims to secure actual participation or extend the formal provisions for participation on the grounds that these rights have been formally already granted so there is no need to reopen that discussion. The problem here is thus not in existence of formal provisions, but rather in political will to observe this provisions towards establishing a true partnership relationship between student representatives and institutional leadership.

Problems with acceptance in principle

4.3 Students as “citizens” and “future elites”

Political socialisation of students

The idea that HE has a contribution to make in the maintenance and development of democratic societies appears largely undisputed in the European context (Biesta 2007a). Zgaga (2009, p. 185), for example, argues that democratic citizenship is a concept inherent in the idea of the university and that HE’s contribution to citizenship ‘can – and should – be conceptualised as an integral fibre within the “full range of its purposes”’ (see also Plantan 2004). Biesta (2007b, p.4) argues that HEIs ‘always already are sites of citizenship, simply because they are part of the lives of those who “inhabit” such institutions, either as students or as staff, and as such provide a range of experiences that are potentially significant for civic learning [...]’. At the same time, ‘the most significant “lessons” in citizenship actually are the result of what people learn from their participation (or for that matter: non-participation) in the communities and practices that make up their everyday life’ (ibid., see also Klemenčič forthcoming). For students, the community of a HEI is a significant (if not the most significant) space of their lives. A positive correlation has been observed between the number of years in education and the levels and forms of an individual’s political and civic participation (Hoskins et al. 2008). The argument is thus made in favour of student participation on the grounds that such participation is part of citizenship education and will have a positive educational impact on student representatives, i.e. preparing them for life as active, responsible citizens in democratic society.

HEIs as sites of citizenship

Student participation in governance not only offers practical opportunities in citizenship, but also transmits norms, values and attitudes, i.e. the so-called ‘hidden curriculum’. In order to counteract depoliticisation of the student body and general distrust in democratic process and institutions, HEIs should offer a positive example of fully welcoming student participation in governance and ensuring that principles of democracy, equity and diversity permeate the entire institutional life (Bergan 2004). There is, hence, “consequentialist” logic in full student participation, democratisation of higher education institutions and student political socialisation (Luescher 2010b). Despite that logic, in European context the conception of students as citizens rarely if ever serves as justification for student participation. Rather, political socialisation has been regarded an anticipated, beneficial by-product of student participation.

4.4 Students as “consumers”/“clients”/“users”

A fairly common view is that in HEIs where students are conceived as consumers, such as in most private, for-profit ones, there is no provision for student representation and no student involvement in governance. This view is clearly mistaken. Student representatives are a near-

ly universal feature also in institutions with an upfront conception of students as clients as part of their institutional vision and culture. Thus, also within this conception of students, the question is not whether to involve them or not in governance, but rather the terms of such involvement.

The case for lesser and more limited degrees of participation is often derived from the consumerist view on education provision: there is a contractual relationship between HEI as a provider of educational services and students as consumers of these services who are expecting to receive value-for-money (Bergan 2004, p. 23). This view is further strengthened by those that view HE just as another ‘mass production industry’ (Scott 1998). In other words, the same managerial principles should be applied in HEIs as in any other commercial service organisation since ‘there is nothing special about higher education’ (Ritzer 1998).

A case for limited participation

Bergan (forthcoming) points out that conceiving students strictly as clients carries with itself several assumptions: ‘Clients are interested only in the end product that they buy [...]. Clients have no interest in the internal workings of providers. If a provider delivers what clients want at a reasonable price, they will stay. If not, they will move elsewhere.’ Students as clients indeed have a right to complain. Also, institutions are eager to understand students’ demands in order to keep them satisfied and hence retain them, and for the purposes of recruitment of new students. Such conception thus implies institutional preference towards advisory (rather than decision-making) mode of student participation. Formal student participation is framed around ‘quality assurance and management, i.e. students are asked to contribute on matters that would improve service and thus increase “customer satisfaction”’ (Luescher 2010b, p. 9ff). Indeed, institutional leadership may be more interested here in student representatives’ expertise and ability to perform various services (e.g. organise student events) and manage student facilities than their representativeness. Within such governance regime, student organisation may have difficulties upholding all of the principles of legitimate student representation mentioned earlier, especially the principle of independence from interference from the HEI.

Advisory role and delivery of student services

Within conception of students as clients, a case can be made also for higher degrees of intensity of student participation. The different conceptions of students come into play in the different domains of institutional governance.¹⁵ First, conceiving students as clients cannot be applied universally within the different functions of the HEI even if this conception is part of the overall “institutional culture”. In re-

A case for more participation

¹⁵ I thank Thierry Luescher for bringing the points made in this paragraph to my attention.

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search, for example, graduate students ought to be received as partners in a joint research project since the successful accomplishment of the project depends on their joint effort. Hence, both scholars and students have a shared interest in the project as well as an inherent stake in the quality of the academic community of which they are part. Similarly, within the new notions of quality of teaching and learning we are moving further away from teacher-centred towards learner-centred teaching. Teachers' control over the curriculum contents and methods weaken while students' active engagement strengthens. These new notions of teaching and learning again do not seem to be compatible with conception of students as clients, but rather as partners in a joint teaching and learning endeavour. It is, hence, perhaps not surprising that higher levels of institutional leadership tend to be more supportive of the view that students should be regarded as customers than academics lower down the organizational chart (Lomaz 2007, p. 42).

Students as “collective clients” and long-term interests

Second, there is a difference in conceiving students as individual clients with short-term interests on returns of the education provision or as a “collective client” having interests also in the long-term improvements for future cohorts. The latter conception obviously implies an inherent stake in not only the immediate output, but also internal processes for purposes of ultimately improving the educational provision for present and future cohorts.

Students as “custodians of the public interest”

The final argument in favour of full participation argues that due to the unique combination of teaching, research and public service HEIs cannot be equated to other commercial service providers, but have instead a special mission. This mission is to cater for the needs of not only their students and other members of the academic community, but also of society at large. In other words, in European context HE is considered a public good. A sort of “public ethos” permeates basically every aspect of institutional functions and decision-making. Full involvement of students in institutional decision-making thus consolidates their role as “custodians of the public interest”.¹⁶

The prevailing conception

In summary, in European context the most advocated conception is that of students as full members of the academic community. This conception has come forward through the formal affirmative stance taken on this point by the European Ministers within the Bologna Process. It has been strongly advocated by ESU as well as Council of Europe and several national governments. One unresolved question regarding this conception remains in a potential conflict of allegiance of student representatives. Fried (2004, p. 97) suggests that in the European context ‘there still seems to be the prevailing perception amongst students that universities are not “their” institutions but “belong” to the state and are ruled by the professors. “Ownership”, if it

¹⁶ I thank Lewis Purser for reminding me of the points made in this paragraph.

exists, focuses on the immediate environment (department) and on issues of direct concern'. Within this line of thinking, one may suggest that European student representation comes closer to the "stakeholder approach" according to which student representatives' principal role is to represent the interests of their respective constituency, i.e. the student body to which they feel primarily responsible. Student representatives tend to seek higher degrees of intensity of participation in governance. In contrast, the American "communitarian approach" posits that students, together with other members of the academic community, have a common commitment to the institution, for which they feel primarily responsible. Hence, student representatives' allegiance is primarily to the institution, and the US-type of student participation in governance is of lower degrees of intensity. While European students' sense of ownership of the institution as a whole might not be as strong as it may be in American HEIs, this does not mean that they do not identify with it at all, or at least with some groups within their academic community: a specific department to which they belong, their student cohort as a whole, or within the student organisations in which they participate. With European HEIs increasing effort to have students identify with their institutions and develop a sense of belonging, the European version of the "communitarian" approach may well be developing in the direction of a combination of both: an enhanced sense of "ownership" and partnership-based student participation in governance.

5. Conclusion

Student participation in HE governance within EHEA – be it in formal terms or according to actual influence – is arguably the most developed in the world. The process towards the establishment of EHEA has not only had a profound impact on higher education reforms at the institutional and national system levels, but arguably influenced also European student representation in two significant ways.

First, in several formal communiqués within the Bologna Process, Ministers stressed that students are 'competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area' (Bologna Process 2001). This message was further reinforced by granting ESU full involvement – together with EUA, EURASHE, UNESCO-CEPES and the Council of Europe – to the structures within the Bologna Process. Thus, ESU affirmed its role as a 'representative voice of European students'.

Effects of EHEA on student representation and participation

Formal acknowledgement of students as partners in EHEA

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Student unions' policy orientations – circumstances conducive to Europe-wide student cooperation

Second, the Bologna Process has significantly influenced the policy orientations of ESU and its member unions since 1999. Since the issues discussed on the European level coincided with those on the national and institutional level, national and local unions became increasingly interested in ESU's work. Since Bologna issues became so prominent within national and institutional policy-making, NUSes and their local members have become increasingly interested in obtaining information, develop expertise and participate in activities organised by ESU. Furthermore, ESU managed to "upload" some of its most salient issues onto the Bologna agenda: that HE should be considered a public good and is a public responsibility; that the social dimension of the Bologna process has to be considered; and that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other HEIs. The Bologna Process has in this way created circumstances highly conducive to European-wide student cooperation.

ESU's effort to strengthen student movement

It is true that, as the ESU reports, the Bologna Process, and the European-level recognition of the student role in HEIs, has not yet made a significant difference on student participation in institutional governance in most countries (however, with few visible exceptions mostly in Central and Eastern Europe). Nevertheless, the high-level political recognition has allowed the ESU to focus on the next step of systematic and strategic internal capacity building. The establishment of the Student Union Development Committee tasked with supporting the development of independent student unions in Europe is an important step in this direction. It can therefore be expected that through this effort we will see good governance in student representative governments strengthened across Europe, and conversely also strengthened student participation in HE governance.

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Biography

Dr. Manja Klemenčič is an independent researcher in Slovenia. She has held fellowship positions at Harvard's Center for European Studies and Harvard Kennedy School of Government, at the Center for European Policy Studies in Brussels, and at the Boston College Center for International Higher Education. From 1998 until 2001 she acted as a Secretary General of the European Students' Union and was in particular engaged with launching ESU's participation in the Bologna Process and in the Stability Pact for South East Europe. Her publications in the field of higher education studies include articles on student participation in the Bologna Process, higher education for democratic citizenship, and demographic challenges for higher education. She holds a PhD in International Studies (2006) from the University of Cambridge

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