



# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN EUROPE:

society, higher  
education and  
student governance



Council of Europe  
Higher Education  
Series No. 20

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE



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# Preface

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I am happy and proud to introduce the 20th volume of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series. Since it was launched in December 2004, our Higher Education Series has explored pertinent issues of higher education policy ranging from the contribution of higher education to developing democracy, human rights and intercultural dialogue through issues of governance and quality to structural reforms and the recognition of qualifications.

I am particularly pleased that this “anniversary volume”, marking the 20th book and the 10th anniversary of our series, focuses on student engagement. The Council of Europe holds the view that while democratic institutions and democratic laws are essential, they are insufficient to bring about democracy. Institutions and laws will only function if they build on a culture of democracy, and our societies will not be able to develop and sustain a culture of democracy unless education plays an essential role in the endeavour.

Democratic competences – which include democratic attitudes – must be developed at all levels of education, including higher education. The Council of Europe does not share the view expressed explicitly or implicitly by some that the development of broader generic competences should stop with secondary education and that higher education should focus solely on the “serious business” of developing the subject-specific competences of the chosen academic discipline.

To the Council of Europe, all levels of education must develop generic and subject-specific competences with a view to fulfilling all the major purposes of education:

- ▶ preparation for employment;
- ▶ preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- ▶ personal development;
- ▶ the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base.

Student engagement is essential to developing and maintaining a culture of democracy. Democratic skills, behaviour and attitudes cannot be developed in classrooms alone. Higher education needs to encourage students to participate actively in the governance and life of their institutions as well as to engage with broader society. Higher education must provide students with the competences required to engage in public space as well as the desire to do so. Institutions have a responsibility to develop democratic culture, as do students and their associations.

This 20th volume of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series explores student engagement through theoretical essays as well as through case studies and practical examples. Most of the essays come from various parts of Europe but some also explore student engagement on the basis of experiences from other parts of the world. Many of the authors are students and student leaders at various levels but some are faculty or policy makers. This variety of perspectives is, I believe, one of the strengths of the book.

The variety of perspectives is also reflected in the team of editors. Manja Klemenčič is now an established sociologist and educational researcher working at Harvard University while maintaining strong links to the University of Ljubljana. She started her career as secretary general of what is now the European Students' Union in the late 1990s. Rok Primožič recently completed his career as a student representative, culminating in a one-year term as Chairperson of the European Students' Union, and will now return to life as an "ordinary student". Sjur Bergan is Head of the Council of Europe's Education Department and also has a past – albeit a more distant one – as an elected student representative. He has been series editor of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series since its inception and has played a strong role in establishing it as something of a European reference in higher education policy.

I hope you will enjoy reading the book and even more so, I hope this book will help stimulate both reflection and action to help higher education develop and maintain the democratic culture and the democratic innovation without which our democracies cannot function.

*Snežana Samardžić-Marković*  
*Director General for Democracy*  
*Council of Europe*

## A word from the editors

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*Manja Klemenčič, Sjur Bergan and Rok Primožič*

The aim of this book is to contribute to the growing scholarship on student engagement within higher education as well as to demonstrate the importance of student engagement to the development and maintenance of the democratic culture that enables democratic institutions and democratic laws to function in practice. The most prolific literature in this area has been devoted to student learning and teaching and the ways students can learn better, deeper and more by being actively engaged. This volume covers three much less explored areas of student engagement: in society through political participation and civic involvement; in higher education policy processes and policy-making structures; and within the student unions as the foremost organised and institutionalised form of student engagement. As such, perhaps the main emphasis of the volume lies in conceiving student engagement as the preparation of students for life as active citizens in democratic societies, while the other purposes of education – preparing them for sustainable employment, the cultivation of their personal development and the development of a broad and advanced knowledge base<sup>1</sup> – are certainly also visible and often interchangeable.

The chapters in this volume present a considerable variety of theoretical, empirical and policy perspectives as well as different levels, contexts and units of analysis, but all are broadly concerned with student engagement – individual and collective – and higher education policies and practices. The volume is structured into three parts, moving from a macro to a micro context of student engagement.

In the introductory chapter, Manja Klemenčič introduces the concept of student agency to the literature on student engagement with the purpose of connecting the scholarship and advancing our understanding of the mechanisms which underlie student engagement.

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1. See Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research.

Part I is devoted to the role of students in society at large. The chapters are devoted to theoretical and empirical explorations of student participation. Thierry Luescher-Mamashela reviews and elaborates on the theoretical contribution on student activism by Philip G. Altbach, the foremost scholar of student activism in the 20th century. Rómulo Pinheiro and Dominik Antonowicz conceptualise the university campus as a space for student activism and compare the student revolts of the 1960s and 1970s with contemporary student protests. Drawing on the Slovenian experience, Mirjana Ule focuses on the rising culture of individualisation and its implications for student engagement. Bojana Čulum and Karin Doolan offer an ethnographic study of participation in student protests at the University of Rijeka in Croatia in 2009, focusing on the transformative experiences of the protesters. With special focus on the cases of two major contemporary student movements in Serbia and Croatia, Milica Popović explores the impact of the institutionalisation of the student movement within the governance schemes of higher education institutions and the susceptibility of students to political influences. Using the theory of strategic action fields, Leasa Weimer conducts a discourse analysis of the student unions' resistance to the introduction of tuition fees in Finland. Drawing empirically on the cases of Serbia, Croatia and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Martin Galevski offers an analysis of the specific role and capacity of youth organisations in student civic engagement. Drawing on the EUROSTUDENT survey, Dominic Orr, Froukje Wartenbergh-Cras and Christine Scholz discuss how the student body in Europe is diversifying and the implications for student engagement. David Crosier suggests that despite the trend in recent decades for higher education to expand its reach to an increasing number of students, the social profile of students is not changing at the same rate. This has profound implications for equality and is crucial for our understanding of who contemporary students are and how they engage.

Part II deals specifically with student influence in higher education and offers theoretical and empirical accounts of student engagement in higher education policy making and governing structures at different levels of higher education governance. Paul Trowler argues that initiatives designed to enhance student engagement in universities need to be underpinned by an explicit and workable theory of change and change management and offers a vignette designed to illustrate how these concepts might be elaborated in a departmental context. Addressing the case of German universities, Marion Gut analyses the extent to which universities consider advancement of student engagement an organisational task and offers examples of two programmes with a pedagogical framework that describes what students do and a managerial-pedagogical concept that describes what universities do. Vicki Trowler draws upon research funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the United Kingdom on leadership for student engagement in challenging conditions to explore the benefits and the costs of engaging students as partners in governance and learning for both student representatives and their institutions. Martin Hall and Andrew Snowden draw on their first-hand experience as university vice-chancellor and former student union president respectively to discuss the political process of drafting the University of Salford Student Charter. Based on an ethnographic study of several departments in Czech universities, Petr Pabian draws a provocative picture of student virtual communities for sharing course material as a counterbalance to poor quality of teaching. The last two chapters in this part focus on the European Students'

Union (ESU). ESU is the umbrella organisation of 47 national unions of students from 39 European countries. It aims to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at European and international level to all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the Council of Europe and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Through its members, ESU represents over 11 million students in Europe. George-Konstantinos Charonis and Robert Santa analyse ESU's contribution to the deliberations on and formulation of policy on higher education financing in Europe. Asnate Kažoka presents the ESU Student Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance, the foremost mechanism for preparing students for involvement in quality assurance processes and structures across European countries.

Part III explores the characteristics and operations of student unions and the engagement of students within these structures. Jens Jungblut and Regina Weber offer an ontological account of hybrid national student unions in the context of corporatist-pluralist governmental steering, which challenges and advances the existing typology of student organisations at national level. From the perspective of a national representative in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, Bartłomiej Banaszak tells the success story of the Students' Parliament of the Republic of Poland in its development towards a professional organisation and its involvement in national higher education policy making. Gabriela Bergan offers a comparative analysis of students' rights in Europe and analyses how students' rights influence the way in which student unions organise themselves. Michiel Horsten analyses student representation in Flemish University Colleges and in particular the policy influence strategies of student representatives. Ana Sofia Ribeiro discusses the challenges of representation of first-generation students in Portuguese higher education. In their case study of the German Federal State (*Land*) of Schleswig-Holstein, Laura Asarite and Sophie Wulk write about the quality of representation of international students. Finally, Paul Long uncovers the story of the United Kingdom's student union involvement with the music industry.

The volume concludes with Sjur Bergan's reminder that student engagement in higher education governance and, more broadly, in institutional life is vital to building democratic culture and developing democratic competences. While our understanding of democracy has traditionally focused on institutions, these can only function if they are underpinned by a culture of democracy, that is a set of attitudes and behaviours that encourage the resolution of conflicts through discussion and deliberation with due regard for the rights of both majority and minority views and interests.

We trust you will find the essays in this book interesting, stimulating and challenging. We hope they will inspire students to participate actively in higher education governance and, more broadly, to commit to working in the public sphere for the benefit of all citizens. We also hope the book will demonstrate to higher education faculty, staff, policy makers and others that student engagement is a vital part of our democracy.



## Introduction

# What is student agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement

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*Manja Klemenčič*

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a theory of student agency to the study of student engagement. Student agency refers to the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment. It encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility ("power") and agentic orientation ("will"). The notions of agentic possibility and orientation are temporally embedded, implying that they are shaped through considerations of past habits of mind and action, present judgments of alternatives for action and projections of the future. They are also intrinsically relational and social, and situated in structural, cultural and socio-economic-political contexts of action. The main argument presented is twofold. First, studentship is highly conducive to engagement due to its liminal and developmental characteristics. In other words, students are likely to be "agentic", that is they seek to exert some influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. Second, a theory of student agency develops the micro foundations of student behaviour. As such it has the potential to unravel the mechanisms under which students exert their agency in the context of higher education and beyond. An agentic approach could, thus, connect and advance the multifaceted scholarship on student engagement.

**Keywords:** student agency; student engagement; student experience

Since education is not a means to living, but is identical with the operation of living a life which is fruitful and inherently significant, the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself. And this is not an end to which studies and activities are subordinate means; it is the whole of which they are ingredients. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1980/1916)

## Introduction

In Europe, higher education is conventionally thought of as having four equally important, overlapping and concurrent objectives (Council of Europe 2007: paragraph 5; Bergan 2005; Bergan S. in this volume):

- ▶ to prepare students for sustainable employment;
- ▶ to prepare students for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- ▶ to cultivate students' personal development;
- ▶ to develop and maintain – through teaching, learning and research – a broad, advanced knowledge base.

Accordingly, the roles students adopt while studying are multiple and overlapping. Students are learners in coursework and often also in extracurricular activities. By acting as teachers, mentors and tutors, students also contribute to the learning and personal development of their peers. They contribute to the advancement of knowledge as producers of knowledge and invention and of the arts as artists. Students, individually and collectively, seek to influence their higher education environment and conditions of study at all levels of higher education governance: in the classroom, department committees, university senates, in governmental and intergovernmental bodies and initiatives such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). They act as stakeholders, as members of an academic community, as a constituency or as customers depending on the particular rules and norms of governance structures. Finally, studentship does not preclude student political and civic engagement within wider society nor paid or unpaid work in the labour market. Students are citizens, local community members and part of the workforce.

All these roles presume student agency as something students can develop – individually and collectively – through self-reflective and intentional action and through interaction with the environment in which they are embedded. By exercising their agency, students exert influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. As suggested by Marginson, higher education can be understood as “a process of student self-formation” (Marginson 2014). The activities students engage in are all in some way or another geared towards changing themselves and their conditions of life, that is they are self-formative (*ibid.*). Yet, through their agency they also contribute to the development of others, development of knowledge and to economic and social development.

Studentship as a life stage and a life world is liminal and developmental. It is a stage of “being free and becoming” (Barnett 2007: 3) and as such is highly “agentic” – highly conducive to action and interaction. Studentship is liminal in the sense of always being a rite of passage to some new role, status or life condition. In a way, all activities in studentship, except for the crudely existential, are in some way oriented towards the formation of the projected future self, towards “becoming”. During studentship the projections of future selves become more concrete and more closely related to immediate study, extracurricular engagements and life experience. Much of student action is self-reflective searching for their identity, their purpose in life, and the meanings in their existence. In late adolescence, students begin to address the roles of adulthood and fully consider what they wish to

do with their lives, occupationally and otherwise (Bandura 2006a). Students tend to expand their engagement in the larger social community both in the scope of their activities and in their modes of involvement (*ibid.*). Studentship is also inherently developmental. It is the locus of “higher learning” in formal education and associated with higher levels of cognitive, emotional and practical (in terms of taking care of oneself independently of one’s parents) maturity. These conditions are particularly enabling of agency.

As the student population has become increasingly differentiated so have the conceptions of students and studentship become more varied. Students in the age cohort of 18 to 24, who are studying full-time, are no longer the sole type of students in higher education. Political projects of lifelong learning and of increasing access to higher education have improved conditions of study for mature and part-time students in Europe (see Orr, Wartenbergh-Cras and Scholz in this volume). While these changes are reflected in highly diverse conditions of studentship, the fact remains that studentship represents a rite of passage to a different status or different conditions of work and life (or at least so it is hoped) and that actions taken tend to be self-formative in one way or another. Thus, studentship continues to present enabling conditions for student agency even if the focus and the extent of the actions and interactions will vary significantly across different categories of students. Mature and part-time students tend to engage in different activities and to a different extent when balancing between family, work and study than this tends to be the case for students in full-time education who are free from care of others or from having to work to support themselves. Student agency is at the centre of studentship, and differing conditions and contexts of studentship render themselves more or less constraining and more or less empowering of student agency. Immediate life and study circumstances as much as family background, past experiences and projections of the future all shape how individual students exercise their agency. They also determine how students structure, regulate and evaluate their behaviour and their life circumstances.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a theory of student agency to the research on student engagement. Drawing from social cognition theory and sociological theories of human agency, student agency is conceptualised as a process of students’ self-reflective and intentional actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic possibility (“power”) and agentic orientation (“will”). Student agency refers to the quality of actions and interactions (*cf.* Biesta 2008), and not something students possess. The notions of agentic possibility and orientation are temporally embedded, implying that they are shaped through considerations of past habits of mind and action, present judgments of alternatives for action and projections of the future. They are also intrinsically relational and social, and situated in structural, cultural and socio-economic-political contexts of action.

The main argument presented is twofold. First, studentship is highly conducive to engagement due to its liminal and developmental characteristics. In other words, students are likely to be “agentic”, that is they seek to exert some influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. Second, a theory of student agency develops the micro foundations of student behaviour. As such it has the potential to unravel the mechanisms under which students exert their agency in the context of higher education and beyond.

An agentic approach could, thus, connect and advance the multifaceted scholarship on student engagement. This chapter first presents the existing theories of human agency, which are adopted into conceptualisation of student agency in the following section. The final section offers suggestions on the use of theory of student agency in research on student engagement.

## Theories of human agency

Social theory includes ample discussions of the role of structure versus human agency in human behaviour (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). The central tenets in this sociological discussion are the questions of the extent and the conditions under which actors can exercise agency. In sociological investigations, the term agency is usually “juxtaposed to structure and is often no more than a synonym for action, emphasizing implicitly the undetermined nature of human action, as opposed to the alleged determinism of structural theories” (Scott and Marshall 1998: 11). In psychology the conceptions of agency also capture the capacity for autonomous intentional social action, which is not bound only by structural factors, but also by the psychological and social psychological make-up of the actor (Scott and Marshall 1998). This dualism in the theoretical agency-structure debate has gradually been overcome in recent scholarship. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) has underlined the importance of cultural capital and habitus (the set of cultural schemas actors use when they act) in actors’ behaviour, as well as reflexive thinking underlying action. Alexander (1988, 1992) introduced the notions of reflexive elements (interpretation) alongside instrumental action (strategising), thus extending the instrumentalist logic of social action proposed by Coleman (1990). Giddens (1991) had significant impact on the discussion with structuration theory, according to which structure and agency are intertwined in a way that structure is simultaneously exogenous and endogenous to agency, and they can both constrain and enable agency. Furthermore, Giddens (1984) introduced the concept of “dual structures”, proposing that in a dynamic interdependent process actors shape structures and structures shape actors’ behaviour. In sum, the contemporary notions of human agency have established notions of “embeddedness”, of agency being “situated” and “in-context”, and of the interdependence of agency and structure, albeit with differing degrees of clarity as to what structure and context actually mean (Sewell 1992). I have found most helpful conceptualisations of human agency from Bandura in social psychology (1986, 2001) and Emirbayer and Mische in sociology (1998).

In his “social cognitive theory” Bandura (1986) subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency where actors are neither autonomous agents nor simply subject to environmental influences. Unlike the structuralists, the most central mechanism of human agency for Bandura is people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise those behaviours necessary to bring about a desired outcome. In other words, people have “self-efficacy” beliefs which are about the capacity to exercise control over events, and which are different from individual predictions of the likely consequence of their behaviour. Self-efficacy beliefs operate on action through motivational, cognitive and affective intervening processes (such as mastery experience, positioning against equals, encouragement from others, and physical and emotional states).

Bandura (2001) takes an agentic perspective assuming that individuals have some ability to control their lives, while recognising the chance encounters which often shape one's life course. When viewed from a social cognitive perspective, the freedom of agents to act is not conceived just passively as the absence of constraints and coercion in the choice of action, but proactively as the exercise of self-influence to realise selected goals and desired outcomes. People who develop their competencies, self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs can generate a wider array of options that expand their freedom of action. They are also more successful in realising desired futures than those with less developed agentic resources (Bandura 1986). The exercise of freedom involves rights as well as options and the means to pursue them.

Social cognitive theory distinguishes three modes of agency, each of which is founded in people's beliefs that they can influence the course of events by their actions. These include individual, proxy and collective agency (Bandura 2001). In personal agency people bring their influence to bear on their own functioning and on environmental events. In many spheres of functioning, people do not have direct control over the social conditions and institutional practices that affect their everyday lives. Under these circumstances, they seek their well-being, security and valued outcomes through the exercise of proxy agency. In collective agency people share a belief in their collective efficacy.

Since Bandura's theory revolves strongly around the notions of free choice, optimism, conscious influences and uniqueness, I find it particularly helpful in conceptualising student agency. Importantly, Bandura (2001) also notes the cultural conditionality of efficacy beliefs: how they are developed and structured varies across cultures, as do the ways in which they are exercised, and the purposes to which they are put. In short, there is a commonality in basic agentic capacities and mechanisms of operation, but diversity in the culturing of these inherent capacities.

In sociological literature, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call for a better understanding of the question of mechanisms by which actors exert agency, a question that was left largely unexplored by previous scholarship. They emphasise the temporal embeddedness of human agency as informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities), and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). Accordingly, they define human agency as the:

temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970).

In other words, agency is temporally embedded through past patterns of thought and action, through imagining the possible future trajectories of action and accordingly configuring the structures of thought and action, and through the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action.

Emirbayer and Mische argue for capturing the dynamic interplay among these three dimensions and consider “how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action” (ibid.: 963). Viewed internally, “agency entails different ways of experiencing the world, by means of which actors enter into relationship with surrounding people, places, meanings, and events;” and, viewed externally, agency entails “actual interactions with its contexts” (ibid.: 973). Grasping the dynamic possibilities of human agency is then to view it as “composed of variable and changing orientations within the flow of time. Only then will it be clear how the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency” (ibid.: 964). The empirical challenge is that of “locating, comparing, and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particular structuring contexts of action” (ibid.: 1005).

Emirbayer and Mische’s theoretical insights on the temporal embeddedness of agency and the dynamic contexts of action are a major contribution to theories of human agency. What their theory does not capture is the mechanisms under which agentic orientations can be changed over time (Biesta 2008: 18), and indeed strengthened (or weakened) through developing competencies, self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs, that is with agentic resources that, along with contexts of action, can generate a wider array of options for action, as suggested by Bandura (2001). Indeed, the quality of engagements in particular contexts of action depends also on agentic resources and their changes over time, which are among the mechanisms that can help us understand changes in agentic orientations over time (Biesta 2008).

## Conceptualising student agency

Drawing from social cognition theory and sociological theories of human agency, student agency is conceptualised as a process of student actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic orientation (“will”), the way students relate to past, present and future in making choices of action, and of agentic possibility (“power”), that is their perceived power to achieve intended outcomes in a particular context of action and interaction, but also to self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind.<sup>2</sup>

The agentic perspective of student engagement proposes that student behaviour cannot be fully understood solely in terms of socio-structural conditions or psychological factors regardless of which level or unit of analysis of agency is considered and regardless of which temporal proximity of causation is approached (Bandura 2001). A full understanding of student agency indeed requires an integrated causal but not deterministic<sup>3</sup> system which is sensitive to the different and changing temporalities of students’ agentic orientations (“the will to act”) and agentic possibilities (“power to achieve intended outcomes”). In other words, the ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past (routine), future (purpose) and present (judgment) make a difference to their actions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 973). In

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2. The point of students’ self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind I have adopted from the comments on this text made by Simon Marginson, for which I am extremely grateful.

3. I thank Simon Marginson for alerting me to the non-deterministic nature of such a causal system.

line with this definition, the theory of student agency, as outlined in this chapter, includes six premises.

First, student agency is something that individual students or collectives of students develop alone or interacting with other people, materials and ideas within a particular socio-structural and relational context of action (Biesta 2008). As suggested by Biesta, agency is the quality of self-reflective and intentional action and interaction, and not something students possess. From an agentic perspective, students are conceived as self-organising, proactive, self-regulating and self-reflecting (Bandura 2006a). The extent to which students hold these dispositions shapes their agency, but it does not define it. Experiences of the past and projections of the future similarly shape their agency, but do not define it. Student agency emerges – is exerted – only when students intentionally act and interact with someone or something, and this includes students' self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind. To be agentic, students need to act intentionally even if their intentionality is not supported by a clear idea of goals and action plans, but some anticipation of likely outcomes (some forethought) and some belief in one's efficacy (that one can achieve desired effects by one's own actions) is crucial (*ibid.*). What the expected outcomes are varies immensely. Not all desired outcomes involve instrumental reasoning about the effects on study success or employability. Some activities students choose simply for leisure in their spare time or for collective purposes.

Students often engage in activities without having in mind a definite desired outcome of that activity or being able to fully foresee all of the possible consequences of action. For example, a student volunteers to prepare a class presentation because she thinks this might improve her course grade, but might not be aware that that class presentation might lead her to do her thesis on the topic and that the professor will mention it in a recommendation letter later, and so on. Or, a student joins a basketball team at her university because she enjoys playing basketball and this is how she has been spending several afternoons a week ever since high school. Several years down the line, a hiring team at an investment bank might favourably view her basketball playing in a hiring decision, considering perhaps that basketball playing involves the strengthening of teamwork skills and indicates a competitive disposition. At the time of playing basketball this student was, however, most likely unaware of such long-term advantages of an activity she pursued as a hobby, and was acting under the "veil of ignorance" about the implications for her employability in the future.

Second, in a given situation, student agency can be stronger or weaker. Students may be not at all agentic depending on the situation (Biesta 2008). Having strong agentic resources, such as well-developed dispositions of self-organisation, self-regulation, self-reflection and proactivity can enhance a student's quality of action or interaction – his or her agency in a particular context of action. Intentional self-development, of which learning is an essential part, has a generic positive influence on strengthening student agency (*ibid.*). In fact, agency is both a condition of self-formation and an outcome of it.<sup>4</sup> Students who have more knowledge, better skills and access

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4. I thank Simon Marginson for this statement, which I have adopted in full.

to information can make better judgments regarding a particular socio-structural context of action and better decisions on how to act to achieve desired outcomes.

However, many students, when asked how they came to a particular higher education institution, or when they are asked later in life how they ended up in a particular job, will often refer to chance encounters. There is indeed “a lot of fortuity in the courses lives take” (Bandura 2006a: 166). Bandura (2001, 2006a) points out that even fortuity, as an element of peoples’ lives, is not contradictory to the concept of agency, and can be enhanced through personal development. Having knowledge and skills can enable students to make the most of opportunities as they arise, even unexpectedly (Bandura 2001). Exploring different interests, people, places and events of engagement expands the possibility of chance encounters. Cultivating strong social networks and developing cultural capital can strengthen agency in a particular situation as much as it can help identify interesting and fortuitous opportunities. Having supportive and encouraging (and confidence-boosting) friends and family or mentors also has an impact on self-efficacy, which is essential for agency.

Self-efficacy beliefs are closely related to notions of agentic orientation and agentic possibility as they operate on action through motivational, cognitive and affective intervening processes combined with environmental variables. As discussed above, these beliefs can be changed through intentional self-development and ongoing experiences, but as psychological studies inform us, they are also strongly grounded in socio-economic background, childhood and family experiences, past experiences in schooling and beyond, and so on. Students concurrently hold multiple visions of their past, present and future selves, some of them more pronounced than others. This brings us to the third premise of theory of student agency.

Third, student agency is temporally embedded. Different temporalities shape students’ sense of what is possible to achieve in a given situation (agentic possibility) and what is desirable (agentic orientation). Student agency includes students’ selective reactivation of past habits of thought and action, students’ imaginative generation of possible future selves, and students’ capacity to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible choices of action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Actors selectively recognise, locate and implement schemas which have been developed through past experiences and through ongoing and situated interactions (*ibid.*: 975). In the projective dimension of agency actors are able to invent new patterns of thought and action, rather than merely repeat past routines and habits that may constrain them (*ibid.*: 983-4). Students construct new possible images of future selves and along with these projections, the ways to achieve them.

Students also contextualise their immediate social experiences and interactions by connecting past experiences and future orientations to present situations (*ibid.*: 994; Biesta 2008). The key activity here is in forming judgment on the desirability of specific outcomes as well as the possibilities and the courses of action needed to achieve them. It is in this practical-evaluative dimension of agency that the interplay between agency and context is brought out most forcefully.

Higher education is envisaged and designed to be transformative, and students are continuously prompted to construct their purpose and their visions of future directions of self. In the idealised vision of teaching we hope that something we convey

as teachers will have created for students a “transformative moment”, a sudden change in habits of thought, a new vision of the future – of the desired world, of one’s own purpose, role and actions. What we often fail to acknowledge, however, is that for students the transformative moments often happen outside the classroom, in interactions with other students or in activities they pursue while students. There are ample reasons as to why we ought to explore student agency outside of the confines of the classroom, because this is where most student engagement actually takes place and this is where, often, the most lasting effects of studentship on students’ life courses happen.

The fourth premise is that student lives are placed and socially developed in contexts of interdependent educational, political, social, economic and cultural conditions that present unique opportunities, constraints and challenges to student agency. Higher education systems vary in terms of political culture (including the role of the state) and educational culture (including how learning and obtaining academic qualifications is valued in a society and how families interfere in students’ educational choices). The funding of higher education by the state and the cost of education for students, along with the availability of loans and grants, are crucial conditions that can decisively constrain (or free) student agency. Students who work while studying tend to choose different engagements and tend to have weaker agency in, for example, classroom work or student clubs, due to lack of time, fatigue and other existential concerns. Student freedom is not conceived of only as the absence of constraints and coercion in choices of action, but proactively, involving rights as well as options and the means to pursue them (Bandura 2001). Student agency is inevitably influenced by the distinctive life experiences provided by the eras in which students live (Elder 1994). The state of students’ rights in a particular country and institution has a profound impact on student agency – both individual and collective (see Bergan, G. in this volume). Availability of financial support, information and the quality of lower levels of schooling similarly affect student agency.

Structural arrangements are not completely independent of student agency and exogenous to the activities of students. Certain aspects of the political, social and economic context are out of their control and students can do little or nothing to influence them. For example, there is nothing students can do about massification, which raises competition for student places and frequently decreases the relative amounts of state funding available per student. Global financial crises, such as that which began in 2008, have profound implications on students’ employability and study conditions, yet there is not much students can do except demand responsible social policies from governments. Armed conflicts and wars have devastating effects on students, both in immediate terms and with regard to their entire life course. In the context of higher education institutions and local communities their agentic possibilities are much stronger and extensive. Students can and do influence social practices and structural conditions within their study programmes, faculties and universities, either individually or through student representatives or collectively through group initiatives or movements. These conditions, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources and opportunity structures for students’ personal development and functioning. Students engage also in macro contexts as voters and through political and civic engagement in interest groups or movements. In

fact, higher education is seen as helping to cultivate dispositions and competences for active democratic citizenship, or political and civic participation (Bergan 2004, 2005, 2011, 2013; Bergan and Damian 2010; Biesta 2008; Bok 2010; Klemenčič 2010; Bergan, S. in this volume).

Fifth, student agency is inherently relational. Most students would testify that the relationships they developed during higher education and the entire social side of studentship is an important, maybe even the most important, aspect of higher education experience. The people they relate to crucially influence both students' sense of what they wish for and what they can achieve. Students navigate, organise, regulate and evaluate their study and life through a multiplicity of concurrent, overlapping independent social relations and social networks, which can be physical or – increasingly – conducted through the Internet.

Sixth, there are three different modes of student agency: personal, proxy and collective. Students exert proxy agency in areas in which they cannot exert direct influence, do not wish to invest time and resources, or believe others can do better (Bandura 2001). Most commonly students exercise their proxy agency through individual student representatives and student unions. Students ask their student representatives to act on their behalf to solve a particular problem or secure a particular outcome. Proxy agency relies heavily on perceived social efficacy for exerting influence on behalf of others (ibid.: 13). Students also exert collective agency when they pool their knowledge, skills and resources, provide mutual support, form alliances, and work together to secure desired – shared – results. Student movements and non-institutionalised student initiatives are typical forms of student collective agency.

## **Theory of student agency in research on student engagement**

Contemporary students live in a world which is highly interdependent and characterised by flows of information, knowledge, capital, goods and people. The contexts in which students act and interact are increasingly chaotic and subject to multiple concurrent, overlapping and mutually interdependent influences. When structural context becomes less of a given, the importance of student agency to create desired conditions for study and life becomes more important and even necessary (Biesta 2008). The postmodern neoliberal *Zeitgeist* in Europe presents a powerful and evolving social system which significantly marks students' values, their lifestyles and the skills they seek. It also marks student agency by emphasis on individual choice and control over own learning. Proponents of neoliberal higher education reforms claim that giving students more choice and more control over learning ultimately empowers them: they gain more responsibility over their learning, self-development and thus future life conditions. In many ways technology is seen as further enabling to student agency. Critics point out that neoliberal engagement policies are part of governments' "window dressing" to disguise rising social inequalities within higher education and beyond. According to them, uneven distribution of prestige among higher education institutions within stratified national systems hampers the social mobility function of higher education. Students from advantageous backgrounds with strong cultural capital have better chances to be admitted to prestigious universities. In turn, they develop competences and cultivate different "capitals" which render

them more eligible for prestigious jobs. Even if students are given more choice and more control over their educational trajectory within the institutional setting, that does not change the fact that they are subject to broader societal inequalities. This is not to say that creating formal structures and informal opportunities for student engagement in teaching and learning, extracurricular activities, and institutional governance structures and processes is not commendable and necessary. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that student agency in the context of higher education institutions is also influenced by broader socio-structural constraints, which ultimately shape students' long-term educational trajectories and life courses.

In policy as well as scholarly work, student engagement is promulgated as key to a number of academic and societal goals. Student engagement has been portrayed as a key factor in students' study success (Pritchard et al. 2008; Michael 2006; Carini et al. 2006), in student retention (Thomas 2012) and in employability (Fallows and Steven 2000). Student engagement has also been conceived as a proxy for institutional quality, and as such has been integrated into institutional performance measurements (Gibbs 2010; Trowler and Trowler 2010, 2011; BIS 2011). Beginning with John Dewey's work we find the idea that higher education should focus on the education of enlightened, informed and critical citizens. Notions of student engagement as leading to the development of the dispositions and abilities necessary for engaged citizenship in democratic societies have been since elaborated further (Bergan 2004, 2005, 2011 and 2013; Bergan and Damian 2010; Biesta 2008; Bok 2010; Klemenčič 2010; Bergan, S. in this volume).

Consequent to these normative appraisals, research on student engagement proliferated, however without a common theoretical framework and with little collaboration or even discussion across disciplinary fields. The literature broadly labelled as dealing with some form of student engagement spans three major areas (Trowler 2010; Trowler and Trowler 2010). The most prolific is research on student engagement in learning and teaching (Ashwin 2009a, 2009b and 2014; Case 2013), in extracurricular activities (Holdsworth 2010; Stevenson and Clegg 2011, 2012; Clegg, Stevenson and Willott 2010) and student experience more broadly (Kandiko and Mawer 2013; Kandiko and Weyers 2013). Literature on access to higher education (Reay 2002; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010; Crozier et al. 2008) and student employability (Brenan and Shah 2003; Harvey 2005; Tomlinson 2007; Yorke 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006) is a related strand of the sociological literature on inequalities and the effects of college on students. Student engagement is also addressed within the literature on higher education governance (Klemenčič 2012a, 2012b, 2011 and 2014), quality assurance (Cockburn 2006; Alaniska 2006; Galán Palomares 2012; Zhang 2013; Kažoka in this volume) and institutional research (Klemenčič and Brennan 2013). Finally, there is student engagement literature – that which addresses student civic involvement and political participation in democracy, especially student activism (Altbach 1966, 1979, 1981, 1989a, 1989b, 1991, 1992 and 2006; Lipset and Altbach 1966 and 1969; Klemenčič 2014; Altbach and Klemenčič 2014).

Particularly influential has been the scholarship related to the North American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh 2001, 2003). The NSSE seeks to assess "the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience" (Kuh 2001: 2).

The underlying assumption lies in positivist thinking that observable phenomena – student engagement and experience – can be measured and validated through quantitative survey questionnaires, and that causal relations (correlation) and time priority exist between specific independent and dependent variables. While student surveys can be helpful in providing data for overall assessment of institutional functions with regard to student experience, and scan for immediate student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with particular student services, this approach has a number of widely acknowledged limitations when broader conclusions as to the effects of college on students are drawn. A methodological flaw that critics most frequently point out is that such surveys provide a “snapshot” view of student experience that does not do justice to its inherently dynamic and contextual, and developmental and self-developmental nature.<sup>5</sup> Survey questionnaires are based on preconceived categories as to what the institutional researchers expect the correlations to be between educational provisions and university circumstances (the independent variables) and student experience and engagement (the dependent variables). These expectations may not always be accurate given the interdependent and multifaceted factors and interactions that underlie student interactions and thus their experience. Yet another weakness of this approach is its inability to capture student engagement as multidimensional, dynamic and developmental, and the effect of working under the assumption that students exercise rational choice from shared starting points and in undifferentiated circumstances (Sabri 2011). The starting premise of this research has been that student agency is shaped by the institutions; that is “by the structure”: the focus has been on the question of how the institutions organise and use their resources to promote various forms of engagement.

The institutionalist and behaviouralist literature stemming from survey-based research tends to oversimplify what is a highly dynamic process of student choices of engagement simultaneously influenced by a multiplicity of different factors. There exists notable qualitative research which highlights factors other than institutions in shaping student engagement. The socio-economic and cultural background of students is given its due in classical sociological inquiries into how class, race, gender and cultural capital influence student agency. For example, in their investigation of students’ choices of extracurricular activities, Stephenson and Clegg (2011) suggest that the capacity of students to imagine and act to bring about their “future selves” is in fact highly structured by class (ibid.). In a study of working-class students, Reay, David and Ball (2005) find that choice of study is not based purely on rational individual decision making by informed consumers in a market, but is influenced by intensely social and familial factors, networks and connections, and the ability to make “distinctions” among the unequal social and educational goods on offer (ibid.; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010; Crozier et al. 2008). Some of this research also points to the importance of socialisation and social relations in shaping student agency. We find more explicit focus on socialisation in the social network literature, for instance in investigations of the correlation between Facebook use and civic participation (Valenzuela et al. 2009) and in the literature on the social nature of learning (Ashworth 2004; Ashwin 2009a). Ashwin (2009a), for example, highlights the dynamic ways in which students and academics influence each other in teaching-learning interactions, and how these interactions are shaped by teaching-learning

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5. I thank Simon Marginson for alerting me to the two latter aspects.

environments, student and academic identities, disciplinary knowledge practices and institutional cultures. Other researchers focus on the role of emotion in shaping student engagement (Kahu et al. 2014; Beard, Clegg and Smith 2007).

In addition to these approaches, Kahu (2013) has taken an important step with her more integrated approach to the study of student engagement. She disentangles the central variables in student engagement and the relationships among them, highlighting the importance of the broader socio-cultural context along with structural (university culture, policies, curricula, assessment and student background, family support, etc.) and psycho-social influences (university teaching and student motivations, skills, etc.). The engagement itself is then channelled through affect (enthusiasm, interest and belonging), cognition (deep learning, self-regulation) and behaviour (time and effort, interaction and participation). The consequences of engagement suggested by Kahu are dual in temporality (proximal and distant) and in domain (academic and societal). By depicting the complex array of factors influencing a student's engagement, she points to the unique nature of the individual experience and the need for in-depth study of particular student populations (Kahu 2013: 766), a point which I find particularly important. One major shortcoming of this framework, however, is its inability to capture how different temporal orientations shape student behaviour. The role of past habits and future projections play as important a role in supporting agentic orientations as the socio-psychological influences of students' present judgment of the environment which Kahu's framework covers.

I believe that we need to move even deeper to the micro foundations of student agency so as to capture both the temporality and the multi-level relational contexts of student engagement. It is through such an approach that we can better understand how different conditions that shape student agency interact and play out over time and to what effect. An agentic perspective retreats from the aim of explaining how broad structural conditions within the context of the higher education environment affect students. Rather, by working empirically on smaller units or systems longitudinally, it seeks to uncover and fully capture the specificities of individual cases of student behaviour and experience (see Haggis 2003). It also seeks to address studentship and student agency in the context of the life course and life projects (see Biesta 2008; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In this way, propositions about the conduciveness of certain conditions to the exercise of student agency and mechanisms underlying student agency can be suggested, rather than limiting oneself to consideration of causal relationships between predetermined factors and expected outcomes.

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Part I

## **Students' role in society**

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## Chapter 1

# Theorising student activism in and beyond the 20th century: the contribution of Philip G. Altbach

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### **Abstract**

For most of the second half of the 20th century, Philip G. Altbach has followed, analysed and theorised on student activism in Europe, North America, India and beyond and become the foremost scholar on the topic. This chapter critically reviews Altbach's work on student activism (1964 to 2006) and his efforts in developing a comparative theoretical understanding of student activism in terms of its causes, organisation, ideological orientation and outcomes, along with the backgrounds and identity of student activists, and the importance of national and institutional contexts and historical conjunctures in the emergence of student activism and in the response of national and university governments to student protest. The chapter draws on Altbach's thinking on student politics and activism and most recent theoretical contributions on changes in European higher education governance and student representation at system and institutional level to consider four questions: under what conditions does student activism emerge? What are the typical characteristics of student organisations/movements? What are the typical characteristics of student activists? What are the effects of student activism? In so doing, testable propositions for theorising student activism in, and beyond, 20th-century Europe are developed. The chapter thereby challenges Altbach's own assertion that "student activism lacks any overarching theoretical explanation" (1991: 247).

**Keywords:** student activism; student politics; student engagement; university governance

## Introduction

Studies of student political activism in Europe and the international student movement will always mention the work of Philip G. Altbach, whose pioneering work and publication record on this topic spans almost half a century. This chapter examines a central pillar of Altbach's lasting contribution: the conceptualisation of key characteristics of student activism and related propositions regarding the causes of student activism, its organisation, the backgrounds and identity of student activists and their typical ideological orientation, the effectiveness and impact of student activism, as well as context-specific and conjuncture-related propositions. Thus, while Altbach repeatedly argues that there is no "overarching theoretical explanation" for student activism, and hence that it is "difficult to explain and even more problematic to predict" (Altbach 1991: 247), the purpose of this chapter is precisely to contradict this view by showing that he actually provided such a framework, even if he did not utilise it systematically to this end. The chapter does not directly deal with Altbach's empirical and historical research on student activism in Europe, North America, India and other parts of the "Third World", but rather with his synthesis and abstraction of this "highly complex, many-faceted phenomenon" to provide a conceptual framework for "understanding the configurations of student politics" (ibid.: 247). It therefore shows at a theoretical level that Altbach's work continues to be a relevant point of departure for investigating student politics in Europe and beyond.

Like many young scholars of today who conduct research into student politics, Altbach started out as a student activist. First in high school, then as an undergraduate majoring in sociology and history in the late 1950s and eventually as a master's student in educational administration at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s, he became a member of liberal-religious and humanist-pacifist American student and youth organisations, culminating in his role as national chairperson of the nationwide Student Peace Union from 1959 to 1961 (Altbach undated, circa 1961, 1997: vii, 2009: 1, 2013). Altbach's master's dissertation *James B. Conant* (1963) and his first published academic articles, *Japanese students and Japanese politics* (1963) and *The international student movement* (1964), coincide with the transformation of political commitments into academic interests (and with the dissolution of the Student Peace Union in 1964), and were followed by his PhD *Students, politics, and higher education in a developing society, the case of Bombay, India* (1966), published in 1968 as *Turmoil and transition: higher education and student politics in India* (Altbach 1968a).

Altbach began a fruitful collaboration with prominent political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset during his post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard University from 1966 to 1967 (see Lipset and Altbach 1966, 1969; Altbach 1997: ix). In the *Comparative Education Review's* special issue on student politics of 1966, Altbach established himself as one of the main analysts of student politics in the United States and, due to his interest and doctoral work, of student politics in the "new nations", the developing countries of the Third World. Unlike Lipset, Altbach has retained his interest in the topic for most of his academic career; his publication record expanded rapidly, focusing mainly on American and Indian student activism and student politics in developing countries in general.

As the wave of student revolt swept through Europe and other parts of the globe in 1968, Altbach was ideally placed to provide insightful commentary and analysis. In *Student revolt in Europe* (1968b) Altbach compares the student protests in Italy, West Germany and Poland to each other, as well as with student activism in American universities and in developing countries. With reference to the US, Lipset and Altbach (1966: 320) argue that the “student revolutions” were being “greatly exaggerated by the mass media” and “involve only a tiny minority of the student population”. In western and central Europe, however, the situation of 1968 was different, involving up to half of the student populations of major universities (Altbach 1968b: 755), notwithstanding its “overexposure in the mass media” (Moodie 1999: 295). In *The student barometer* (1969) Altbach focuses on student politics in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet intervention in August 1968 that had so dramatically halted the national movement towards sovereignty and liberation. European student activism also features prominently in the large edited volumes on student activism: in *Students in revolt* (Lipset and Altbach 1969), in *Student politics: perspectives for the eighties* (Altbach 1981) and, much later, in *Student activism: an international reference handbook* (Altbach 1989a).

For most of the 1970s, 1980s and the early 1990s, Altbach returned to his focus on student political activity in the US, India and the Third World. In books like *Student politics in America: a historical analysis* (1974, second edition 1997) and important articles such as “From revolution to apathy: American student activism in the 1970s” (1979a), “American student activism: the post-sixties transformation” (Altbach and Cohen 1990) and “Introduction: student activism in the seventies” (Altbach 1979b) he reflects, among other things, on shifts in student activism before and after the 1968 moment, as well as the revitalisation of student activism as part of the impact of the anti-apartheid movement on student politics in the US in the 1980s. A sustained interest is devoted to the observation and analysis of student activism in developing countries with publications focusing on India (1968a, 1974, 1984) and Asia (1970), and more generally the comparison of student activism in the “First World” and the “Third World”. The landmark article “Student politics in the Third World” (1984) is dedicated to the latter topic, as are sections in other publications.

Among the lasting effects of 1968 – and of Altbach’s work on and beyond that key moment in European student history – is that the study of student activism has become more than a pastime for students and young scholars. The study of student politics in general and student activism in particular, along with other aspects of student engagement in politics on and off campus, has become a respectable academic pursuit. It is well entrenched in the burgeoning fields of comparative education and higher education studies as well as in a varied range of disciplines, including anthropology, history, political science and sociology, along with its place in social movement and youth studies. From the 1960s through to the mid-2000s, Altbach has been the most persistent and consistent analyst of student political activism and the student movement, and as the number of studies on student politics is increasing, his pioneering work on these topics is being widely acknowledged, but rarely treated in any great depth. The culmination of Altbach’s work is contained in several encyclopaedic chapters on student activism where his strength as synthesiser rather than comparative analyst is fully brought to bear. This chapter is an attempt to revisit Altbach’s framework and reconsider it in terms of specific theoretical propositions.

## Conceptualising student activism

According to Altbach (1992: 1444), student activism “is inherent in the nature of the academic community” and “will continue to be a powerful force”, both on campus and in society. Yet, in many contemporary studies of student activism, key notions of “student politics”, “student activism”, “student representation”, “student unrest” and “student protest” are conflated, as well as terms like “student governance” and “student government”, and “student movement” and “student organisation” (Luescher 2005). In Altbach’s work on student activism, “student” typically refers to higher education students and thus excludes those in vocational training colleges and high schools. This is not to say that his framework may not be applicable in those contexts; it is, however, developed specifically in relation to activism of students in college and university, or at similar institutions. The collective of students is referred to as the “student community” (Altbach 1966: 187) or, with reference to all students at a particular institution, as the “student body”. The fact that student communities are to some extent age-graded, transient, divided by faculty and discipline, live in fairly close-knit residential communities, come from similar familial and class backgrounds and so forth, all make the student community and student organisations and movements somewhat unusual (Altbach 1991: 252).

The term “student politics” is perhaps best used as an umbrella concept to refer to all kinds of political activities of students, whether formal or informal (Luescher 2005), ordinary or extraordinary (Pabian and Minksová 2011), or oriented towards society or academia (Altbach 1966: 184). Altbach (1991: 248) attests to the typically oppositional nature of student activism, characterised by forms of student campaigns, protest marches and even violent demonstrations. Today, student activism may be defined as part of the informal or extraordinary political activities of students, as against the now ordinary and formal political activity of student representation in official bodies of higher education governance (at various levels) and beyond. The distinction is substantiated by the convention that student protest and student activism are frequently used interchangeably in the literature. Moreover, the term “activism” forcefully invokes the idea of political engagement through public action (as against the “boardroom politics” involved in formal student representation). In Altbach’s terms, student activism typically is about the public expression of new ideas, about shaping public debate on a topic (e.g. the nuclear arms race and the Vietnam War in the 1960s, disinvestment from apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, or women’s rights, gay rights and global warming in the 1990s and 2000s), and therefore it is often done through publications, public speaking, campaigning, the use of mass media (and, one must add today, social media), and finally through demonstrations and other forms of agitation (Altbach 1992: 1438).

Student organisations and student movements are the platforms from which student politics are collectively organised. They can be international, national, inter-institutional or institutional, but campus-based organisations and movements are the most common (Altbach 1964). Badat (1999) offers a useful distinction between student organisations and movements on the basis of their

membership. Thus, “student organisations are usually voluntary membership organisations within the student body” whereas “movements are broader entities, typically consisting of several organisations with no formal individual membership” (Badat 1999: 22). In Altbach’s writing, a student movement is defined as “an association of students inspired by aims set forth in a specific ideological doctrine, usually, although not exclusively, political in nature” (1966: 180). Here, the focus is therefore not on formal membership but on “a combination of emotional response and intellectual conviction” (ibid.). While this definition of a student movement differs considerably from more recent ones that focus on the effort of “a large number of students to either bring about or prevent change” (Gill and de Fronzo 2009: 207-9), it will become clear below that this element is evidently implied.

A peculiar kind of student organisation is that with the compulsory or statutory affiliation of an entire student body. Such an organisation goes by the name of “student union”, “student guild” or “student association”, is officially recognised, and if it is established to represent the general student body, one may speak of a national student association or union (Klemenčič 2012). The elected executive members of an institutional student union or guild, forming a students’ representative council or the like, typically constitute the “student government”. The notion of a “student government” provides a useful conceptual means to distinguish officially recognised, formal structures of student governance from other student organisations. Although Altbach recognised the importance of these structures as part of everyday student life on campus, his unit of analysis in the study of student activism has been the “more radical groups [that] grow out of these ‘official’ organisations” (Altbach 1966: 178).

Against the foregoing overview of definitions and related key characteristics, Altbach’s early caution with regard to the difficulties involved in analysing and understanding student activism and student movements can be appreciated; empirically it stemmed from his early work on student politics in India and the US. The conceptual framework that Altbach developed in these contexts came to be applied to his work on student activism internationally. It ripened over almost three decades of intense study of student politics.

The early articles “The international student movement” (1964) and “Students and politics” (1966) already use Altbach’s basic vocabulary and the perspectives of later years to analyse student activism: the focus on student movements and organisations as the platforms of activism; the interest in their historical origins and the central place afforded to the scope of activity, political impetus of activists and ideological orientation; the understanding that variations in student politics and the effectiveness of activism are closely related to the level of political development and responsiveness of the political system; the appreciation of the peculiarities of the student community which both facilitate and hinder student movements; and finally, therefore, the argument that student politics must be understood within its particular historical, socio-political and cultural context even if there are many typical characteristics and discernible commonalities (and differences) across time and space. All these elements are present already in his earliest work. In later work they are refined and laid out more systematically.

By 1989, Altbach's thinking on student activism crystallised to a point where the prism of analysis was set. His encyclopaedic chapters – that is his contributions on student activism to several higher education reference works such as *Student activism: an international reference handbook* (1989a), *International higher education: an encyclopaedia* (1991), *The encyclopedia of higher education* (1992), and *International handbook of higher education* (2006) – largely recap a story which, conceptually speaking, is complete as his contribution, and only requires the occasional empirical update. High-level inferences make up most of that contribution; in large parts, they are not generalisations based on the rigorous application of the comparative method as it is understood today. Rather, Altbach's method is that of a synthesiser, one of discerning commonalities and differences across various contexts, and establishing modal characteristics.

### **Altbach's framework for studying student activism**

Altbach's framework, as laid out in his encyclopaedic chapters between 1989 and 2006 along with ideas from earlier writings, espouses a sensitivity to different national and institutional contexts, the characteristics of higher education, the backgrounds of student activists, and the features characteristic of student organisations and movements. At the macro-political level, the stage of political development, regime legitimacy and responsiveness of the political system to political demands matters in understanding the emergence, nature, role and impact of student politics. At the system level of higher education, certain characteristics inherent in different national higher education systems and types of universities matter in understanding student activism. At the level of the student community, typical characteristics of studentship, such as its transient nature, are responsible for the most peculiar features of student organisations and movements. Furthermore, who the likely student activists are – and who are not – can in part be explained by generalisations concerning the academic, socio-economic, political and familial backgrounds of students. Altogether, these varied features suggest ways of studying the effectiveness, impact and future pattern of student activism. In the way it is presented here, Altbach's framework therefore involves a complex multi-level system of categorical classification as well as specific propositions regarding the emergence, outcomes and impact of student activism, the response to student activism, and the characteristic features of student organisations and movements and of student activists.

The analysis and presentation of Altbach's framework here is guided by a number of questions, which may serve as research questions for future empirical studies:

- ▶ under what conditions does student activism emerge?
- ▶ what are the typical characteristics of student organisations/movements?
- ▶ what are the typical characteristics of student activists?
- ▶ what are the effects of student activism?

In keeping with Altbach's framework these questions are elaborated and further specified by foregrounding various structural and conjunctural conditions.

## Under what national conditions does student activism emerge and succeed?

Over a period of 40 years of academic writing Altbach has persistently argued that “the most important distinction [in variations among student movements] is between student activist efforts in the industrialised nations and those in the Third World” (Altbach 1992: 1442, Altbach 1966, 2006). The distinction is, however, less one that refers to a (today largely obsolete) definition of “Third World” in terms of socio-economic development or Cold War political alignment (as against a First and Second World). Certainly, there are relevant socio-economic aspects, like the fact that student populations in so-called “Third World” nations tend to represent a much smaller share of the total population and are concentrated in major capital cities; they also tend to be from the most affluent and influential families and thus form an “incipient elite” who will eventually take over the reins of their nation (Altbach 1991: 257). Yet, the crucial distinction is one of political development and regime legitimacy: the political systems of developing countries tend to be “young”, less democratic and less responsive, and thus lacking in legitimacy. As Altbach (1992: 142) carefully puts it:

Political systems in the Third World have not always been installed through the ballot box and they lack wide legitimacy; thus they are more easily threatened by dissident movements of various kinds. A weak mass media and frequent limitations on free expression means that Third World regimes are generally out of touch with public opinion. Students often provide articulation for much more widely held views and concerns. Their movements are frequently the conscience of at least the educated segment of the population.

Concomitantly, Altbach finds that in industrialised (First or Second World) nations where regimes have faced a legitimacy deficit – “such as in much of eastern Europe, and in several western countries during the 1960s” – student activism can be significant and influential (*ibid.*). In contrast, student efforts to overturn the government seem both difficult and unnecessary in countries with open and pluralistic systems of government, such as the US (Moodie 1999: 298).

Moreover, the legitimacy of students themselves matters. According to Altbach, another broad variation is that in the industrialised nations or, to put it more precisely, in established democracies, “students do not see themselves nor are they seen by society as being legitimate political actors”, at least not to the extent this is the case in non-democratic societies. In the “new” nations, students have often played an important part in bringing about national self-determination through their participation in nationalist and liberation movements. Thus, historically, the student movement has established a degree of political legitimacy that allows it to “speak truth to power” with considerable authority (Altbach 1992: 142). In this respect, Altbach (1991: 250) has himself put forward a clear proposition, stating, “Where student activism is traditionally accepted as a legitimate element of the political system it is more likely to have an impact on society.”

A crucial variable in the effectiveness and impact of student activism on society may therefore be the respective level of legitimacy of the political system compared to that of the student movement. The “dramatic” differences between industrialised countries and the Third World (Altbach 1991: 256) may therefore be understood in

these terms. This proposition may not only hold true with respect to the role and impact of student activism in national politics and society; in higher education politics, the same may hold with respect to university reforms, as suggested by Altbach and various others (e.g. Munene 2003, Nkomo 1984).

### **In what higher education systems and institutions is student activism likely to emerge?**

In general terms, academic life permits and hinders student activism. On the one hand, it provides considerable free time for students to live life at their own pace, build close-knit communities with like-minded peers, and explore, debate and mobilise for new ideas. On the other hand, the studies also regulate life and follow a timetable, and exam periods can be all consuming and make activism more difficult.

At the system level of higher education, certain characteristics inherent in different national higher education systems, types of universities and disciplines of study matter in understanding student activism. For one, there is no conclusive argument whether student activism is more typically a phenomenon characteristic of elite, mass or universal higher education. Student activism has been observed in all types even if its meaning may vary (Trow 2006). Different traditional patterns of higher education systems do seem to have an impact on student activism even though, through the Bologna Process and similar processes of convergence and isomorphism, the different modes and related system characteristics observed by Clark (1978) are on the wane. In the traditional European continental system of higher education with its infrequent examinations and pace of study that is more determined by students, student leaders have had more time to devote themselves to political work than in the Anglo-American system. Frequent examinations, the course-credit system and a more regulated timetable of academic progression distinguish it from the continental European “laissez-faire” system (Altbach 1991: 249). The Anglo-American and continental European systems have been historically reproduced in the university systems of former colonies.

The transient nature of the student population and rapid turnovers in student leadership make student movements difficult to sustain, and create a tendency for students to be impatient to see change (*ibid.*). Against this, the broad-based “structural realities of academic life” provided for by the different national systems are important in that they can influence the length of student generations, the amount of time student leaders can devote to political work, and thus the potential of a student activist to become a “permanent student” (*ibid.*). The proposition here is therefore that the less regulated (or more laissez-faire) the academic life of students, the more likely that student movements will emerge and be sustained across several student generations, with traditions of activism developed and maintained.

The extent to which a student movement can have nationwide reach depends on the size and heterogeneity of the higher education system. In the large and heterogeneous American (national) or European (supranational) system, organising a coherent student movement is extraordinarily difficult (Moodie 1999: 296). While this has improved with large student federations such as the European Students’

Union (ESU), in very small national systems made up of a handful of institutions, such as found in many developing countries, organising a student movement of national impact is much easier.

On the one hand, academic institutions are inherently part of the activist equation in that they are by nature highly politicised: politics is an integral part of the creation and dissemination of knowledge. They are the “factories of new ideas” and “engines of development” and have acquired and maintained special freedoms (and responsibilities) in order to be able to act as such (Altbach 1992: 1438; Castells 1991). On the other hand, the type, size, prestige and location of universities matters greatly. Given that in terms of their backgrounds, student activists tend to come from well-educated, urban families and are wealthier and more privileged than the average student (and tend to be among the best students academically), they are also typically clustered in the best and most prestigious universities (Altbach 1992: 1443). In the same institutions, they are likely to come into contact with cosmopolitan, activist professors (*ibid.*). Moreover, studying in a university that is located close to the country’s capital or major cities “gives students a sense that they are at the centre of power” (Altbach 1991: 257); it makes access to information and decision makers easier and demonstrations are more likely to receive national media coverage (which is very important in terms of getting a response).

Thus, with reference to the US in particular, Altbach argues that historically student activism can be found only in a small number of institutions: the more cosmopolitan and prestigious universities on both coasts, a sprinkling of major public universities in between, and some traditionally progressive liberal-arts colleges (Altbach 1997: xxxvi, in Moodie 1999: 397).

In addition, students from some faculties and disciplines are more inclined towards activism than others. Student activists tend to come from the social sciences and humanities as well as from mathematics; least inclined towards activism are students from applied and professional fields like commerce, engineering and agriculture (Altbach 1991: 252, 1992: 1443; Lipset and Altbach 1969). The reason for this pattern may be that (1) student activists self-select into the social sciences because these disciplines focus on the study of society and social problems; (2) the subject matter actually affects students and produces more radical views and a more activist inclination; and (3) the course of studies for regulated professions tends to be more structured and thus makes it more difficult for students to “take a year off” and come back to their studies (Altbach 1991: 253).

The finding regarding the “disciplinary specialisation” of student activists may be extrapolated to the institutional level to propose that the more vocationally or professionally oriented the institution (e.g. a university of technology, a polytechnic), the less likely are student movements to emerge from within it. This may further extend to system level, whereby the related proposition would be that from the professionally oriented side of a binary system or in dual systems of higher education, student activism is less likely to emerge.

Finally, will student activism eventually emerge forcefully in private higher education? On the one hand, it has been argued (with reference to Latin America) that private institutions tend to “specialize in job-oriented fields such as business

administration, [which are] not normally linked to activism" (Levy 1991: 151; also see Levy in Altbach 1989a). On the other hand, given that this argument about student political quiescence in private higher education relates to high-quality institutions, the question remains whether the unprecedented proliferation of low-quality higher education will only increase the number of unemployed graduates who, as the Arab Spring has shown, readily participate in new social movements or whether academically-oriented, etudialist student movements will eventually emerge from within private institutions focusing on improving the quality and relevance of private higher education qualifications.

Therefore, the multi-level perspective and various distinctions among different systems and institutions have enormous heuristic value; they also involve a number of highly suggestive testable propositions with enormous potential for further study.

### **What are the typical characteristics of student activists?**

Many of the typical characteristics of student activists have already been mentioned; they are part of Altbach's "sociological generalisations" concerning "who are the activists". What matters are: (1) the familial, socio-economic and political background, whereby student activists tend to come from well-off, well-educated, urban families that are supportive of activism; (2) minority groups tend to be overrepresented among student activists (e.g. Christians in India; Protestants in France; Jews in the US); and (3) they tend to come from a small number of academic disciplines and are among the academically best-performing students (Altbach 1991: 252-3). Thus, the typical student rebel is not representative of the student body; she or he is more likely part of a small minority of the total student community.

Some studies have shown that student activists tend to have a "complex set of attitudes and values [that] contributes to activism", including a "higher moral sense than their uninvolved peers" (ibid.: 254) or, perhaps, idealism (Altbach 1966: 177). Among the ideological commitments shown by student activists in the past have been nationalism; opposition to authoritarianism of various forms; a commitment to open and democratic forms of government; equality with respect to race and gender and gay rights; and more recently, environmentalist concerns (Altbach 1991: 247, 1992: 1438). Hence, Altbach argues that "student activists have frequently been the 'conscience of their generation'" (1992: 1444). Lastly, student activists tend to be leftist, even if this has historically not always been the case (Altbach 1991: 1441-2).

The main question that arises from the sociological generalisations is whether they continue to hold up in a global higher education context that is characterised by unprecedented growth of student numbers, internationalisation, and a related diversification and fragmentation of national and institutional student bodies. Moreover, some recent studies have found that students specialise politically towards either informal activist involvement or participation in formal student leadership and representation in official governance bodies (Luescher-Mamashela et al. 2011). What the reasons and criteria for this choice are and the typical characteristics of the latter student politicians has, however, not been established beyond a small subset of institutions.

## What are the typical characteristics of student movements?

The emergence of “virtual” youth and student movements observed during the Arab Spring, and thus the impact of information and communication technology and social networks like Facebook and Twitter on student activism post-date Altbach’s work and offer useful new material for theorising student movements. In 1966, Altbach put the challenge of analysing and understanding student movements as follows:

One of the difficulties in analyzing student movements is their transitory nature – the student community as well as the interests of the students change rapidly. Organisations are often temporary, and leadership fluctuates. The emphasis of the movements shifts from campus to society and back again at rather regular intervals, and the movement itself can disappear for extended periods of time. Interaction between the educational system, the broader political and economic situation, and the socio-psychological nature of the student community is complex, making any thorough understanding of the role of the students in politics and on the educational establishment difficult (Altbach 1966: 186).

Thus, already at this early stage in the development of his theoretical framework, Altbach pinpointed key characteristics of student movements. Later, he argues that:

the dynamics of student movements are not unlike those of other social movements although the specific aspects of campus life – an age-graded population, a fairly close community, common social class backgrounds and other elements – make student movements somewhat unusual (Altbach 1991: 252).

Foremost among the unique characteristics is the transient nature of studentship, which has a powerful impact. Given the short life cycle of student generations, lasting typically between three and five years only, student movements tend to be short-lived and sporadic. Moreover, Altbach notes their “fluidity” and stresses that their rise and demise are difficult to predict. Furthermore, given the typical oppositional nature of student activism, student movements tend to be reformist if not revolutionary in outlook, and in their ideological orientation reflect the commitments of the activists involved.

In his early writings, Altbach distinguishes among different types of student movements based on their ideological alignment, focus and orientation. While the Cold War distinction between student movements aligned to and supported by the pro-Western bloc and the Communist bloc has become obsolete (Altbach 1964), the other distinctions continue to be useful. In terms of topical focus, orientation and scope of activity, Altbach distinguishes between “etudialist” and “society-oriented” student movements. Etudialist movements are inward-oriented, primarily towards higher education and student-related concerns. Conversely, society-oriented movements are concerned with societal issues – political, social or cultural (ibid.: 184). A second distinction is between norm and value-based student movements whereby the former are particularistic and “generally aim at the correction of specific grievances or at a particular goal” while the latter are “concerned with broader ideological issues”. Altbach adds that the ideology or value-based movements are more likely revolutionary; norm-based movements tend to be more reformist (but may nonetheless be quite militant over specific issues) (ibid.: 183-4). A final characteristic

added to the equation is political party affiliation. According to Altbach (ibid.: 184), “student groups affiliated to political parties usually have a value orientation and are often concerned with broader political issues”. Correspondingly, recent studies show that party politics tend to introduce a complex dynamic into student movements, which may compromise the representation of student-specific interests (Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume 2014).

Altbach makes an important point in his discussion of the classifications, arguing that there is a great deal of correspondence between the two classifications (see above), in that “there are similarities between the norm-value distinction and the ‘etudialist’-society orientation of the student movement” (Altbach 1966: 184). The recent study by Jungblut and Weber (2012) on the transformations of the German national student union over almost two decades suggests that these distinctions and Altbach’s related proposition continue to be relevant (even if the authors have not made reference to Altbach’s pioneering work). In addition, Altbach’s groundwork can also be seen in the structural axis of Gill and de Fronzo’s (2009) classification of student movements. Moreover, given that there are quite specific properties to each of Altbach’s classifications (as sketched out above), they offer good material for comparative analysis and systematic empirical testing.

## What are the effects of student activism?

Altbach is somewhat ambiguous about the effectiveness of student activism, even if he affirms that its overall cultural and political impact on higher education and society has been highly significant (albeit more so in developing countries than in Europe and North America). At national level, student activism has in some cases simultaneously been highly effective as well as counter-productive: for instance, in the 1960s students caused the downfall of governments in Korea and Thailand, but then the military took over rather than the group favoured by the students (Altbach 1991: 256-7). At campus level the “institutional response to protest, while difficult to predict, has sometimes obtained some of the changes demanded by students, although full success has seldom been achieved from the student viewpoint” (ibid.: 251).

This ambiguity may be understood in terms of Altbach’s oft-stated proposition that the effectiveness of student activism is not so much determined by factors directly related to the issues raised by students or the type of activism employed. Rather, as a kind of extra-parliamentary opposition, student activists at best wield influence on decision makers. Altbach’s argument is that the effectiveness of student activism is determined to a large extent by the response of other social groups in and outside the university, and ultimately, the response it receives from government (ibid.: 249-50). To provoke a response, the message of the activists must be disseminated but “it is frequently difficult to predict either the nature or the scope of media attention” (ibid.: 250). Lipset and Altbach (1966: 175) and Moodie (1999) all found that student activism was overexposed in the mass media in the late 1960s. The exposure that student activism gets in the media is therefore a crucial factor in determining its potential effectiveness.

There is a range of typical responses to student activism on the part of government or institutional managements: ignoring student activists, engaging and negotiating with

them, or repressing activism to various degrees (Altbach 1991: 250). The violent repression of student activism is often a factor in “increasing both the size and the militancy” of activist movements (ibid.). As a short-term strategy, repression may work well; for the long-term, however, it may prove counter-productive, sowing “the seeds of later unrest” (ibid.: 251). In this regard, it is proposed that the ways activists articulate their concerns are conditioned by the response they expect (ibid.: 249-50). A related and more general proposition is therefore that the pattern of response to student activism determines the nature of future activism and ultimately student political culture.

Outright confrontational tactics are, however, typically a measure of last resort; they are evidence of a polarisation of interests on a campus and/or in society at large. A lack of channels to pursue co-operative tactics and/or a lack of responsiveness to the use of co-operative tactics may give rise to the pursuit of increasingly more confrontational ones; hence, the choice of tactics may be generally dependent on the responsiveness of the regime. Studies on student activism from various contexts therefore recommend the establishment of formal structures for communicating and negotiating with student leaders, as an appropriate response by university authorities to reduce disruptive student political activism on campus (Luescher-Mamashela 2013: 1446).

### **The student rebel: a post-script?**

Among the long-term results of student activism at campus level has been the formal inclusion of students in the decision-making structures of higher education governance – most notably at institutional and sub-institutional levels but also at system level. However, this inclusion also presents a dilemma for student activists:

On the one hand, the legal provision for student representation may be regarded as an achievement of students’ erstwhile political struggle; on the other hand, it also changes the very nature of the engagement by removing it as a cause for political struggle. The paradox involved ... is that student representatives participating in formal settings may need the subversive, activist support of their constituency in order to be able to defend and possibly extend the gains made by previous student generations, whether or not these have been legally enshrined (Luescher-Mamashela 2013: 1447).

Correspondingly, the burgeoning number of recent studies on formal student representation (e.g. Zuo and Ratsoy 1999; Bergan 2004; Lizzio and Wilson 2009; Cardoso and Machado dos Santos 2011; Michelsen and Stensaker 2011; Minksová and Pabian 2011; Klemenčič 2011, 2012) are indebted to the history of student activism and the pioneering work on this topic by Altbach and others. They represent a significant, distinct shift from informal to formal political activity of students on campus and an accompanying re-conceptualisation of the former as “extraordinary” and the latter as “ordinary” student politics (Pabian and Minksová 2011). The student subject has thus become incorporated in the governance machinery of higher education while gradually the dominant conceptualisation of “student” in relation to the university has begun to privilege notions of students as “consumers” (at worst) or “co-producers of knowledge” (at best) (Luescher-Mamashela 2010, 2013; McCulloch 2009). Altbach’s subject, in contrast, is never the student as consumer: it is the student as activist, idealist, rebel. His core interest was that small inner circle of militant campaigners,

organisers and protesters – and their relation to the student body, student organisations and the student movement, and ultimately to core institutions of modern society. In spite of this shift at the level of higher education governance, the study of student activism will continue to be relevant as long as universities fulfil their emancipatory role, and the spectre of student rebellion haunts illegitimate regimes and governments and unresponsive university managers wherever they are.

## Conclusion

While student activism is indeed a “highly complex, many-faceted phenomenon” (Altbach 1991: 247), there have been many advances towards understanding it, and undoubtedly future work will continue to refine this to the extent of being able to anticipate its emergence, perpetuation, demise and effects. Despite changes in higher education on a global scale, the “student rebel” remains part of “the activist equation” and will provide ample opportunity for studying student activism.

There are good reasons for future studies into student activism. As Altbach notes in the introduction to his seminal work *Student political activism: an international reference handbook* (1989a), student activism has historically had a significant impact on national politics and broader society, and on all levels of governance relevant to higher education:

Political leaders would do well not only to listen to student protest movements but also to understand their dynamics, since regimes have been threatened or even toppled by activist students. The academic community also needs to understand student activism, as students have from time to time been key actors in movements for university reform and have also disrupted academic institutions.

Moreover, student activists themselves gain from understanding their own practice more deeply. As Altbach puts it, “the activists themselves should be fully aware of the history, politics, and potential of student protest movements since, as has often been said, those who do not know the past are doomed to repeat it” (1989b: 1).

This chapter has outlined a selection of the key features of Altbach’s theoretical framework to provide for propositions that can be elaborated and tested in future comparative studies of student activism in Europe and elsewhere, along with a number of classificatory frameworks that hold promise for further development and updating as heuristic devices. It has thereby shown that Altbach’s work is pioneering and substantial and remains highly relevant even as higher education expands and moves increasingly into the centre of the knowledge society.

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## Chapter 2

# “I am tired of reading history. Now I want to make it!” The rise and fall of the university campus as a space for social rebellion

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### **Abstract**

This chapter provides a historical account of the events leading to the student revolts of the 1960s in North America and Europe. In order to contextualise developments, the case of the University of California at Berkeley is used. Our analysis is sociological in nature, building on the notion of the campus as a “social space”. In the light of recent developments from across Europe, we discuss both the role of students and the university campus in initiating and nurturing broad social protests and in articulating the aspirations of youth. In so doing, we find some parallels but also significant differences in the nature and character of student revolts in the two time periods covered. Similarly, our analysis reveals that, as a social space for the articulation of wider social reforms, the university campus has gradually yet steadily lost its symbolic and pragmatic role.

**Keywords:** 1960s student protests; university reforms; Berkeley; campus as a social space; student demonstrations in Europe

## Introduction

The 1960s have been described as “the most portentous upheaval in the whole history of American student life” (Brubacher and Rudy 1976, cited by Rudy 1996: 150). However distinct in scope, this phenomenon has historical precedents and the university campus has, throughout history, played a crucial role in the enhancement of wider social and political reforms. Both the French Revolution (1787 to 1799) and the Enlightenment (1650s to 1790s) are considered to be cornerstones providing the youth of the world with an ideological context for protest. As Gottfried Dietze puts it, “The enlightenment’s quest for truth set free the desires of youth, inspired youth perpetually to seek new enlightenments” (1970: 11).

Ever since the Middle Ages, the university (*universitas* in Latin, that is “the whole”) and its inner space have had a privileged position in society, as far as its legal character and social nature are concerned (see Rüegg 1992). Academic freedom, exercised via free and critical rational thinking, has been a basic pillar of the modern university ever since Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) provided the ideological foundations (ideals) for the “modern university” (see Boehm 1983).

Over time, academia came to symbolise, *inter alia*, the creative and unattached reflection of individuals’ social realities, thus transforming the university campus into an arena of privileged critical discourse and radical action. This phenomenon is illustrated by the student revolts of the 1960s in Europe and North America. With this in mind, the current chapter addresses the following research question: what makes the university campus, as a social space, such an ideal platform for the initiation of wider social reforms, and what can be learned from contrasting historical developments in North America and Europe with more recent events from Europe?

The paper is organised as follows: following the introductory remarks, section two introduces the reader to the (sociological) notion of the campus as a social space. Section three provides a historical account (mid-1700s to early 1960s) of “life on campus” in North America. This is followed by section four’s focus on the “campus rebellions” of the 1960s that occurred at the University of California at Berkeley, and which paved the way for student protests across the country as well as overseas. In sections five and six, the discussion moves to Europe where a historical account of student protests is provided, followed by an analysis of 1968’s events in the light of recent student protests across the continent. In the chapter’s final section, we revisit the research question posed at the outset, and provide a critical assessment of historical and contemporary events in the light of the concept of the campus as social space.

## The university campus as a social space

For sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, the notion of space contains in itself the principle of “a relational understanding with the social world” (Bourdieu 1998: 1). As a social space, that is a system of relations composed of various agents (Bourdieu 1989), the university campus is part of a wider reality, namely society, in and within it. For

example, while discussing the 1960s' anti-war protests in North America, Heineman states that:

Off-campus peace work was just as extensive as on-campus organising. Where the surrounding community proved to be unacceptable to the anti-war message, faculty devoted their energies to campus mobilisation (1993: 46).

As a microcosm of society, the university campus came to symbolise the ideal "field of power" (Bourdieu 1998: 34) where social demands are addressed and power struggles exercised. In a similar vein, the campus serves as a "testing ground" for debates and actions that can then be propelled into the public sphere. Put differently, the campus has gradually become a "staging ground to 'reconstitute' society" (Kerr 1991: 150).

As for the interplay between the university campus and its surrounding environment, earlier studies show evidence of the "social divide" between the university and the city (see Bender 1988), for example around matters pertaining to religious and ethno-cultural values, as well as social class (Heineman 1993: 68). In addition, as a rather complex institution (see Pinheiro et al. 2012), the university is composed of a multiplicity of academic tribes and their respective values, norms and identities (Becher and Trowler 2001), hence giving rise to the idea of distinct systems of relations within a given campus (Bourdieu 1989). For example, Heineman's inquiries within SUNY (State University of New York) Buffalo into normative orientations in the 1960s, point to the idea of an "old campus" composed of the humanities and the social sciences supportive of social and internal (university) reforms versus a "new campus" composed of traditionally conservative fields such as the hard and applied sciences that were opposed to such reform agendas (Heineman 1993).

## **A short history of student revolts in North America**

The British imperial crisis (1765 to 1776) led to political protests in favour of American independence at Princeton, Harvard, Yale and Rhode Island College (Rudy 1996). During this period, the local academic elite played a key role in helping formulate colonial demands and in crafting proposals for a new political entity. By 1766 Harvard, America's oldest college (founded in 1636), had already experienced its first student upheaval. The period 1798 to 1815 marked the first wave of broad student protests in North American history (Novak 1977). By 1769, a member of the Harvard Corporation commented: "The young gentlemen are already taken up with politics. They have caught the spirit of the times" (ibid.: 4).

The period 1805 to 1808 was characterised as "the era of great campus rebellions" (ibid.: 17). In 1823, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) publicly stated that: "The insubordination of our youth is now the greatest obstacle to their education" (ibid.: 164). The spring of 1934 saw the first coast-to-coast student mobilisation in American history. In April 1936, and as a result of the rise of political radicalism due to the Great Depression (1929 to 1940), half a million college students organised a "strike for peace" protest across the nation (Rudy 1996: 125).

The end of the Second World War in North America was characterised by a period of exponential economic and demographic growth. The McCarthyism of the 1950s (see Fried 1990) came to symbolise the end of domestic social and political stability. The

so-called American “dream” and “century”, aimed at propelling the United States – its peoples and ideology – to the centre of the “civilised” world, was seriously under threat: internationally, by the rise of communism (ibid. 1990); domestically, by the growing civil rights movement in the South (Eagles 1986). The latter ignited student militancy and political activism across the country.

Following the Second World War, the GI Bill of 1944 increased student numbers by giving returning veterans the opportunity to enrol in higher education, setting in motion a massive restructuring of the domestic higher education system (Geiger 1993). When, in the early 1960s, the baby boom generation reached academic age, the system reached its historical peak of expansion, and its overall structure changed almost overnight (Kerr 1991). The federal government’s priorities during the Cold War period triggered a process of military research-based funding with universities and their research departments as major recipients (Kerr 1991, 2001; Geiger 1993). The aforementioned factors initiated an unprecedented process of the massification of higher education (Trow 1970, 1972). Departments expanded, new disciplinary specialisations emerged, and professional administration came to the forefront of universities’ strategic activities (Jencks and Riesman 2002).

The massification of higher education radically transformed the institutional landscape throughout the country. Over time, the system became more and more bureaucratic and impersonal to both faculty and students (Kerr 1991). Wider access allowed participation of a variety of student groups drawn from all parts of society (Trow 1970, 1972). For the first time in history, higher education had lost its associated notion of class privilege and, as a result, enabled underrepresented groups like ethnic minorities and members of lower social classes to access to the inner world of academe. The increasing variety of student groups manifested itself around a heterogeneity of ideals, values, lifestyles and expectations. In less than two decades, the university campus dramatically changed from a social space characterised by a rather homogeneous white Protestant elitist profile into something of a “melting pot”. In other words, the campus had become a more accurate representation of the wider world.

In the early 1960s, small groups of Black students staged “sit-in” demonstrations against racial segregation in the South. Higher education institutions located in the rest of the country followed suit, leading to student mobilisation on a national scale. This basically meant that the spirit of the civil rights movement (Eagles 1986) had now been brought onto the campus. The massification of higher education, both in terms of students and faculty, gave rise to the establishment of “mega campuses” across the country (Kerr 1991). By 1972, the University of California alone possessed nine separate campuses, over 100 000 students and an annual budget of US\$600 million, of which half came from public sources (Archer 1972: 253).

Heterogeneity among students and faculty led to a shaking up of the status quo, conflicts and power struggles amongst internal stakeholders. For example, a 1969 national survey revealed that 36% of active academic staff found military involvement “morally compromising” whereas 45% thought it a “legitimate activity” (Heineman 1993: 44). As far as student activism was concerned, generally speaking, those in the social sciences, humanities, law, fine arts and education tended to be rather supportive of it. In contrast, the more “realist” fields of the (natural) sciences, engineering and

agriculture were largely opposed to student protests. In ideological terms, so-called “liberal faculty” tended to be represented by sociologists, social workers, political scientists and psychologists. Economics, education and humanities faculty were amongst the “conservative” academic wing. Applied fields like business and engineering were “pro-war”, that is supported military conflict in Vietnam, largely due to their connections with the conservative political establishment (Heineman 1993).

By the mid-1960s, the profile of student activism at major state-run universities such as Michigan State, SUNY Buffalo, Kent and Penn State was typically that of white American males enrolled in an undergraduate programme in either the liberal arts or the social sciences (Heineman 1993: 91). Unsurprisingly, many student militants studied sociology, a discipline that, *inter alia* describes the effects of individuals’ social conditioning (Spender 1969: 105). As for minority groups, there were four distinct types of Black students attending American university and colleges during this period: revolutionaries, whose primary purpose was to use the university space for wider social revolution; radicals, who opposed what was perceived as a “racist” university system; militants, who wanted to play a constructive role at the university; and moderates, whose core purpose was to gain valuable marketable skills and knowledge (Trow 1970).

## **Berkeley: a campus in turmoil**

In 1873, the University of California (UC) moved to the Berkeley campus from the old private college of California at Oakland (founded in 1869<sup>6</sup>). The liberal model of a university followed by UC Berkeley combined three basic, somewhat contradictory, elements: utility, culture and research (May 1993). In practical terms, this meant: a democratic and utilitarian university for the people, that is through the rejection of tuition fees and acceptance of poor students; a stronghold of polite (liberal) traditional culture; and a centre for high-powered and specialised research studies. In order to compete with its eastern counterparts, like Harvard and the University of Chicago, UC Berkeley followed the German research-oriented model inspired by Wilhelm von Humboldt (see Turner 2001) and pioneered by Johns Hopkins University. When it came to faculty and student bodies, Berkeley was more liberal, for example, in hiring ethnic minorities and accepting women as equals. By 1900, females already constituted 46% of the student population (May 1993).

During the 1950s, the UC system evolved into a huge institution composed of several campuses, hundreds of research programmes and thousands of students from all strata of society. As a consequence, liberal education at undergraduate level was de-emphasised and the professionalisation of the academic administration was fostered. By the mid-1960s, Berkeley had become the crown jewel of UC President Clark Kerr’s “multiversity” idea, based on the notion that the university’s core objective was that of serving the government and directly contributing to economic progress (Kerr 2001). On campus, a strong emphasis was then put on government-sponsored research and close ties to federal agencies. Yet, largely as a side effect of its massive size (more than 25 000 students by 1964), both students and faculty became alienated

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6. Online at: <http://berkeley.edu/about/hist/foundations.shtml>, accessed on 4 November 2014.

from the huge campus bureaucracy, and dissatisfaction with the administration gradually increased.

In the late 1950s, President Kerr liberalised earlier restrictions allowing controversial discussions on campus. The new directives required non-political student groups to present balanced programmes, including the presentation of conflicting views or ideas, with a tenured faculty member as mediator. In 1959, Kerr's new directives stated: "It is essential the university facilities shall not be used in ways which will involve the university as an institution in the political, religious, and other controversial issues of the day" (Otten 1970: 161). Between 1955 and 1965, the annual number of political speakers on campus rose exponentially, from 7 to 188 (Otten 1970). More importantly, sponsorship of such speakers shifted from a few moderate on-campus groups in the 1950s to many militant groups in the 1960s. In other words, within a decade, the Berkeley campus became the epicentre of major social and political discourse.

During the first half of the 1960s, a series of national events disrupted normalcy both on and off campus. In November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. In the summer of 1964, there was bloodshed in Mississippi over civil rights, followed by riots in the Los Angeles Black ghetto in the summer of 1965. In February 1965, President Johnson ordered attacks on North Vietnam, triggering nationwide anti-war demonstrations at university campuses. In March 1965, a group of faculty members from renowned universities, disappointed with the Johnson Administration, published an article in *The New York Times* "arguing for peace", and decided to establish a university committee on "the problems of war and peace" (Rudy 1996: 155). This, in turn, propelled the rise of "teach-in" sessions (open social and political debates) at university campuses throughout the nation.

In the autumn of 1964, President Kerr banned political activists from the Berkeley campus, triggering the first *de facto* student revolt of the decade. Mario Savio, the leader of the Free Speech Movement, stated: "We want to be able to mount action on this [Berkeley] campus" (Rorabaugh 1989: 22). Earlier, he had expressed his frustration with the situation on campus while stating: "I am tired of reading history. Now I want to make it!" (ibid.: 46). Later that year, students occupied all four floors of a main building on campus. An enquiry revealed that these were mostly "liberal Democrats", non-active in politics or civil rights and primarily middle-class Jewish, Protestant and Catholic students enrolled in the humanities and the social sciences. Similarly a group of young scholars, mostly teaching assistants who were disappointed with the conditions at the university, formed mutual support groups and became reform-minded activists. In March 1969, while addressing the academic senate, Berkeley's Chancellor Roger Heyns stated:

If the academic community chooses to use the university as a base of political action ... then it has made the university an important piece of political real estate. And it will follow, inevitably, that others, outside the university, will then regard its control and management as important goals which they select (Archer 1972: 262).

The protests by both students and young faculty had their foundation in the type of authority exercised by the university administration itself. A report by the

Cox Commission<sup>7</sup> on the events at Columbia University in 1968 had concluded, “Authoritarian structures did not allow the ‘natural student leaders’ to participate in university governance” and that this “new generation of students is the best informed, most intelligent and idealistic the country has ever known” (Otten 1970: 4-5). At Berkeley, President Kerr’s bureaucratic machinery had isolated students, alienated faculty and created rivalries among members of the university administration. An empirical study on university authority at Berkeley spanning close to a century revealed six distinct historical phases, namely: authoritarian paternalism (1869 to 1899), with few rules and strict surveillance; paternalistic self-government (1899 to 1919) based on student solidarity and trust as the basis for control; a period of decline of student authority (1919 to 1930), marking the end of paternalistic self-government and the consequent breakdown of solidarity; paternalistic bureaucracy (1930 to 1945), based on institutional neutrality and formal regulations; the post-war years (1945 to 1958), with the administration in full control via the use of public relations; and lastly, the managerial bureaucracy (1958 to 1964), consolidated around Kerr’s legal-rational style of authority and marking the end of traditional paternalism (Otten 1970).

Interestingly, according to Otten (1970: 160), it was bureaucratisation (see Gornitzka et al. 1998) rather than liberalisation that caught the attention of student activists at Berkeley. The demands advanced by the Free Speech Movement pushed for more political speakers and for the right to organise demonstrations, both on and off campus. In retrospect, it could be argued that these student demands represented a considerable shift from discussion to action, thus transforming the university campus into a privileged social space (Bourdieu 1990) for organising wider political and social confrontations.

However, by the end of the decade, splits in the student movement and actions by university authorities (e.g. the expulsion of some radical leaders) drained the Free Speech Movement of most of its original vigour. Heterogeneity among stakeholders also meant that protesters’ agendas differed considerably on a wide range of issues – racial integration, the educational system, war, lifestyles, the environment, and so on. As the rebel generation gradually moved off campus and into society, its radicalism became diffused and diluted. According to Levitt, the student movement in North America died since “it both won and lost its struggle” (1984: 185). Notwithstanding this, important changes in the internal fabric of universities were accommodated, not least when it came to the role of students in matters pertaining to university governance (see Riesman 1980).

## **Student protests in Europe: the 1960s**

In Europe, student revolts erupted mainly as protests against the United States’ prosecution of the war in Vietnam. That said, various studies point to many deeply

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7. Organised at the request of the Executive Committee of the Faculty, the Cox Commission was given the mandate to establish a chronology of events leading up to and including the Columbia crisis, and to inquire into the underlying causes of those events. The Commission held 21 days of hearings during May 1968, heard testimony from 79 witnesses, and compiled 3 790 pages of transcript. More information is available at <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/1968>, accessed 24 September 2014.

endogenous social and political causes in each of the countries affected by the student protests of the late 1960s (Albert and Albert 1984; Singer 2002; Klimke and Scharloth 2008). Despite their different dynamics, their own “heroes” and specific political manifestos, what these student movements had in common was the fact that they erupted on campus. They were fuelled by hundreds of thousands of students who emerged as new political actors in the context of the expansion (massification) of higher education (Trow 1970, 1972, 2007).

The root causes of the unrest throughout Europe were manifold, reflecting a wide variety of student grievances, including taboos against visitors in students’ rooms and other restrictions as well as the lack of student participation in university governance. Writing about Italy, Mancini noted that “students are bound to be little more than guests” (1968: 428). In West Germany, too, students found themselves outside the governance system with literally no influence over internal university affairs. Events reached a peak in 1968, when student protests spread across the entire continent: including Italy, England, Spain, Poland, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and the former Yugoslavia (Klimke and Scharloth 2008). For the most part, European students rebelled against the oppressive nature of industrial society and the establishment of an “imperialistic state” (Hilwig 1998) that was, *inter alia* seen to violate human rights (Merritt 1969).

Interpreting student unrest across France during this period, Walsh (1968: 521) contends that students perceived “the university increasingly becoming merely a cog in a capitalist power structure aimed at maximising profits”. For students belonging to the baby boomer generation of the post-Second World War period, particularly those located in cosmopolitan urban areas like Paris, West Berlin or Rome, universities had become a symbol of the authoritarian state and the paternalistic society so prevalent in the late 1940s and 1950s, imposing strict rules and regulations as a means of enhancing social control. In contrast to their parents, this new generation of students celebrated individual freedom, liberty and political pluralism.

In West Germany universities, which have traditionally been rather autonomous institutions compared to their continental counterparts (see Nybom 2003), gradually lost their democratic dimension with students being stripped of powers of decision making. For example, at the Free University of Berlin (established in 1948), students, faculty members and city officials had traditionally shared institutional authority under what was termed the “Berlin Model” (Merritt 1969).

Student rebellion against university structures represented a revolt against the state and society, as pointed out by Mancini in referring to events in Italy: “The [student] Movement aims at waging a revolution, an all-out revolution; it aims at overthrowing not only the university system, but, via the university or directly, the economic and political system of the nation as such” (1968: 429). Similar accounts reveal that this was also the case in other European countries such as West Germany and France (Klimke and Scharloth 2008).

Notwithstanding their actions and broad social goals, students across Europe found little support outside university campuses. Their radicalism and bold demands for a more democratic society and a less imperialistic political system were largely ignored by broader society, which had enjoyed continued economic growth since the late 1940s. In

countries like West Germany and France students were politically isolated, and received little support from trade unions which were already deeply rooted within the political establishment (Rootes 2007: 4866). In fact the opposite occurred, with many trade union leaders joining marches demonstrating their support for the government against student protests. In France communists, who belonged to the most radical political groups, provided support to Charles de Gaulle's government (1959 to 1969) to combat student unrest and blocked any alliances between students and workers, claiming that all sorts of conflicts needed to be resolved in parliament (Vincent 1969: 39-46). In some countries, like Italy, students did receive direct support from workers (unions), culminating in the establishment of a wide "anti-imperialistic coalition". It should be noted that one of the unintended outcomes of the student unrest of the late 1960s was the formation of clandestine organisations (e.g. in Italy and West Germany) that grew out of the student movements and adopted increasingly radical forms of action, including kidnapping and/or murdering political opponents (della Porta and Diani 2006: 151).

In central and eastern Europe, for example in Czechoslovakia (Williams 1997) and Poland (Osęka 2008), students were rather sceptical of their Western counterparts and their respective social agendas. For many living in the Soviet bloc, Western demands seemed artificial, insignificant and naïve in comparison to the plight of students in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia. For central and eastern European students actively engaged in fighting repressive communist regimes, the pictures of their Western counterparts with images of Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and Karl Marx must have seemed odd, to say the least.

Marwick (1998) contends that student protests behind the Iron Curtain were largely independent social developments (in terms of values, ideas and political aims), whereas the revolts by their Western counterparts were united by a single goal, namely, to bring an end to capitalism and the imperialistic state. Between West and East, there were movements such as those promoted by students in the former Yugoslavia who renamed the University of Belgrade "the Red University of Karl Marx", unveiling banners appealing for the end of the "Red Bourgeoisie" (Zilnik 2009: 181).

All in all, the picture one gets of Europe's student protests in the late 1960s is a rather complex one, and it should not be oversimplified to the cliché of a polarised continent divided between East and West. Instead, we are inclined to agree with scholars who shed light on the similarities between student protests across Europe while noting that: "many of the [student] dissenters in eastern and western Europe shared a common hope that a third way might be created between communism and capitalism" (Fink et al. 1998: 23).

## Recent events from across Europe

Since the epic revolts of the late 1960s, students across Europe have continued to be actively engaged in social and political issues (Altbach 2006). During the 1970s, they were at the forefront of fights against authoritarian regimes in Portugal (1974), Greece (1974) and Spain (1975). In the early 1990s, students demonstrated on British streets against implementation of a poll tax. Students were heavily engaged in the democratic revolutions (late 1980s) in central and eastern Europe, suggesting that, as a political constituency, students are an integral element of what some term street politics (Bayat 1997: 15), defined as a set of conflicts (and their social implications)

between a part of the populace and the authorities, shaped and expressed episodically in the physical and social space of the streets.

Generally speaking, European students have been found to be compassionate and socially engaged protesters, yet they also tend to attract the attention of radical political movements (Altbach 2006). More recently, they have been active participants in numerous actions against education-related reforms in various countries: in Italy (2005), around school and college reforms; in Spain (2008) around the Bologna Process; in Austria (2011) and Germany (2003), against budget cuts in public education; in Denmark (2005) against reforms prohibiting collective college exams; in Greece (2006) against the new law of higher education; and in France (2007) as a result of the law on the autonomy of universities (Péresse).

Students have protested to express their dissatisfaction against reforms that move in the direction of “new managerialism” or New Public Management (Christensen and Laegreid 2013). Some scholars (see Fernández 2014) conceive of student protests in the 21st century as a new wave of movements comparable with the student revolts that took place in the late 1960s, with some caveats. In 1968, the student movement revolted against the emergence of the “mass-university” (Trow 1970), whereas more recent protests have tended to oppose the rise of the “corporate university” (Allen 2002). That said, the more recent student protests across Europe have drawn their inspiration and energy from the myths surrounding May 1968, thus revealing their wish to maintain a historical connection.

A significant difference between the two protest waves pertains to the fact that the most recent events, largely associated with the acute socio-economic crisis facing Europe and many other parts of the world, have largely taken place outside university campuses and have only been weakly connected to the change dynamics within universities per se (see Maassen 2009; Pinheiro and Stensaker 2013). Further, although student organisations have been a part of recent social unrest, the more recent wave of protests is not student-led as such. There are, however, a few exceptions worth mentioning: protests against the new law on higher education in both France and Greece in 2007; opposition to raising tuition fees in the UK and the Republic of Ireland in 2011; and demonstrations against cuts in public spending on education in a number of countries across Europe. However, in our view, these relatively disconnected actions are part and parcel of national party politics attempting to address specific issues related to higher education rather than student-led movements aimed at initiating wider societal change or institutional reform, as was the case in the 1960s.

By far, the largest and most spectacular recent wave of protests occurred in 2011: “the Icelandic Revolution”, the Portuguese “Geração à Rasca” (“generation in trouble”), the Spanish “Indignados” (“outraged”), in addition to student protests in Greece, were all directly linked to the financial woes facing their respective countries. In an attempt to couple more recent developments with those of the late 1980s (central and eastern Europe) as well as 1968, John Harris, a columnist with *The Guardian*, raised the following question: “Is 2011 a year that will change the world?” Similar remarks were advanced by Rachman in *The Financial Times* (2011), linking developments in the late 1960s, 1990 and 2011, including the role of students in what has become known as the “Arab Spring” (see Castells 2013a), in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen.

A large number of recent social protesters across Europe have been university students (including young graduates), who are not only unhappy with austerity measures but also with the fact that they are unable to enter local labour markets. A recent analysis of unemployment rates across Europe (Eurostat 2013) reveals that the above constituencies have strong reasons to protest, particularly in southern Europe. In 2012, the unemployment rate among those under 25 reached 55.3% in Greece, 53.2% in Spain, 37% in Portugal and 35.3% in Italy.

## **Discussion and conclusion: the role of students and the university as a social space**

Bourdieu's analysis of the events of 1968 in Europe led him to conclude that "[t]he places of the greatest rebellions are those in which the gap between statutory aspirations linked to high social origin and educational success is at the maximum" (1990: 45). Interestingly, this seems to be a finding coherent with our analysis of the events during the 1960s in North America as well, with the most violent and radical demonstrations occurring at major, even prestigious, higher educational institutions. In a similar vein, and in tandem with Bourdieu's thesis, our own analysis of the student and faculty profiles composing the bulk of the movement shows that the latter was characterised by, in the case of students, members of the middle class (Catholic, Jewish and Protestant) as well as sympathisers of the civil rights movement, including most Black and other ethnic minorities. As for faculty, they tended to be young academics from the liberal arts and the social sciences.

Could it be that, in line with Bourdieu's analysis of the European student protests (in 1968), the North American events of the 1960s were a direct function of the fact that both young students and faculty realised that the new cultural/educational capital acquired would not necessarily guarantee social mobility and economic success, that is access to economic capital? If correct, this hypothesis is paramount in our understanding of the student rebellions of the 1960s overall, to the extent that they exposed a set of underlying (macro- and meso-level) structures within the educational system and society as a whole, related to inequality of opportunities and the defence of privileges by established elite groups.

Hence, more than a mere power struggle among the different stakeholders (liberal fields v. applied fields; senior faculty v. junior faculty; elite students v. mass students; students and faculty v. administration; Blacks v. whites; liberals v. conservatives, etc.), the student movements of the 1960s may well have symbolised a "movement of privilege, against privilege, for privilege" (Levitt 1984: 185), at a historical time when the character of privilege itself was changing in society as a whole. Consequently, it was after this period that the university campus emerged as the privileged social space where the so-called "new working-classes" would emerge (Levitt 1984: 174). This, as the university changed its role from provider of higher, elitist culture and refined character towards becoming the indisputable, monopolistic trainer and certifier for the middle class (Trow 1970, 1972, 2007).

That said, despite the similarities between the student protests in the late 1960s in North America and Europe and more recent events in Europe, we nevertheless consider them rather distinct phenomena, partly since both are by-products of their times.

The 1960s protests were about big ideas, principles and rebellion against society and the state apparatus (e.g. increasing bureaucratisation), with the university as an institution (Olsen 2007; Pinheiro et al. 2012) that was representative of citizens' increasing social alienation. Although for the most part these early movements did not succeed in overthrowing the state as a legitimate socio-political actor, they nonetheless gave rise to profound social changes both in Western societies (see Marwick 1998) as well as in the internal fabric of universities, for example as regards internal governance (de Boer and Stensaker 2007). In contrast, the more recent protests have focused on very specific issues associated with the current economic situation and the current and future personal aspirations of students and graduates, including access to well-paid jobs, rather than on grand ideas or social projects. In addition, contrary to what was the case in the 1960s, more recent protests, where students were but one of the many constituencies involved, were centred in/around the central squares in the capital cities of Europe instead of the immediate vicinity of the university campus, which has gradually lost its symbolic role (Bourdieu 1989) as a privileged social space for initiating wider societal reforms.

One possible explanation for this could be related to the rise of the "network society" (Castells 2010) on the one hand, and the importance attributed to social media in the mobilisation of various types of social activities (Castells 2013a), including student protests (Maireder and Schwarzenegger 2011; Theocharis 2012), on the other. In other words, as a social space (and symbolic place), the university campus has gradually been replaced by a ubiquitous "networked space" (Castells 2013a) for autonomous communications that transcend time and space barriers: "a public space, a space for deliberation which ultimately becomes a political space, a space for sovereign assemblies to meet and to recover their rights of representation" (Castells 2013a: 11). In short, in the early 21st century and in contrast to the previous (1960s) era, the university campus has ceased being the "space of spaces" (Castells 2013b) for the mobilisation and organisation of wider social protests.

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## Chapter 3

# Student activism in times of individualisation: the case of Slovenia

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*Mirjana Ule*

### **Abstract**

The chapter compares contemporary student protests of the decade from 2000 to 2010 with the student uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s, with special emphasis on the changes in the countries in transition, particularly in Slovenia. The main thesis developed in the chapter is that today, students' social criticism is not only expressed differently, but also evaluated differently in society, especially due to the changed relations between society and youth. In Slovenia the position of young people has transformed from that of a symbolic representative of societal change in socialist times to an ordinary age group in contemporary times, with no particular societal importance – it has even been reduced to a marginal group. Since the late 1990s, students in the European Union (EU) and in Slovenia have focused not on bringing about change in society but on improving their own position in society and in universities. We believe that the main reasons for this are the weakened position of youth in modern societies and the new conditions of growing up, which foster the disengagement of young people from the public space and favour one's private space.

**Keywords:** student movements; post-adolescence; life course; transition; value orientations

## Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed a number of student protests in many European countries, for example in Italy, Austria, Germany, France, Spain, Croatia, Finland, the United Kingdom and Greece. Slovenia has also been affected, with students demonstrating against the government's intended introduction of tuition fees. In all countries, students have mostly protested against what they see as the deterioration of their standards, the reduced accessibility of studies, particular flaws of the Bologna reforms, and neoliberal education reforms. Even when they have protested for more general reasons, such as austerity cuts, neoliberal capitalism, rising inequality in society and the demise of the welfare state, it has not triggered broader public engagement, unlike the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s or the "new social movements" of the 1980s. What is common to all recent student protests in Europe is that young protesters have mostly expressed a growing distrust of leaders and blame politicians for their having worse life prospects than their parents, rather than voicing any elaborate critical view of society (Mayers 2012). Moreover, these protests have neither attracted a suitable specific scientific analysis nor triggered any echoing political debates or social changes (Bürne 2009).

The main thesis developed in this chapter is that today students' social criticism is not only expressed differently, but also evaluated differently in society, especially due to the different relations between society and students. It seems that the relations between students' inventiveness and the readiness of civil society and the public in Europe to consider their initiatives were most favourable in the 1960s and 1970s.

All of Europe has been facing truly radical changes in the life trajectories of individuals and in the transitions from youth to adulthood. The notion of "youth" has been extended, and the patterns of transitions to adulthood have become more plural and are no longer predictable. Increasing numbers of young people, especially students, pursue the kinds of life patterns that can be described as "choice biographies" (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). But this so-called reflexive modernity also brings about a "manufactured uncertainty": individualisation is not a free choice but a compulsion to construct one's own biography under the conditions of a welfare state, with one's own varied resources. The prolongation of youth cannot be attributed only to the prolongation of education or to an "egoistic choice of free lifestyles"; in fact, a majority of young people are not able to achieve "adulthood indicators", such as a regular job or independent housing, due to structural reasons. Young people have become a "precarious workforce" everywhere in Europe.

Society enables the massive enrolment of students in tertiary education in part to relieve the pressure on the labour market. The weakening of the socio-political relevance of youth diminishes the political will of students to engage in broader socio-political aims and "redirects" their will to engage in "particularist" protests and movements. Some of the new conditions of growing up in modern societies are the prolongation of youth and education into one's late 30s, the growth of the cultural and personal autonomy of youth, and the rise of semi-autonomous private worlds of youth (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). These conditions motivate students to disengage from the public space and favour private space, and are consistent with other, individualised forms of politics, for example with demonstrations, strikes,

expressing opinions on the Internet and social media, signing petitions, single-issue protest movements, but not so much with traditional politics and broader political movements. Individualised forms of political engagement are most popular among students in particular (European Commission 2012).

We believe that, consequently, students have reconciled with their position of prolonged youth and their life situation and no longer relate their own integration into “adult society” with the need to make more radical changes in the dominant culture and social order. It seems that students assess their own social power and influence as too weak to achieve any significant social changes, which is why they prefer to accept the position of prolonged youth (Inglehart and Welzel 2008). Even if students engage in more critical social movements they risk being marginalised from the electoral politics of established political parties and also from the majority of other young people, who remain passive or cannot follow them because of their lack of knowledge and education (Sloan 2014).

### **“Let’s be realists, let’s demand the impossible”**

The ideal of growth and progress was one of the fundamental conceptual notions in the post-war decades in Europe, particularly in the ideological structures of youth. Ideologies of progress and radical social change were a crucial factor in the social construction of youth; they were homogenising youth in a virtual embodiment of a societal future. This kind of positioning of young people was especially characteristic of the socialist systems of the former Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, after the Second World War. Civil society had opened up to students’ initiatives so the values and ideals of student movements and subcultures were able to become the central motive of civil society movements and initiatives.

Researchers of the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s have explained the massiveness and universality of these movements with the unconscious reaction of young people to the early stages of post-industrial or late modern society (Zinnecker 1982; Baacke and Ferchoff 1993). It was these very student movements that were to foretell the beginnings of the information society or the “knowledge society”, where knowledge, innovation, information and communication are the key strategic developmental factors rather than mass industrial production and consumption (Keniston 1971; Braungart and Braungart 1989; Ziehe, 1991). These movements were also announcing that the central contradictions in modern societies would emerge in the areas of developing knowledge, education and communication. One such contradiction is the difference between the instrumental, value-neutral use of knowledge and its socially responsible use. However, the contradiction between students’ experiences, knowledge and social reality alone would not suffice to explain the emergence of student movements in the 1960s and 1970s; it was the appearance of more radical student activist groups that acted as the catalyst for student criticism and protests.

The classic studies on the causes of the radicalisation of (American) students at the end of the 1960s were carried out by Kenneth Keniston (1968, 1971). In his opinion, the origins of student radicalism lay in small radical groups, while their radicalism

was the outcome of a special kind of socialisation and biographical development.<sup>8</sup> Keniston explained this radicalisation with a theory on post-adolescence as a new life period which arises after the “stormy” period of youth and before adulthood. He contended that post-adolescence was a new period of intensive personal and identity crisis following the primary identity crisis of adolescence. It is experienced especially by those young people who prolong their education into their 20s and thus find themselves in a special educational moratorium (Keniston 1972). The identity crisis of post-adolescents chiefly stems from the failure of young people to identify themselves with adult society and their future roles in it. Namely, during post-adolescence there is a more conscious and critical reflection on one’s own social roles as well as on society as a whole. Post-adolescents live through a specific life period of (prolonged) youth with its own lifestyle and practices, which compete with the existing adult lifestyle.

Keniston highlighted several factors influencing the formation of a post-adolescent lifestyle: the psycho-social factors of growing up, the cultural climate at universities, the life and value orientations in students’ communities, and favourable social circumstances for the emergence and spreading of social movements (Keniston 1968). A distinct characteristic of young radicals was that they had developed a special social sensibility from early childhood and then transferred it to political activity. They mostly came from middle-class, liberally oriented and intellectual families. The majority of student protesters did not challenge the values and life ideals of their parents because they shared common liberal principles and values. At most, they protested against the failure to realise these values and principles and against the hypocrisy of everyday life (Rosenmayr 1976: 215).

Other analysts of student protests also found causes in the specifics of the growing up of the student population (Habermas 1973). As young people, students are socially marginalised, yet within this marginalised social group, they are still privileged. According to this interpretation, it was precisely this very paradoxical connection of marginality and privilege that triggered the student uprisings and protests all over the world. Namely, their radicalism derived from a social and socialisation privilege which had subjectively transformed itself into a protest against rigorous values, lifestyles and taboos. Due to quite favourable life experiences that allowed the students more personal independence and freedom, more spontaneity, more risks and innovations, they doubted the sense and directions of the development of industrial society. However, in the view of Herbert Marcuse, an important analyst and ideologist of the student movement in Europe, the new sensibility of the students

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8. The student radicalism of the late 1960s had its beginnings in the US, in the so-called Vietnam Summer. In the summer of 1967 a large group of students from UC Berkeley gathered to organise a project of resistance to the American intervention in Vietnam. Those who started the project were named the New Left, while those who supported the project later were named the New Radicals. This group was characterised by its strong opposition to the war in Vietnam, and also by its striving for other changes in the prevailing values, institutions and politics of the US and the wider world. As a respected researcher and social scientist, Keniston was invited to join the project. It stimulated him to continue researching the radicalisation of students, including very important case studies of the most radical students in the movement, which were published in the oft-cited book *Young radicals* (Keniston 1968).

was not an entirely “psychological” phenomenon. Among student youth, social changes simply became a personal need, causing them to “intervene between the political practice of changing the world and the desire to reach personal freedom” (Marcuse 1969: 61).

The social and cultural climate in university institutions was also an important factor in the development of student radicalism. For the university happenings and events, it was very important to have a proper protest subculture active enough to develop student leaders, programmes and demonstrations (Keniston 1971). These circumstances appeared precisely in the most reputable universities and colleges. This suggests that the quality of the academic institutions intentionally or unintentionally promoted the development of the student movement. It was also necessary that several professors who identified themselves with the ideas of radical students participated in the movement. The result was then that the universities themselves were radicalised, and not just the students. Moreover, the response and attention of the public was crucial – students need public attention, especially from the media. At the same time, students supported the protests of other social classes against the rising “one-dimensional consumer world” (Marcuse 1969). Thus, especially characteristic of the student protests of the late 1960s was the fact that the students did not try to achieve a better life only for themselves. They were not only striving for their own positions, but were pointing out critical issues facing all of society. Instead of just focusing on secondary goals that only concerned changes in their own position (for instance, the conditions of studying), students placed political goals at the forefront.

Nevertheless, the student uprisings of the 1960s and early 1970s were not political protests in the traditional sense. They had no clear political goals, were not party bound, and were not led by formal organisations of political activists. They were among the first world civil society movements since they not only brought into public consciousness several libertarian and civil components and tendencies but also some fully individual, psychological needs such as sensual and emotional expression; the power of imagination and fantasy; the need for self-realisation, freedom and creativity; individualism as a lifestyle; and peace. At the same time, the student movements triggered whole new sets of social needs which eventually became all the more important. Even today, different civil and social movements are still bound to these social needs, such as ecology, peace and feminism. Some of the slogans of the movements of the time, such as “The private is political” or “Long live the creative imagination”, show that knowledge of society and creativity was not a goal to be reached but a simple fact, and stood for freedoms that had to be realised in modern society. That is why “Let’s be realists, let’s demand the impossible” was the only proper pledge of these movements.

A significant characteristic of the student culture of the 1960s and 1970s was the irrepressible need for the universalisation of the principles, values and life goals for which the protesters were striving. At the forefront of student universalism were human rights, equal opportunities, the rule of law, social equality, solidarity with oppressed and marginalised social groups and nations, non-violence, and resistance to consumerism. In contrast to most interpretations that understand this pledge as a sign of the fundamental utopianism of the young, I believe that the demands of the

students were realistic as they were already anticipating the dangers of the global social changes on the horizon.

## The student movements in Slovenia in the 1960s and 1970s

The student movements of the 1960s and 1970s were the first to connect students across the world. They were not only a significant social phenomenon in the West but also appeared and played an important role in central and eastern Europe, in the former socialist societies, as well as in countries of the so-called Third World. Students in eastern Europe generally called for civil society rights and the abolition of the privileges of the *nomenklatura*. In Czechoslovakia, they were a prelude to the Prague Spring. In Poland, they led to the removal of the then leader Gomułka and to increasing liberalisation of the regime. Later, Polish students together with the trade union movement *Solidarność* established strong underground independent civil society groups which led to the collapse of the regime at the end of the 1980s.

The story of youth in Slovenia was part of the common frame of Yugoslavia until the 1990s. Yugoslavia was writing a story which was meant to be socialist, but nevertheless different from other real-socialist stories (Ule and Renner 1998). This diversity can be seen in a relative openness to the world and in a greater autonomy of the individual in the system. The role of young people in post-war Yugoslavian society was clearly integrative. Young people were motivated to identify with the system by the argument that it was precisely through their intensive co-operation in the building of the socialist society that they would create a better future for themselves. Since Yugoslav society was developing very rapidly economically, and young people were participating in this swift advancement (in terms of the possibilities of education, employment and an improved material standard), the great majority of them had identified themselves with the social system and its values and aims (Ule 1988). The political public was fascinated by its young people, whose clearly positive image was compared to the negative perceptions of youth in the West.

This process took place under particular pressure from ideological and political structures that had taken control of all spheres of work and the behaviour of young people. However, from the 1960s onwards, the speeches of politicians as well as texts and comments in the media began to warn against the various “non-socialist”, “bourgeois” habits of some young people. Students were considered particularly suspicious, as they had always been the most resistant to the authorities and its ideologies. Political speeches often addressed university students separately from other sections of the younger generations, especially from the exemplary working-class youth. The authorities warned the general public that students were becoming alienated from society and from the Communist Party, that they were beginning to accept negative influences from the West, and that criminal immorality was appearing among them. Young people, for the first time, became a source of worry in Yugoslavia. Conflict between young people (university students) and society had intensified by the end of the 1960s and culminated in the student movements. These movements appeared at approximately the same time as in other parts of the world and were the first mass expression of the crisis of Yugoslav socialist society. Students

demanded greater liberalisation of the system, freedom of speech and media, and more decentralisation of economic and political power.

In Slovenia this was a period of “doing away” with “liberalism”, the introduction of purges in political circles and among intellectuals at the universities, the imposition of Marxism and the ideology of self-management in the education system, and reforming education in the sense of instrumentally guided education. A few changes at faculties and universities were also introduced, which were seemingly in favour of the students. For instance, in the universities in Slovenia and other republics of the former Yugoslavia, a tripartite composition of faculty and university bodies was introduced, with representatives of university staff, students and external (mostly political) representatives. Student representatives thus at least officially had the same status as professors and political representatives, but in fact the autonomy of universities actually diminished because the sphere of politics controlled the universities through its representatives.

From the early 1970s, student protests were suppressed or came to an end everywhere in the world. In Slovenia as well as in the whole of the former Yugoslavia, political repression and renewed ideological pressures on students increased. The independent student organisation was abolished and affiliated to the youth organisation, which had always been faithful to the Communist Party. At the beginning, this merger proved frustrating, especially for the students. In the 1980s, however, it proved beneficial for the development of new social movements and civil society, particularly in Slovenia. The youth organisation was strengthened by personnel who had passed through the “school” of student movements and worked in student media. Thus, in the 1980s a sensible and diverse youth scene formed in Slovenia, representing a significant part of an independent political public. It was also an initiator of alternative social movements and civil society initiatives. In the 1980s, through their different, provocative political practice, the new social movements warned about the apparent politicisation of life in Slovenia and were important actors in the early years of the transition and the shift to a pluralist society.

However, as the results of an extensive survey carried out in 1986<sup>9</sup> on a sample of 6 849 young people (Aleksić and Vrcan 1986) showed, at that time there were important differences among young people across the republics of the former Yugoslavia. The results revealed significant differences among Yugoslav youth that did not originate in social differences, as might have been expected, but which were linked primarily to the republic affiliation of the respondents. The survey showed not only differences in positions towards the system, but also differences in value and cultural orientations across Yugoslav republics and provinces. A factor analysis of value orientations on the scales of individualism, collectivism and traditionalism showed that in Slovenia

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9. In 1986 we carried out a pan-Yugoslav youth survey named “The situation, consciousness and behaviour of the young generation in Yugoslavia” (N = 6 840 questionnaires). The idea originated from the leadership of the Yugoslav youth organisation. The research team was constituted of researchers from the whole of Yugoslavia; the head of the research team was Professor Srdjan Vrcan from the University of Zagreb. The research was also supported by some leading (more liberal) politicians in the Yugoslav political leadership. Without their support, this research would not have been possible.

and Croatia the prevailing values were related to individualism, while in Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina the prevailing values were related to collectivism and traditionalism (ibid.: 72).

The results of this survey therefore signalled that many differences and contradictions existed in the social and political system of Yugoslavia. While on the one hand young people in the less developed areas of Yugoslavia and those living outside of major urban centres still rather blindly trusted the traditional patterns of development, on the other hand, in Slovenia and in other developed urban centres of Yugoslavia, there was already an emerging model of reflexive modernisation that was based on civil society and the new social movements. Research had drawn attention to how these differences were generated in the young generation, and anticipated the later collapse of the system. In Slovenia it was young people who had been the initiators and leaders of the societal changes and also the most distinctive representatives of these changes. Perhaps this role was even more significant for the break with the communistic one-party system than the actual political power of young people.

### **The transformation of student activism in times of dominating neoliberal policies**

The student movements at the end of the 1960s and the subsequent waves of “new social movements” in the 1970s and 1980s had focused the attention of the public on the students. In the media and in the professional community an expectation developed that students were a particular kind of political elite who could, through their protest movements, jump over the obstacles on the path to social change. These public expectations were hindering a realistic assessment of students’ participation in society. As with every other social achievement, the socio-cultural radicalisation of the student population was not a self-evident event. It was the result of complex historical events and social conflicts as well as the persistent and arduous efforts of individuals and groups.

Students as a social group have gained a lot from the modern welfare state: more accessible tertiary education that has spread further to all social classes; the prolonging of the adolescent moratorium; the formation of a student culture and media; public sympathy; and the recognition of students as actors of social change (Beck 1997). This relationship between students and society lasted into the “golden times” of the economic upswing and almost full employment. Yet the situation has changed in the last two decades, with economic growth turning into economic crisis. The fact is that the promises of neoliberal economists and politicians about continuous development and progress have proven to be erroneous, and this error is felt especially by young people (Arnett 2007; Côté 2007).

The situation students face today mainly results from two societal changes that significantly affect young people’s position in society: the prolongation of youth and young people’s economic and social dependence on their families on the one hand and, on the other, the social changes in late modernity that are modifying the life courses and life chances of young people who are in the transition to adulthood. Today, it is already more or less evident that the principal reason for the large increase in the share of young people continuing their education at university level is not

the generosity of state policies towards the young or the latter's strategic choices. University enrolment reduces early pressure from young people on the labour market while soothing potential social unrest due to the lack of employment opportunities available to them. Already during the economic boom in the second half of the 20th century, young people with university degrees and low initial incomes represented a cheap, skilled labour force to capital owners (Griffin 1993). Today, in times of economic crisis, the transition to employment is even more difficult and strained.

Along with the prolongation of education, the period of young people's dependence on their families has also been extended. Prolonged dependence on parents, which is not just of a material nature, is a process visible throughout Europe, with only regional differences being substantial (Du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm 2006). This process is especially distinctive in Slovenia. As recent data from research of the student population in Slovenia show, during tertiary education almost half of students (44%) live at home with their families (Ule, Tivadar and Živoder 2011). Moreover, a comparison with EUROSTUDENT research (Orr, Schnitzer and Frackmann 2008) reveals that a greater percentage of students in Slovenia live with their parents than the average across Europe. At least in Slovenia, students appear to have established a sort of pact with their parents allowing them to stay at home so long as they are students.

As Eurostat data show, living with the family may be less satisfactory or desirable for European students in the EU, but it is at the same time more affordable (ibid.). Living with the family of origin prolongs direct dependence on the parents and family, not only in a material sense, but also in a psycho-social sense. This makes the development of independent student social consciousness more difficult. It also means that many students have to adapt their choice of study and university accordingly. Meanwhile, the state is relieved of the responsibility to care for students, and since families have very different social, cultural and economic capital available, the basic inequality of students comes to the fore. Students from more disadvantaged families have to enter the student labour market. According to EUROSTUDENT data from 2007, 65% of students in Slovenia had at least occasionally worked in the student labour market (Ule, Tivadar and Živoder 2011). Many students are faced with prolonged dependence on their families of origin, uncertain part-time work, the institutionalisation of lower incomes and a substantial increase in the costs that allow at least a reasonable degree of independence (Côté 2002).

Although it is true that the general educational level of young people has gone up, when one considers the increased demands for a more qualified labour force, it is youth from the middle and upper classes, who enrol in more prestigious schools, that have again gained the most. This last is worth noting in the light of the middle and upper classes' "investment decision" to spend on their children's education (Voigt 2007).

## **Young people in Slovenia in times of transition**

Since the political twist in the 1990s, which in Slovenia was considerably less dramatic than that in other republics in the former Yugoslavia, the new nation has established a socio-economic system characterised by a neoliberal economy and a weakened welfare state. This system does not require any particular symbolic representation

for its own legitimacy, nor social movements to represent the political will of the people. Above all, there is no such need for any ideologies to be expressed through young people. Instead, the notion of ideology has been supplanted by capital, profit, national homogenisation, religion and family. Therefore, the hypothetical inherent link between youth and progress has been replaced with another, equally hypothetical inherent link, this time between youth and the individualisation of life. This link is initiating young people into the new privacy of the globalised consumer society. The autonomy of young people has been considerably reduced by the narrowing of the welfare state, which has transferred the majority of the costs for the social reproduction of youth from the state back to the family. Young people are marginalised in the labour market, excluded from the essential flows of adult society and consequently, deprived of the origins of power. Without economic or political representatives, young people have only few rights, privileges and accordingly, a lower social status. Young people are no longer a crucial voice or an important representative of society, but an ordinary age group with no particular or clear social role.

Changes in social status and positions provoke different reactions among young people; among these adaptations we can clearly discern also changes of life and value orientations. The results of diverse youth studies after 1990 in Slovenia show that for young people, the shaping of everyday life and value systems has been a part of their daily search for a balance amid their personal wishes and expectations on the one hand, and social demands and options on the other (Ule and Renner 1998). Yet the balance between expectations and demands on one side and individuals' competences or capacities for action on the other is conditional and exposed to a great many risks. For many, the conventional signs of success (e.g. income, career, status) fall short of their hunger for a "fulfilling life" and an increasing need to "find their own way" and to freely shape their personality.

An overview of value orientations indicates that the most important values for young people in Slovenia today are expressive values, such as true friendship, family life, peace in the world, freedom of acting and thinking, protection of nature, and those associated with the world of beauty and art. Less important are "material-career values", such as material goods, money, power and influence. It is very interesting to note that the values we typically assign to youth, such as an exciting life, creativity, originality and imagination, are less important too (Ule and Živoder 2012).

Moreover, recent studies of youth in Slovenia also show that the scope and weight of the problems young people are facing are increasing, as are the risks associated with attempts to solve these problems (Ule 2010). While young people in the 1986 survey were still highlighting problems related to civil rights and liberties, such as "moral crises and lack of ideals" (16% of respondents thought this was very important), "insufficient concern by society for youth" (14% of respondents strongly agreed), "lack of freedom of speech and thought" (11% of respondents strongly agreed), students in the earliest studies in the 1990s started to highlight largely social and economic problems (ibid.). Research on the social and economic situation of students in Slovenia in 2008 reveals similar trends: 69.4% of respondents stated they expected to encounter problems when starting employment (Ule, Tivadar and Živoder 2011).

Most young people respond to the new circumstances of contemporary society with increased effort and a continued search for opportunities along with an exploration of risks – not with protests or by demonstrating a rejection of society as it stands. Young people's extensive resistance to the intrusions of society into their individual lives is manifested in their negative or passive attitudes to politics. In Europe generally, and especially in the transition countries, young people are keeping a distance from traditional political activity. Political parties barely attract new members. Contemporary civil society initiatives and movements are facing similar problems. Some researchers explain this trend through the effects of the particular media and Internet culture in which the young are growing up (Mizen 2004). But this is hardly a sufficient explanation. And yet young people do show interest in at least some topics like social justice, environmental protection and the problems of marginal groups (Ule 2010). At the same time, politicians depend and count on the votes of older generations, and this leads to an even deeper rupture between young people and formal politics.

Research on youth in the 1980s in the former Yugoslavia already indicated the sceptical attitude of youth towards the public, and this was especially true of Slovenia. In those times, scepticism was accompanied by a readiness to engage in informal, alternative forms of political action, civil initiatives, etc. However, in the transition period in Slovenia students have turned away from any kind of politics as a collective activity. They have simply been trying to stay "out". It is interesting that in a study entitled "Jugend 2006" youth researchers in Germany found that youth minorities of the radical left and right still exist, but more than by ideology they are marked by the expression of positive or negative emotions, prejudices and by the tendency to belong to "powerful" groups that know how to withstand state institutions (Hurrelmann and Matthias 2006).

The majority response of the young to their hyper-complex life situation is, as youth research throughout Europe shows, an implosion into privacy and a policy of reducing risks in life choices and decisions (Brannen et al. 2002; Helve and Evans 2013). This is evident also from the responses of young people in Slovenia to the question of whom they trust and to what extent. The most trustworthy person, for a student, is his or her mother (Ule and Živoder 2012). Thus, the most conspicuous of the recent changes is the shift of young people's attention to everyday life and privacy, and their return to the family. This could be called a domestication of youth, and it has a twofold significance: one is the return of young people from the public sphere to the private, and the other is the obstruction of the critical and alternative tendencies of young people under the auspices of the "home".

Changed attitudes to the public and the private represent a common cultural phenomenon distinctive of all modern youth. As competition intensifies for enrolment in (prestigious) schools and (appropriate) employment, emotional family support and family social networks are becoming decisive. While youth in the 1970s and 1980s rejected this imaginary as a space of control and coercion, today young people are embracing it. The difference is that the young have reached a sort of contractual relationship with their parents whereby they can realise their aspirations for social promotion without bigger familial resistance. Parents, on the other hand, have to protect and support their children long after they have reached psycho-social adulthood.

Something similar is true of schools and universities where silent contractual relations are being established between the institutions and the young people who enter them. The consent for such relations is disciplining young people considerably more than any pedagogical or institutional authority or coercion. Here the role of the silent, hidden curriculum is key in initiating the young into the world of adults – the everyday battle to acquire and maintain jobs and career achievements through the mechanisms of selection, competition, productivity pressures and the morality of self-responsibility. Universities have become a normal component of the educational process and are losing their previously privileged space for the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. Above all, the role of the university today involves rounding off the whole complex of institutions which attend to the normatively set process of growing up.

In addition, the cultures of young people, the media and new technologies do not break through the framework of prolonged youth and their infantilisation and remain well within the boundaries of individual reflections about opportunities and risks. Family, school, university, media and culture therefore provide young people mostly with the psycho-social “equipment” needed for coping with individual opportunities and risks, but not for a wider and more demanding critical reflection on social circumstances. These are then the key reasons why the emancipatory achievements of youth, which have emerged precisely in the period of the educational moratorium of younger generations since the 1960s, have not outweighed the constant and actual danger of the social infantilisation of youth. On the contrary, quite systematically and apparently inevitably, they have become commercial and de-problematized forms of infantilised youth or mass cultures.

## Conclusion

The position of young people in Slovenia has been transformed in the last two decades. Post-socialist transition has rendered empty the fundamental ideological concept through which youth was linked with the idea of modernisation, that is the concept of progress. The hypothetical inherent link between youth and progress has been replaced with another, equally hypothetical inherent link, between youth and the individualisation of life, which initiates young people into the new privacy of the globalised consumer society. Today, due to this change in inherent links, the deconstruction of youth displays itself as a particular historic trap, which in the end returns young people to the place where their social historical emancipation originated, namely, to the world of privacy, family, parents. The breakdown of the link between modernisation, emancipation and social progress at this stage of post-transitional development points to the intrinsic limitations of the modernisation process that is propelled by neoliberalism. The passage from socialism to neoliberalism has also revived social differences such as class, gender and ethnic differences.

The fundamental paradox facing young people today is the contrast between an increasing range of options for individual management and planning of life on the one hand, and decreasing predictability and control over life courses on the other. Social and economic status continues to determine life courses, but their influence is less visible and less direct because collective traditions have been weakening and

individualistic strategies are becoming dominant. The individual alone is compelled to take the necessary steps to avoid shouldering the burden of the consequences of individualisation. These difficulties exacerbate the social and psychological vulnerability of young people. They also escalate difficulties and accumulate unresolved problems that tend to feed into one another. Youth studies across Europe indicate that the structural characteristics of social vulnerability (for example a disadvantaged starting position) as a rule become intertwined with cultural and interactive aspects (Ule and Živoder 2012; Helve and Evans 2013).

Due to the mostly structural sources of problems and difficulties during youth, young people often experience them as an irresolvable vicious circle and sometimes try to solve them by means of various shortcuts that they have not reflected on (e.g. consumerism, addictions and escapism through pop youth lifestyles). At best, these shortcuts only temporarily drive one's problems out of mind, but in fact they only make them worse. What is more, due to its developmental irresponsibility, today's adult society is literally and without hesitation parasitising the future. This irresponsibility of society towards the future goes hand in hand with its indifference towards young people, regardless of the cult of youth that otherwise reigns over contemporary mass culture.

Such is the socio-historical framework in which the social and political transformation of student activism in Slovenia and in Europe has taken place. The recent student unrest across Europe implicitly warns about all these problems. Above all, it points to the high sensitivity of students regarding those measures and events that can negatively affect the free choice of studies, the wider accessibility of studies for young people from all social classes and the autonomy of universities. Such a sensitivity has also been noted in research on the student population in Slovenia (Ule, Tivadar and Živoder 2011). Perhaps today these are the key points where the contradictions of the social system play out. Despite their apparent particularity and fleetingness, especially compared to the movements from the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary student protests nevertheless tackle the tendency of the economic and political elite to rule the people. They indirectly expose the internal boundaries of the neoliberal system of production and reproduction of modern European societies. Namely, the problem of neoliberal economies is that through the mechanisms of the reproduction of economic capital they attempt to also govern the reproduction of human capital and, moreover, they transfer the costs of this reproduction onto the shoulders of individuals and their informal, mainly family-based support networks (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Regardless of all the social and cultural innovation and knowledge achieved by students, which were crucial for reforming youth into a social or even a political subject in the period of the student movements and new social movements from the 1960s to the 1980s, the key problem of young people remains unresolved, namely their prolonged personal and systemic dependence. Even if students are allowed to earn some income for their studies and get by with a combination of family support, scholarships and various forms of mostly precarious employment, this does not eliminate their basic economic and social dependence. What is more, the socio-economic dependence of students also aggravates all other forms of their equal participation in society.

We maintain that student criticism is a rule, while student resistance is an exceptional situation. Resistance should be expected when students can no longer integrate their critical attitudes into reality through a gradual accumulation of social experience, and when these attitudes accumulate in special intellectual, symbolic and emotional subsystems that are in manifest contradiction with the publicly and implicitly expressed norms, rules and ideals of existing societies. Student criticism is often expressed in forms of social cynicism and social anomie. However, the social cynicism and social anomie of students are also political effects. In their negative consequences they are undoubtedly more dangerous than increased student politics and resistance. Namely, the inclination towards social anomie is an ideal background for the emergence of authoritarian populist movements in society.

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## Chapter 4

# “A truly transformative experience”: the biographical legacy of student protest participation

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### **Abstract**

Dissatisfied with the neoliberal agenda for education, high tuition fees, the increasing commodification of higher education and the implementation of the Bologna Process, students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Rijeka in Croatia “occupied” their faculty for 20 days in 2009, thus joining student movements worldwide inspired by similar grievances. During these 20 days the faculty became their home: they slept on its floors, cooked and ate in its yard, planned and managed various events (lectures, workshops, exhibitions, performances), prepared media releases, organised assemblies and mobilised academic staff. This chapter explores the biographical impact of this experience on a group of students who were interviewed in 2009, on the 20th day of the faculty occupation, and then again four years later, in 2013. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) concepts of “field” and “habitus” and Turner’s (1969) concept of “liminality”, we interpret the protest as a liminal phenomenon characterised by transgression in an otherwise conservative educational field which led to habitus modifications. We have classified the main dimensions of change identified in the interviews as knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, educational and professional trajectories, and social networks and personal development. For the interviewed students, the occupation of the faculty building was a period of learning, of “destabilising” and “demystifying” power relations, and forging new friendships. They unanimously described their protest experience as transformative.

**Keywords:** student protests; biographical impact; habitus; field; liminality; transformation

## Introduction

In 2011, *Time* magazine named “The Protester” the person of the year, paying homage to all those involved in protests from the Arab Spring to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow. Richard Stengel, then *Time* Managing Editor, explained the choice as follows:

For capturing and highlighting a global sense of restless promise, for upending governments and conventional wisdom, for combining the oldest of techniques with the newest of technologies to shine a light on human dignity and, finally, for steering the planet on a more democratic though sometimes more dangerous path for the 21st century (Stengel 2011).

Student protests have attracted strong media as well as academic interest. They have been the focus of numerous articles discussing student uprisings across different contexts including Latin America, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (e.g. Alcántara, Llomovatte and Romão 2013; Giroux 2013; Stromquist and Sanyal 2013; Guzman-Concha 2012; Maira and Sze 2012; Solomon and Palmieri 2011). Guzman-Concha (2012), for example, addresses factors contributing to student protests in Chile including longstanding failures in the education system, lack of regulation of the private sector, the historically left-leaning identity of student movements, indignation at injustice and a feeling of helplessness. The Chilean case is also discussed by Stromquist and Sanyal (2013), who note how student protesters explicitly challenged neoliberal policies while demanding free education, an end to profit-making in education, indebtedness and the financial burden on families, as well as equitable access to education. Resistance to neoliberal “common sense” is a common denominator driving student protests worldwide. It is identified by Giroux (2013) in his discussion of the Quebec student movement, Alcántara, Llomovatte and Romão (2013) as fuelling student protests in Mexico, as well as by Dolenc and Doolan (2013) writing about student protests in the Croatian context. In terms of reactions to student protests, Giroux (2013) writes about a pro-government smear campaign against students in Quebec, which labelled them “self-seeking brats” (Conway 2012, in Giroux 2013) and Maira and Sze (2012) discuss violent events at the University of California, Davis, when ten students were pepper sprayed by two police officers.

The focus of these articles is on factors contributing to student uprisings, student demands, forms of resistance and reactions to the student protests. This chapter shares the academic interest in student protests, but from a somewhat different angle. It explores the impact of student protest participation on the protesters themselves, informed by authors such as Crossley, who notes “the experience of social movement participation has been shown to have a dramatic and durable politicising effect upon individuals” (2003: 50). The informants for the chapter were student activists in the protests at the University of Rijeka, part of the student protests in Croatia that began in spring 2009, when students occupied the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb. Our interest has been in whether participation in the protests has had an impact on the educational,

professional and personal biographies of the student protesters. Are their narratives illustrative of disappointment or empowerment, continuity or change?

## Right to education protests

In order to explore how participation in student protests may have affected student biographies, it is essential to portray the student protests themselves. Castells (2012) has identified a set of common characteristics pertaining to new social movements including Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish Indignados and the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. According to Castells, these are rarely programmatic movements – they are at the same time local and global, networked in multiple forms, leaderless and non-violent. To a great extent, this set of characteristics can also be attributed to the Right to Education student protests in Croatia.

New social movements may be rarely programmatic movements, but the motivation for the student protests in Croatia can be seen as twofold (Dolenec and Doolan 2013; Doolan 2011). On the one hand, there was a programmatic element to them. The protests were motivated by a specific goal: the abolishment of tuition fees at all levels of higher education. On the other hand, the protests went beyond this short-term goal and “aimed at changing the values of society” (Castells 2012: 227). Indeed, what was striking about the protests was their pronounced critique of neoliberal practices not only in higher education but also society. The commitment of the protesters to radical change was expressed in pamphlets that declared, “Our long-term goal is to end the neoliberalisation of this society” (Independent Student Initiative 2009). In an educational context, education as a right rather than a service was a leitmotif of the protests, indicating resistance to the commodification and privatisation of higher education undertaken in the name of “quality” and “efficiency”.

Solomon and Palmieri describe recent student movements as “resistance against capitalism’s assault on students and the underprivileged” (2011: 2). “Knowledge is not a commodity” and “Education is not for sale” are examples of banners used in the student protests in Croatia, whose messages exemplify the simultaneity of the local and global dimensions of new social movements. Local-global pronouncements of resistance against neoliberal logic in education came together in 2009 under the Global Week of Action initiative, whose statement notes, “Around the world over the past decade students, pupils, teachers, parents and employees have been protesting against the increasing commercialisation and privatisation of public education, and fighting for free and emancipatory education” (International Student Movement 2009). This supranational dimension of student protests can also be identified in terms of criticism of the Bologna Process. For example, students protested against the implementation of the Bologna Process in Spain in 2008 and at the ministerial meeting in Vienna in 2010. Although the 2009 Right to Education protests in Croatia were not specifically directed at the Bologna Process, the students interviewed for the study reported in this chapter mentioned their dissatisfaction with what they saw as the consequences of the reform’s implementation in the Croatian higher education system. For the students, this includes a decline in the quality of education because of the increasing overload of students and professors with bureaucratic procedures, a shift of focus from “true” learning to various petty obligations, and the introduction

of market values in the system, for example through the encouragement of competitiveness among students.

Other characteristics common to the social movements analysed by Castells (2012) include their use of Internet and mobile communication networks, horizontal decision making in assemblies and their commitment to non-violence. The web page which was regularly updated during the student protests in Croatia has links to a Facebook page and Twitter and students gathered in assemblies which they defended as necessary “in a situation where formal representative mechanisms and student representatives do not have any real power to influence issues which are directly linked to their status and future” (Slobodni Filozofski 2009). In addition, student protests in Croatia were non-violent. Protesters responded to accusations that faculty building sit-ins were a form of violence by stating that existing restrictions to higher education access were a far more destructive form of social violence (ibid.).

### **Liminality, field and habitus**

We use Turner’s concept of liminality and Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus as analytical tools to discuss the biographical impact of student protest participation. Yang interprets protests as liminal phenomena in his discussion of the Red Guard’s movement as an identity-transforming experience: “They separate participants from preexisting structural constraints and give them freedom and power to remould themselves and society” (2000: 380). Drawing on Van Gennep (1909), Turner (1969) describes the liminal phase as a realm that has few or none of the characteristics of the previous or following phase and in which the individual or group has ambiguous characteristics. This liminal situation is characterised for Turner by freedom (rejection of rules and norms), egalitarianism (unsettling structural relations), communion and creativity. According to Yang, the extent of personal change protesters experience depends on the degree of liminality, that is how radical the movement is in terms of these characteristics, though he says, “Rarely do they remain the same, due to the liminal experience of the movement” (2000: 385). In this chapter we interpret the faculty occupation in Rijeka as a liminal situation.

According to Crossley (2003), a Bourdieuean explanation of how social movements happen in a (relatively) static field-habitus constellation is that habitus falls out of alignment with the field in which it operates: “creating a situation in which ‘belief in the game’ (*illusio*) is temporarily suspended and doxic assumptions are raised to the level of discourse, where they can be contested” (ibid.: 44). For Crossley, such critical attitudes or shifts in beliefs and strategies of action occur in relation to issues which are very important to people, to the point that they are ready to fight for them. And tuition fees, in the context of a growing awareness of the impact of neoliberalism, were one such issue for students.

For Bourdieu and Wacquant, fields are socially structured spaces consisting of “a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16). Bourdieu’s use of historicity and anchorage suggests a fixed nature of field relations. Indeed, although Bourdieu sees social fields as fields of struggle where things always move and are never fully

predetermined (“a structure that is different each time”), he also acknowledges their constraining nature to the extent that he is “often stunned by the degree to which things are determined” (ibid.: 200). In other words, there is a tendency for continuity rather than change in Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of field relations. In the educational field, this continuity manifests itself, for instance, in established, taken-for-granted power relations between actors oriented towards each other, yet carrying different amounts of capital: students, students and teachers, teachers and management, management and local government, local governments and national government, national government and supranational structures. In terms of where capital resides in the decision-making process, there is a well-established hierarchy acknowledged in the Right to Education protest pamphlets: “There is no real power to influence questions directly related to the status and future of students through formal representational mechanisms” (Independent Student Initiative 2009). In other words, in this field game students have less capital than decision makers. The Right to Education protests can be viewed as a transgression in an otherwise conservative educational field, with students challenging established hierarchical relations and the practices that result from them.

Student behaviour is shaped in predominantly conservative educational fields and has a tendency to reinforce them. From when they enter primary schooling to when they enter university education, students are taught the rules of the game, which include obeying historically posited hierarchies. This educational disposition, part of their “habitus”, is shaped to reproduce rather than transform relations in the educational field. Bourdieu defines habitus as “the mental structures through which they [agents] apprehend the social world” (1989: 18). More specifically, according to Bourdieu, the habitus is a series of durable, transposable dispositions (1977: 72, in Desmarchelier 1999), an unconscious and internalised “roadmap” for action with encoded schemes of perception and appreciation reflecting the division into social classes (1984: 170), which becomes a *modus operandi* for action, but which the individual defines and regulates continually (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 75). We use Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to draw attention in our analysis to a pre-protest disposition in which certain structures and practices are habitually reinforced and a critical post-protest disposition which questions them. In relation to the latter, we ask whether the student protesters acquired what Crossley (2003) refers to as a “radical habitus”, that is a disposition towards further political activism, or are they disillusioned?

Yang (2000) categorises work on the biographical impact of movement participation according to whether it examines short-term (e.g. Calhoun 1991, 1994; Lichterman 1996) or long-term (e.g. Robnett 1997; Downton and Wehr 1997) impact. Short-term impact includes a tendency to become more committed activists, whereas long-term impact implies a sustained commitment to political activism. Interviewing student protesters four years after the protest has enabled us to address both of these to a certain extent.

## Methodology

Our study is anchored in a qualitative approach focused on trying to make sense of student protesters’ experiences by interpreting the meaning that they give to

their own engagement in “occupying the Faculty”. It is informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective according to which reality is subjectively perceived and interpreted by people (Broido and Manning 2002). In this framework, reality is a negotiated system of understandings in which human beings (student protesters in the case of this research) make sense of their acts (Potter 1996).

The study consisted of interviews conducted in 2009 and 2013 in order to explore how insiders to the student protests experienced their involvement over time. In 2009, semi-structured interviews were conducted and students were asked to identify the impact the participation in 20 days of faculty occupation may have had on them, including their own learning process: what they had learned, what new skills they might have gained, and what kind of attitudes they might have changed or developed. In 2013, structured e-mail interviews were used due to interviewee absence from Rijeka and available time. On this occasion, students were asked to reflect upon the possible long-term effects of protest participation, such as influences on their educational and professional selves as well as personal development.

The initial ten interviewees were selected from students from the Independent Student Initiative who were recognised as the “core group” responsible for the occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Rijeka. In 2013, eight out of the ten interviewees agreed to take part in follow-up interviews. Two students refused to participate in any activities associated with European institutions.<sup>10</sup> Participation in both interview rounds was voluntary. The interview data were analysed inductively using the constant comparative method of data analysis that involves mining the data, selecting emerging themes, defining categories, and redefining them as new themes or disagreements arise related to a critical reflection on observed themes (Merriam 1998). The following categories were identified in response to our interest in the biographical impact of student protest participation: knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, educational and professional selves, and networks and personal development.

The study did not assume the attitudes of the interviewees in advance, nor did it produce generalisable information about the transformative potential of participation in (student) protests. Rather, it explores and in the interpretation highlights salient points in the students’ understanding of the impact their protest participation had on them. Basic information about the students interviewed is provided in Table 1.

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10. One of the students who refused to participate in the research explained her decision as follows: “any European institution connected to higher education is just another institution that, in addition to those with a more explicit political and neoliberal agenda, I take to be responsible for the break-up of higher education, and its conversion into a commodity on a treadmill. That’s how I see it. They are trying to impose standards for standardising students, they quantify knowledge and join it up with businesses which impose a framework and punish those who are outside the framework – with the aim of achieving a European higher education area (that is the transformation of students into consumers and slaves that will help Europe to be more competitive in relation to Japan, China and America), and the maintenance of European imperialist aspirations.”

**Table 1: List of interview participants (pseudonyms)**

Pseudonym	Gender	Field of study	Year of study in 2009	Second interview participation
Marina	female	Cultural Studies	Undergraduate, 2nd	+
Renata	female	Cultural Studies	Graduate, 1st	+
Petar	male	Cultural Studies	Undergraduate, 2nd	+
Gloria	female	Cultural Studies	Undergraduate, 3rd	+
Daniela	female	Cultural Studies	Undergraduate, 2nd	+
Nikola	male	Philosophy	Undergraduate, 1st	-
David	male	Cultural Studies	Undergraduate, 3rd	+
Ana	female	Cultural Studies	Undergraduate, 3rd	+
Sandra	female	Pedagogy	Undergraduate, 2nd	+
Ema	female	Pedagogy and English	Graduate, 1st	-

## **A transformative experience**

On the 20th day of their occupation in 2009, visibly exhausted from a three-week stay in the faculty building, which included sleeping on a hard floor and on tables, cooking for 30 people, organising lectures, workshops and press conferences, co-ordinating communication with various actors, engaging in working groups and running an assembly, the 10 students interviewed remained enthusiastic about the protest. They described the experience at that time as powerful and transformative:

It's a very powerful experience that helps me meet my other self...and I wasn't ever aware that this other me existed (David, 1st interview).

I can see this is already a very important experience in my life, as it has changed me completely, it has set me free (Marina, 1st interview).

It is the kind of experience that pushes me now to think and act outside the box (Renata, 1st interview).

Four years later, students' feelings about their participation had not changed. All the interviewees described their experience as important and life changing:

The most important event of my student life (David, 2nd interview).

It was an amazing experience, it got into me, it changed me on so many levels (Marina, 2nd interview).

It was really revolutionary because it was messing with my thoughts on so many levels (Renata, 2nd interview).

Definitely an experience that changed my life (Petar, 2nd interview).

A truly transformative experience (Ana, 2nd interview).

Authors such as Yang (2000) and Crossley (2003) have noted that participation in social movements changes participants' identities and habitus and the excerpts above suggest such transformation. Based on our interviews, we have identified the main dimensions of this transformation as follows: knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, educational and professional selves, and networks and personal development.

## Knowledge, skills, attitudes, values

All of this that is happening is such a powerful and positive experience, I really do not know where to start explaining what I have learned so far, I think it will be easier to reflect on that in a couple of years (David, 1st interview).

The interviewed students perceived their learning in terms of acquired knowledge, skills, attitudes and values across various fields: political (about politics, public policy, social movements, solidarity, democracy, direct democracy, activism, power relations, community mobilisation, media manipulation); personal (readiness to engage, readiness to sacrifice personal interests, security and insecurity, physical, mental and emotional strength and/or weakness, responsibility); and collective (group dynamics, role play, tolerance, patience, mediation, conflict resolution, the power of collective action).

Students easily identified a range of skills (organisational, communication, administrative) they had improved and/or developed during the protest, often connecting them to a variety of functions performed during the protest. For example, the students who were in charge of security highlighted that this helped them learn about teamwork, task co-ordination and time management. Members of the "media group" gained skills in communicating with media representatives, conducting media text analysis, writing critical reflections and press releases, and learning to follow different patterns of communication via TV, radio or daily newspapers. Part of this group was focused on new media and developed skills in web page development, running blogs and social networks.

Being part of the "legal group" helped students gain skills such as document analysis (e.g. law, statutes, regulations), preparing and holding meetings, writing meeting minutes and writing official letters to various actors. Students in the role of assembly moderators developed skills that are well illustrated in the following excerpt:

I moderated an assembly with more than 200 people. No amount of courses can prepare you for such an experience – I had to take care to follow the points we had agreed on, if not, then I had to return the focus to the fundamental points of the discussion, I had to calm down the "tone" of the conversation, be careful not to lose the main points, give people the opportunity to express their thoughts, monitor the time available, warn people about inappropriate behaviour (Sandra, 1st interview).

Most of the interviewed students agreed that they benefited most from gaining additional organisation and communication skills, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

I think we all benefited a lot by gaining great organisational skills – no one was prepared for such a large protest and faculty occupation and organisation, but it seems to me that we showed everybody that we can successfully "carry on our backs" this kind of self-organisation as a group of students (Gloria, 1st interview).

Being at the meeting with Minister Primorac and his cabinet showed me that we have learned so much about communication during this occupation, and that the assembly is mostly to “blame” for that. The way he and his private office communicated with us and even how we communicated amongst ourselves was really disappointing. It was at that moment I figured out how much this had changed my, and even others’, communication skills – we learned to listen to each other, to accept others’ opinions regardless of (dis)agreement, to construct a good argument, we learned how to exchange arguments, not personal opinions (Petar, 1st interview).

Beside such “practical” skills, some students also recognised the importance of motivating the group or “raising morale”:

I am sure that each of the students engaged in any of the working groups has learned a lot about various things, and has gained different skills, especially those who were members of the media and legal group. I was, on the other hand, responsible for raising morale (laughs)... but I truly believe this is an important aspect of keeping any revolution alive, and trust me ... it is not easy at all. This is one of my “lessons learned” (Daniela, 1st interview).

In terms of their attitudes and values, certain students noted that the student protest influenced their attitudes in relation to contemporary political and economic issues, the mission of the university in society, academic authorities, social movements and activism in general. The following excerpt from Gloria’s interview in 2013 illustrates what Crossley (2003) has referred to as “radical habitus”, a disposition towards further political activism:

No political event (and for me, the student protest was primarily an event of political engagement and character) has left as much trace and determined my further (political) behaviour and attitude adjustment as the student protest did (Gloria, 2nd interview).

Indeed, the four-year span shows how our interviewees have drawn from their student protest experiences in the context of nurturing their own activist tendencies. In the last few years all of them have been engaged in community actions, ranging from new student protests, volunteering in local community organisations, raising public awareness on various political issues, organising public lectures, engaging in direct actions and mobilising their local community.

The students’ experiences and lessons learned are quite rich and diverse; however, a term mentioned by the students that brings together many of these skills, values and attitudes is “active citizenship”. Several of the interviewees mentioned that education for responsible and active citizenship should become a “new” value for educational changes in the national context. Their activism is in itself very close to “ideals” of citizenship as expressed in works that emphasise the importance of the engaged citizen who actively seeks to shape the society in which s/he lives (e.g. Miller 2000; Griffith 1998; Heater 1990). However, what the interviewed students mean by active citizenship seems closer to Isin’s (2009) notion of “activist citizenship”. For him “active citizenship” is a script for already existing citizens to follow already existing paths, whereas “activist citizenship” makes claims to justice, disrupting defined orders, practices and statuses and breaking habitus.

## Educational and professional selves

Participation in the student protests had an impact on the educational choices and trajectories of several of the interviewed students. For example, it influenced their choice of topic for their final thesis (e.g. “A truly free and organised society: anarcho-syndicalist guidelines for the organisation of society”; “Direct democracy”; “Anarchy as culture”). While conducting research for her paper on direct democracy in an international context, one student even went to the United States for a semester. Some of these students later decided to pursue graduate studies in political philosophy and economy, some wrote their final graduate thesis on protest-related topics (e.g. “Anarchist criticism of society”), while some chose master’s and doctoral studies addressing topics such as policy development, class and gender identities. For some, the experience did not affect their further institutional (formal) education, but it did have a significant influence on their “do-it-yourself” education. Certain students became more engaged in academic activities, such as writing for journals, editing and reviewing papers for the student journal, and organising public lectures and round tables targeting social issues. Their educational selves were also affected by changes in communication with certain professors who, according to several students, became more collegial following the protests.

The relationship with some professors at the university was no longer the same; after the faculty occupation we all became a lot closer and the relationship developed into a more collegiate one than the professor-student one it was before (Petar, 2nd interview).

We gained the respect of teachers at my department and exams and traditional learning were no longer in the foreground, but rather it was conversation, discussion, debate, and so it remained until the end of my studies (David, 2nd interview).

While reflecting upon the impact that their engagement in the protest had on their professional careers, certain students mentioned career choices (e.g. choice of academic career) and one student also noted that the confidence he gained during the protest helps him in his current professional environment. Interesting examples of how protest participation has affected protesters’ professional lives are captured in the following excerpts:

What I have learned from the faculty occupation is that nothing will be just given to you and that you have to fight even when the situation looks unfavourable. It is this particular theory that I apply in my professional environment (David, 2nd interview).

I seek every single opportunity that my job offers me to tackle many social issues because I believe it can reach people and maybe even be helpful (Renata, 2nd interview).

## Networks and personal development

Yang (2000) writes about the role of social interactions in the process of collective action, noting that they deepen commitment to the cause. We found with our interviewees that social network expansion and related personal development have been crucial results of protest participation. Interviewees mentioned the expansion of their friendship networks and the nurturing of these friendships up to the present day.

Some provided other examples of social capital acquired during the protest, such as connections with various actors in the local community engaged in the fields of culture, politics and education.

Building on such notions of social capital, most of the interviewees also mentioned how their sense of community and collective action had changed, and how this particular protest experience influenced their faith in people and the possibility of positive social change. The selected interview excerpt illustrates well Putnam's (2000) notion of social capital as connections among people and the norms of trustworthiness and hope that result from them:

I feel safer, more secure, I have more confidence in people; this protest experience has given me tremendous faith that we can change something as I saw how thousands of students can work together and change society (Petar, 1st interview).

In terms of personal development more specifically, besides gaining confidence and self-esteem, all the interviewees noted how they have become more tolerant in everyday life:

Communication with people, like-minded ones but also those who have completely different worldviews from mine has improved dramatically and I have become much more tolerant. Before the protest I was very exclusionary and did not give people who think differently a chance. However, during the protest I realised how important this is (David, 2nd interview).

Reflexivity is another characteristic that students mentioned as heightened during and after the protest. Our interviewees noted that engagement in the protest was mentally and emotionally intense since they were questioning themselves on a daily basis, and confronting their own attitudes, beliefs, relationships with other people, known and unknown concepts, political views, identities as students and citizens, and in the end, even their readiness to continue their engagement in the protest. Such reflexivity has been identified by Castells (2012) as a key characteristic of contemporary social movements. This reflexivity is of course conducive to habitus changes.

## **Empowerment-disappointment, change-continuity**

The focus of this chapter has been on the impact of student protest participation for a selected group of students who participated in the 2009 occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Rijeka in Croatia. The students fought against neoliberalism, for democracy, for their voice to be heard, and for the right to education, equitable access to higher education, tuition fee abolition and publicly funded higher education, echoing a global phenomenon. According to Giroux (2013), principles such as justice and equality have become crucial to the "radicalised democratic and social project" advanced by student protesters worldwide.

Inspired by Yang's (2000) interpretation of social movements in terms of Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, we interpret the faculty occupation in Rijeka as a liminal situation characterised by freedom, egalitarianism, communion and creativity. For the interviewed students who belonged to the "core" group behind the protests, the occupation of the faculty building was a period of rejecting existing norms,

“destabilising” and “demystifying” power relations, exercising horizontal decision making through assemblies and forging new friendships. The interviewed students unanimously described their protest experience as transformative:

the only thing I did during my study that was truly worth something (Gloria, 2nd interview).

one of the most important experiences in my life so far (Daniela, 2nd interview).

Such transgressive “in-between states” in an otherwise conservative educational field are unsurprisingly conducive to personal change and we have classified some of the dimensions of this change identified by our interviewees as knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, educational and professional choices, networks and personal development. For Yang, the degree of personal transformation depends on “the extent to which participants are freed from previous structural conditions and on the depth and intensity of the new experience of participation” (2000: 385). The previously illustrated intensity of protest experience is suggestive of the extent to which our interviewees had indeed experienced personal transformation.

We have used Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) concept of habitus to highlight a pre-protest disposition in which certain structures and practices are taken for granted and a post-protest habitus transformed by a “crisis” in the educational field. These pre- and post- states are illustrated well by the following excerpt:

It helped me move from a previously passive to more active state of mind (Ana, 1st interview).

As Crossley puts it, “activism entails an ongoing attempt to change their habitual ways of being-in-the-world: that is, ‘habit-busting-habits’” (2003: 56). This “new” habitual way is characterised by a disposition to activism and “activist citizenship” shared by all our interviewees. However, in certain cases it goes beyond the political to also include everyday practices. Two interviewees mentioned such changes:

During the protest I realised that maybe I cannot change the world, but I can work on myself and daily choices like where and from whom to buy food – in supermarkets or directly from small producers; whether there is a need to buy some brand, or if I can go with second-hand...this protest taught me basics of solidarity on the smallest things, it has influenced most of my attitudes, about one million daily choices and decisions I make. I still truly believe in activism and that a handful of committed people can make changes (Marina, 2nd interview).

This experience was truly transformative, as it has changed my “weekend activism” into daily experience and a certain lifestyle (Renata, 2nd interview).

In terms of the biographical legacy of student protest participation, our interviewees’ narratives are exclusively narratives of empowerment and personal change. The fact that the students we interviewed were from the “core” group of student protesters possibly contributes to this finding. On the other hand, our interviewees’ perception of their legacy to the educational field is varied. Several students expressed their disappointment with the impact student protests have had on educational policy, educational institutions and students, suggesting the difficulty of making changes to the educational field “from below”:

Our impact on institutions and educational policy was short term, and that's the reason for my grief (David, 2nd interview).

I think that new generations of students are not left with much as the commercialisation of education still continues (Marina, 2nd interview).

I think most of today's students are not aware of the protests and that faculty occupations ever occurred, or if they are, I am sure they don't understand what it was all about, what we were actually fighting for (Renata, 2nd interview).

However, students unanimously mentioned the abolishment of tuition fees at undergraduate and graduate study programme entry in Croatia as a tangible positive outcome of the protest. They also pointed out various "intangible" positive outcomes such as the raising of student voice against neoliberalism, displacing authority, leaving "lessons learned" for new generations, revitalising a student culture of direct social action and empowering students for future protest actions. Crucially though, what has remained after the student protests as a legacy to society is a group of young people who seem dedicated to fighting for a better world:

It is quite difficult, but necessary to be part of social movements, because only such movements can lead to real social change that can lead us all forward. Many will try to suppress you, but the most important thing is to stay calm, focused and confident and never forget that you're the one fighting for a better society (David, 2nd interview).

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## Chapter 5

# Parliaments or streets?

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*Milica Popović*

### **Abstract**

The chapter aims to examine the impact of the institutionalisation of the student movement within the higher education institutions' governance schemes and the inclusion of students as stakeholders within the "official" channels of the student movement, with a special focus on two case studies: Croatia and Serbia. The chapter tries, by juxtaposing institutional and anti-system student movements, the eternally binary structure of active student groups, to research the relation between the student "activists" and student "professionals" (Klemencič 2007) in Croatia and Serbia. Two major student movements that have taken place in those two countries in recent years (Occupy the Faculty of Philosophy, in both cases), though different in scope and aims, have been organised outside of the structures of student unions recognised as official partners in their respective higher education arenas. On one side, institutionalisation of student movements within the governance structures of higher education institutions has raised their susceptibility to political influences, weakening their autonomy. On the other, the overall economic and political situation has largely taken away the privileged status of students, which is crucial for high-level participation and activism. The chapter wishes to identify overall possible causes for the pacification of official student representation in Croatia and Serbia, focusing on the pacification of a student movement as a social movement through its institutionalisation and co-option within the system's structures.

**Keywords:** student movements; student participation; higher education governance; student protests

## Introduction

Even before 2011, while the Occupy movement was spreading around the world, we were witnessing in Serbia and Croatia, in 2006 and 2009 respectively, two autonomous student movements which fought the commercialisation of higher education by occupying their universities. As the Balkan countries wake from their transitional period of low civic and political participation, following the turbulence of the 1990s, we face the emergence of new student movements.

The transition countries of South-Eastern Europe suffer from an overall low level of civil participation, a weak potential for collective action and political apathy. In “Citizens, organisations and dissociation”, the large report prepared by CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, we see that trust in the impact of civil society organisations in policy development remains strikingly low – 63% of self-assessed interviewees from civil society organisations believe there is no impact or it remains very limited (2011: 36). The same report tells us about the numbers of people who would never participate in political actions – in South-Eastern Europe, 31% of the population would never sign a petition, 39% would never attend a peaceful demonstration and 50% would never participate in a boycott (ibid.: 42). At the same time, within the new social movements, student movements are generally in decline. Since the vibrant 1990s, notably in Serbia, when students were one of the leading forces in the struggle against the authoritarian regime, student movements have changed their scope, purpose and political and institutional means. This shift will be explained later in the chapter when we describe the happenings of the Occupy the Faculty movements in Serbia and Croatia. The chapter will seek to determine whether this decline and/or shift could be a consequence of the impossibility of reducing the plurality of “subject positions” and contemporary multifaceted identities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Lyotard 1984), which prevents major student mobilisations. In other words, the diversity of student body had made it more difficult in recent years to “cultivate a collective student identity” (Klemenčič 2014: 9). Another possible reason behind the decline of student participation could be the introduction of new managerialism in higher education governance, along with other various higher education reforms and the Bologna Process, as well as the political and economic crises across the whole of Europe.

This chapter aims, through two case studies of non-institutional student protests in Croatia and Serbia, to identify the reasons behind the shift from institutional to non-institutional student efforts. Specifically, I juxtapose institutional and anti-system student movements, the eternally binary structure of active student groups, researching the relation between student “activists” and student “professionals” (Klemenčič 2007) in Croatia and Serbia through the presentation of two student protests at the faculties of philosophy in Zagreb and Belgrade. In so doing, I wish to present alternative channels of student participation in these two countries, outside of the official student unions and student parliaments. The protests were different in scope and aims, but they were both organised outside of the structures of student unions recognised as official partners in the higher education arenas of Serbia and Croatia.

At the same time, there has been an overall tendency towards the politicisation of higher education in the region (Zgaga et al. 2013). I inquire whether this has happened because (transitional) contemporary social structures demand mobilisation in areas

“sociologically inaccessible to the repressive forces of the ruling class” (Wilcox 1969), leaving student mobilisations outside of formal student representation structures which could be influenced by the “ruling class”, that is the political parties. Or is it rather the case that social movements are by definition characterised by a low degree of institutionalisation (Koopmans 1993), and institutionalisation has taken away the mobilising power of students? Why have the only major student protests in the last decade in Croatia and Serbia been organised outside of institutionalised student structures?

## Higher education in times of transition

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the difficult conflict years of the 1990s, Croatia and Serbia undertook “transition” from socialism to democracy and the market economy, the only accepted forms of development at the “end of ideology” (Bell 1962). As liberalisation and democratisation took, or still are taking, their place as fundamental elements of the newly installed regimes (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986), researchers have looked into the phenomenon of the political apathy of post-socialist citizens (Greenberg 2010). Yet political interest does not necessarily correlate directly with participation (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). The low turnout of students for student parliament elections does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest of students in higher education policy, their position in society and the overall social and economic reforms happening in their respective countries. The results of a survey conducted within the TEMPUS SIGMUS (Strengthening Student Role in Governance and Management at the Universities in Serbia) project in Serbia have shown that average student turnout rates are approximately 20.3%. Nevertheless, in 36% of the cases the higher education institutions’ management structures actually did not have any data on the turnout rates for student parliaments (SIGMUS 2011).

As the transition processes also included higher education reform, through the alignment of Serbian and Croatian higher education systems with European and international trends, this meant their participation in the Bologna Process. Croatia entered the Bologna Process in 2001 and Serbia in 2003. Inheriting systems with many flaws, Serbia and Croatia undertook the reforms that were perceived as a necessary step in the EU accession process. The Bologna Process, however, became a catch-all term for all reforms implemented by the governments, regardless of whether they were really part of the non-binding European accession process or just a national decision in education policy. This allowed populations in Croatia and Serbia to perceive the Bologna Process equally in terms of the implementation of student-centred learning and the introduction of tuition fees. Following the economic and social crisis, the already difficult economic situation of students in the transition countries of South-Eastern Europe was aggravated, with tuition fees largely preventing access to higher education to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As per the first EUROSTUDENT survey in Croatia, the majority of students – 60% – pay tuition fees either as full-time or part-time students (Institute for the Development of Education 2012: 6), and families are funding 82% of students (ibid.: 9). The overall economic and political situation, including the rise of the costs of study, has largely taken away the privileged status

of students, which is crucial for high-level participation and activism. At the same time, student numbers have significantly risen.

The Bologna Process introduced new forms of formalisation and institutionalisation of student participation. In the view of Jungblut and Weber (in this volume), the institutional logic promoted by the Bologna Process implies that student organisations need to become – and indeed have already become – more professional and they are therefore moving away from some of the classical features of student movements as identified by Klemenčič (2012).

The institutionalisation of student movements within the governance structures of higher education institutions has raised their susceptibility to political influences, which has led to a weakening of their autonomy. In the general atmosphere of highly politicised societies, where political pluralism has also introduced a high incidence of corruption, student organisations and movements have not remained unsullied. By some estimates, according to the Center for Free Elections and Democracy,<sup>11</sup> approximately 10% of the population are members of a political party, even if they are not active. In Serbia, general trust in institutions has dropped since 2006 (EBRD 2011).

The general perception is that the political parties have often embraced student activists, as student representatives are “significantly affected by the existing structural relations between the university and the state and between student politics and the enviroing political system” (Weinberg and Walker 1969: 80). In a non-regulated environment with a lack of democratic traditions of autonomous student movements, political parties have infiltrated student representation. There has not been in-depth research in this regard, but the lack of data is itself a kind of data. A number of media and blog posts have called for individual statements from students (Blic 2010; Delić 2013; Nasciturus, the portal of students of the Law Faculty in Split,<sup>12</sup> etc.).

Weinberg and Walker explain this phenomenon as being a result of systems with limited university autonomy and centralised party recruitment (1969: 82). As neo-corporatist tendencies began to include workers in transitional neoliberal societies by formalising their struggles through trade unions and political parties, a similar process was taking place through inclusion of students in student organisations and student parliaments often controlled by political parties. The youth sections of political parties, it seemed, had been tasked to infiltrate student representation. A newspaper article in Serbia (Blic 2010) noted that even the changes in the student parliament coincided with that of the parliamentary elections. In the same article, ex-student vice-dean Jelena Veljić claimed that all newly elected student parliament members were members of political parties: “Responding to my question as to why anyone would take over the student parliament, they said that the leaders of the youth section of the Democratic Party has an interest in following what is happening in the Faculty of Philosophy”.

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11. Available at <http://cesid.org>, accessed 26 September 2014.

12. See [www.nasciturus.com/najnovije/ponavljaju-se-izbori-za-studentski-zbor-sveucilista-u-splitu.html](http://www.nasciturus.com/najnovije/ponavljaju-se-izbori-za-studentski-zbor-sveucilista-u-splitu.html), accessed 26 September 2014.

This created an environment in which the academic community's management structures usually remained close to the political party in power. If a higher education institution's management and student parliament members happen to come from the same political party, one would expect low potential for conflict between the students and management policies, especially given that student parliaments are considered part of the management (Kurepa 2007: 20). An example of the instrumentalisation of student parliaments in daily political struggles can be illustrated by a press release on the judiciary reform published in 2010 by the student parliaments of law faculties in Serbia (Studentski parlamenti Pravnih fakulteta 2010). The press release directly attacked certain politicians and jurists, discrediting them by "shedding light" on their family and private connections. Interestingly enough all the names mentioned were members of or those considered close to a single political party, the Democratic Party. Such politicisation of higher education institutions has, inevitably, largely pacified student participation. This type of influence of multiparty politics on student representation is represented as one of four scenarios, one in which "the student leaders lose their autonomy and therefore their ability to authentically represent student interests" diminishes and/or vanishes (Luescher-Mamaschela and Mugume 2014: 20).

### **The (non)institutional shift**

Croatia adopted its first law on student parliaments in 1996,<sup>13</sup> while Serbia instituted a body of student parliaments through its law on higher education adopted in 2005<sup>14</sup> (Službeni glasnik RS, 76/05, 97/08 and 93/12). Ever since, in Serbia, there have been attempts at drafting a law on student organising to further regulate the functioning of student parliaments, but without success. This has left a large *vacatio legis* in the detailed regulation of student representation in Serbia. Nevertheless, the actual influence of students seems to have remained limited, and may be explained by "a lack of interest in student representation or the poor organisation of representative student bodies or lack of legitimacy of student bodies" (Zgaga et al. 2013: 77). Indeed, all three reasons stated above may apply. The introduction of new managerialism into the governance of higher education institutions did not encourage the full acknowledgment of students as partners. The academic environment, too, does not provide incentives for the further personal growth of students, whether in their search for knowledge and in their development as active citizens. As a consequence of decade(s) of poor pre-tertiary education, university professors often criticise current students for lack of motivation and knowledge, characterising them as "worse" than previous generations (Vukasović 2010).

Given the lack of academic, economic or social support and the overall perception of laziness as regards the new generation, the institutionalisation of student representation did not improve student status. Tuition fees continued to rise, and there was inadequate expansion of student scholarships, loans or other financial support. Even though in the 1990s students represented the main force in the push towards democratisation, notably in Serbia, the transition did little to build trust in

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13. Law on the Student Parliament (1996), Republic of Croatia, Narodne novine 57/96.

14. Law on Higher Education (2005), Republic of Serbia, Službeni glasnik 76/05, 100/07, 97/08, 44/10, 93/12.

the institutions. But this lack of trust did not inspire mass or anti-system protests until 2006. As Astrid Reinprecht explains in an audio interview: “The system doesn’t provide incentives for protests.”<sup>15</sup> She adds that in Serbia, the legacy of the co-option of the Otpor leaders by the political system created an additional burden for student activism. The new higher education policies proved to be detrimental to students and further disheartened student participation. The institutionalisation of student participation, wherein the rules of the game are sometimes unclear, deepened the cleavage between student activists and student professionals (Klemenčič 2007). And as “where few take part in decisions, there is little democracy” (Verba and Nie 1972: 1), the lack of trust in the democratic process of student participation as well as student apathy increased. Also, the transition from a socialist centralised economy to a free market economy, (often) understood in strict neoliberal terms, changed the perception of (higher) education. As Europe and the rest of the world were positing the knowledge-based economy as the essence of development, in South-Eastern Europe the perception flourished that “economic roles” and “competition” were the desired focus of higher education, ahead of “broader societal roles” (Zgaga et al. 2013: 58).

In such an atmosphere in Croatia and Serbia, new student/social movements have emerged only in the last couple of years. The protests and occupations we have seen have been outside of the sphere of formalised student organisations or student representation. In this chapter we understand social movements in line with Pakulski’s definition, where social movements represent “recurrent patterns of collective activities which are partially institutionalised, value oriented and anti-systemic in their form and symbolism” (Pakulski 1991: xiv). In the cases studied here, the degree of institutionalisation of the occupations remained low or almost non-existent and the participants insisted on remaining outside of the imposed system of student representation. As we will see later, at times they also refused any negotiation with the management of the higher education institutions and insisted on remaining a collective political body without leaders who might capitalise on their popularity later on. They insisted on a communitarian approach, giving legitimacy exclusively to the plenum, a body based on the principles of direct democracy. Their strongly ideological demand for free education was accompanied with a form of protest which was equally rooted in ideological anti-systemic principles.

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, (these) students did not perceive student parliaments as appropriate sites for the mobilisation of their resources in the fight for free education. It was clear that the institutional mechanisms of participation had failed to establish trust with student populations as places of dialogue, democracy and effective advocacy for student rights.

## So where did the students go?

As a result, students reclaimed faculties and universities as “their” spaces, which they transformed into places of dialogue, democracy and advocacy for student rights. As

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15. *Interview with Astrid Reinprecht on social movements in the Balkans*, available at [www.mixcloud.com/CSEES/interview-with-astrid-reinprecht-on-social-movements-in-the-balkans](http://www.mixcloud.com/CSEES/interview-with-astrid-reinprecht-on-social-movements-in-the-balkans), accessed 26 September 2014.

the two occupation movements in Serbia and Croatia show, they took their struggle outside of the student parliaments and existing student organisations.

This shift to the non-institutional space could be explained by the transitional context outlined above, in which higher education and students share a precarious status in most of South-Eastern Europe. More context might be provided by theories of political participation, notably youth participation, which dismiss apathy and lack of participation as a lack of interest in political and social issues. These theories try to explain a shift or a transformation of modes of civic engagement along two axes: changes in the modes or channels of participation on one hand, and changes in the substantive issues addressed on the other (Hustinx et al. 2012). As the notion of trust in institutions, as defined by Putnam, remains strongly correlated to civic engagement (1995: 73), new phenomena in student activism might emerge even as trust in student parliaments and student organisations declines. Students are no longer lured into hierarchical organisations with membership structures but search for rather “easy-entrance, easy-exit” modes of involvement (Norris 2003).

Thus students might seem to shift towards non-formal “near-groups”, structured but temporary (Yablonsky 1962). Yet they still do not always achieve large mobilisations. A recent example of a student protest organised in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by the informal group (R)EVOLUTION+, demanded the country’s inclusion in the Erasmus+ process, which had been hindered due to the political instability in the country. The protests were organised throughout the country, but student turnout remained low. In Sarajevo, for example, there were only 150 students present at a protest, of 40 000 students enrolled in higher education institutions. Still, the protests were organised by an informal group and not a student organisation or student parliament. In Croatia and Serbia, the student protests were on a (much) larger scale.

## Occupy (direct) democracy in Zagreb<sup>16</sup>

The student protest that took place in Croatia in 2009 represented a precedent, the beginning of a possible new era in student activism in the region. It was the largest student protest in the country since 1971.<sup>17</sup> As Horvat and Štiks say, the blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, which then spread throughout the country, became “the Event” in contemporary post-conflict Croatian history (2010). Pupovac noted, “For the first time students demanded thorough social and political transformation – transformation that starts with rearticulating of democracy” (2012: 178).

It all started on 7 May 2008, when protests were organised around Croatia against tuition fees, poor implementation of the Bologna Process and the degradation of student standards of living. The Independent Student Initiative for the Right to Free Education remained active and a year later, “the Event” took place. On 20 April 2009, the International Day of Action against the Commercialization of Education, together with student groups around the world, the Croatian Independent Student

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16. See [www.slobodnifilozofski.com](http://www.slobodnifilozofski.com), accessed 27 September 2014.

17. A protest known as the “Croatian Spring” took place in 1971, which demanded greater autonomy for the Republic of Croatia and liberal political reforms within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Initiative issued a press release demanding the right to free education, declaring it “essential for any democracy”. The press release stated the demand for free education at all levels: undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate. It argued that state taxes should serve as a guarantee for elementary rights, such as the right to free education, and provide for social justice and equality. The first plenum took place and it voted for the blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb with a single demand: free education for all. Direct democracy was adopted as the functioning principle of the protest. The blockade lasted for 35 days in spring and for another two weeks in autumn 2009, at more than 20 faculties in Croatia. As in the beginning the blockade received support from both the media and the faculty management, the impact of the movement was large. Still, the Ministry of Education ignored the blockade for a very long time and the support of the faculty management slowly faded as the weeks passed. Also, though up to 1 000 citizens at a time attended the initial plenums, in the final weeks there were only a couple of hundred present every evening.

This protest, besides the universality of the demand, had other specific characteristics. Its entire organisation and modes of functioning was described in a collective work named *Blokadna kuharica (The blockade cookbook)*, which was published immediately after the protest in 2009. The main principle of functioning, as mentioned above, was direct democracy, which was exercised through the plenum. The plenum was the key decision-making body, gathering all interested students as well as citizens. Citizens were invited to participate on an equal footing with students, as the issue of free education for all was considered a fundamental question for the whole of society and not just the academic community. All citizens present had the right to speak and to vote and decisions were taken by majority vote. During the blockade, the plenum took place every evening but it was envisaged that in “times of peace”, when there was no blockade, it would take place once a week.

Outside of the plenum, the protest also organised units like working groups and sections to consider specific issues. The sections were mandated by the plenum to deal with certain questions and they had a stable membership. The working groups were ad hoc bodies. In both cases, those bodies operated as collective subjects, with no specification of their members or any leadership. An interesting working group was set up after the blockade for the dissemination of direct democracy, with the aim of supporting other citizens in their struggles – including agricultural workers. Communications were organised through the daily newsletter *Skripta* and, of course, a web blog. The media strategy was focused on depersonalisation, thus all the press statements were anonymous and press conferences were held daily at the faculty, with different students giving statements and answering questions on each occasion.

So how did the blockade function? The plenum agreed to block only the educational process – meaning classes and seminars – while all other academic and non-academic activities were allowed. The faculty library worked normally, exams and consultations could be held in professors’ offices, and so on. For the students, direct democracy was a crucial segment of the protest. They considered it essential for motivating people towards activism, participation and interest in decision-making processes. Of major importance for the protest was the collectivism of actions and interests and the status of the plenum as the only political subject in the struggle

for free education. Even though certain rules and guidelines for the plenum existed, including a code of conduct, these were documents which served only as a guiding aid in the functioning of the blockade and did not represent a serious formalisation and/or institutionalisation of the protest. As informal and “unorganised” as the protest was, there were no untoward incidents during the blockade, whether at or around the faculty. The blockade received support from numerous public figures from all around the world, including Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler.

The relationship of the students participating in the blockade with the formal student organisations and the student parliament (*šudentski zbor*) in Croatia was characterised by a number of issues previously discussed in this chapter but above all their lack of trust in institutionalised student participation. Research conducted by a group of sociologists during the blockade, among the participants, demonstrates that 88% of participants distrusted the management of the university, 83% showed little or no trust in the university student parliament and 55% showed little or no trust in the faculty student parliament (Čulig et al. 2013: 111). As for the expectations of blockade participants, 23% of them expected the blockade to change the current student parliament of the faculty (ibid.: 104). One of the public debates organised by the blockade participants in November 2009 discussed the history and legitimacy of student parliaments in Croatia. The main issues raised were questions of legality versus the legitimacy of the student parliaments, as well as the attempts of political parties to influence them.

The student parliaments did not participate in the blockade or, so to say, “the Event” of student activism in Croatia. The relations between the student parliaments and the plenum seem to have been either strained or non-existent. Considering the universality of the demands of the blockade and the number of students present at the plenum versus student turnout for the elections of the student parliaments, we must ask ourselves how it happened that the institutionalised student representation drifted away from the “real” student issues on the ground.

### **Meanwhile, in Belgrade<sup>18</sup>**

There had been a number of protests at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade since 2006, organised outside of the biggest student organisations and/or student parliaments. All were smaller in scope than those that took place in Croatia, and they also left fewer written records and raised little interest within the academic community. The best documented was the blockade from 2006, described thoroughly in the collective work *Borba za znanje (Fight for knowledge)* published in 2007 (Kurepa 2007). The protest of 2006 demanded a 50% reduction in tuition fees and regulation of the qualification level of the old undergraduate diplomas (pre-Bologna Process study cycles), among other demands. It took different forms, from protest gatherings to an intrusion into the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade during an Academic Council meeting and the blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy from 22 to 28 November.

During the protest, organising and participating students had an open conflict with the two main student organisations: the Student Alliance of Belgrade (the remnant

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18. See [www.plenumfilozofskog.blogspot.com](http://www.plenumfilozofskog.blogspot.com), accessed 27 September 2014.

of the socialist Yugoslav regime's student organisation) and the Student Union of Serbia (the remnant of the independent student organisation during the late 1990s, which participated in the overthrow of the Serbian authoritarian regime). The conflict culminated on 22 November, when the official student organisations organised a series of events to commemorate the start of the big student protests in 1996 and 1997.<sup>19</sup> It led to total confusion in and around the Faculty of Philosophy of Belgrade. Even though at the time, the student organisations and the students participating in the alternative protest shared a common demand (the regulation of the qualification level of the pre-Bologna undergraduate diplomas), there was no common ground for co-operation or common advocacy efforts. The official student organisations insisted on using the institutionalised channels of student participation without supporting activities such as intrusions into academic meetings or the blockade that started on that day. They also rejected the protestors' legitimacy to negotiate with university management and the Ministry of Education on any of these topics. Equally, the students outside of the student organisations rejected the legitimacy of institutionalised student representatives in representing the students as a whole. The number of students involved in the blockade was much smaller than in Croatia, barely coming to a hundred. This was used by the student organisations to undermine their importance and capacity.

The aftermath of the 2006 protests led to the adoption in 2007 of a rulebook on the disciplinary responsibility of students by the University of Belgrade.<sup>20</sup> In addition to addressing the usual disciplinary breaches, such as cheating in exams or plagiarism, the rulebook also sanctioned blockades of faculties. Such an article might have represented a serious breach against the human rights to assembly and free expression, but it was not stopped by the student organisations and student parliaments. The overall public perception of such methods remained very much one of disapproval.

One of the many discrediting remarks made vis-à-vis the student protesters was regarding their political and ideological positions. The student "activists" were always portrayed as extreme left groups or anarchists. The conflict between the student protesters and the official student representatives remained open, as the former organised another protest in 2010 against alleged fraud in the elections for the student parliament at the Faculty of Philosophy.

In 2011, another blockade of the Faculty of Philosophy took place, spreading also to the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade. Educational activities (lectures, exams, consultations with lecturers, etc.) were allowed and the protesters had a large number of demands: 13 in the field of education/exams/organisation of education/literature; 7 in the funding field including the lowering of tuition fees and abolition of other financial fees;<sup>21</sup> and 7 in the field of student organisation – including the introduction of the plenum as the student representative body. Apart from the scope

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19. In the winter of 1996-97, student protests lasted for three months against the Serbian regime's election fraud and authoritarian character.

20. Rulebook on the disciplinary responsibility of students – *Pravilnik o disciplinskoj odgovornosti studenata* (2007), godina XLV, broj 133, Glasnik Univerziteta u Beogradu.

21. Different administrative fees, including those for applying for an exam, renewing the academic year, issuing a diploma, etc.

and the size of the blockade, the protests in Belgrade differed from that in Zagreb in that they never had one universal demand. All the demands that were aimed at cutting back students' workload were, in public, used as the ultimate proof that the protesters were nothing but a bunch of "lazy" students.

The Rector of the University of Belgrade, Professor Branko Kovačević, went to the media to accuse the students of "living in communism, as the students who do not pay tuition fees are lucky that we are doing them a favour" and invited the state to "reinstall order at the blocked faculties" (Blic 2011, Gucijan 2011). The management of the Faculty of Philosophy insisted on official channels of student representation, using also a private security firm to break down the blockade. During the protest, there were a number of incidents caused by unidentified groups, named by the protesters as belonging to the far right. A member of the student parliament of the Faculty of Philosophy stated that the protesters were an irrelevant group of students and that some were not even students of the Faculty of Philosophy, and accused them of belonging to "ultra left" groups and posing unrealistic demands for free education to a country that was dealing with "more important issues like Kosovo" (Milanović 2011).

Student representatives, elected for the student parliament with often very low turnout, disagreed with the demands for free education as well as the methods of protesting. Institutional channels were considered the only legitimate way to fight for student rights. Turnout for elections and the number of activists within student organisations remain low, which contributes to the question of whether the current forms of student representation fulfil the role of true student participation in the management of higher education institutions and the development of education policies.

## Who will represent the students?

Students are facing a changing environment, both in academic institutions and within their societies in the transition countries. As their economic status falls and the overall student body diversifies, along with heavier demands on their academic "efficiency" students are losing interest in official channels of student participation. At the same time, their lack of interest does not mean they are not ready to participate in other forms of student organisation. The distrust between official student representation and "regular" students continues to grow and it opens up a number of challenges for both student "activists" and student "professionals" (Klemenčič 2007) in the region, as well as for the whole academic community. This could be the time to consider alternative modes of student mobilisation.

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## Chapter 6

# Student union resistance to tuition fees in Finland

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*Leasa Weimer*

### **Abstract**

The higher education system in Finland has traditionally been free for all students, regardless of nationality, pursuing bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. However, in 2009 the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture introduced a tuition fee pilot programme in tandem with new public management reforms as part of the New Universities Act. The five-year tuition fee pilot programme allows universities to charge tuition fees from international (non-EU and non-European Economic Area) students enrolled in select English-taught master's programmes. This qualitative study examines how strategic actors, specifically the student union, hold power in the higher education policy field as they resist tuition fees. The theory of strategic action fields (SAF) is employed to analyse how these collective strategic actors oppose the move towards market-based reforms through discursive formation. The study concludes that collective actors (particularly the Finnish student union) are instrumental in the Finnish higher education field as market-based reforms are introduced and they struggle to maintain a system without tuition fees.

**Keywords:** student union; tuition fees; strategic action fields; Finnish higher education; academic capitalism; international higher education

## Introduction of tuition fees in Finland

Until 2010, the Finnish Constitution guaranteed a higher education system with no tuition fees for all students, regardless of nationality, pursuing bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. With the New Universities Act of 2009, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture increased the autonomy of higher education institutions, encouraging universities to become more entrepreneurial and innovative. The new legislation included a five-year pilot programme allowing universities to charge tuition fees from international (non-EU and non-European Economic Area) students enrolled in specific English-taught master's programmes. The Ministry of Education and Culture granted 131 international degree master's programmes (IDMPs)<sup>22</sup> within 9 universities and 11 universities of applied sciences (UAS, polytechnics sector) the right to take part in the experimental tuition programme.

Out of the 131 selected IDMPs only 24 chose to charge tuition fees (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012). Selected universities and polytechnics choosing to charge tuition fees also made decisions on the tuition fee amount, student selection and enrolment (Hölttä, Janssen and Kivisto 2010). While the number of participating IDMPs in the tuition experiment is small, the creation of such a programme in Finland serves as a turning point in the shift to a more market-oriented higher education system. Free-of-charge Finnish higher education has reflected the basic principles and ideals of the Finnish welfare state (e.g. universalism and equal opportunities); hence, a shift towards commercialising higher education is dramatically at odds with the social and cultural history of the country. Educational equality has been the cornerstone of the Finnish welfare system since the end of the Second World War, thus resistance to the tuition fee pilot programme has been significant.

## Theoretical framework

The theory of strategic action fields (SAF) explains how collective actors create social structures in meso-level organisations (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012). Specifically, this theory serves as a framework to analyse how actors in the Finnish higher education field defend the stability of existing institutional arrangements or enact social change. Fligstein and McAdam define three collective actors in the SAF theory:

- “incumbents”: actors with influence (their views are dominant in the organisation);
- “challengers”: actors with alternative vision to dominant logic, but who wield little influence;
- “governance units”: actors that oversee compliance and functioning in the field (internal to the field, not external state structures).

In the Finnish higher education system the incumbents seek to maintain and protect the status quo of a higher education system without tuition fees, while the challengers aim to alter the social order by introducing tuition fees for international students. Actors use resources, social skills and opportunities that emerge in the field to gain more favourable positions. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the incumbents

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22. IDMPs are defined as degree-granting master's programmes, taught in a language other than Finnish or Swedish, typically enrolling Finnish and international students (Weimer 2012).

(the student unions), exploring the discourse used by these collective actors to defend their position in the field.

The SAF in this study is defined as the Finnish higher education system. The field of Finnish higher education reforms has traditionally been dominated by actors from the Ministry of Education and Culture, academic trade unions, political parties, student unions and even national industry organisations (Välilmaa 2012). There is no one central power in the SAF but instead many actors who take on different positions according to the various reforms and issues that emerge.<sup>23</sup>

The SAF theory serves to uncover and locate student union members who mobilise into collective groups that contest academic capitalism. The theory of academic capitalism illustrates how universities and higher education actors intersect with markets, often attaching a price to something that was previously free of charge or increasing the price of formerly low-cost products (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The incumbents in this study are those actors who oppose tuition fees and academic capitalism. They contest the transformation of knowledge into a commodity, the university into a business, and the student into a consumer. They believe that there is an alternative model to the market model of higher education and value the public good of higher education and the essence of educational equality for all, a cornerstone of the welfare state philosophy.

## Method

This chapter uses data from a larger dissertation study focused on the tuition fee changes in Finland (Weimer 2013). A qualitative research design is employed that is both descriptive and analytical in nature. Qualitative interviews from 25 respondents provide rich and detailed interpretations of the evolution of the tuition fee pilot programme in Finland. The purposeful sample includes individuals at the national level (that is staff of the Ministry of Education and Culture, higher education organisation representatives, etc.), university administration, academic staff (professors), university staff (administrative staff), and representatives of the student union. Documents serve as secondary data to ensure that the results are accurate. Interviews and documents were analysed using an open coding method, wherein themes and patterns emerged based on the theory and research questions. Patterns and themes emerging from the interviews were then analysed and interpreted using the aforementioned theoretical framework.

## Student unions in the Finnish SAF

Student unions<sup>24</sup> hold a unique position in the history of Finland and the tuition fee debate. They represent a collective group of actors in the opposition movement against

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23. J. Välilmaa, personal communication, 9 November 2012.

24. In this study, the term “student unions” refers to both the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) and the individual student unions at higher education institutions. It is important to note, however, that there are distinct differences between these two organisations. The SYL is registered as a legal “voluntary” association and its members include individual student unions at higher education institutions. The individual student unions at higher education institutions are autonomous legal entities with mandatory membership for enrolled students (A. Aniluoto, personal communication, 25 October 2012).

tuition fees (the incumbents) and have a long history of maintaining a strong voice in the national higher education policy arena: “Student unions are very powerful and when they lobby they have a heavy impact within each political party” (interview with national-level representative). The National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) was founded a few years after Finland’s independence in 1921 by the Helsinki University and Åbo Akademi student unions (Suomen Ylioppilaskuntien Liitto 2013). Through the years both the SYL and the student unions at higher education institutions have been instrumental in advocating continued student welfare (health insurance, housing and grants for domestic students).<sup>25</sup> Student unions in Finland have become professionalised, modelling their organisational structure on the Finnish Parliament. This structure includes some elected members as well as full-time and paid employees. Student union culture has reinvented itself as many representatives graduate to become leaders in national government and the corporate world, thus the union is a national breeding ground for future politicians, government officials and industry leaders:

Student organisations [student unions] are very strong in Finland; they are very influential. Very many ministers and directors of big companies and members of parliament are former student politicians. For instance, the director of Nokia is a former chair and very many ministers have been active in national student policy and that makes the organisation very powerful. I think that members of parliament or even ministries listen sometimes more to the student organisation [union] than the Rector’s conference or the professors’ union (Interview with national-level representative).

The tradition of involving the student unions’ voice in the political process continues to this day. Most Ministry of Education and Culture working groups and calls for comments on legislative and government actions involve representatives from the national student union:

We usually have a lot of representatives in different groups in government working groups. We usually get [asked to participate], when government is asking for pronouncements from different stakeholders. We are usually one of them [the stakeholders] when there’s some kind of proposal to legislation or some kind of decree issued (Interview with student union representative).

Overall, student unions have a strong voice because there is a long tradition of the Finnish Parliament and Government involving them. In the SAF, “the rules of the field tend to favor them, and shared meanings tend to legitimate and support their privileged position” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 13). Altbach argues that when student activism is “traditionally accepted as a legitimate element of the political system it is more likely that activism will have an impact on the society” (Altbach 1989: 100).

The student unions’ position against tuition fees is known throughout the SAF. Generally there is consensus among the collective actors that incumbents have

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25. A government-financed grant is available for all Finnish students (and permanent Finnish residents) to supplement the cost of their studies and housing while studying in higher education. Grants are not based on need or merit. The 2012 study grant amount for students studying in higher education institutions is €298/month and the maximum housing supplement, which is meant to cover 80% of the rent, is €201.60/month (Kela 2012).

power in the SAF because of their historical position. One university administrator speaks of the student unions' influence:

Of course, students have a big voice in this society also and Finnish students are quite against this [tuition fees]. Especially because there is a fear that if we start to introduce fees for our non-EU student then eventually it will mean we have fees for our Finnish students as well. And, free education is like I said something that is very valued (equality) and what it implies (Interview with university administrator).

From a comparative analysis of student politics Meyer and Rubinson (1972) argue that national social processes influence a high level of student politicisation. They claim that there are three reasons students are politically active in certain countries. First, the social status of "student" is defined within the society and political system, thus this symbolic definition leads to increased political action. In the Finnish context, students have a social status that may be considered privileged as they are afforded government subsidies and discounts on travel, and student unions have a sustained voice in the higher education policy arena. Second, when an education system is both institutionalised and regulated at the national level, student status becomes more normalised. In Finland, student unions have grown with the institutionalisation of higher education. Student unions are central to the institutional decision-making structure as they hold seats on many university boards and there is a common agreement that it should take care of most student welfare issues. Third, nation-building processes lead to educational systems being used as the vehicle for defining citizenship, with students as the social elite. Since the 19th century, higher education has been a vital institution in the formation of Finnish national identity and its nation-building project (Välímää 2004, 2012). After the Second World War, education became an essential aspect of the welfare state agenda, thus establishing educational equality as a national core value.

Although student unions have a strong history of being a player in higher education policy, they have struggled to maintain control in the SAF as challengers gradually gain position in the field. For example, when faced with the realisation that the tuition fee pilot programme was a likely proposition, the incumbents negotiated strongly with the politicians to introduce a mandatory scholarship programme as a pre-condition for the pilot programme participation. If a tuition fee experiment was implemented, the student unions needed to continue to protect the status quo of educational equality. For the incumbents, a needs-based scholarship programme upheld the value of educational equality as it ensured that international students from lower socio-economic backgrounds would still have an opportunity to pursue higher education in Finland. However, as the legislative wording was revised, through multiple drafts, the proposed need-based scholarship simply became a scholarship.

## **Strategic discourse**

Within the SAF, collective actors strategically employ discourse not only to justify their stances, but also to gain position in the debate by mobilising others. Through social skills the actors interpret rules in the field and then mobilise resources through cognitive, affective and linguistic facilities. Fligstein and McAdam state, "Social skill is the

ability to induce co-operation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities” (2012: 178). One way that student unions create and sustain collective action is through the social construction of specific discourse (rationales).

The student unions’ overarching ideological opposition to tuition fees is based on the idea that Finnish society, as a whole, benefits from higher education. Therefore, society should invest in higher education. Incumbents view higher education as a public good and responsibility. There are four main rationales that emerge from the data. First, the incumbents believe that once tuition fees are introduced for international students, tuition fees will soon be introduced also for Finnish students. They call this domino effect the “gate theory”. Second, incumbents also believe that higher education should be insulated from market forces and thus they are resistant to the behaviour and practices of academic capitalism. These two themes, equality and resistance to market-oriented higher education, are not specific arguments protecting international degree students against tuition fees, but more generally they reflect the overall ideology of the incumbents. However, the last two rationales are specific to international degree students. The third rationale supports international social justice wherein respondents view tuition-free higher education as development aid. Finally, the last rationale incumbents employ is the notion that the introduction of tuition fees contradicts national efforts to internationalise higher education and the labour market.

## Gate theory

The most frequently used argument against tuition fees has been named the “gate theory”, a theory created in the SAF by collective actors. A challenger describes the theory:

There’s of course the basic students’ movement opposition to fees for international students, the so-called “gate theory”, that suggests that if you introduce fees for non-EU students, the next step is for the government to introduce fees locally (Interview with university administrator).

In other words, once the gate opens for universities to charge tuition fees for non-EU students, the gate will remain open and tuition fees will be applied to EU and domestic students. When analysed, this argument becomes more about protecting Finnish students and the core value of educational equality than about the international students who are subjected to the pilot programme. A student union respondent explains the “gate theory” and addresses the apprehension about the tuition fee pilot programme expanding to include Finnish students:

The whole student movement in Finland has been very sceptical about tuition fees in general and it’s been one of the biggest topics in the last decade or two to be against tuition fees in general. The student movement is a bit worried that tuition fees might spread to Finnish students as well...so there have been demonstrations and big campaigns against the tuition fees (Interview with student union representative).

As this respondent notes, one tactic the student unions employ to establish co-operation and mobilise others is the organisation of public demonstrations and campaigns. For example, in April 2010 the SYL organised a demonstration against tuition fees in Helsinki where approximately 2 000 students gathered in Senate Square and marched

to Parliament House (Dobson 2010). In addition, student unions around Finland host annual “free education days” in November to rally continued support for their position.

The idea of tuition is still politically sensitive. Many challengers speak of the sensitive nature of tuition fees and in particular how the gate theory has made intellectual discussions on the topic difficult. A respondent explains:

It’s important to understand that this tuition fee experiment is politically very sensitive. In Nordic countries, especially in Finland, it’s been very difficult to discuss tuition fees because there is a “gate theory” in the background that if we have experimental tuition fees it will automatically lead to tuition fees for all programmes for all people (Interview with university administrator).

The incumbents, by default, have an easier time establishing their position because they defend the dominant logic and a fundamental value of Finnish society. It is through the gate theory argument that the incumbents aim to protect free education or more generally the basic core value of educational equality, a value deeply embedded in Finnish welfare philosophy from the late 1950s. Reflecting on the idea of educational equality, one respondent explains how student unions have historically resisted tuition:

In the history of the student union we have always wanted no tuition fees for anybody, even for the students from outside the EU. We like to have free [higher education] for all because we see that it is equal; we like that our students are in an equal position (Interview with student union representative).

It is not only the incumbents that discuss how free higher education has become a significant policy instrument to maintain equality. Even the challengers speak of how “free education” remains an essential element of the welfare state’s design, demonstrating how collective actors have a common understanding of the role educational equality plays in Finland. One challenger acknowledges this common national understanding:

I think it goes to this welfare state idea, it is a part of the package, nothing is free really, we pay a lot through our taxes. But, still we have free education, basically free health care and we take care of our children and elderly. It’s part of the ideology that has made this country what it is. I think it is quite telling that most of the political parties see these things quite similarly whether they are more on the left or more towards the right. Of course there are variations, but the belief in this model is very Nordic and very Finnish (Interview with university administrator).

While the incumbents draw on this deeply emotional core value to justify and gain support for their position, the challengers acknowledge the importance of this core value and how it makes the tuition fee discussion politically volatile. For example, a university administrator speaks of how free education reflects the basic values of society and democracy:

The whole issue to introduce tuition fees in Finland has been politically extremely difficult. It touches a very deep value structure in Finland: education must be free for all. Free education is associated with basic values and democracy and everyone’s right regardless of the ability to pay or not and it’s so deeply rooted in Finnish system that it’s a very difficult question for all political parties (Interview with university administrator).

Even though the tuition fee pilot programme is exclusively for non-EU students in selected English language masters' programmes, the "gate theory" opens up the debate for more general ideological arguments about tuition fees for Finnish society. Thus, the discourse also includes how educational equality promotes social mobility. With the absence of tuition fees comes the assumption that there are no barriers to participating in higher education. A university staff respondent speaks about this idea:

We want to offer good education for all people regardless of what their background is. So, all have the possibility to enter universities, for example, to get a higher level of education even if their parents didn't have that possibility in the past (Interview with university staff member).

Many respondents speak of how the distributive justice of broad participation in higher education has contributed specifically to the success story of social mobility in Finland and more generally to nation building. Through social skills honed in the SAF, incumbents gain the capability to eloquently frame their argument in such a way that it mobilises people to protect social mobility, the essence of what educational equality has come to signify. A student union respondent explains in more detail why free education represents educational equality and in the end social mobility:

I think it [free education] is really important for any society, it's one of the main reasons why in Finland, compared with other countries, it has been relatively easy to move from one class to another or it's one of the main things that ensures social mobility and equality of opportunities. I think without free education Finland would turn much more into a class society where your parents' position predetermines where you end up in your life. I think in all Nordic countries we have quite a strong appreciation for social mobility and it's a very essential value that everyone has a chance to climb up in society (Interview with student union representative).

## Resistance to academic capitalism

The second rationale that incumbents use is a general anti-market stance to higher education arising from their resistance to academic capitalism. Kauppinen, Mathies and Weimer (2014) develop a conceptual model highlighting market transactions in the international student market, one of which is the exchange of tuition fees for knowledge. The student unions' argument is rooted in a general suspicion of market forces and how these transactions change the student into a consumer and the higher education institution into a provider. Yet, even within this rationale against tuition fees the fundamental value of equality remains central to the argument. This student union respondent explains their discontent with market-oriented higher education:

You treat people the same regardless of where they come from and I don't see education as a product in that sense or a marketable good. I really dislike the idea of having a business model for universities or higher education in general or having this kind of idea on effectiveness that they want to push through and they have to make a profit and everything. It's just incompatible with my way of thinking (Interview with student union representative).

There is apprehension surrounding the introduction of tuition fees because it has the potential to change the teacher-student and university-student relationship. A respondent explains how this change in student identity affects how paying students are treated in the university community:

We're afraid that there will be A and B class students, that those students who pay will get better service than those who don't pay. This sort of market logic will prevail in the university so that the university no longer thinks of students as equal members of the university community. Instead they think that students are like customers and that they have to maximise the income that they can get from students ... In Finland we have a strong tradition of considering the students as part of the community together with professors and staff. But if they pay money then they just become customers (Interview with student union representative).

Such consumerist policies are seen as devices to fundamentally change "academic culture and pedagogic relationships to comply with market frameworks" (Naidoo, Shankar and Veer 2011: 1145). The incumbents worry about the fundamental changes that academic capitalism practices bring to the classroom.

## **International social justice**

The third rationale used by the incumbents includes the philosophy of tuition as development aid. The basic idea behind this rationale is that free Finnish higher education helps educate international students coming from developing countries with limited infrastructure for quality higher education provision. A government unit respondent speaks of how the student unions use this rationale not only to gain support for their general position against tuition fees, but also to counter the pilot programme with the need-based scholarship programme:

Our student unions have emphasised that Finnish higher education has been a possibility for several international students who come ... from countries that are not doing that well. So, our free education has enabled those students to have access to quality higher education. One of the reasons that student unions have been against this trial has been this kind of global responsibility thinking (Interview with national-level representative).

## **Tuition fees: contradictory to internationalisation efforts**

Finally, just as the incumbents believe that higher education benefits accrue to Finnish society, they also believe that Finnish society profits from having international degree students enrolled in national higher education institutions:

We have more to gain from having people come into the country and study and bring new ideas; we feel that that's a valuable contribution in itself (Interview with student union representative).

In view of this, they build their argument on the assumption that introducing tuition fees will decrease the attractiveness of studying in Finland, resulting in an overall decline in the number of international students. In the eyes of the incumbents and

many other respondents, reducing the number of international degree students remains contradictory to national internationalisation efforts. In the Strategy for Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in Finland (2009-2015) there is a mobility goal to recruit 20 000 international degree students by 2015,<sup>26</sup> making up 7% of the total students enrolled (Ministry of Education and Culture 2009).

Within this rationale, there is an assumption or even a fear that the number of international students will decrease with the introduction of tuition fees. Many respondents refer to what happened in the neighbouring Nordic countries, Denmark and Sweden, when tuition fees were implemented in 2006 and 2010, respectively. In particular, a respondent in the governance unit acknowledges this apprehension:

There is also a lot of discussion about what happened in Denmark and Sweden (where the number of applicants decreased) and if the same will happen in Finland (Interview with national-level representative).

Another respondent at the national level mentions how findings from student union surveys adds to this trepidation:

There are fears that the number of applicants will decrease if we have fees because in different student surveys the biggest reason for choosing Finland for future students is that we do not have fees (Interview with national-level representative).

In 2005, SYL conducted a student survey of international degree students at five higher education institutions.<sup>27</sup> One of the questions was: "Would you have chosen your current university as a place for studies if you had to pay tuition fees?" Out of 602 respondents answering the survey question, 60% of the respondents answered no, while the majority of the other 40% responded that they would be willing to pay less than €1 000/year as tuition (Kärki 2005: 38-40).<sup>28</sup> The student unions use these results to support their argument that international degree students are attracted to study in Finland because of the absence of tuition fees, thus if tuition fees were introduced international degree students would choose to go elsewhere.

A major theme running throughout the collected data is the international attractiveness of the Finnish higher education system. This theme reflects the general concern that Finland, being a non-native English-speaking country, in addition to being perceived as challenging because of the location, climate, etc., has to work hard to attract and recruit international degree students. Here a respondent discusses

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26. In 2010, there were 15 707 international degree students enrolled in Finnish higher education institutions (CIMO 2011).

27. The survey collected responses from 608 international degree students in 5 higher education institutions. In 2005, there were approximately 8 000 international students studying in Finland.

28. Out of 237 respondents who answered that they would be willing to pay tuition fees, only 99 answered the following question asking what amount they would be willing to pay: 75 respondents answered that they would be willing to pay under €1 000 per year, 17 respondents answered €1 000 to €3 000, 6 respondents answered €3 000 to €6 000, one respondent answered €6 000 to €12 000, and no respondents answered €12 000 to €18 000 (Kärki 2005: 39-40).

the challenges associated with the attractiveness of studying in Finland compared to other countries:

Finland has a lot of good sides but it certainly has some unattractive sides. We are such a small country, far up north, the climate, the language, and our country is not that internationally minded yet (it's quite inward too...the atmosphere, the culture). So it is a lot easier for an international student to go to London for example or some other British place or even to the Netherlands. It might be easier to go to Sweden (Interview with national-level representative).

While it may be more attractive to study in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands or Sweden for those reasons, financial attractiveness (tuition fees, cost of living, etc.) also plays a role in the choice of institution. In their rationale against tuition fees, many incumbents discuss Finland's financial attractiveness and competitiveness:

It's also a question of having a competitive system, I mean, you always say you have free education but for someone from outside of the EU to come to Finland, Finland is an expensive country. You pay for your living and you pay for your upkeep: housing, at least in Helsinki, the estimate is around €700 a month. When you come to the country, you must have at least €6 000 in your account and you must have health insurance. So, it's free in a sense that you don't charge tuition fees but it's a very expensive choice for a lot of international students (Interview with student union representative).

## Conclusion

Student union members in the SAF have shaped the contentious, politically sensitive, ongoing debate over tuition fees in Finland. As incumbents in the field they aim to protect higher education as a public good by defending the deeply rooted Finnish social welfare value of educational equality. In this sense, the incumbents aim to protect the social welfare system from neoliberal tendencies that privatise and convert collective goals into individual responsibilities.

While this chapter did not focus on the challengers in the field, they continue to gain momentum in the national debate as a few divisive legislative proposals for tuition fees have emerged in the Finnish Parliament since the beginning of the tuition fee pilot programme. The challengers align with the academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime. They co-opt discourse from EU policy as well as leverage opportunities to gain position in the field. The challengers in the SAF believe that the Finnish higher education system is not financially sustainable as a system without tuition fees. They assume that international student tuition will bring in a new line of revenue, remove the burden of paying for international students from taxpayers, and help relieve the anticipated future competition for public funding vis-à-vis the country's aging population.

In the future, the market-based higher education reforms in Finland may well be seen as what Fligstein and McAdam (2012) identify as a "rupture" or crisis in the field, but it is too early to call it that. The outcome depends on how and if the reforms bring about internal developments or destabilising changes to the field. Fligstein and McAdam assert: "One empirical indicator of the crisis in a field is the inability of incumbents to reproduce themselves" (2012: 176). As demonstrated in this study, the

incumbents (student unions) continue to reproduce themselves and hold power in the SAF despite the tuition fee pilot programme. In the future, however, challengers will continue to put tuition fees on the legislative table, especially in times of financial austerity. The incumbents will need to maintain their power in the SAF; otherwise a crisis typically results in an “episode of contention” wherein the rules and power relations in the field are up for grabs.

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## Chapter 7

# The role and capacity of youth organisations and student engagement: a comparative study of Serbia, Croatia and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”

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*Martin Galevski*

### **Abstract**

Multiple studies have addressed the general developments of post-socialist civil society in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. However, very few of them recognise or address the specific role and capacity of youth organisations in student civic engagement. This chapter is primarily concerned with the capacity of youth organisations to engage students in three selected countries – Serbia, Croatia and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” – addressing both good practices, peculiarities and some challenges encountered. The analytical framework used in this study is an adaptation of Hart’s (1992) ladder of youth participation – which is readjusted to serve the context of analysing youth organisations.

**Keywords:** youth organisations; student civic engagement; participation in policy making

## Introduction

Over the past few decades the countries of the former Yugoslavia have experienced considerable political and economic changes, accompanied by changes in the development of civil society. While multiple studies have addressed the general developments of post-socialist civil society in the region (Howard 2003; Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Bojčić-Dzelilović, Ker-Lindsay and Kostovicova 2013), little attention has been paid to the role of particular subgroups or organisations in the process of transforming society. Namely, very few studies recognise or address the specific role and capacity of youth organisations in student civic engagement. In this respect, youth organisations have been largely absent from the literature or are mentioned only in passing as part of a wider analysis of civil society organisations.

This chapter is primarily concerned with the capacity of youth organisations to engage students in three selected countries – Serbia, Croatia and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, with particular attention to the roles played by youth organisations in youth-related decision-making processes, and how such roles shape the perspectives and actions of young people.

For the purpose of this analysis youth organisations are distinguished from student unions. While definitions may vary, here the latter are understood as student representative bodies formally engaged and tied to the decision-making bodies of universities. Youth organisations, on the other hand, are defined as civil society organisations whose membership and focus are young people and whose activities are related to meeting the needs of young people. Such organisations commonly operate in a broader context than higher education. Given that an increasing number of students are no longer part of the traditional age cohort (usually defined between 18 to 24 years), we argue that it is relevant to discuss youth organisations as structures, which usually include or serve students and their interests. Therefore, examining youth organisations more broadly can offer us a glimpse of student civic participation.

The analytical framework used in this study is an adaptation of Hart’s (1992) ladder of youth participation – which is readjusted to serve the context of youth organisations. The chapter chronologically traces the development of youth organisations over the course of three different time periods, paying attention to the political and ideological underpinnings of youth policies in the selected countries. It begins by offering a brief historical overview of youth organisations in the former Yugoslavia, followed by an analysis of their development during the 1990s, and ends with a discussion of their role since the turn of the new millennium to the present – which will represent the largest part of the chapter.

## Analytical framework

In recent years a wide range of models and theories on youth participation have emerged (for a comprehensive list see Karsten 2011). One of the earliest and most influential models on youth participation was developed by Hart (1992) who used the metaphor of a ladder (see also Arnstein 1969) to propose eight degrees of youth involvement, each of them corresponding to one rung on the ladder. While the ladder of participation was initially designed to serve as a typology “for thinking

about children's participation in projects" (Hart 1992: 9), the model can be adjusted to a range of questions and has already been, in different forms, adopted by a wide variety of scholars and policy makers (Treseder 1997; Lardner 2001; Driskell 2002). Here the main characteristics of the ladder are readjusted and interpreted in the context of youth organisations and their type of involvement in decision-making processes. Accordingly, Hart's reference to child participation has been replaced with the involvement of youth organisations, while his reference to adults has been replaced with a reference to the state.

The bottom three rungs of the eight-degree ladder described by Hart (1992) – manipulation, decoration and tokenism – are examples of non-participation models and do not account for the meaningful participation of youth organisations:

manipulation: youth organisations are invited to take part in decision-making processes, but they have no real influence on decisions and outcomes. By means of manipulation, youth organisations are allowed merely the illusion of participating, whereas in fact they continue to be manipulated. The relationship between the state and youth organisations is top-down and hierarchical;

decoration: youth organisations are used merely as a visual aid, commonly, though not exclusively, for political events and purposes, and have little real understanding of the issues discussed. The aim of such activities is openly not youth-led and youth organisations do not have any meaningful role, except in being present;

tokenism: this is closely associated with symbolic *pro forma* efforts made by the state, through which it appears that youth organisations have been given a certain voice, though this is only to prevent criticism and make it seem as if young people are being fairly represented; in reality, they have no real influence on any decisions. In this rung, youth organisations often have stereotypes and labels attributed to them.

Moving up the ladder, Hart (1992) proposes various degrees of genuine participation that should be encouraged:

assigned but informed: youth organisations are informed that an activity is taking place and are invited to take on a specific role within the activity. This requires that youth organisations understand the objectives of the activity and who has made the decision regarding their involvement, as well as why they are being involved;

consulted and informed: this involves activities that are initiated and run by adults, but youth organisations are consulted and their opinions are taken seriously. Youth organisations are given feedback on how their suggestions contributed to the final decisions or results, but there is no guarantee that they will be acted on;

state-initiated, shared decisions: activities are initiated by the state, but decisions are shared with youth organisations. The challenge here is to ensure that youth organisations take part in all aspects of the activity and are treated as equal partners;

youth-initiated and directed: activities are initiated and run by youth organisations. The state may take a supportive role, but the activity can be carried out without its intervention;

youth-initiated shared decision making with the state: activities are initiated by youth organisations and decision making is shared between youth organisations and the state.

In line with previous criticism of Hart's ladder as being overly rigid and hierarchical, the starting point of this analysis is that "reaching the top" of the ladder does not necessarily ensure the most meaningful or effective participation. This is particularly important since some authors have expressed divergent opinions about the extent to which youth organisations should be given a role in decision-making processes as representatives of young people (Denstad 2009). In addition, the relative importance of different rungs may shift over time without necessarily moving away from previous forms of participation. Finally, it is worth noting that Hart's ladder represents an ideal-type model and therefore it is only used here as a general guide, without the intention of determining absolute measurements for the countries under study. The ways in which the ladder has been misinterpreted by some scholars beyond its use as a metaphor has been subject to a range of reservations expressed by Hart (2008) in a later text, where he corrects the oft-assumed linear and sequential character of the ladder.

## Youth organisations in former Yugoslavia

In line with early understandings of civil society as being in opposition to the state, and therefore dangerous, the political regime of the former Yugoslavia attempted to eliminate any form of independent civil activity that might confront the socialist political system. Despite such efforts, a rich array of mainly amateur civil society groups emerged, some of them as spin-offs of the regime itself (Geremek 1992). These included various sports and cultural clubs where young people exercised a considerable degree of autonomy to engage in innovative fads – as long as those forms of involvement were in areas without political relevance or imminent danger to the established political order. Nevertheless, such youth groups were an important feature of the emergence of community life and voluntarism in the former Yugoslavia (Sterland and Rizova 2010).

In politically sensitive areas of action, the representation of youth was the exclusive domain of the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia, formally envisioned as an independent self-managed form of social participation, though in reality almost entirely a source of coerced and compulsory social mobilisation under the tight control of the state (Howard 2003). Participation in the League was an informal prerequisite for upward social mobility, admission to higher education and career advancement in the public sector.

In such circumstances, the attitude towards youth policy reflected the non-participation models described by Hart (1992), wherein young people were primarily regarded as recipients of policy, rather than as equal partners in the process of developing and implementing youth policies.

## Youth organisations in the 1990s

In the immediate years after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, despite the heightened attention to civil society, the attitude towards youth did not change drastically, as

most youth organisations were similar to those from the socialist period. Youth organisations were either the successors of the volunteering youth clubs, or a conceptual continuity with the old state-led youth organisations. The exercise of political power was largely left to political parties and the political role of youth decreased rather abruptly, leaving limited space for authentic youth organisations to become visible. None of the three countries during this period had distinctive or clearly formulated youth policies. To some extent this policy vacuum was produced due to the absence of proper initiatives, but also as a consequence of the war in Croatia and Serbia and ethnic tensions in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. As a result, young people became virtually invisible to policy makers, whereas youth-related issues were often ignored or approached in an ad hoc manner.

In addition, the perception of young people as vulnerable and at risk (Finn and Checkoway 1998) has created resistance to the idea of including as a policy actors young people. In rare cases where youth organisations were involved in political processes, they were based on the same instrumental principles from the socialist past, as an extended hand of the state, with the use of the lower non-participation rungs of the ladder described by Hart (1992). One example is the Croatian Alliance of Youth Groups that was characterised by strong political party interference and influence on the leadership of the organisation, eventually leading to its exclusion from the European Youth Forum in 1999 (UNDP 2004). In this sense, not only was there an attempt to neutralise any form of authentic youth activity, but also efforts to safeguard the status quo by setting up state-sponsored national youth councils – which quite successfully created confusion among young people as to which organisations were to be trusted. As a result, the majority of young people – partly due to their experience with similar organisations during the socialist era – were reluctant to participate in youth organisations or any other type of voluntary organisation throughout the entire decade of the 1990s. In addition, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were often presented by politicians and media as “anti-state” or “anti-governmental”, thereby largely contributing to the maintenance of their poor public image.

Due to their disappointment with institutional forms of participation, some young people turned to more direct, looser forms of citizen and political networking as the loci of their demands and interests. The most vivid example of such a shift is from Serbia, where several student movements and protest cycles marked the 1990s as a “delayed echo of the movement that brought about the collapse of the socialist system” (Lazić 1999: 4) as well as a result of a general delay in the transition of the country (Bieber 2003). Throughout the decade, the spontaneity, authenticity and “tactical innovation” (Nikolayenko 2009: 2) of youth movements in Serbia secured them a near monopoly over organised peer groups and youth culture – eventually reaching out to more members than any other youth organisation. The protests from 1996 to 1997 organised by students and the Serbian opposition coalition *Zajedno* (Together) emerged in response to an attempt at election fraud during the local elections in November 1996 (see Lazić 1999; Gormovic and Erdei 1997). A year later, in 1998, *Otpor* (Resistance) was formed as a prodemocratic youth movement which helped galvanise the general public against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic and came to be widely credited for its vital role in his overthrow in the autumn of 2000 (Kostovicova 2006). Since then, *Otpor*’s strategies of non-violent action have inspired numerous youth movements

in many parts of the world, including Georgia's Kmara (Enough) in 2003 and Ukraine's Pora (It is Time) in 2004 (Popovic, Milivojevic and Djinic 2006; Nikolayenko 2009).

In contrast to the calls for democratisation and a strong focus on social justice in Serbia, the student movement in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" from 1997 – which still remains the largest in the country's recent history – had strong manifestations of nationalist sentiment that condemned it to failure. The enactment of a new law that allowed the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje to provide teacher training for ethnic Albanians in their mother tongue led to a series of protests by ethnic Macedonian students who demanded an immediate withdrawal of the law, which was seen as unconstitutional and destabilising (Myhrvold 2005). Besides the general expression of discontent with the work of the government, the student protests were accompanied by strong nationalistic overtones and slogans often degenerating into pure animosity towards ethnic Albanians, even if that might not have been the initial intention. Hence, while student movements are often ascribed an important role in the formation of social capital, the example of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" implies that such informal networks do not necessarily promote democratic values and may serve as a source of additional ethnocentrism.

In Croatia, despite growing dissatisfaction among the general population with Tuđman's government – whose nationalist and semi-authoritarian politics dominated the country – the extent of public protest and youth movements was disappointingly low during much of the 1990s (Fisher and Bijelić 2007). In an effort to ensure broader participation in questions of public concern, during the period preceding the 2000 elections, a more institutionalised form of civil society action took hold as some 140 NGOs established the alliance Glas 99 (Voice 99), aimed at voter education and increasing election turnout. A few months later, the Serbian NGO sector used the Croatian experience and organised a similar pre-election campaign – Izlaz 2000 (Exit 2000). While young people figured prominently as both subject and object of the awareness-raising campaigns, fairly few youth organisations participated as coalition partners. Rather, young people took part as members of the well-organised "adult" NGO community, receiving mentorship and hands-on experience from experienced older activists. In this sense, civic initiatives such as Glas 99 and Izlaz 2000 served as a popular and effective way to create a cadre of youth activists who eventually took leading roles in building sustainable youth organisations.

## Youth organisations since 2000

Within the first few years of the new millennium, youth NGOs began to emerge in all three countries, broadly aligned towards the promotion of democratisation and engagement of young people. While the increase of youth organisations was largely encouraged by the penetration of international donors in the region, the pace of development and the variety of their functions and purposes in each country were also influenced by the willingness of political actors to extend decision-making ownership to youth organisations or young people in general. Following the practices and recommendations of the EU and the Council of Europe in the area of youth, all three countries adopted national youth strategies in order to place more emphasis on youth as a source of potential rather than a concern or a problem.

In Croatia, based on a series of discussions with a variety of stakeholders conducted across the country, a five-year National Youth Action Programme was enacted in 2004 (Republic of Croatia 2004). A year later, in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, a broad 10-year National Youth Strategy was adopted, but with a rather unclear institutional framework and mechanisms for implementation (CRPM 2007). In Serbia, as Mreža mladih Hrvatske (the Croatian Youth Network) had done, the unofficial Koalicija mladih Srbije (Coalition of Youth in Serbia) gathered the largest and most influential youth organisations in the country to publicly advocate the importance of developing a national youth strategy. As a direct result of the initiative, the Serbian Government set up the Ministry of Youth and Sport in 2007 as a body to regulate and address youth issues; it drafted and adopted a National Youth Strategy in 2008 (Republic of Serbia 2008). While the potential of such strategies to empower young people is yet to be fully realised, according to some critical observations (Azanjac et al. 2012), the strategies in place exist only on paper and contribute marginally to the improvement of the status of young people. This has been particularly evident at the local level where – with the exception of Croatia where more than 100 local action plans have been developed – it is still not possible to speak of an upward development in creating local youth action plans (Denstad 2009). Partly, this has been caused by the unequal geographical distribution and heavy concentration of activities of the majority of youth organisations, including the most active ones, in urban areas with significant populations.

In terms of the legislative setting in which young people operate, Serbia is the only country with a Law on Youth from 2011,<sup>29</sup> while in Croatia the Croatian Parliament adopted a Law on Youth Advisory Boards (2007)<sup>30</sup> to cater to youth bodies acting at local and regional levels. In “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, a law on youth was drafted in 2011, however it was withdrawn from parliamentary procedure after being criticised by a number of youth organisations as being non-transparent and shaped by top-down policy prescriptions (see for example Law on Youth Policy Brief 2011).<sup>31</sup> The initiative inspired many youth organisations to co-operate on a range of youth issues, ultimately leading to the creation of a permanent coalition of youth organisations, Republika Mladi (Youth Republic) and the establishment of an independent National Youth Council in 2013 (EYF 2013). The success of Republika Mladi later became a guide for other grassroots initiatives which involved direct political lobbying and advocacy. With respect to Hart’s ladder (1992), the actions of Republika Mladi allow us to recognise elements of youth-initiated and directed activities since actions were initiated and carried out solely by youth organisations and without the intervention of the state. According to Denstad (2009), in situations where youth organisations dominate the entire strategy development process, there should be enough space left for the equal involvement of government representatives

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29. Youth Law Serbia (2011), available at [www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_mladima.html](http://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_mladima.html), accessed 28 September 2014.

30. Law on Youth Advisory Boards (2007), available at <http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/297305.html>, accessed 28 September 2014.

31. Law on Youth Policy Brief (2011), available at <http://mladizakon.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/policy-brief-law-on-youth-en.pdf>, accessed 28 September 2014.

and other stakeholder groups or individuals. Otherwise, the process may become completely NGO dominated, depriving other stakeholders of a sense of ownership.

While the practice of establishing different types of umbrella organisations is not new, the creation of national youth networks such as Mreža mladih Hrvatske in Croatia, Koalicija mladih Srbije in Serbia and Republika Mladi in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” have helped create a shared sense of youth community and a forum for the exchange of experiences and ideas in a structured and systematic way. In this respect, these youth networks have created not only an opportunity to learn from each other’s experiences, but also to build capacities and feel that one is not working in isolation but is part of a greater community. Shared advocacy initiatives on various youth issues (e.g. tackling corruption in higher education) have taken place not only at national level but also increasingly through regional networks. While it is not always easy to identify or attribute specific results or outcomes to a network, as opposed to an activity carried out by an individual organisation, the examples mentioned above suggest that youth organisations in all three countries have recognised the advantages of such networks and the strategic importance of forming partnerships as a means of improving their position in decision-making processes and policy dialogue, as well as strengthening their capacity to implement youth-focused activities.

Yet the ability of such youth fora to influence political decision making and shape youth policy remains limited. Apart from Croatia, where certain responsibilities in resolving youth issues have been delegated to Mreža mladih Hrvatske at local level, youth organisations do not share decision-making authority in youth policy issues. In this sense, the role of youth organisations corresponds to the middle rungs of Hart’s ladder, with youth organisations being consulted and informed, but holding relatively little power in all aspects of the implementation of activities. Similarly, there has been a lack of full recognition of youth organisations as being able to act on behalf of young people in various public institutions. For example, although several youth organisations base their offices and activities within universities, they have not been able to participate in institutional decision-making processes as relevant stakeholders, at least not in the same manner as student unions.

Although youth organisations are becoming an increasingly distinctive subsector of civil society commonly referenced in official documents in all three countries, there is little reliable, systematic and comparable data on the number of such organisations. Partly, the challenge here lies in the problematic classification and definition of youth organisations in the respective countries. In Croatia, youth organisations are not formally defined and thus do not differ from other types of NGOs registered in accordance with the Law on Associations (National Youth Programme, Republic of Croatia 2009). However, in the planning and implementation of youth policies, youth organisations are considered those organisations with a membership mainly under the age of 29 and/or organisations with a strong programme focus on youth. In Serbia, a similar typology based on membership and thematic focus is in use. Youth organisations are those whose membership consists of at least 75% young people and/or organisations whose objectives, among other things, are aimed at young people. In “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, the draft law on youth provided a broad reference to youth organisations as those contributing to improving the status of young people at local and national levels.

While the lack of adequate data makes it difficult to determine the exact number of youth organisations dealing with young people, there seems to be an increase in such organisations in all three countries. The number of youth organisations, however, remains relatively low compared to the total number of registered organisations. According to data from the directory of NGOs in Serbia, out of almost 20 000 registered organisations, there are 178 NGOs categorised as youth and student organisations. An earlier report from 2011 identified 138 such NGOs, with approximately 60 classed as student organisations (Council of Europe/EU 2011). In Croatia there are over 40 000 organisations, with only 345 youth organisations being identified in 2003 (Hrvatski Esperantski Savez 2003). But in less than a decade, the number of youth NGOs has doubled to 831 (Morić and Puhovski 2012). A study on youth trends in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” from 2010 mapped 103 youth organisations (SEGA 2010), while the latest registry identified 34 student organisations based in the capital Skopje (Youth Educational Forum 2012). To what extent these registered youth organisations are truly active is not certain, but as is the case with many other types of NGOs in the region, a large proportion most likely exist on paper only.

The number of young people active in youth organisations is also not known. But certain documents indicate that young people (especially those in education or who have obtained higher education degrees) in Serbia and Croatia are increasingly engaged with different types of voluntary organisations (National Youth Strategy, Republic of Serbia 2008; National Youth Programme, Republic of Croatia 2009). In line with these findings, the proportion of young people working for NGOs has slightly increased over the decade (UNDP 2004; Republic of Serbia 2008). An exception is “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, where despite the relatively large number of registered NGOs, political parties remain a more attractive avenue for participation, especially among the younger population (Marković et al. 2006; SEGA 2010). Owing to a tradition inherited from the socialist past of the former Yugoslavia “a large number of Macedonian citizens continue to believe in the absolute authority of the State to cater for all social needs” (Sterland and Rizova 2010: 32). Such a situation is complemented by a general mistrust and deep suspicion of civil society as well as a fundamental lack of belief in civic activism as a force for change. Drawing on Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993), the weakness of civil society can be also attributed to a deficit of social capital in post-communist societies, which itself is linked with the notion of trust. An additional factor that contributes to the low levels of public support for, and participation in civil society, is that NGOs in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, but also in other countries of the region, are still often labelled (primarily by some state officials and pro-government media) as led by wealthy foreign-led mercenaries which undertake activities for the benefit of a few individuals.

One approach to circumventing the difficulty of acquiring reliable statistical data is offered by Checkoway and Richards-Shuster (2003), who measure participation by the quality, capacity and conditions of engagement rather than by the quantity of young people or number of organisations. Similarly, Hart (1992) distinguishes between authentic and meaningful participation. In all three countries, the majority of youth organisations have limited access to the finances needed to maintain professional staff and infrastructure. Engagement within youth organisations is often seen more as an extracurricular activity rather than a professional engagement. Consequently, many

youth organisations are unable to maintain yearlong activities and lack a long-term strategic approach to organisational development. Such constraints have often pushed youth organisations towards the development of a certain homogeneity of outputs. Namely, in the effort to cater to the expectations of donors or the state and in order to achieve short-term (financial) security, many youth organisations have abandoned their missions and developed organisational “isomorphism” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The result is that, through a variety of pressures such as donor guidance, youth organisations tend to converge and adopt similar working practices and activities.

## Conclusion

In this chapter the role and capacity of youth organisations in engaging students were analysed with respect to three countries – Serbia, Croatia and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” – and with reference to the rungs of the ladder of participation proposed by Hart (1992). The discussion, based on three different time periods, suggests that despite some differences among the respective countries, youth organisations face a number of common problems and challenges within their respective societies.

With respect to the usefulness of Hart’s (1992) framework for the analysis of youth organisations’ participation levels, the study confirms a general adequacy, however, with variation as to the importance of the ideal-type rungs proposed. The chapter suggests that a number of characteristics described by Hart (1992) under the lower non-participation models of the ladder may be associated with the former Yugoslavia and the 1990s. The limited contribution of youth organisations to student engagement during these periods needs to be understood in the context of a political and social past that has largely determined the generally inadequate environment in which youth organisations operated.

With respect to the period since 2000, a transition from non-participation models towards a hybrid of a number of genuine participation models is evident. However, the state still assumes a dominant role in determining youth policy. Thus, efforts to engage youth organisations in decision-making processes are still, generally, seen as exceptions rather than the norm. While recently all three countries have taken important steps in laying the foundations of national youth policies, some backward-looking practices left over from the socialist era and the 1990s continue to find a place in the new, supposedly more democratic participatory context of civil society development. In addition, although youth organisations through the formation of a number of umbrella organisations have played a key role in the process of initiating youth policy discussion, their role in the implementation phase of such policies remains an open question – one that asks whether young people will continue to be viewed as passive recipients or active elements in the setting of policy priorities and objectives.

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## Chapter 8

# A challenge for student engagement: the decline of the “normal” student

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### **Abstract**

Increasing the inclusiveness of higher education is one of the original goals of student organisations, but the data in this contribution suggest that this will, in turn, lead to new challenges. A student organisation is confronted with two challenges in its goal to be representative of the whole student population. The first challenge is to understand the concerns of the student body it represents. The second is to ensure that as far as possible the leadership of the student organisation itself represents the diversity of the student population. This contribution looks, firstly, at how the student body in Europe is diversifying and argues that this process will continue into the future. It shows that these non-traditional students are less likely to be on campus during the week and/or more likely to be working in paid employment. Student organisations must reflect these changes in their policy debates at institutional and national level. This might be easier if such non-traditional students were also well represented in the student organisations. Research from the Netherlands suggests, however, that this is seldom the case.

**Keywords:** student organisations; EUROSTUDENT; work-life-study balance; non-traditional students; diversity of student population

## Introduction

A student organisation is confronted with two challenges in its goal to be representative of the whole student population. The first challenge is to understand the concerns of the student body it represents. The second is to ensure that as far as possible the leadership of the student organisation itself represents the diversity of the student population. Although this is not absolutely necessary, it would be helpful for the organisation if those occupying the top posts are not only familiar with the issues that concern the student body, but have to some extent experienced them. In both cases, the more diverse the student body, the more difficult this becomes.

This chapter starts out by looking at the current diversity in European student populations using the most recent EUROSTUDENT data. It argues, in particular, that the age profile of the student body has been changing and will continue to change in the future, leading to a more diverse student population. One of the aspects of diversity is how students spend their time. Using the concept of a “time budget” from EUROSTUDENT, the chapter will show that older students are less likely to be on campus and more likely to be working long hours in paid employment alongside their studies than their younger counterparts. This presents new challenges for the study-work-life balance of students, which student organisations must reflect on. Additionally, it suggests that this group of older students is also less likely to be engaged in student organisations due to their high workload. The chapter uses data from a Dutch survey to show that it is indeed less likely that “non-traditional” students will be involved in student organisations.

## Diversity of the student population

The diversity of the student population has been growing in European higher education systems (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012). This is related to at least three main factors: growth of the higher education sectors, efforts to make higher education more inclusive and – latterly – demographic developments. The EUROSTUDENT dataset from 2011 provides a snapshot of the resulting student population in 25 countries (Orr, Gwosc and Netz 2011). The report highlights the fact that the majority of students in European higher education tend to be bachelor’s level students no older than 24 years old, who entered higher education almost directly after leaving secondary school (direct transition students), are female, and have parents who themselves graduated from college or university (high education background).

However, the data also shows that so-called non-traditional groups of students are emerging. In one fourth of the countries, the share of students aged 30 years or over is at least 18%, the share of students with a delay of more than two years between leaving school and entering higher education (delayed transition students) is at least 19%, and the share of students whose parents did not attain tertiary education themselves (low education background) is at least 24%. It also shows that around 1 in 5 students spend less than 21 hours in a typical study week on study-related activities (that is students with low study intensity as measured by time spent on self-study and attending courses and lectures). In one fourth of the countries, this share is around 1 in 4 students. Table 1 summarises these key statistics.

**Table 1: Diversity of European student population – Share of students per country by selected characteristics**

	Age bracket			Transition route		Educational attainment of parents		Study intensity
	up to 24 years	25 to 29 years	30 years or over	direct transition students	delayed transition students	low qualification background (ISCED 0-2)	high qualification background (ISCED 5-6)	low-intensity students
1 Quartile	60	9	7	81	8	3	38	20
Median	71	15	14	87	13	9	48	17
3 Quartile	80	20	18	92	19	24	57	24

Source: EUROSTUDENT IV dataset.

Note: For each student group three percentage shares are given. These shares show the median value and the values of the first and third quartiles in cross-country comparison of the 25 countries that took part in EUROSTUDENT IV. The median value is the point dividing the number of countries into two halves, meaning that half the countries have a percentage share below this value and half have a percentage share above it. The first and third quartiles are computed in the same way, but with different splits. The first quartile is the mark where one quarter of the countries have a value below it and three quarters a value above it. The third quartile is – vice versa – the mark where three quarters of the countries have a value below it and one quarter a value above it. In this way, it shows the normal range of shares across countries.

The major determining factor for a more heterogeneous student population is, in fact, the age profile of the student body. Older students are more likely to be from low education backgrounds, tend to enter higher education via second-chance routes (to be delayed transition students), to study part-time and to work alongside their studies (to be low-intensity students) (Orr 2010).

For this reason, it is relevant to look to demographic developments in the general population as a possible marker for what could happen to the student population in the future. For instance, population statistics for Europe show that the typical student age bracket of 18 to 24 years made up 80% of the student population in 2000, and made up 77% of the student population a decade later, in 2011. Using Eurostat population prognosis data (Europop), it is possible to see in Figure 1 how these demographic dynamics across Europe are expected to continue.<sup>32</sup> For simplicity, these developments are shown for the geographic regions of Europe (Jordan 2005).<sup>33</sup>

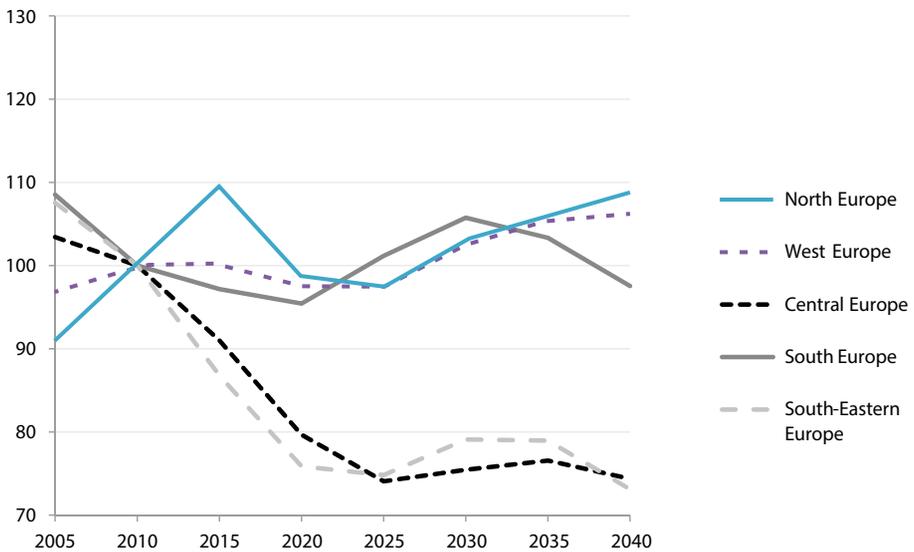
Since the data for 2005 and 2010 are real data, the chart sets 2010 as an index of 100. It shows that leading up to 2010, the typical student population (aged 20 to 24) has been declining in Central Europe, South-Eastern Europe and Southern Europe. In

32. Unfortunately the Europop dataset does not contain data for the age bracket 18 to 24, therefore the next best range used here is the 20 to 24 age bracket.

33. Northern Europe: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway; Western Europe: Belgium, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Iceland; Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Liechtenstein, Switzerland; Southern Europe: Spain, Italy, Malta, Portugal; South-Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Romania.

Central Europe – comprising the biggest group of countries – this decline has been strongest in Poland (-11%), Slovakia (-8%) and Slovenia (-7%), while Switzerland and Luxembourg have bucked this trend. In Southern Europe, Portugal and Spain have seen the biggest declines (-17% and -11%, respectively), while in South-Eastern Europe it has been Greece and Bulgaria (-16% and -9%, respectively). A comparison of the prognosis for 2025 with the values for 2010 shows that only one of the four regions can expect not to have a continually declining 20 to 24-year-old population – Southern Europe. This is due to slow growths in this population for Italy, Portugal and Spain, while this population in Malta will have decreased in comparison to 2010 by more than one fifth. Many countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe can also expect a decline of their shares of “traditional students” by one fifth or more. These developments would suggest that the student population is very likely to become even more diverse in the near future. The significance of these developments for student organisations lies in the fact that they will have to make special efforts to uncover and represent the particular challenges of these new students.

**Figure 1: Evolution of 20 to 24-year-old population by region, 2005 to 2040 (from 2010 prognosis; index 2010 = 100)**



Source: UOE dataset and for prognosis from 2010, Europop2010 dataset from Eurostat.  
 See: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Population\\_projections](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Population_projections).

## Students' time budget

One of the main issues is likely to be that of maintaining study engagement, while preserving a study-work-life balance which enables successful study completion (Köhler, Müller and Remdisch 2013). It is therefore of interest to look more closely at how different types of students – and especially older students – spend their time. In order to investigate the personal time budget of students, the EUROSTUDENT survey asks students to report their use of time in a typical study week.

A typical week is defined as a week during the study semester, which best reflects the student’s routine. The survey differentiates between study-related activities, which encompass both taught studies and personal study time, and employment-related activities. Taught studies are a student’s contact hours. This includes lessons, seminars, hours in labs, tests, etc. Students are required to report taught studies in clock hours, even though course hours may differ from this. Personal study time, in turn, refers to a student’s hours of self-preparation. This includes time spent on preparation, learning, reading, writing homework, etc., and is also reported as clock hours. Table 2 shows data from the EUROSTUDENT IV dataset from 2011, differentiated by age bracket.

**Table 2: Time budget in a typical study week – Comparison by student age group**

	Taught studies		Personal study time		Paid jobs		Total	
	up to 24 years old	30 years old or over	up to 24 years old	30 years old or over	up to 24 years old	30 years old or over	up to 24 years old	30 years old or over
1 Quartile	18	10	13	13	3	20	35	43
Median	20	12	16	14	6	27	42	54
3 Quartile	21	14	18	16	8	32	47	63

Source: EUROSTUDENT IV dataset.

The data shows that while 18 to 24-year-olds tend to have an overall time budget of 42 hours per week (median), this reaches 54 hours per week for students aged 30 or over, that is on average 12 hours per week more are dedicated to the activities captured in the time budget. A closer look at these activities shows that personal study time remains largely the same for both age groups, but time on campus (that is taught studies) is much lower and time spent on paid work much higher for the older age group. The EUROSTUDENT survey also looks at the satisfaction level of students regarding their typical weekly time budget. In general, the higher amount of fixed hours of a student’s week is also reflected in their dissatisfaction with their time budget, as shown in Table 3. The level of dissatisfaction, which can have various causes related to balancing the different activities in a week (that is to the study-work-life balance), can be seen to be higher for students in the age bracket 30 years or older, since it increases from around 23% for younger students to 32% for older students. Combining studying with work responsibilities clearly increases the overall weekly time budget of students. It also decreases the amount of time available for study-related activities, which may negatively affect progress and completion of studies. Further, with increasing age compounding factors such as family responsibilities may further restrict the flexibility of students’ time budget. As a result, their satisfaction with their weekly workload decreases. As Köhler, Müller and Remdisch (2013) suggest, flexibility in the design of study programmes might help employed students manage this double responsibility. However, this solution is also likely to further reduce the amount of time on campus for these students.

**Table 3: Share of students who are (very) dissatisfied with their time budget – Comparison by student age group**

	All students	Up to 24 years old	30 years old or over
1 Quartile	21	17	22
Median	23	23	32
3 Quartile	29	26	39

Source: EUROSTUDENT IV dataset. Note: (very) dissatisfied = students stating they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

## Students engaged in student organisations

There is very little information about which type of student actually gets involved in student organisations. After researching the EUROSTUDENT network, one national survey was found which includes questions on this issue. The research team used this data to investigate what differentiates students who are engaged in student organisations in the Netherlands from those who are not.

The research of Warps, Prins and Rijnhart (1999) already shows that most students participating in student organisations do so because they were asked by fellow students who themselves are active in these organisations. This would suggest that being on campus frequently may affect the chances of becoming a student representative. Additionally, the Dutch Student Monitor looked at the time budget of students involved in student organisations as compared to those who are not (Table 4). It is interesting to note that the study intensity appears to be very similar in both groups (that is taught and personal study time). The difference is a lower amount of hours dedicated to paid employment (6 hours v. 9) and around 4 hours per week dedicated to working for the student organisation coupled with 2 hours on other membership boards. This data suggests that the student who works for a student organisation must be in a position to do without income from paid employment.

**Table 4: Time budget in a typical study week – Comparison of Dutch students' time budget by engagement in a student organisation**

	Taught studies	Personal study time	Paid jobs	Student organisation	Other board memberships
Not in student organisation	15	17	9	0	1
In student organisation	15	16	6	4	2

Source: Dutch Student Monitor Higher Education 2012.

With a logistic regression it was possible to further analyse the Dutch data to investigate the unique influence of various student characteristics, and pinpoint relatively clearly what differentiates students engaged in student organisations from those who are not. Table 5 shows that Dutch students who are engaged in student organisations are more likely to be relatively young (in the age group 22 to 24), more often have parents who themselves attained a higher education degree (that is are from a higher

educational background) and more often work in a paid job less than 10 hours per week than their counterparts who are not engaged in student organisations. Conversely, students studying in universities of applied science, female students, students in the age group of 30 years or older, students from non-academic parents (that is from a lower educational background), part-time students and students who work 10 hours or more besides studying are likely to be underrepresented in student organisations.

Assuming that we would find similar data for other countries, student organisations face a significant challenge in the coming years. Increasingly, they must strive to represent a more diverse student body with divergent study conditions and they must work even harder to include some of these students in their own student organisations.

**Table 5: Logistical regression – What differentiates students engaged in a student organisation from those who are not?**

Indicator	Exp(B)	Sig.	Meaning
Type of higher education institution (1 = university of applied science)	<b>0.468</b>	**	Less often from universities of applied science
Sex (1 = female)	<b>0.762</b>	**	Less often female
<i>Age (30 yrs or over = ref)</i>			
Up to 21 years	1.570	n.s.	More often in age group 22 to 24
22 to 24 years	<b>2.056</b>	*	
25 to 29 years	1.212	n.s.	
Highest educational attainment of parents (1 = parents with HE)	<b>1.371</b>	**	More often from higher educational background
<i>Qualification studied for (master's=ref.)</i>			
Bachelor's	1.157	n.s.	
Other	1.527	n.s.	
<i>Formal status (full-time students=ref.)</i>			
Part-time	<b>0.357</b>	**	Less often part-time students
Dual track	0.339	n.s.	
<i>Study intensity (low intensity=ref.)</i>			
High intensity	1.017	n.s.	
<i>Working hours (10 or more hours/week=ref.)</i>			
No job	1.015	n.s.	More often working less than 10 hours per week, besides studying
Less than 10 hours per week	<b>1.386</b>	**	
<i>Central activity (work=ref.)</i>			
Study	1.147	n.s.	
Other	1.403	n.s.	
Constant	0.051	**	

Source: Dutch Student Monitor Higher Education 2012. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , n.s. = not significant.  $N = 11\ 162$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.05$ .

Note: a value above 1 denotes that this student group would be more likely to be part of a student organisation than the reference group (= ref.). Significant results are highlighted in bold.

## Conclusion

Increasing the inclusiveness of higher education is one of the original goals of student organisations but the data here suggest that this will, in turn, lead to new challenges for student organisations, which must reflect this diversity. As is shown in other parts of this volume, student organisations are also becoming increasingly involved in the development of policy and practice in higher education at institutional, national and European levels. They must now think of new ways to involve the diverse student populations in debates on such developments, so that they can also reflect the problems of students balancing their studies with work and other commitments besides their studies.

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## Chapter 9

# Student engagement: the social dimension and role of quality assurance

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*David Crosier*

### **Abstract**

If higher education students are to be more engaged in the learning process, they first of all have to become students. The starting point for this chapter is that, despite the ongoing trend in recent decades for higher education to expand its reach to an increasing number of students, the social profile of students is not changing at the same rate. Therefore while numbers increase, it does not necessarily follow that higher education is becoming more diverse and inclusive. Moreover, despite government commitments to set social dimension policy with targets and concrete measures, evidence on the implementation of such policy is difficult to find. In this context the role of quality assurance is a critical area to consider, as it is a key mechanism for public authorities to steer or induce change across higher education institutions. Topics examined in quality assurance systems tend to reveal priorities for what is considered important in higher education. Using recent comparative research evidence, this chapter examines the role of external quality assurance agencies in social dimension issues, and concludes that the absence of serious attention to the social profile of students is a matter for reflection and concern.

**Keywords:** student engagement; access to higher education; socio-economic characteristics of students; quality assurance

## Recent changes in higher education and their impact on student engagement

It is a universally acknowledged truth that the beginning of the 21st century has been a period of unprecedented transformation in higher education. This holds true in all parts of the world, with rapidly expanding participation in higher education being driven by the development of knowledge economies and the perceived need for greater numbers of highly skilled workers in the labour force. Internationalisation and globalisation have become major issues to factor into higher education development, and the growth of privatisation has also had a significant impact on public higher education provision.

In Europe many of the major higher education policy developments that have taken place so far this century have been articulated and understood through the Bologna Process. The main objective – the establishment of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – has been a major project and a focus for the wider process of modernisation and of scientific and cultural renewal. While the attribution of specific changes to the Bologna Process is often widely disputed, there is no doubting the fact that important transformations have taken place – partly as a response to the forces driving expansion of demand. The structure of higher education degrees is the feature that is most commonly associated with the Bologna Process, but equally noticeable has been the rapid rise and development of quality assurance systems. Since the Bologna Process was launched, 22 countries have established national agencies for quality assurance (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012: 60) and, in several, there is now a second generation of quality assurance agencies, with new agencies replacing or building on existing ones in response to a reassessment of quality assurance objectives. Both the changes in degree structures and the rise of quality assurance can be understood as responses to the process of rapidly increasing demand.

The expansion of higher education has also created a new dynamic for student engagement. The challenges of creating a community of engaged learners are of a different nature and scale in mass higher education systems when compared to the not-so-distant days of elite higher education systems. The concept of learner-centred higher education has also come to the fore since the launch of the Bologna Process, although this concept has clearly been understood and addressed with different levels of enthusiasm and commitment in different institutions and countries. Becoming more “student centred” is also a major challenge at a time when numbers are rising and there is increasing pressure on budgets. Beyond these considerations, while commitment to student-centred learning could be predicted to have a positive impact on raising the level of student engagement in higher education, an even more fundamental pre-condition for student engagement is student participation.

It may seem paradoxical to raise this question at a time when student participation levels are at a historical high, and when available evidence suggests that this trend is continuing (ibid.: 21). As more students are participating in higher education, this could lead to an assumption that more students are therefore “engaged” in their learning. However, greater demand for higher education should not be mistaken as a sign in itself of greater student engagement, nor of a cultural shift in higher education

institutions towards greater engagement with students. Indeed, it could be argued that demand for higher education has risen despite a lack of effort to engage with a greater diversity of learners on the part of both institutions and policy makers.

There is also a noticeable trend in the policy arena to focus on the instrumental role of higher education in economic development. Public debate often emphasises the role of higher education in employment and its role in stimulating economic development, while paying less attention to the impact on personal development and in forming active citizens. This is true not only at national level but is also evident in recent European policy documents. Within Europe 2020, the EU's strategy for smart and sustainable growth, for example, higher education is firmly placed at the heart of strategies for economic recovery, while promotion of the 2014 to 2020 Erasmus+ programme focuses on giving students and staff opportunities to develop their skills and boost their employment prospects. Employment and economic development are thus at the forefront of attention.

This is not to say that other perspectives on the role of higher education have completely disappeared from view. The Council of Europe has consistently maintained a focus on the wider purposes of education, and this is exemplified in its Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 on the public responsibility for higher education and research. The Bologna Communiqués also present a wider range of purposes for higher education. Such documents are, however, unable to counterbalance the impact of the more dominant discourse on the role of higher education in relation to the labour market and economic development.

While the percentage of the population participating in higher education is rising steadily, this could signal greater problems for those citizens who do not participate in higher education. In some countries, for example, the increase in higher education participation is accompanied by worrying levels of early school leaving – which indeed is a reason why these two topics have been highlighted in the Europe 2020 strategy. Figures from 2012/13 show that Spain, for example, despite having reached the EU headline target of 40% participation in higher education, has the highest levels of early school leaving in the EU, with 25% of the relevant age cohort failing to complete secondary education. Viewed together, these statistics on higher education participation and early school leaving indicate a society grappling with huge problems of inequity (European Commission 2013).

While social distinctions in the past have tended to be characterised in terms of financial “haves” and “have-nots”, it could well be that, as we move forward to more knowledge-based societies, the main distinction will be drawn between the haves and have-nots in terms of their knowledge, skills and competences. It is therefore important to ask questions about the social characteristics of students entering higher education systems, and most importantly to find out whether particular profiles of citizens still tend not to participate in “mass higher education”.

## **The rise of the social dimension?**

The fact that life chances can be predicted rather precisely in all countries on the basis of information about the social profile of individuals should concern and astonish us

more. With no biological or genetic evidence to explain differences in educational attainment among people from different socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds, the wide disparity in educational outcomes can only be understood through the interaction of a complex set of social mechanisms. Theorists commonly refer to these mechanisms as social and cultural capital – the social networks and system knowledge that enable some to gain privileged access to education and develop more productive relationships with other students and teachers, later translating into differences in educational qualifications, jobs and earnings (Bourdieu 1979).

The question of student characteristics, which encompasses the discussion of underrepresented societal groups, has been addressed in the Bologna Process under the label of the “social dimension”. The issue appears to have gained considerable ground – at least in terms of the amount of discussion devoted to the topic and volume of papers produced – since the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999. Although the term “social dimension” has been widely used in European policy papers related to higher education, it is a concept that is difficult to pin down. When appearing in European higher education policy papers and declarations the word “dimension” typically indicates a fuzzy area of policy debate. For example, the “European dimension” and the “international dimension” have both featured as topics of many intergovernmental policy discussions. Debate has no doubt been facilitated by using very broad-brush and imprecise definitions, or by not defining terms at all – thus allowing a wide range of issues to be considered. The same is true of the debate on the social dimension of higher education.

Although the term “social dimension” is now common currency in Europe, it is still relatively recent, being first used in the 2001 Prague Communiqué, where “Ministers also reaffirmed the need, recalled by students, to take account of the social dimension in the Bologna process” (Bologna Process 2001). Yet it took another six years before the term was actually defined in a meaningful way with the London Communiqué explaining the term as a “societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations” (Bologna Process 2007).

From this definition, it is clear that the social dimension is a prerequisite for student engagement. Whatever is to be understood by reflecting the “diversity of our populations”, it is primarily concerned with ensuring that a broad range of students are able to gain access, progress and succeed in higher education – and successful participation is therefore a necessary condition to be able to engage in higher education, irrespective of how broadly the concept of engagement is defined.

However, in an era of rapid change, it is an extremely tricky proposition to pinpoint which policy measures might make an impact on changing the socio-economic profile of students. Even with the greatest political will in the world, and with a range of policy measures and interventions that might be characterised as social engineering, social dimension objectives cannot be achieved easily. Moreover, the challenges in European higher education as perceived in London in 2007 were soon to intensify with the onset of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008, which led to an even greater demand on higher education to help bring countries through the period of crisis. Nevertheless, the crisis and its aftermath have

certainly not stifled discussion. Arguably, a greater boost has been given to goals of the social dimension, with the agenda being somewhat refocused as a matter of economic necessity rather than driven primarily by a concern for social justice. Since 2008, there appears to be a developing awareness that countries that fail to provide access for a broad range of their population may struggle to prosper in a fast-changing economic reality.

Thus, in recent years, countries have all found good reasons to commit to developing and monitoring strategies for the social dimension, and this common commitment was to be expressed in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué in 2009, where countries set out their intentions to develop and monitor strategies for the social dimension:

Each participating country will set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade. Efforts to achieve equity in higher education should be complemented by actions in other parts of the educational system (Bologna Process 2009).

## Monitoring the social dimension

If the Bologna Process social dimension commitments had been addressed with genuine urgency and political will, no doubt a major transformation in the social role and responsibility of higher education would have taken place. With commitments to measurable targets and radical strategic action to transform the overall social profile of the student population agreed on, considerable progress could have been made, and monitored. However, though some countries have made significant improvements in collecting relevant data, they are the exception. Even where relevant data are collected, there is a lack of systematic analysis and exploration of what such data mean, and there is a consequent lack of explicit policy measures.

The problem, however, goes much deeper than failures in establishing data collection systems or indeed of setting appropriate higher education policy. Attention to social dimension issues has to take place at all levels of education, as the policy commitments made in the context of the Bologna Process actually imply a wide social reflection on the functioning of our education systems. Even the most optimistic observer would be hard pressed to find evidence of any country reflecting holistically on how the continuum of educational provision can enable all individuals to develop their potential.

Arguably, early childhood education and care has been the weakest link in the chain of educational provision. The benefits of early childhood education are well established, with Burger (2010: 161) pointing out that:

research has demonstrated the value of providing preschool interventions for both socio-economically disadvantaged and more privileged children ... The developmental progress of disadvantaged and more privileged children in preschool programs either proceeds in equal measure in absolute terms or offers larger gains in relative terms to disadvantaged children.

While the benefits of early childhood education and care, particularly for disadvantaged children, are clear, a 2009 overview of provision in Europe found that the population categories least likely to access early childhood education and care provision are ethnic minority children in underprivileged families and children of single-parent families – in other words, those disadvantaged children standing to benefit the most and having the greatest need of such provision. Moreover the most common exclusionary factors include the level of fees, lack of available places and access criteria related to factors such as employment (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2009).

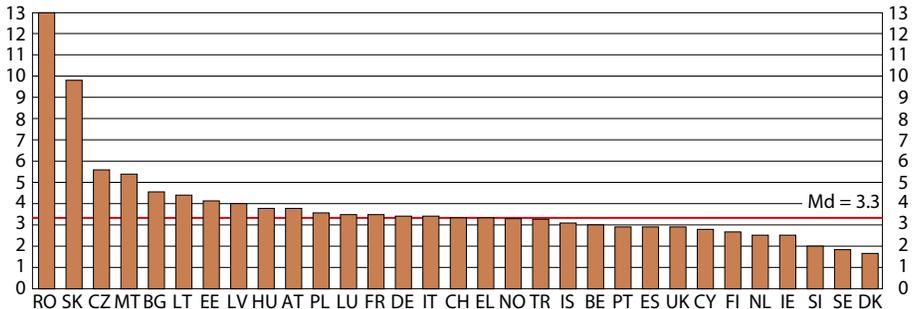
Patterns of advantage and disadvantage that are set at these early stages of education are often reinforced in compulsory education systems, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds being more likely than their peers with parents having high levels of education to suffer learning difficulties, and more likely to fall behind their peers as a result of measures such as streaming and grade retention. In many systems there are also geographical issues to consider, as schools host populations with very different socio-economic profiles. Lower socio-economic and migrant groups may be found in high concentrations in particular districts and schools, and this reality may or may not be addressed with policy measures and differential resources. A further complication may be the orientation of school students towards academic or vocational routes at the end of primary education. Where such streaming occurs, there is often a strong overlap with the socio-economic profiles of students, with the middle classes tending to be strongly represented in the academic routes and disadvantaged socio-economic groups more strongly concentrated in vocational education.

In this societal reality, it is not feasible to expect higher education to redress the equity balance that has played out in preceding levels of education provision. Yet this does not mean that higher education cannot play its part in expanding opportunities. The uncomfortable truth at the moment, however, appears to be that very few students from disadvantaged backgrounds actually succeed in higher education – irrespective of the country in which they live. Indeed Figure 1, which features in the 2012 Bologna Process implementation report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012), presents the odds ratios for attaining a higher education qualification, comparing students with highly educated parents (tertiary education) to students with medium-educated parents (upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education). It shows very clearly that parental educational background plays a strong role in influencing their children's opportunities to achieve a higher education qualification. Of course the parental educational level can also be understood as a proxy for financial status, as those parents with a higher education background are more likely to populate the wealthier strata in society compared to those parents educated to a lower level.

Denmark, Slovenia and Sweden are the countries where the impact of parents' educational background, although still evident, is the weakest. In most other countries, however, the relative chances for students with highly educated parents to attain higher education are between two and five times higher than for students whose parents have a medium educational level. It is in two former Eastern bloc countries, the Slovak Republic and Romania, however, that the relative chances for children of highly educated persons are the greatest – 10 and 13 times higher, respectively. There

is therefore no guarantee that an evolution away from the ideology of the Soviet era is likely to have had a more favourable outcome in terms of providing equal opportunities. Indeed the process of embracing a new capitalist ideology in the post-Soviet era may well be contributing to increasing levels of inequity in these countries.

**Figure 1: Attainment by educational background – Odds ratio of students with highly educated parents (tertiary education) over students with medium-educated parents (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education) to attain higher education, 2009**



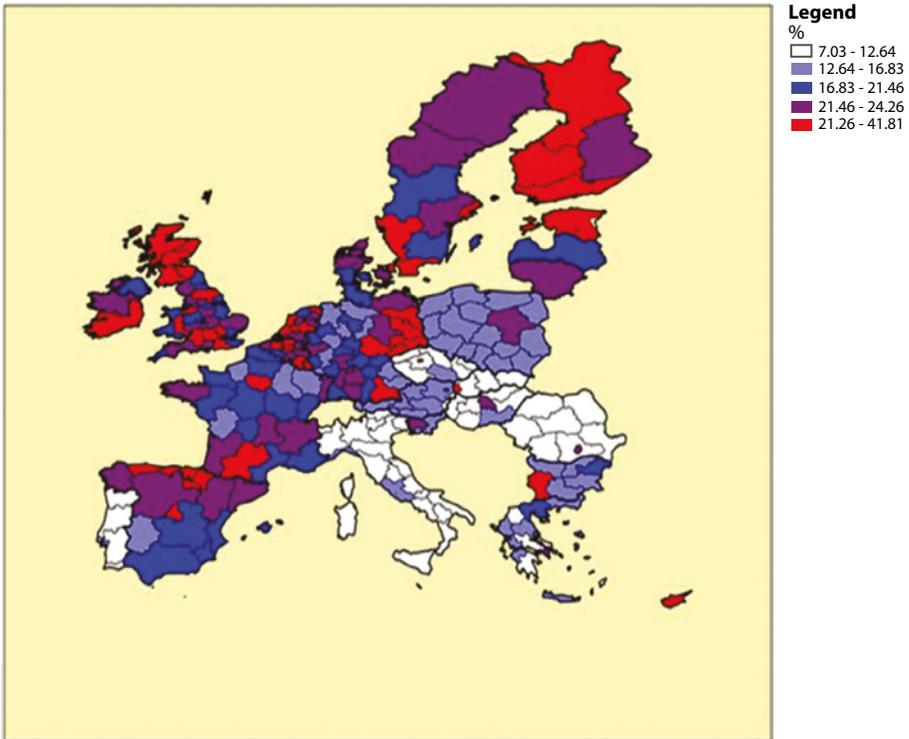
RO	SK	CZ	MT	BG	LT	EE	LV	HU	AT	PL	LU	FR	DE	IT	CH
12.95	9.77	5.55	5.38	4.56	4.41	4.12	3.95	3.79	3.77	3.55	3.49	3.46	3.42	3.39	3.30
EL	NO	TR	IS	BE	PT	ES	UK	CY	FI	NL	IE	SI	SE	DK	
3.25	3.21	3.20	3.04	3.01	2.89	2.89	2.87	2.76	2.61	2.50	2.47	1.97	1.79	1.63	

Source: Eurostat, LFS ad hoc module 2009.

Another greatly neglected aspect of the social dimension debate relates to differences in educational outcomes associated with regions. Figure 2 (Ballas et al. 2012) clearly shows that the percentage of the population that benefits from higher education varies considerably across regions in European countries. Indeed, the Eurostat data used to generate this map show that in 8 EU member states, there is a difference of more than 15 percentage points between the best and worst-performing regions. The United Kingdom has the biggest gap – between inner London (41.8%) and Tees Valley and Durham (18.4%) – and is followed by France (a 21% difference between Île de France and Corsica), the Czech Republic, Spain, the Slovak Republic and Romania.

The map also shows that most of the regions where there is a strong concentration of individuals with tertiary education can be found in north-west Europe (the United Kingdom, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands), while the regions with the lowest rates of tertiary education graduates are to be found in Italy, Portugal and in central and eastern Europe. While this information is not simple to interpret, as issues such as labour market mobility among regions have a major impact on such statistics, the map illustrates nevertheless that inequity is not only an issue among countries, but also an issue of differences among regions within countries. This should be reflected in the policy debate.

**Figure 2: Proportion of persons with tertiary education: persons aged 15+ with tertiary education – levels 5-6 (ISCED 1997) as % of all persons aged 15+**



Source: Eurostat

Table: © EuroGeographics for the administrative boundaries

## Quality assurance and the social dimension

We have seen that the Bologna Process has been a notable catalyst for the development of quality assurance systems, and also that in recent years there have been increased discussions and commitments made to social dimension matters. Indeed the London and Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqués (Bologna Process 2007, 2009) bear witness to an intention to develop and implement strategic action at national level. It might therefore be expected that quality assurance would be a prime mechanism to steer higher education institutions into a more thorough and professional approach to data collection and analysis regarding the social dimension.

The Eurydice Network has recently addressed quality assurance agencies to ask them how they deal with issues related to the social dimension (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2014). The student experience of higher education can be broken down into three stages for the purpose of considering the social dimension. The first stage is of access, which requires awareness of the offer of higher education, the requirements to be admitted and the process of admission itself. The second

stage is the experience of the study programme itself, including support that may be provided when problems are encountered. The third stage is the transition from higher education into the labour market.

Agencies were asked rather open questions related to these three stages. With regard to access and admissions, the agencies were asked if, in the course of a typical evaluation, there was a requirement to consider the process of admission/entry to a higher education institution or programme. If the answer was positive, the respondent was invited to provide more information. Subsequently, agencies were asked whether they were required to consider any characteristics of the social composition of the student body (e.g. socio-economic status of students, ethnicity, disability, gender). Again, further information was requested in the event of a positive answer.

The questionnaire took a similar approach to the topics of dropout and employability. Agencies were asked if they were required to consider the institution's and/or programme's practice with regard to reducing dropout and improving completion rates and finally to consider the institution's relationships with local, regional, national or international employers.

Replies were received from less than a third of the agencies contacted, a fact which itself might indicate a lack of interest and attention to social dimension issues. Meanwhile the agency responses from the 12 countries that answered indicated that the social dimension remains relatively unexplored.

## **Access and quality assurance**

For many potential students from so-called traditional groups – that is those groups within which higher education can be considered a normal expectation – the process may be relatively straightforward. The potential student will be well informed about what she/he is expected to do, and will prepare and follow the requirements for admission. This is not to imply that the process will be easy: on the contrary, in some cases admission requirements may be extremely demanding. Nevertheless, expectations and procedures will be clear, and people closely connected to the student will often be able to offer advice and support.

For a potential student from a family where there is little or no prior experience of higher education, the challenge of access is greater. While procedures and processes may be identical for all students, what they represent to students from non-traditional groups is potentially more burdensome. If support in the form of knowledgeable advice is to be provided, it will be less likely to come from family or friends, and hence the potential role of academic guidance services can be significantly greater.

Beyond guidance in terms of study and career options, there may also be a need to accompany and support students through the process. Many students may harbour considerable self-doubt about whether higher education is really appropriate for them, and they may lack the self-esteem and confidence to perform to their best during admission processes, including in examinations and interviews. While any student may face these kinds of challenges, the chances of a non-traditional student facing such issues are high, and the available options for appropriate support may be limited.

While procedures may be clear, objective and universal, they will be experienced differently by each individual, and some of the different types of experience will correlate closely with student profiles. These basic differences in access for different types of student imply that any government concerned to widen participation in higher education would attach importance to the monitoring of admission processes, and to understanding better how the admission systems affect different groups of students. Indeed, an admissions system that does not pay attention to its impact on different potential users can hardly claim to be of high quality.

The evidence from quality assurance agencies, however, suggests that strong attention to admissions systems is far from being the norm. While quality assurance agencies may examine some questions of access and admissions, they do not tend to do so from a perspective of ensuring that admissions systems are fit for the purpose of widening access. Indeed the agencies that provided information on this topic suggested that the main reason for examining admission systems is to check that the admissions process is coherent with programme requirements. No agency claimed to look at the differing impact of admissions systems on different types of student.

From the responses of quality assurance agencies it might be inferred that little data are collected to differentiate profiles of students on admission. However, while this may have been true until relatively recently, it appears that more and more data are now being collected. Eurydice information suggests, for example, that data on the socio-economic status of students are monitored in around half of the countries of the EU (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2014).

However, Eurydice also shows that other issues that are a major part of the discussion of underrepresentation in higher education are less frequently monitored. Migrant status data are captured in 10 systems, and data on ethnicity of students and staff in only 6. Meanwhile, despite rhetoric about higher education systems needing to be more responsive to the labour market, only 11 systems collect data on the labour market status of students prior to entry in higher education.

Collecting data, although important, is nevertheless merely the first step in the process of evidence-based policy development. Beyond data collection lies the question of whether and how data are analysed. As many countries are at an early stage of systematic data gathering, it is too early to draw clear conclusions on how social dimension data are affecting policy development.

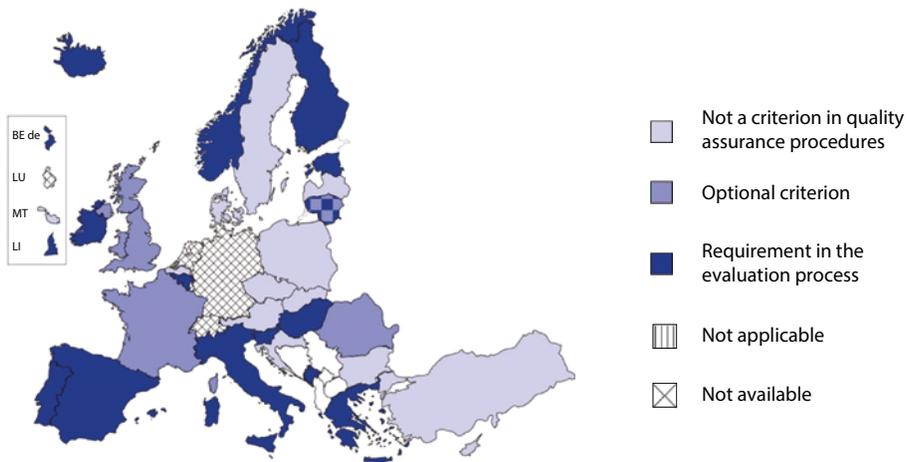
## **Student progression and quality assurance**

Responses on other social dimension topics reveal a similar picture. Dropout rates, for example, are often considered in quality assurance procedures. As Figure 3 shows, Eurydice data suggest that there is a requirement for dropout rates to be considered in 18 systems (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2014), while in 3 others, it is an optional criterion for evaluation. There are, however, 11 countries where information on completion/dropout rates is not a criterion used in external quality assurance procedures.

More significantly, however, there is little evidence that information gathered in quality assurance processes is followed up in an attempt to understand and address

the underlying causes of dropout. Instead, the rates of dropout are seen purely as indicators of the success and viability of programmes and institutions. There is also a clear absence of dropout data related to underrepresented groups. The only collected data include gender, which is more a result of systematic collection of basic student characteristics rather than a targeted choice. A few countries monitor completion rate data with regard to people with disabilities, while Belgium (Flemish Community) monitors the completion rate data of first-generation students (that is those students whose parents did not obtain a higher education qualification). These cases are few and far between. The general rule is that countries either track completion rate data for the whole student body, or they do not undertake such monitoring at all.

**Figure 3: Completion/dropout rate as a criterion used in external quality assurance, 2012/13**

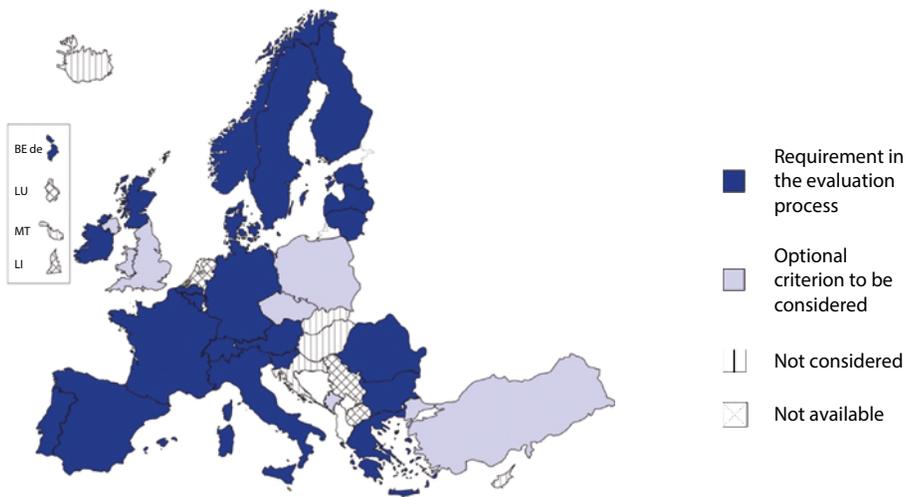


## Employability and quality assurance

Higher education has always had an important role in preparing graduates for the labour market even if this role has not always been acknowledged or affirmed strongly by academics, institutions or public authorities. In the 21st century, with the rise of knowledge societies and the expansion of demand for higher education, employability has become a more primary focus of higher education. Scrutiny from quality assurance systems would thus be expected. Figure 4 confirms that employability-related procedures are indeed found in external quality assurance procedures in a large majority of European countries.

Employability-related quality standards may focus on a variety of aspects. The most common issues examined are employer involvement in programme development, the relevance of programmes for the labour market, and consideration of graduate employment rates. Employers may also be involved in external quality assurance procedures, which is the case in around half of Europe's education systems.

**Figure 4: Employability-related criteria in quality assurance procedures, 2012/13**



However, despite this emphasis on employability, there are limitations to the way in which quality assurance agencies consider the information gathered. In particular, there is no evidence of any country or agency systematically analysing employment opportunities in relation to the social profiles of graduates. Thus, even where there are very good graduate tracking systems in place, they tend not to differentiate graduates according to defined social characteristics. It is therefore impossible to know whether factors such as socio-economic disadvantage or ethnicity – which are known to have an impact on the likelihood of accessing and completing higher education – may also have an impact on employment after graduation. While one might hope that employers are blind to such criteria, and that they focus on the qualifications, knowledge, skills and competences that graduates bring to the labour market, it is impossible to ascertain with confidence whether there are also issues in the transition from higher education to the labour market that need to be addressed, as these are not a focus of today’s quality assurance systems.

Research has also revealed a lack of attention of quality assurance to student services, including those related directly to employability, such as career guidance, internship and student job agencies. The European University Association’s (EUA) *Trends 2010* report shows that such services are much less likely to be the subject of internal quality assurance processes than study programmes or staff, for example (Surssock and Smidt 2010: 82). As these services potentially have a major role in encouraging students to develop relevant labour market skills and also to match employers to potential employees, this is another gap that needs to be filled in the further evolution of quality assurance.

## Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that, despite the major transformation that has been taking place in our higher education landscape in recent years,

governments, higher education institutions and citizens appear to some extent to have been sleepwalking into an era of mass higher education rather than preparing for it. Moreover, far from being a central objective of mass higher education, widening and diversifying participation appears to have been addressed more as a policy afterthought.

While quality assurance systems clearly have a role and responsibility to act on behalf of societal interests, at this stage it seems that agencies are not yet equipped to address key issues related to the impact of higher education systems on different types of students. The disconnect between the work of quality assurance systems and the stated goals of higher education systems should be a matter of greater concern and debate. Indeed, the social dimension itself still has considerable ground to make up before it can really claim to be at the heart of policy thinking.

Looking to the future, what does this mean for student engagement? Firstly, we should acknowledge that although there have been major changes to some features of higher education, there are also aspects of our systems that have not evolved so rapidly. Importantly, massification appears not to have greatly affected the typical socio-economic student profile. While there are now larger numbers of students in higher education systems, the increase in diversity is taking place at a much slower pace.

On the positive side, there is clearly greater acknowledgement of the need to widen and diversify the higher education population, and it seems unlikely that the debate will disappear. However, to date it appears that rhetorical commitment is more easily achieved than concrete action. There is also a challenge in identifying the right policy levers at different educational levels and taking appropriate action for particular regions. To address these challenges seriously means considering all levels of education provision in a holistic and coherent way.

One major difficulty is that the social dimension represents a long-term and permanent project, with few short-term political benefits. Changes to early childhood education policy today may make a positive impact on higher education attainment only in 20 years' time – and such a perspective may therefore offer limited opportunity for policy makers focused on more short-term objectives. Yet the social dimension is about issues, values and choices that affect everyone, and it is therefore a common, societal project. If we fail to make the changes to enable our higher education systems to reflect the diversity of our populations in a much better way, any concept of student engagement will also be devalued.

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Part II

## **Student influence in higher education**

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## Chapter 10

# Changing the shape and outcomes of student engagement

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*Paul Trowler*

### **Abstract**

The chapter argues that initiatives designed to enhance student engagement in universities need to be underpinned by an explicit and workable theory of change and change management. It sets out a social practice approach to conceptualising the operation of workgroups in higher education and goes on to elaborate the corollaries of this in terms of the management of change. It concludes with a vignette designed to illustrate how these concepts might be elaborated in a departmental situation.

**Keywords:** social practice theory; student engagement; complex adaptive systems theory

### **The significance of change theory**

As long ago as 1986, Cerych and Sabatier identified one of the most significant factors behind the “mixed performance” of innovations as being the paucity of causal theories of change underpinning them. Their research into the genesis and progress of nine higher education projects across Europe became a classic of implementation studies, yet their warnings about the key success factors in change processes continue to be ignored. Their warning about the paucity of thinking about the mechanisms of change (“change theory”) is especially significant, and points to a deficit in most change initiatives to the present day. Several studies of more recent change projects (e.g. CSET 2008) have confirmed this view, showing that despite the injection of considerable resources, some initiatives designed to enhance learning and teaching in universities have limited effects because they lack a robust, well-developed and explicit change theory.

Gosling and Hannan's (2007) evaluation of the five-year, £350 million project Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) highlights exactly this problem. CETLs were 74 specialist centres focusing on different aspects of learning and teaching in higher education, spread across the higher education system in England and Northern Ireland. Gosling and Hannan (2007: 634, 645) note:

The model of change being employed was based on the theory that rewarding those already doing well, by establishing them as "beacons" of excellence, was the way to improve overall standards ... [This] appeared to be designed to make those already judged to be excellent even better than the rest, and it did not seem to allow those who were not successful the chance to learn how to do better next time.

I have argued elsewhere (Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham 2005) that every innovation is imbued with a theory or theories of change. However, these usually remain tacit, unchallenged and, like that underpinning the CETL initiative, are often ineffective, misconceived or even counter-productive. This chapter argues the vital importance of adopting an explicit and powerful change theory, appropriate to the context of change. In earlier publications colleagues and I have offered accounts and reflections on innovations which were, and were not, troubled by this issue (Trowler 2001; Trowler, Saunders and Knight 2002; Trowler, Hopkinson and Comerford Boyes 2013; Saunders 2011a, 2011b; Bamber et al. 2009; CSET 2008).

## **The underpinning theory of reality: the ontology of change**

At the foundation of any change theory is an ontological theory, a theory of the nature of social reality. An example is the prevalent theory of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983, 1987), which suggests that the development of reflective practice within universities is an effective way to bring about the enhancement of learning and teaching institution-wide. Based on this approach, educational developers have devoted a lot of attention to encouraging reflective practice amongst new lecturers in particular (Ecclestone 1996). Underneath this theory of change is an ontological theory: methodological individualism. This posits that the agency of individuals can lead to systemic change, that individual attitudes, behaviours and choices are the significant phenomena driving the social world.

However, critics from various positions argue that this ontological prioritisation of an "ABC" perspective ("Attitudes, Behaviours and Choices", Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012) is ill-founded. From a critical realist or social realist perspective, for example, it misses the significance of structural influences and real forces that condition attitudes and behaviour and so choices. Margaret Archer's work (1995, 2007, 2010) is significant here, as is that of Bhaskar (1989).

The position set out here is similarly critical of methodological individualism, being rooted instead in social practice theory, which like critical realism takes account of both agency and structure in its understanding of change. A practice perspective refocuses attention away from the individual actor, focusing instead on situated practices which are extra-individual. A "practice" is viewed as an organised constellation of group activities: it is a social phenomenon, not an individual one, as

a habit is (Schatzki 2012). As this occurs the co-constitution of meaning happens. So social practice is always relational, not individual: a “social practice” involves the collective development of routinised recurrent behaviours in the performance of tasks. These are connected to mental and emotional states, including definitions of the situation, background knowledge, forms of understanding, know-how, and emotional conditions and motivational drivers (a definition developed from Reckwitz 2002: 249). Social contexts involve multiple overlapping and nested sets of practices which influence each other.

Social practices deploy what Giddens (1984) calls “practical consciousness”: knowledge of how to “go on” without conscious attention to how the performance is enacted. This involves acquiring and deploying a set of dispositions, perceptions and actions, which give people who are immersed in them a “feel for the game”, an intuitive understanding of what is “right” (Bourdieu 1990).

A practice perspective also attends to the role of artefacts in practice performance, to material mediation. The accomplishment of social practice always involves artefacts of one form or another, and there is mutual engagement of artefact use and practice performance: artefacts shape the performance while performance shapes the detail of artefact deployment.

Practice theory stresses the situatedness of knowing, saying, doing and relating. Understanding and explaining the social world is a fundamentally complex task. What is “known” and practised in one context does not always apply in another. This means that achieving transfer between social contexts is not a simple enterprise. Time is as important as place in this. Social practices are always emergent; there is a historicity to them so that the past, present and future are all evident at any one time, and this too is situated (Boud 2012).

So this ontological perspective sees the social world as ensembles of practices enacted by groups which have been configured to achieve specific outcomes through their activities. For social practice theory, social structures exist and have significant effects on practices, even though social agents may not be aware of them or their power. Practices always have a material dimension, and one which periodically involves an uneven struggle for control of resources, power and discursive and knowledge practices.

## **Building practical change theory on the ontology of change**

The implications of practice theory for change initiatives are profound. That ontological perspective shifts us away from the “ABC” theory of change towards the enactment of practices. Yet because it is individual people whom we meet every day, talk to and plan with, there is a gravitational pull to explaining the success or failure of change initiatives in terms of the ABC theory. Managers and change agents often think that people they manage are “change averse” (Fullan and Scott 2009). They complain that trying to encourage people to reform what they do is like “herding cats”, that they have the wrong goals and motivations, that they talk too much but do not act enough. Change agents often find there are a few enthusiasts for initiatives, but that engaging others beyond these few enthusiasts is an insurmountable challenge.

These complaints see the social world as comprising individuals, either amenable or not to desired change.

However, social practice theory can shed new light on the situation. Whenever significant innovations begin they presage new discourses, new types of tools, new agendas and new configurations of power relations and subjectivities. But existing sets of social practices condition responses and fundamentally affect the implementation process. To expect a smooth ride to “reform” in such circumstances is naive. As Fuller says:

One of the basic reasons why planning fails is that planners or decision makers of change are unaware of the situations faced by potential implementers ... they introduce change ... without attempting to understand the values, ideas and experiences of those who are essential for implementing change (2007: 110).

However, the way the change process is managed can have important effects on outcomes, and this is where the significance of an explicit and robust theory of change, based on a practice ontology, comes in.

The perspective proposed here builds on complex adaptive change theory (CAST) and associated management practices (Dooley 1997; Holland 2006). This elaborates the implications of a social practice ontology for change and change management in a way which is congruent with that view of social reality, but which is practical.

CAST is sceptical of initiatives which are implemented only via a technical-rational, top-down approach, based on rigid pre-defined “visions” made real by a series of incremental steps. Rather, universities are seen as complex adaptive systems operating in a turbulent and unpredictable environment. They have multiple goals which change over time and are often mutually contradictory. When universities or their constituent parts change, they always do so on the basis of a given current situation, which might be quite tenacious, and on the basis of a historical trajectory that brings them to that point. Actions by change managers can have subtle and unforeseen outcomes, sometimes in areas apparently unrelated to those in which the action is taken.

As a result of this, change management practices based on a CAST approach involve sensitivity to context and history, fostering comfort with uncertainty and acceptance of variable outcomes in the short term. CAST-influenced management involves a willingness to allow time for fundamental changes to occur and an ability to build consensus by adapting plans and approaches. Leaders informed by CAST develop an ability to understand the patterns of practice already in place, the forms of knowing, as well as the possibilities and limits of their own abilities to manage these (Spender 2008). They recognise that reform will involve changes of a different character in different locations, because of different histories and differences in sets of practices that have been developed *in situ*. They also see that the artefacts in use are of great significance in shaping practices, and that changing those will have significant, but somewhat unpredictable, effects. A willingness to adapt to context, and to be permissive of adaptation rather than simple adoption of innovations within the broad scope of the project, is one of the hallmarks of the successful application of the CAST approach. Key phrases for the CAST-influenced

change agent are: extensive discussion; delayed movement to decision; adaptability; low-resolution initial planning and vision; inclusive decision making; participant engagement; encouragement of challenges to the status quo; high-quality information; self-organisation locally; acceptance of diversity; frequent feedback cycles; permissiveness towards adaptation.

## **Change theory and student engagement**

As noted, a social practice theory-influenced CAST perspective stresses the importance for leaders of clusters of social practice already in place and of the potential salience, congruence and profitability (or otherwise) of new initiatives in relation to those practice clusters. This means that one needs to keep these three features – salience, congruence and profitability – in mind in undertaking a careful analysis of, first, the innovation, second, the context of implementation and third, the relationship or “fit” between them. This process can be categorised under the following headings:

- ▶ establishing the focus for engagement initiatives;
- ▶ establishing the parameters of change;
- ▶ establishing appropriate implementation strategies.

The chapter next addresses each in turn, using the example of initiatives aimed at enhancing student engagement.

### **Establishing the focus for engagement initiatives**

Change agents involved in enhancing student engagement face a decision concerning which focus of student engagement they primarily wish to address, and hence which areas of practice. Trowler (2010) establishes three foci of student engagement: in learning and teaching; in the structure and processes of higher education, including representation; in identification with the higher education project. Elaborating on this, the student engagement framework for Scotland set out by sparqs<sup>34</sup> (2013) identifies five foci:

1. students feeling part of a supportive institution;
2. students engaging in their own learning;
3. students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning;
4. formal mechanisms for quality and governance;
5. influencing the student experience at national level.

Others have proposed different categorisations (Jary and Lebeau 2009; Dubet 2000). Whichever is prioritised, these dimensions of student engagement usually mobilise different though overlapping and nested areas of practice, though the different foci are interconnected, as Ashwin, McLean and Abbas (2012) have shown. For those leading enhancement initiatives the first step is to identify and prioritise areas of need in the recurrent practices in their context. This has consequences for the locus

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34. sparqs stands for student participation and quality in Scotland. It is publicly funded to support student engagement in Scottish higher education and the quality of the learning experience.

of interventions and the shape of the congruence, salience and profitability of any desired changes there.

Establishing the focus of the need leads to the second task, that of establishing the extent of desired changes.

## **Establishing the parameters of change**

One of the corollaries of thinking about the congruence of any desired enhancements to student engagement with current practices (understood in both behavioural and phenomenological terms) is that there are limits to what is achievable, at least in the short term. Envisaging revolutionary change is unlikely to succeed in higher education contexts. So the question of “fit” becomes a significant one: what is achievable in this place in particular? Here the axioms associated with CAST become particularly significant: leadership approaches based on this theory are well adapted to gain a “feel” for the limits and possibilities of change. This leads to the third activity, which concerns implementation approaches.

## **Establishing appropriate implementation strategies**

Thinking carefully through the character of recurrent practices in place, and the likely shape of innovations that will address areas of most need, leads to consideration of implementation strategies that are likely to be successful. CAST approaches foreground the significance of the profitability for groups (or threats of losses of various sorts) associated with changes in practices. Such approaches will consider the artefacts in place, and perhaps new artefacts that could be introduced and the likely effects of doing so. They will take into account issues of power and identity, and how these might be threatened or otherwise affected by likely changes. They will be based on an expectation that outcomes will not necessarily be predictable, and that other factors influencing changes in recurrent practices will have simultaneous effects.

## **Conclusion**

Rather than conclude this chapter with further comments pitched at a somewhat abstract level, I finish with a vignette of my own creation. It is designed to concretise the discussion and offer food for thought, rather than being presented as an example of “the right way” to do things. I hope my comments to this point have shown that it is not possible to offer universal models of the “one best way” to implement changes because of the significance of contextual contingencies.

## **A vignette**

The Department of Literature and Creative Writing at Sutherland City University was under pressure. Results from a postgraduate research experience survey were poor, particularly the feedback from postgraduates under the heading “research culture”. At the same time the national higher education quality assurance body had introduced a student engagement chapter into its quality code. This required universities to

engage their students in various structures and processes. The Head of Department (HoD) saw that they would not do well in relation to those requirements either.

The problem for the HoD was that this was a department of two halves. The Literature staff tended to take a relatively conventional approach; they were interested in studying the canon and developing an appreciation and understanding of fine works amongst their students. Meanwhile staff on the Creative Writing side were pedagogically somewhat less interested in transmitting and discussing content, having a very clear focus on students and their skills, involving them in much decision making at all levels. Wenger (1998) might describe the two halves as two communities of practice, but like most workgroups in universities each half also had their internal divisions, status and power differences, and different approaches. Nonetheless they each had a set of nested social practices which framed their professional lives.

The HoD felt certain that the main issues to be addressed lay on one side of the Department, but to give a voice to this would be to cause an eruption, with staff giving extended explanations about the different nature of the disciplinary specialisms and the deterministic nature of the subject in terms of teaching approaches. Political and personal rivalries would come to the fore, with powerful characters throwing their weight around. The HoD knew that this was not a productive way to go.

Her response was as follows. At a staff meeting she introduced the issues, and then stated her view that surveys like the one they had conducted on the postgraduate research experience and the requirements of the quality assurance agency were part of an unhelpful control culture, but that improvements were necessary. There was a need to raise scores on the survey, and a need to demonstrate compliance to the quality agency requirements. And anyway, she noted, who could really be against an “inclusive” culture?

The Literature side took a limited and pragmatic approach in the discussion. For example, the research experience survey had asked postgraduates about participation in departmental seminars and the opportunities to discuss work with other postgraduates and the wider research community. So staff suggestions centred on sending messages to postgraduates and putting up posters for seminars they might want to attend. The Creative Writing side wanted to show that they were already doing everything necessary, and anyway (one staff member said) wasn't it somewhat ironic that they were having this discussion in a meeting which specifically excluded the student voice? The response from the other side was a defensive/passive-aggressive reaction.

Wanting to forestall an argument likely to produce more heat than light, the HoD asked two individuals, one from each side of the Department, to liaise with colleagues and come up with a plan (she had already obtained agreement from the two to do this). After three months, the two people were to return to the staff meeting with a series of suggestions for change. The staff meeting agreed that these two should lead developments: no one else wanted the work. The HoD knew that the chosen individuals would be good at listening and negotiating, but that they also had the respect of their colleagues. She believed that change processes needed to be resourced and that it was necessary to have a good, but emergent, implementation plan.

After the meeting she provided a number of resources to the two. These included case studies from similar departments in other institutions, a list of contacts with experience in the area, including the national and institutional student unions, and some examples of specific changes that had been made elsewhere, and the effect they had had.

Together they discussed the principles they would work to in this effort. They would get the broad involvement of staff and students in making changes; they would work to develop a shared purpose; plans would remain emergent until there was movement to consensus; decision making would be inclusive with participant engagement; challenges to the status quo would be encouraged; high-quality information would be made available to everyone. Meanwhile, there would be acceptance of the diversity that existed across the Department, with no attempt at homogeneous approaches.

After a process of discussion and negotiation with staff and student representatives the following measures were put in place:

1. Student representatives would each be allocated 50 euros a term to take course convenors for coffee and cake. That time together was to be spent making sure that the representatives were well informed about the issues on the agenda of forthcoming meetings at which they would represent the student body. The intention was to switch the role of representatives in these meetings from being merely critical to making well-informed contributions to discussions in a more positive way.
2. Two on-campus postgraduate students were asked to lead a series of seminars. Students would set the agenda and invite specialists to come to discuss the issues. A small budget was provided for the expenses of any external specialists.
3. A two-day writing retreat was organised for staff and students together, with clear goals and required outputs.
4. There were meetings with other departments in the university which were thought to have made progress in the areas of engagement, to discuss the things they were doing. Subsequent discussions in the Department of Literature and Creative Writing focused on what could be adapted, what was not appropriate and what would simply not work for them.
5. A particular opportunity was presented by concurrent work within the Department on the development of online provision – a wholly e-learning version of a course currently presented face-to-face. Experts from different organisations, including the National Union of Students and e-learning specialists, were invited to discuss ways in which students could contribute to online provision at the same time as studying the content.
6. The course evaluation tool that the Department used was amended. Like many such evaluation schedules around the world, this asked questions about students' satisfaction with the resources provided, the quality of teaching, the accessibility of the presentation of content and so on. After a departmental meeting reviewing student engagement surveys from around the world and discussing good engagement-indicator questions for their students, a new system was put in place. This learned from latest practice in the National Survey of Student Engagement (2013) and included questions about collaborative learning, high-impact learning practices,

involvement in decision making about their learning, and the quality of interactions at the university. Evaluation results from all courses would be published internally for staff and students each year.

This vignette has concentrated particularly on the learning and teaching focus of student engagement. The readers' context will, of course, be different. It is likely that other priorities will apply, and other approaches will be more productive. The micro-politics of the situation will certainly be different, and the resources, including knowledge resources, will differ in multiple ways too. To repeat: the theoretical and conceptual parts of this chapter and this illustrative vignette are designed only to offer food for thought.

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## Chapter 11

# Towards student engagement as an organisational task? Some recent examples from Germany

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*Marion Gut*

### **Abstract**

Since the expansion of higher education, the study experience of students at German universities has mainly been an academic one. Students attend university to acquire academic knowledge. Activities that occur outside the classroom and foster personal development are considered a private, non-university matter. Universities do not consider it one of their organisational tasks to provide leisure activities or programmes or assist students to participate in extracurricular learning or form learning communities. The chapter analyses two notable exceptions, two study programmes that show a high level of student engagement, and emphasises the twofold character of student engagement: it is both a pedagogical framework that describes what students do and a managerial-pedagogical concept that describes what universities do. The chapter focuses on the latter, on student engagement as an organisational task. It first investigates the measures the study programmes have taken to encourage engagement and then analyses the broader developments that have supported these organisational changes. It argues that the emergence of student engagement as an organisational task is the result of intertwined processes: the transfer of foreign pedagogical models and the development of universities as organisational actors. Both are intensified through the ongoing process of differentiation in German higher education.

**Keywords:** student engagement; study experience; organisational actorhood; differentiation; Germany

## Introduction

Since the expansion of higher education, the main feature of the relationship between German universities and their students has been the provision of academic learning. That is, the university-related experience of students is predominantly an academic one. At the university, students attend courses and prepare for exams, whereas meeting friends and following personal interests like sports or music are generally considered to belong to the private part of student life. Hence, apart from academic learning in the classroom, students' daily lives are rarely, if at all, connected to their university. It is not part of universities' core function to provide leisure activities or programmes or assist in forming learning and living communities.

In contrast to this understanding of student life, the concept of student engagement incorporates non-academic activities and outside-the-classroom experiences as part of the study experience. It focuses on how intensively and with what attitude students participate in the academic and non-academic life of their university, inside and outside the classroom (Astin 1999/1984; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Coates 2007; Kuh et al. 2010). The following chapter highlights the twofold character of the concept of engagement: on the one hand, it is used as a pedagogical framework that describes what students do; on the other hand, it is understood as a pedagogical-managerial tool and an organisational task that describes what universities have to do to encourage engagement (Kuh et al. 2007: 44; Kuh 2009: 685; Trowler 2010: 16).

The chapter presents an analysis of two study programmes in Germany in which both dimensions of student engagement are present: not only do students systematically engage in activities related to their study programme, but the programme management also understands the importance of encouraging that engagement. The analysis focuses especially on the latter dimension – on the study programmes' understanding that the promotion of student engagement is their (organisational) task – and its main purpose is to explain how this specific understanding emerged. The investigation is carried out in two steps. First, it asks what measures were taken by the programme management to implement and anchor students' engagement in the two cases. Second, these measures are contextualised within ongoing processes in higher education in Germany and around the world to provide a broader understanding of why student engagement has emerged. Institutional theory is used to explain the emergence of student engagement in Germany as, on the one hand, a result of the adoption of a foreign model fostered by diffusion processes in a modern world society (Meyer et al. 1997) and, on the other, part of the transformation of universities into strategic organisational actors (Krücken and Meier 2006). It is argued that both processes are fostered by the ongoing differentiation process in the German higher education system.

The chapter begins by describing the two dimensions of student engagement. It emphasises the particular understanding of higher education and organisational actorhood inherent in the concept of student engagement and then examines the presence of this understanding in German higher education. This discussion is followed by an exploration of how student engagement is encouraged in the two cases by the study programmes' management. The chapter concludes by analysing how the

adoption of foreign ideas and the construction of organisational actorhood, both fostered by the differentiation process in German higher education, have led the study programmes in question to promote student engagement as an organisational task.

## **Student engagement as a two-sided concept**

The concept of student engagement was developed in the United States and is thus closely connected to and embedded in the US college model. It was mainly brought to the research agenda by Alexander Astin in the 1980s (Astin 1999/1984) with his work on “student involvement” and later developed further under the label of “student engagement”. In an early definition, Astin described the highly involved student as “one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (ibid.: 518). A later definition by Coates, which can be also found in the North American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), focuses on active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and the feeling of being legitimised and supported by university learning communities (Coates 2007). The definitions of Coates and Astin help us in particular to understand what engaged students do.

But when Vicki Trowler, in her literature review, states that student engagement “is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the study experience” (Trowler 2010: 3), she makes an important point that is sometimes underdeveloped in the literature: student engagement is a two-sided and reciprocal concept (ibid.: 16; see also Kuh et al. 2007: 44). On the one hand, it is a pedagogical framework that describes a specific form of study experience – what students do. On the other hand, it is a pedagogical-managerial concept that understands the enhancement of student engagement as an organisational task of universities – what universities as organisations do.

The chapter, because of its focus on student engagement as an organisational task, examines only forms of student engagement that are related to and fostered by the university. That is, the chapter does not investigate other types of student engagement such as student protests or political activism in general insofar as they are not related to or incorporated by the university.

## **Student engagement as a bundled pedagogical framework**

Individual and organisational actors use the pedagogical framework of student engagement to create a successful study experience (Kuh et al. 2007). The chapter does not investigate whether student engagement really leads to a better educational outcome; instead, it demonstrates that when it is used for that end, it relies on a specific conceptualisation of higher education. If we approach student engagement from the perspective of neo-institutional theory, we can treat it in the North American context as a kind of an institutionalised “more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behaviour” (Greenwood et al. 2008: 4). We can outline three dimensions as the “normative

systems and cognitive understandings” that underpin this behaviour (ibid.: 4). Through the concept of student engagement, these three dimensions are intertwined.

### **The purpose of higher education: what should students learn?**

Because the concept of student engagement is closely connected to the US college model and the idea of a liberal-arts education, the aim of university studies – in discourse and usually also in practice – is understood as the promotion of broad personal development (Kuh et al. 1991). The acquisition of academic knowledge and skills continues to be at the centre of the university experience, but it serves the broader goal of promoting students’ personal development and growth.

### **Where does learning take place?**

According to this broad understanding of the purpose of higher education, learning can take place almost anywhere, inside and outside the classroom. The emphasis on the importance of outside-the-classroom learning is an important and long-established strand of student-engagement research (Terenzini, Pascarella and Bliming 1996). There can be activities that are curricular but occur outside the classroom, as for example some types of project-based learning or service learning. But extra-curricular outside-the-classroom activities are also considered highly important, as can be observed at traditional US campus universities, where almost all social life takes place on campus. The idea is that learning does not end when students leave the classroom or their teachers.

### **From whom should students learn, and what role is attributed to them inside the university?**

Because students spend a lot of time with their fellows, the community in which they live and learn is crucial to the study experience. This is why Coates (2007), for example, also includes support from university learning communities in his understanding of engagement. Accordingly, learning is understood to occur not only between teacher and student, but also among students. Students are part of a community to which they should contribute, and within which they should communicate and exchange their thoughts and opinions. They should be “active”, as Astin put in when referring to students devoting “considerable energy to studying” and participating “actively in student organizations” (1999/1984: 518).

## **Student engagement as an organisational task carried out by a strategic organisational actor**

As stated before, student engagement is not just a pedagogical framework focusing on what students do. It is also a pedagogical-managerial concept focusing on what the university does. In the engagement literature, motivating and supporting student engagement is either implicitly or explicitly considered an organisational task of the university: “Because individual effort and involvement are the critical determinants of college impact, institutions should focus on the ways they can shape their academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement” (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005: 602).

Therefore, it is not surprising that much of the literature focuses on the question of how to generate student engagement (critical success factors and strategies to encourage engagement) and the effects of engagement (especially learning outcomes) (Trowler 2010).

When student engagement is considered an organisational task, the university is given the role of a strong and strategic organisational actor that acts purposefully to fulfil that task. According to the framework developed by Krücken and Meier (2006: 243), strategic organisational actorhood is constructed through four intertwined elements:

- ▶ the establishment of organisational accountability through the proliferation of evaluations, quality measurements, etc.;
- ▶ the definition of the actor's "own" organisational goals, as shown for example in mission statements and marketing or branding materials;
- ▶ the elaboration and expansion of a technical or bureaucratic structure, especially in the university administration;
- ▶ the related process of the professionalisation of university management.

Indeed, if student engagement is considered an organisational task, as for example in the United States and Canada, we can observe all four of these elements: the introduction of the NSSE helps universities in the USA and Canada evaluate their efforts; universities have started to formulate their own goals regarding engagement, for example in the form of mission statements by the student-engagement office (Southeastern Louisiana University 2014); student engagement offices are created to pursue these goals (Northwestern University 2014); and the professionalisation of engagement is fostered by training staff and faculty, for example during a summer retreat (University of Windsor 2009).

These patterns do not mean that every university in the United States and Canada has achieved "complete" actorhood in the area of teaching or a high level of student engagement, but it shows that the concept is clearly anchored in these higher education systems – as a pedagogical tool and as an organisational task.

## **Student engagement in Germany**

### **Student engagement as a pedagogical framework**

Although elements of the student engagement concept can be found in Germany, there is no comparable bundling of all three dimensions within one pedagogical framework. Thus, to investigate the current state of student engagement in Germany, we have to focus on its individual dimensions rather than on the complete model.

Accordingly, the chapter examines the forms that the three underlying dimensions of student engagement take in German universities:

- ▶ learning as including both academic learning and personal development;
- ▶ learning as including activities inside and outside the classroom;
- ▶ the promotion of active student participation in making the university a learning and living community that brings students and teachers together.

The purpose of university education in Germany has always been thought to be the promotion of academic knowledge and the development of the personality. In the discursive tradition of Humboldt, personal development was a question of academic freedom and thereby justified philosophically, whereas in recent debates it is considered a tool to enhance students' ability to succeed in the labour market (Bloch 2009: 81, 107ff.). In the Humboldtian tradition, character development derives from research and academic learning. Recent debates about key competences, in contrast, revolve around looking for new pedagogical models that can foster personal development (Schaeper 2009). Of course, the reality inside universities does not necessarily match the discourses used. The Humboldtian idea of personal development has often taken a back seat to the pure transmission of academic knowledge (Jarusch 1999), and the university often "teaches subjects not human beings" (Euler 2005: 254).

As a result, it is not surprising that learning is still tightly connected to the classroom and to the relationship between teacher and student (two clearly separated roles). Outside-the-classroom experiences and the role of learning communities are rarely mentioned. One possible exception is the concept of service learning, which has been diffused in recent years and which incorporates "outside-the-classroom" sites into university learning (Altenschmidt, Miller and Stark 2009). Obviously, outside-the-classroom activities exist, and students can engage in or commit themselves to many such activities. But apart from sometimes awarding credits for internships or a couple of extracurricular activities, universities in Germany have not encouraged these activities or included and organised them as part of the core of the university experience.

Although students and their needs were the subject of debates and reforms during and after the Bologna Process, they are still not considered an integral part of the university. Discourses that frame them as "consumers" or "customers" (Küpper 2013) assign them new modes of influence or new roles that continue to keep them "outside" the university. German higher education is being influenced by new pedagogical models that encourage an active student role through the "empowerment" of students and the strengthening of their self-initiative – as for example with the focus on student or learner-centred teaching (Nass and Hanke 2013), problem-based learning (Mair et al. 2012), and research-based or research-oriented learning (Euler 2005). In short, single strands of student engagement as a pedagogical framework exist, but not as a bundled and concentrated concept.

## **Student engagement as an organisational task**

As stated above, the understanding of student engagement as an organisational task assumes that the university is a strong and strategic actor, especially in the area of teaching. In general, research into the organisational actorhood of universities focuses primarily on the areas of administration (Krücken, Blümel and Kloke 2009) and research (Hüther and Krücken 2011), and little work has been done on how these developments affect teaching.

As mentioned, student engagement is rarely understood as a "pedagogical bundle" in Germany, as a result of which engagement is not well established as an organisational task. Nevertheless, some processes are influencing the construction of organisational actorhood (according to the four elements formulated by Krücken

and Meier 2006) in teaching in general that could serve as a starting point for the establishment of student engagement as an organisational task:

- ▶ there is a proliferation of rankings and programme evaluations, as well as a strengthening of quality management in the field of teaching (Benz, Kohler and Landfried 2009); Pohlenz and Oppermann 2010), all of which can foster *organisational accountability*;
- ▶ competition among students is rising and forcing universities to *formulate and communicate goals* and establish profiles regarding their approach to teaching (Winter 2012);
- ▶ the *elaboration of the bureaucratic structure* is not occurring only in “traditional” administration. It is also gaining in importance in the area of teaching, as can be seen in the creation of positions in academic programme management, student counselling, quality management, and so on (Winter 2009: 73; Schneijderberg et al. 2013);
- ▶ the *professionalisation of teaching and teaching management* can be seen in the increased training in and research on pedagogy. This timid professionalisation, however, remains far subordinate to research as the crucial qualification for an academic career (Fendler and Gläser-Zikuda 2013).

## **Towards student engagement as an organisational task: two study programmes in Germany**

It is against this background that we can observe a growing number of study programmes that foster the establishment of student engagement – as a pedagogical framework and as an organisational task. The chapter presents an analysis of two study programmes in which student engagement has become an important characteristic of the study experience and has been introduced as an organisational task. This emergence is examined on two levels. First, which organisational measures foster and create student engagement? And second, how can the measures and initiatives be explained from a broader perspective, setting the organisational measures in the context of developments in Germany and around the world?

Analysed are two interdisciplinary undergraduate study programmes that bridge the social sciences, natural sciences and humanities. Study programme A was introduced in 2000 at a university founded in the 1970s with a regional profile. Study programme B was founded in 2012 at a traditional research university. Both programmes have introduced new features into the German higher education system:

they have introduced new fields of study. These study programmes existed in the North American and British university systems, but not in Germany. They differ from classic subject areas like sociology or business administration by including, for example, new interdisciplinary combinations of traditional disciplines;

the programmes were introduced with the aim of creating programmes that are “superior” to the “normal” study programmes at the two universities. They are well equipped, have selective entrance regulations, have introduced structural differences within the university, have gained a certain reputation, and have been awarded prizes by think tanks or organisations that focus on higher education policy, etc.

The study programmes were investigated and analysed in two in-depth case studies that began in 2012. The case studies adopted an ethnographic perspective (Angrosino 2007), which combines participant observation as the core of ethnographic work with problem-centred interviews (Witzel 2000), expert interviews (Liebold and Trinczeck 2002) and document analysis. This chapter draws on multiple sources of data that are part of a broader project about the introduction and institutionalisation of these study programmes. I interviewed 32 students, junior and senior faculty members and members of the university administration. Additionally, a wide range of documents was used, including marketing brochures; webpages; media reports; and internal documents such as grant applications, meeting minutes, documents from the time the programmes were introduced and presentations about the programme. Eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork were conducted during introduction weeks, open days, study courses, workshops and programme-related extracurricular activities such as student initiatives, committees and university events. The research project followed the ideas of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2008/1967).

## **Study programmes' organisational measures to enhance student engagement**

In the two programmes, students are systematically engaged in activities related to their study programme and the student community, and the programme management understands it as a core task to encourage such engagement. In the following, the organisational measures undertaken by the study programmes to encourage student engagement are explained.

### **Starting point: encouraging student engagement as the aim of university studies**

Student engagement has been an integral part of the self-conception of the two programmes from the very beginning. With their interdisciplinary focus, both programmes were founded as a kind of counter-model to traditional education. One aim of the programmes' interdisciplinarity is to enable students to develop themselves through their studies: students might choose from the vast disciplinary spectrum according to their interests and develop their own research questions across disciplinary boundaries. In this way, the programmes emphasise that students' personal development should be supported through the active and independent pursuit of their own academic focus. Additionally, personal development with the aim of enhancing students' employability is inscribed in the programmes, where we can find modules for "responsibility and leadership" and workshops on "how to write and to present", for instance. The programme management has underlined that it aims to offer an experience that goes beyond academic learning. As the administrative manager of study programme B stated, "We understood that we have to offer space for more than only studying".

### **Introduction of personal and selective admission procedures**

For a long time, for the majority of study programmes in Germany, the admission process was either unrestricted or highly uniform: prospective students had to

complete a form and add a copy of their high-school diploma, and that was it. Until the end of the 1990s, these were more or less the only way in which the admission process could conform to higher education legislation (Fries 2007: 3). As a result of changes to this legislation, in the last decade a growing number of study programmes have introduced their own selection procedures, including both investigated cases. These programmes have established a two-step admission process. In the first round, applicants have to fill out forms, add certificates and write a motivation letter. In the second round, they are interviewed by university representatives.

The reason that both programmes introduced a personalised admission process is similar and twofold. First, the admission procedure is used in its original sense – as a tool to select students with the aim of creating a group that meets certain requirements. Hence, the management uses the selection process to choose students who have already been engaged and active and seem to promise to continue their engagement during their studies. As a professor with programme A said, “We are looking for intelligent students who can work independently and think outside the box, and who are critical and active in social activities”. “Being active” has even become formally inscribed in the admission procedure. Accordingly, students who have completed a gap year in any kind of social service or have been engaged in extracurricular activities during school get “extra points”. Additionally, in both programmes it is repeatedly mentioned that the selection process serves less to get the academically strongest students than those who are really motivated – in other words, engaged. Hence, the student selection process serves to create a group of already engaged students, as a result of which it is easier to implement a culture of engagement.

Second, the study programmes use the personalised application process with its interviews to establish a personal relationship between the university and students from the very beginning. The applicants have to be on site for the interviews, thereby establishing a first interaction between them and the programme representatives. These representatives aim to give students the impression that they will be treated as individuals who will be part of a community, and not as anonymous cogs in a bureaucratic machine. Personal interaction and open appreciation for the individual personality are intended to encourage a “spirit of engagement” before the study programme even begins.

### **The introduction of new pedagogical forms inside the classroom**

Study programme B in particular has introduced new kinds of teaching and learning to enhance active participation and “peer learning” among students. The aim is to promote interaction not only between students and faculty, but also among students. As a first-year student in case B stated:

In school, it was more like an *ex cathedra* teaching style. And that’s different here: we are motivated to discuss among ourselves and exchange views and thereby learn new things. It’s not that someone says, “This is the way it is and you have to learn it that way”. It’s more that learning develops through different opinions.

Interaction among students is promoted through the use of new pedagogies that focus on student activeness. Among these pedagogies is problem-based learning, which is mainly employed by study programme B.

## Encouragement of student engagement outside the classroom

Programme management and faculty intend to motivate student engagement in various task forces outside the classroom. The encouragement of three different forms of engagement can be observed: participation in the management and marketing of the study programme, participation in academic programme development and motivation to engage in extracurricular activities – academic as well as non-academic. Faculty and staff encourage students to become engaged in the management, and especially the marketing, of the study programme. A professor stated that he used students' abilities as part of the branding of the programme:

Our logo, for example, didn't fall from the sky. I had the idea of having a competition among the students. We had a lot of different drafts and students and faculty voted. That's how we got our logo, and I think it's damned good.

Students also play an important role on open days and, in study programme B, at the inauguration events. They provide important parts of the official programme and serve as ambassadors, and in that role they inform and talk to prospective students about their studies. Besides branding and marketing support, students are also motivated to participate in the development of the academic programme. When in study programme A a new professorship has to be filled, the programme manager asks the students to be part of the process, participate in the presentation series and talk to the candidates. In a similar procedure at study programme B, the management calls all students together to ask them for their opinions. In both programmes, students are regularly encouraged to share their thoughts about the academic experience and to come up with ideas on what can be improved. It seems to be especially difficult for universities to encourage activities that are non-academic, private but still related to the student community, without interfering too much and suggesting all the initiatives themselves. To solve this "problem", the programme management in case B encourages students to set up committees for any purpose or initiative. And indeed, students have created a wide range of committees, including reading groups, music, hiking and even knitting.

## Provision of space for interaction

As outlined above, interaction and exchange inside a learning community are important facets of the engagement concept. To encourage them, the programmes have created relational spaces, literally and figuratively. Study programme B, for example, provides a "common room" in which students can meet, spend their spare time, and discuss projects and coursework. Study programme A has not been able to provide such a room, but it occupies a floor in a building of the university that plays an important role in creating a sense of identification with the programme and enables faculty and students to meet. When space is understood figuratively, common events for faculty and students do function as a space for interaction. Examples include end-of-the-year-ceremonies, yearly meet-ups to discuss programme development, study trips and – obviously – parties.

## Constructing students' individual actorhood

The construction of students as individual actors is an issue that is related to all five points outlined above and can even be considered the aim of all the organisational

measures described. As reported above, the study programmes understand that it is their task to encourage engagement and active studying on the part of their students. By introducing measures that foster these things, they not only demonstrate organisational actorhood themselves, but also try to foster their students' individual actorhood. Interestingly, these two aims can contradict each other: organisational actorhood implies influence of the organisation on its students' lives, whereas students' individual actorhood should be created and strengthened to establish their independence and autonomy. This issue seems to be part of a broader cleavage described by a lecturer: "We stand in a constant conflict: we can look after our students, or we can prepare them to be independent and ready for the world".

Although the chapter focuses on the creation of organisational actorhood and the question of "what organisations do", it should briefly be mentioned that "what the students do" obviously matters. Faculty and staff may initiate activities, but whether these initiatives are successful depends on the students – their reactions, answers and contributions, or lack thereof.

## **Underlying processes and drivers to explain the introduction of student engagement**

Now that we have described the measures that have been undertaken by the study programmes, the question remains: why they did emerge? Using neo-institutionalist organisation theory, we provide two related explanations.

### **Diffusion of practices in the modern world society**

Student engagement is a concept that originated in North American higher education practices and research. In North America, we can regard student engagement as an "institutionalised rule" that is taken for granted and "built into society" (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 341). As we can see from the introduction of surveys on student engagement and the rise of research using the term as a key word, this "institutionalised rule" has proliferated from its original national context to the English-speaking world in particular, including Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but also to countries such as China, Spain and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (Kuh 2009: 686; Trowler 2010: 3).

From a neo-institutional perspective, the proliferation of this practice and its emergence in Germany can be interpreted as a result of global convergence through diffusion in the modern world society (Meyer et al. 1997). Convergence within organisational fields was first proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as resulting from isomorphic processes with a coercive, mimetic or normative character. The organisational field of higher education gradually becomes globalised, and accordingly isomorphism and convergence across national borders becomes possible (Ramirez and Meyer 2013). This isomorphism accelerates through observation and imitation and as a result fosters the diffusion of scripts or practices across national and organisational boundaries.

Indeed, it becomes apparent that the two study programmes examined here serve as vehicles for transporting practices and meanings from the original higher education

systems they were embedded in to new contexts. Both programmes can be considered “copies” of successful and well-known programmes in the North American and British university systems. They not only stand for interdisciplinary education, but also carry a certain idea of what a study experience should look like. They transfer a spirit that relies on a liberal-arts education and which inscribes distinct roles for students and faculty in the programmes. Student engagement is part of that spirit.

The reason for the transfer – and thus the reason for the introduction of the study programmes – was different in the two cases. In case B, it was a classical mimetic form of isomorphism triggered through relational networks (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 347): a professor learned about such a programme during his time at a university abroad and implemented it in Germany upon his return. In case A, in contrast, the responsible professor created the programme as an attempt to avoid the problems he faced in the disciplinary programme in which he had taught earlier. He and especially his successors have come to refer to the foreignness of the model as an “institutional myth” (Meyer and Rowan 1977) created after the fact in order to legitimise and justify the programme’s introduction inside and outside the university. Regardless of the immediate reason for the introduction of these specific study programmes, however, at a transnational level their emergence appears to be a symptom of transnational convergence. At the national level, in contrast, the two programmes are the first to have introduced these courses and therefore appear to be innovators. Accordingly, convergence at the transnational level can be part of a process of differentiation at the local level.

## **The strengthening and spread of organisational actorhood into new spheres**

When focusing on student engagement as an organisational task that refers to a strong strategic actor, we have to pay attention to a second process fostering its emergence: the transformation of universities into organisational actors. Whereas research into the organisational actorhood of universities mainly focuses on the areas of administration and research, this chapter emphasises the importance of elements that foster organisational actorhood in the area of teaching. For example, the proliferation of rankings and evaluations increases accountability, increasing competition among students can foster the definition and communication of educational goals, new administrative positions are created to achieve these goals, and the field becomes professionalised through increased pedagogical training.

All these elements can help students in the implementation of engagement as an organisational task. But the emergence of this task represents more than simply the strengthening of these elements. It indicates the establishment of organisational actorhood in an area in which it did not previously exist: the organisational actor starts to “organise” the extracurricular engagement of students, their outside-the-classroom activities, and thereby students’ spare time, thus blurring the boundaries between academic life and private life. What is new is not the student activities themselves, but that they are managed, organised and anchored. That is, student engagement as an organisational task is not only a strengthening of organisational actorhood, but also its extension.

## A driver on the ground: the ongoing differentiation process in German higher education

In order to properly understand the emergence of student engagement, a third process, interwoven with the other two, must also be taken into account. This process becomes apparent when we direct our attention to one specific aspect of the study programmes: they are both prime examples of the ongoing differentiation process in German higher education.

Both programmes have introduced two patterns of differentiation into German higher education. First, they differ from classical subject areas and have introduced new combinations of traditional disciplines. They have thereby enlarged the canon of study programmes in Germany and are part of a horizontal differentiation process. Second, these study programmes were introduced with the openly stated claim that they are “superior” to “normal” study programmes and aim to trigger a vertical differentiation process. We therefore have two cases that have introduced vertical and horizontal differences within the German system of higher education. They give us the opportunity to observe how mechanisms that are created through differentiation foster the introduction of foreign ideas and the establishment of organisational actorhood.

In German higher education policy, differences among public universities went unmentioned or even ignored for a long time. Only in the 1990s did issues of differentiation, diversification and the creation of distinctive profiles become part of the political discourse. Government policy was no longer focused on uniformity. Rather, policy began supporting the creation and disclosure of differences among universities with the aim of motivating them to establish unique profiles (Meier and Schimank 2010). In what follows, how this policy change influenced the introduction of these two study programmes is demonstrated. The ideal or obligatory model to introduce a study programme became less uniform. Two developments in particular shaped the specific circumstances of the study programmes’ introduction and created a situation in which different options became apparent and a choice between the options was possible.

First, between 1998 and 2001, the nationwide framework regulation governing curriculum and examinations (*Rahmenprüfungsordnung*) was abolished. This regulation had established a formal and discipline-based set of rules for all German university study programmes (Winter 2009: 9). It was replaced by an accreditation system and the foundation of accreditation agencies. Instead of being state controlled, supervision became a peer-reviewed process. Whereas the framework regulation also oversaw programme content, the now-obligatory Bologna framework focused (first) mainly on formal issues like the credit point system, the construction of modules, and so on (ibid.: 16, 35). The abolition of the framework regulation was intended to give universities more room to develop new study programmes and create particular profiles (ibid.: 17, 20ff.). It also facilitated the introduction of interdisciplinary programmes (ibid.: 17).

Second, third-party funding has become increasingly available for teaching. Although third-party funding for research plays a much bigger role, extra funding options are also now available for university teaching. As with the third-party funding of research, the funds are usually given to single study programmes, projects or departments, and not to the entire university.

These changes created a new set of options for study content and programme funding. Both study programmes analysed took advantage of these options. They used the new flexibility to create a curriculum that differed significantly from that of any other programme in Germany. And it was this flexibility that enabled and facilitated the adoption of models from foreign higher education systems. Additionally, both programmes managed to obtain extra third-party funding. Some of this funding came from the “excellence initiative for teaching” as well as from competition prizes awarded by NGOs or funds to finance foreign guest professorships.

Hence, the differentiation process enlarged the number of possible models for study programmes and forced entities to choose. Accordingly, the two study programmes made decisions based on the new variety of options open to them and thus became responsible for their choices and their consequences. Because “choosing” and “being responsible” are crucial aspects of organisational actorhood, differentiation has fostered the construction of an organisational actor, understood as “an integrated, goal-oriented entity that is deliberately choosing its own actions and that can thus be held responsible for what it does” (Krücken and Meier 2006: 241).

Furthermore, the differentiation process not only fostered the construction of organisational actorhood, it also established it on a specific organisational level, that of the study programmes themselves. The creation of the study programmes as sub-organisational actors was due to a shift of responsibility in the course of the differentiation process. As a result of the abolition of the general framework regulation, the state has lost influence: future regulations are to be controlled by “peers”. But because interdisciplinary study programmes can be introduced without following the guidelines of individual disciplines, the “peers”, the organised professional associations of the disciplines, have lost ground as well. Additionally, access to extra third-party funds has endowed these programmes with some financial independence and thereby somewhat diminished the impact of the university leadership in shaping these programmes. As such, we can follow the process of the reallocation of responsibility. The state, professional societies and university leadership have all lost ground. Responsibility and accordingly accountability have accumulated at the sub-organisational, decentralised level.

To summarise, the differentiation process has, on the one hand, created less uniformity and thereby opened the way for the introduction of foreign ideas. On the other hand, differentiation has been an important driver in establishing the study programmes as sub-organisational actors. Differentiation has therefore made it possible to establish student engagement as both a pedagogical concept and an organisational task.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how student engagement as an organisational task was introduced in two study programmes in Germany as well as the overall developments in higher education that fostered this introduction. The emergence of this organisational task was explained as resulting from the interplay between the transformation of universities into organisational actors on the one hand and the implementation of foreign ideas transported through the study programmes on the other. Underlying these processes is the ongoing differentiation process in German higher education.

The example of the abolition of the general framework regulation for study programmes reveals how differentiation has challenged the traditional German university system as one “based on strong state authority and an equally strong academic oligarchy” in which there was traditionally “hardly any room and legitimacy for universities as independent decision-making actors” (Hasse and Krücken 2013: 189). As a result of the abolition of this framework, the state and the academic oligarchy have both lost influence on the content of study programmes. The process through which programme content is established has become less uniform – or, in the language of institutional theory, can no longer be “taken for granted”. This situation has opened the way for new choices. It has become possible to introduce study programmes influenced by foreign models, and the programme management of the two programmes examined here were forced to develop their own way, their own solutions. In both of these cases, we can observe what Hasse and Krücken (ibid.: 190) describe: that the “taken-for-grantedness” has been replaced by the “development of more individual profiles”.

Understanding themselves as organisational actors motivated and enabled the study programmes as entities to manage and organise the study experience in a new and holistic way – inside and outside the classroom. They introduced purposefully personal admission procedures or new pedagogies and acted strategically to provide space for student activities outside the classroom – academic as well as non-academic. The introduction of student engagement as an organisational task became part of the specific individual profile of the programmes. It shapes the identity of the programmes, which promote strong student engagement as one of the important features of the study experience of their students.

In higher education research, “organisational actorhood” usually refers to the university as a single organisation, an autonomous, goal-oriented entity. The actorhood of the entire university is thereby understood as an organisational model that stands in contrast to other organisational forms, including that of the university as a loosely coupled system, a discipline-based oligarchy, or a professional bureaucracy (for a definition of the different concepts, see Musselin 2007). But the empirical examples in the article show that organisational actorhood, if it is understood in Krücken and Meier’s (2006) terms, can also be applied to sub-organisational entities, the non-centrally managed study programmes. These sub-organisational entities are not a back door for the re-establishment of an academic oligarchy. They are, instead, a new kind of sub-organisational entity: this entity is organisation-specific; it refers to a specific local organisational setting (and not to a trans-organisational disciplinary one); and it is understood by its members as an entity that makes decisions and is responsible for them.

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## Chapter 12

# Student engagement: providing services or forging partnerships?

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*Vicki Trowler*

### **Abstract**

In Europe, the focus of student engagement in representation and governance has shifted over time from that of protest to that of service provision (see Klemenčič 2011), with student unions increasingly taking on the role of service provision. This shift has been noted elsewhere (see Luescher-Mamashela 2010) and associated with the strengthening grip of managerialism and a neoliberal discourse. This erosion of the traditional role of student representation has been contrasted against the ideal of more meaningful engagement of students as partners, and indeed examples of the latter exist. This chapter draws upon research funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the United Kingdom into leadership for student engagement in challenging conditions, and explores the costs and benefits of engaging as partners in governance and learning for both student representatives and their institutions.

**Keywords:** student engagement; student partnership; student leadership

## Introduction

The perception persists that in Europe, the focus of student engagement in representation and governance has shifted over time from that of protest to that of service provision. As observed in Day's (2012: 34) history of the National Union of Students (NUS) in the United Kingdom, many student unions had their roots in both the provision of leisure opportunities and social activity, and the representation of student views, with increasing politicisation over time leading to a greater emphasis on the representational aspect of their work. During the late 1960s, student unions globally were increasingly political, with student protests in Europe (e.g. France, Italy), North America (USA, Mexico), Asia (Indonesia, Japan) and Australia grabbing headlines (Altbach 1989).

However, what has become widely regarded as the "traditional" role of student unions (representing the views of students) has in more recent years been supplanted by an increasing positioning of student unions as purveyors of services to students. In Europe, Klemenčič (2011: 2) notes that:

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" ... 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.

Elsewhere, Luescher-Mamashela (2010: 277-8) reports a similar trend at a South African university:

[A]s the balance of power in the University gradually shifted from academic authority and internal constituency-representation towards managerialist concerns for market-like reciprocities and performance management, value-for-money came to serve as a key principle underpinning students' conception of what they could expect from the University. The value-for-money argument paired exchange and performance accountability in governance so usefully that it was soon applied in holding management accountable. Thus, for instance, when the SRC [Students' Representative Council] protested against overcrowding in lecture halls in 2002, it did so arguing that this situation was "unacceptable given the amounts we pay"... The value-for-money rationale empowered students individually and collectively as clients and consumers which the SRC (and student press) could forthwith serve as a voice.

That this shift should be associated with the strengthening grip of managerialism and a neoliberal discourse is unsurprising: the commodification of "the student experience" is characteristic of a "market model", which, according to Trowler and Trowler (2010: 3):

locates students in higher education primarily as consumers, and is based on neoliberal thinking about the marketisation of education. From this perspective student engagement focuses primarily on ensuring consumer rights, hearing the consumer voice and about enhancing institutional market position.

A recent study of student expectations (Kandiko and Mawer 2013: 5) found evidence of the pervasiveness of this ideological shift among students in UK universities:

A major finding from study was that dominant across all student year groups, institutional types and subjects, students have a consumerist ethos towards higher education, wanting “value-for-money”. This was seen tangibly through sufficient contact hours and resources available and abstractly through institutions’ investment in students, learning spaces and the educational community. This emerged across all year groups and locations (across the UK), rather than being particular for first-year students on the new fee regime in England.

These findings may appear to lend support to the moral panic inspired by popular works like *Academically adrift* (Arum and Roksa 2011), which paint a picture of a generation of students who are unengaged, learning in superficial and instrumental ways to the extent that they are learning at all, and who experience higher learning as a transaction in which they exchange resources (money, time, effort) for a qualification which provides access to suitable employment.

However, this does not convey the full story. The UK has recently witnessed a resurgence of student protest, most dramatically represented by the student fees protests of 2010, and (at the time of writing) most recently involving protests at the Universities of London, Sussex and several others. In attempting to establish the motivation for the protests, Harris (2013: 1) writes:

...I ask...why are they here? “This is all about the privatisation of education,” says Hashmi. “They’re trying to turn students into consumers.”

The University of London Union, she reminds me, is to be abolished. It will be replaced with a “management-run student services centre”, where people will be dealt with as individuals rather than a collective, and “the concept of students running things for students will be pushed away. So it’s basically Thatcherism applied to students. We won’t have a collective space to organise any more [*sic*].”

This would suggest that students are continuing, or have resumed, engagement in some form or other beyond merely consuming higher education. At this point it would seem germane to consider what we understand by student engagement in order to consider what forms this engagement can be seen to be taking, and what the advantages and risks of these various forms might be.

## Student engagement

We understand student engagement to be:

the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution (Trowler 2010: 6).

This definition recognises that the responsibility for engagement lies both with the students and their institutions, and that the aims and intended benefits include both the students and their institutions.

This engagement typically manifests around three focal points: the individual student’s learning, participation in representation and governance, and issues of identity (ibid.: 12). Student engagement can manifest congruently or oppositionally, along affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions, as shown in Table 1 (ibid.: 9).

**Table 1: Examples of positive and negative engagement**

	<b>Congruent engagement</b>	<b>Non-engagement</b>	<b>Oppositional engagement</b>
<b>Behavioural</b>	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
<b>Affective</b>	Interest	Boredom	Rejection
<b>Cognitive</b>	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments

Thus from the above discussion it would appear that students in the UK are continuing to engage, congruently and oppositionally, even in the face of being constructed as “customers” by their institutions and the discourse surrounding the system at large.

More recently, the discourse around “student engagement” (previously framed as “the student experience”) has undergone further inflation, with policy documents and directives now favouring “student partnership”. This is particularly interesting in the light of research, discussed below, which highlights the importance of partnership for the facilitation and enhancement of student engagement.

Zepke (2014) argues that the current favour enjoyed by student engagement relates to its ideological alignment with neoliberalism, with its focus on performativity and its lack of criticality. Setting aside this rather selective and reductionist reading of the student engagement literature, Zepke’s claim does highlight one of the potential risks of an uncritical pursuit or application of student engagement as a strategy – that it can lead to co-option in the name of “partnership”, or focus on individualised private “goods” (if the focus is limited to individual student learning) at the expense of representation of collective student rights and interests. These issues, and others, are discussed more fully below.

## **The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education project**

The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education funded research to explore leadership practices which could enhance student engagement. Interviews were conducted with senior managers, staff leaders and student leaders at three institutions, which were selected for their acknowledged strength in engagement.

### **A climate of engagement**

In order for engagement to be sustainable, it needs to take place within a supportive institutional climate. Interviewees commented on the importance of

shifting to a climate of engagement rather than simply engaging students in isolated aspects:

Originally [the initiative] was about staff engagement, it was to build interest in staff in developing new areas. It then became a PR exercise. Then we began to tie it into teaching so it became a student exercise. I suppose it is about integration. It's not something you do as a one-off. It has to integrate and spread throughout your programme (Academic leader).

Engaged students need engaged staff and an engaged institution. For engagement to be effective and sustainable, it needs to be pervasive:

I've spent a lot of my life involved in studying trade unions and the management of staff in universities and elsewhere, and there are parallel concepts of employee engagement and there are objects of trade union activism. It strikes me that all these things are about partnership and co-operation and working together. You can't do it on your own. Students can't be engaged on their own. They have to have someone willingly engaging with them (Senior leader).

For the climate to be conducive to engagement, all sides need to be willing to take risks. This was described by one senior manager as "a culture of permission", low on sanctions and high on reward.

## **Engaging in partnership**

The key theme which emerged from the findings was the importance of partnership, which involved a systemic shift to a position of shared ownership:

The opportunity for students to have a voice, to be co-producers in all aspects of their education and the university and its wider community ... is something we've been focused on as the students' union for a long time, but I must say since the arrival of [the current VC] we've had a real commitment. We have had a commitment from senior leadership prior to that, but it tended to be solely in the area of the academic experience ... We're in a fantastic position now and the university is really committed to making sure the student voice is heard (Student leader).

The commitment to partnership needs to be demonstrated in material ways. The issue of resources was stressed in a number of contexts, from the initial provision of resources to students or student representative bodies to enable them to participate as equals in university governance, to the resourcing of departments and frontline staff whose remit contributes to creating and enhancing the climate of engagement:

Sometimes we actually see in a very different sort of way that senior management agree with what the students union have to say, and it's the average academic and programme support staff who disagree and it tends to be in areas of student rights ... where they have concern about their ability to deliver that on their schedule, and the university needs to provide the resources to make sure that it happens. And that's something the university is committed to sorting out. So we do sometimes see interesting tensions, and that's the first time we've seen that happen, because it used to be loggerheads with senior management,

and the average academic and support staff agreeing with what we're saying. It's not that they disagree, it's that they can't see it being feasible with their current models, without it having a negative effect on students, or something else having to give (Student leader).

Communication was important – not just one-way communication, but a willingness to enter into discussion on issues and to make leadership accessible, as was illustrated in an incident involving discussions around new student fee proposals:

But there was a little bit of a challenge with the student body, we overcame that ... And actually the vice-chancellor met with those students himself. They wrote to him and he said I want to come and meet with you myself. And to me, that's one of the welcome things I see. For the vice-chancellor to meet with a group of students is fantastic. He can't meet with every student individually, but I think the commitment is there from the senior leadership group. Just last night the PVC [Pro-Vice-Chancellor] copied me in to a student who had written to him personally, who had some concerns. He articulated the university's position but that was a personal e-mail back to that student and he said if you want to have further discussions I will be there or the Head of School will be there. I think that commitment is very positive for students (Student leader).

While student engagement thrives under partnership, it also obviates the need for centralised top-down leadership, allowing for more dispersed forms of leadership, as students – through their engagement with their learning and with the institution – internalise values and identify with institutional goals and absorb leadership attributes and part of the leadership function themselves, thus contributing to conditions in which partnership can thrive:

The relationships between students unions in the UK and universities, there has [*sic*] always been tensions, and I think we've come to an agreement that we are the critical friends and partners in delivering the student experience, and I think that ethos has meant that it's sometimes acceptable that we have different points of view (Student leader).

Importantly, respondents argued that partnership started with mutual respect, allowing power to become more equally shared as sectors learned together to work collectively:

Most of that is about inspiring engagement, by people to an extent seeing that it's about partnership. It may start with respect and develop into something more jointly owned. I think often it starts with a power relationship and then it builds into something which is much more equal. (Senior manager)

We have definitely seen an increase in student participation this year, and I think one of the things that has contributed to that has been feeding back to students the achievements, even if they were small, and they may have been secured in our monthly meeting with the vice-chancellor, I think we were quite poor in previous years. By highlighting that I think that gives students a sense of why they should be involved in student engagement, whether as student rep or course reps or just wider involvement in focus groups or university processes, because they are able to see the change. And I think that's one of the important things for me and the team – and it's been very much a team effort. In reality it's the partnership working, rather than us and them. We actively involve the

university in our processes and they actively involve us in theirs. And for me it's really welcoming to see we've gone from a shift from before when the university wanted student opinion, they'd invite students to a focus group and although it's more work for the student union that the formal request comes through us, and even though it may come from the university we're present as well (Student leader).

Partnership is predicated upon trust, which requires that leaders need to be seen "walking the talk", with their actions consistent (or congruent) with their rhetoric. Examining the documentary sources from the case study institutions, this was apparent. For example, the Annual Report of the students' union of one of the case study institutions quoted the UK Quality Assurance Agency as commenting:

The past three years have seen a sustained commitment to strengthening the partnership between the university and the student body. The audit team identified the close and sustained partnership between the university and its students, which enhances the learning experience, as a feature of good practice.

Sometimes "walking the talk" manifests quite literally, as illustrated by this anecdote recounted during the study:

We had quite a good experience earlier in the year when a number of us went on the march against the cuts to HE. I think that was quite cathartic and helpful in bringing us together more fully with students. I think they could see that we shared the same concerns and then once that had not proved to be particularly successful, we continued to work together trying to find ways to make it work to the benefit of everyone (Senior manager).

One of the telling features of partnerships was the recognition of shared values and a shared vision by staff, students and management. While there may have been differences in positionality, and while different issues may have enjoyed different priority among different sectors, the overall goals and values enjoyed sufficient resonance for partnerships to succeed.

## Community

Partnership invokes a sense of "being in it together", and of belonging to some kind of "community". This "community" can be a physical, geographical entity, as suggested below:

The university has accepted that higher education has changed, and it truly wants students to be a part of that. The university, I think, is truly committed to having the student at the heart of things, but it has to accept that sometimes that view will disagree with the view of the institution ... But I think the university sees the student community, and the staff community, and the university community, as part of the broader community of [City], and that's what a lot of the work is focused on (Student leader).

Notions of partnership and community were also viewed across the dimensions of disciplinarity rather than geography:

We work much more with project-led teaching, so we get [students] to engage in making products, at all levels. I run a competition in [disciplinary application]

which is a UK and international competition ... and obviously students engage with this ... it's all good stuff as far as [the disciplinary group] is concerned. And what goes into that is multidisciplinary, so you can't get in my view a better engagement tool for [a disciplinary cluster] than that, so we've tied that into our teaching for the past several years, and again that engages the students. We're also [disciplinary cluster] ambassadors, and we've been pushing the student [disciplinary cluster] ambassador programme, which again is an engagement process, because they tie in to us, and they tie into the outreach programmes that we do at schools, masterclasses that we run for schools and teachers. This is engagement at a different level – before they even get to us, we want to engage them (Academic leader).

...or indeed “communities of interest”, such as student parents:

Student parents are an “at risk” group because of all the conflicting pressures they're under, yet they're also an invisible group because there are no indications during the enrolment process, so it's difficult to target support ... We've developed a programme training student parents to mentor other student parents, those at the university and including those at local college. Engaging this group of students is important because the student body is changing, and we need to engage all students (Student leader).

...or “communities of practice”, such as the “virtual students' union”:

Another initiative was the creation of a FE [Further Education] college network to familiarise FE students with the students' union in order to increase their awareness and understanding of the union ... [This project] offers training for FE-based student representatives and a pre-arrival “vision” of the university and the students' union with information and advice on university life (Student Union Annual Report).

What mattered was that the shared project (the university) was part of a bigger project – however that was framed – that grounded it and valorised it beyond the confines of the partnership itself. It mattered because it mattered to others, too.

## **Cautions and qualifiers**

While noting the importance of “community” and “partnership”, however, informants cautioned that there was still some way to go before this was fully realised:

I think we're all finding our way, though, to the constitutional and management forms that will allow that to happen effectively, and lots of things are being added in. But a grand structure for that to happen isn't clearly articulated in any UK university that I can see. We have student representatives being added to a whole range of different bodies and groups within universities. Certainly almost all of the bodies and groups I work with we have student representation on. But understanding how the balance of power might work, I don't think is fully understood because we haven't had that very difficult many tests of it yet. But I feel that some of the challenges that the sector is going to face will bring that into stark relief (Senior manager).

There was also acknowledgement that some motives for engagement may be more instrumental:

I think bringing student representatives onto lots of other bodies has been very helpful. So we have students on the project boards for all our building projects, we have them involved in any activities that are involved with changing systems throughout the university, and clearly they're involved in quality assurance processes. So that's very helpful (Senior manager).

...or sometimes not in alignment:

What students want from student engagement is, in all honesty, different to what the university or the students union wants. And I think that's one of the challenges we face. We have to move away from "you pay a fee and you come and get taught, you sit your examinations and leave", and we have to accept that (Student leader).

... but respondents accepted the inevitability of this to some degree:

What the university wants from [student engagement] is some instrumental things, a more satisfied student population as measured, it wants a more successful student population, so it wants a student population that loses less students, so it wants all of those instrumental measures of success. But increasingly the university recognises that the only way to get there is to achieve a more participative environment, a more supportive environment, a more positive environment ... and thus for those things to emerge ... We might all have different motivations in wanting to get to a particular place. So, I might well say to students, we want to provide you with a richer experience, let's discuss what else should be prioritised in order to do that, at the same time that I'm saying to Deans and [other senior managers] the reason for going down this road of engaging with students and trying to an extent to frame expectations but also meet expectations and create a more partnered environment is that it will help you achieve your financial bottom line because you'll lose less students. So I think you can have people on the same journey for different motivations and I don't think that matters particularly. What matters is the journey (Senior manager).

Accepting that some alliances might be tactical rather than value-based allowed for an acceptance of difference, a respect for differing agendas and an acknowledgement that a sound working relationship did not necessarily require everyone to hold the same views about everything in order to get anything done.

One of the risks of partnership is co-option, with student unions taking on duties of university management, sometimes against their own better interests. It requires student leadership which is aware, experienced and confident enough to resist this potential trap and prioritise its duty to represent its constituency:

Sometimes, because the university asks us to sit on so many projects and boards and committees, and I think we're getting a lot better at, instead of saying "can you sit on this committee it would be very useful for us" is explaining the wider scheme of university governance and how it all fits together, and doing a lot of

work with the [university governance] unit, who are responsible for the running of those senior university committees, and actually what we've been developing is what they expect from each of those student committee reps, and we're developing the ability to speak up in those meetings when senior academics are there, and there's been training sessions, but we need to do more of that. It's a learning curve. And I think we've learned from the union and university perspective (Student leader).

Over-extension of students on engagement can also lead to burnout, and engagement demands need to be considered within the context of other demands on students:

We have to remember that students are not just students, they have other responsibilities, they work, they have parental responsibilities (Student leader).

Partnership can lead to the loyalties and legitimacy of student leaders being called into question by their constituents:

It was really challenging for me in terms of some of my student constituent members, who felt that what I should be articulating is that the university should not be setting a fee at all. Now that's a hard argument to win, when the university is extending such an arm to say we want you involved in those discussions, I have to make a call, that being involved in those discussions was a positive thing, I didn't want to waste that opportunity, and I think that frustrated a small minority of the student body ... But that was a little bit of a challenge with the student body, we overcame that. There were calls for my resignation but there will always be in any elected political position (Student leader).

...or, at another level, to role conflict:

One of the most difficult things which causes conflict – I have access to information that's under embargo. If you tell me that this information is in confidence then it's in confidence and I will never leak it, but how can I – one person – represent the views of 20 000 students? If you show me the financials, I'll see the rationale – but I've been here [in the student leadership role] for two years now, I've become institutionalised, I sometimes think a little more like the university side than the student side ... it's challenging, because before we had the position of never being consulted on anything, of being quite reactive, and now we are in that privileged position ... And while I understand the reasoning for [some of those decisions] it makes it very challenging for me as a student leader. So, I think, it's a tough one. And in all honesty, you do your best. But I think there will become a point where we will have to agree to disagree (Student leader).

Beyond the rhetoric, students were well aware that, ultimately, power and responsibility remained primarily the domain of senior management, and that on some issues their interests would naturally diverge. They acknowledged that there would be limits to partnership – even employing participatory strategies such as peer assessment would not absolve the course convenor of accountability for maintaining standards on a course, just as involving students in the highest levels of financial decision making would not dilute the fiduciary responsibilities of senior management.

## Conclusion

While the role of student unions has been significantly repositioned under globalisation and the marketisation of higher education to focus on the provision of services to the student “consumers” of higher education, examples exist of students engaging outside of this framing, both oppositionally (for example, in student protests against fees or outsourcing) and congruently (such as student unions engaging as partners with university management). However, beyond the utopian discourse of “partnership” and “community”, both students and their universities face real costs and risks, which should not be ignored. These include resource costs (money, time and “status”/power), risks to legitimacy, co-option and burnout, and the subversion of progressive ideals to more instrumental motives. Ultimately, questions remain about structural forms in which the balance of power can be resolved to the mutual benefit of all in such partnerships and communities.

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## Chapter 13

# Politics as process: Salford's charter of student rights

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*Martin Hall and Andrew Snowden*

### **Abstract**

This chapter analyses the development of a student charter in the context of the changing relationship between a students' union and a university administration. We identify a core tension between, on the one hand, the accountability of students' unions in the UK to the governing bodies of their universities and, on the other, their political accountability to their student electorates. The University of Salford's first Student Charter was launched in February 2012. By looking closely at the process of its development, and interviewing the student leaders and university administrators who were involved, we show how the tension between working in partnership – the concept of a “covenant” – rubs up against the dynamics of student politics. We see this as the difference between “outcomes” and “process”, and as politics as normal. We also show how local, intra-institutional issues interact with national policy positions and political campaigns; how a general trend in student engagement manifested within the specific context of a single institution. In this sense, “all politics is local”.

**Keywords:** student rights, higher education, legislation, governance, Charity Commission, Student Charter, quality assurance

## Introduction

Our Student Charter is an undertaking between you and your university. For our part, we undertake to provide you with opportunities to learn that - at the least - meet the standards set out in the Charter. For your part, you agree to use your opportunities to best advantage in realizing your potential and your dreams. You've come to us because you believe that we have something special to give you. We've welcomed you to the university because we know that you've got what it takes. The University of Salford has great students and tens of thousands of graduates across the world who have benefitted from their time here. The Student Charter sets out a basis for you to work with our teachers and professional staff to best effect.

Martin Hall, Vice-Chancellor

The Students' Union is delighted to introduce the Student Charter for Salford students. We believe that clarity about rights and responsibilities is imperative in building a strong relationship between students and the University. Students' rights are important in emphasising that excellence in teaching, supervision and support are the most important aspects of academic life, while responsibilities reinforce the partnership that is essential for students to gain the most from their time at University. We are proud to have helped the University create this Charter, and consider it a welcome addition to the student experience at Salford.

Preface, University of Salford Student Charter, February 2012

Students are engaged with higher education at all levels, from the local to the transnational. In this chapter we are concerned with the institutional level of engagement – specifically, the development of a student charter in the context of the changing relationship between a students' union and a university administration. At the same time, we show how positions are shaped by national issues, constraints and opportunities. We are particularly interested in the relationship between “outcomes” (products) and “process” (how outcomes are achieved). In questions of student engagement, as elsewhere, “all politics is local”. Consequently, we will show how institution-specific issues interplay with comparable spheres at the national level.

The University of Salford is in Greater Manchester, northwest England. Once the heartland of the Industrial Revolution, Salford experienced all the consequences of urban decline through much of the twentieth century as textile manufacturing, coal mining and heavy industry moved away from the city. More recently, there has been a steadily accelerating economic recovery as the service sector has expanded and digital and creative enterprises have developed. The history of the university has reflected these local circumstances. Founded in the late 19th century as the Salford Working Men's College, the institution was a College of Advanced Technology before receiving a Royal Charter as a university in 1967. In 1996, a merger incorporated a range of health professions as well as art and design disciplines. Today, the University of Salford has about 20 000 students, with a majority from the northwest region and about 10% drawn from across the world and well over 100 different countries. The university offers a full range of qualifications, from undergraduate degrees to doctorates and has a significant reputation for research in Health and Social Care, Environment and Life Sciences, Science and Engineering, the Built Environment and Arts and Media (University of Salford 2014).

While the university has long had a Students' Union this was previously a social and recreational organisation. However, in 2006 changes to the Charities' Act required governance reforms for many students' unions in the UK. At Salford, this prompted a re-evaluation of the role and effectiveness of the Students' Union, resulting in significant changes in governance that were implemented in July 2007. In effect, this was a re-launch of the organisation and the beginning of an explicit concern for students' rights and opportunities at the university, and of political engagement with the university's administration. As we show, the development of the Student Charter has its roots in the significant changes in the way that the University of Salford Students' Union engaged from mid-2007 onwards.

Our narrative and interpretation of these developments has been informed by interviews with key participants in these developments.<sup>35</sup> One of the authors (Andrew Snowden) was President of the Students' Union between 2006 and 2008, when the union was reshaped. We interviewed five additional Students' Union elected leaders and a previous Chief Executive Officer for the Union. The other author (Martin Hall) joined the university as Vice-Chancellor (the equivalent of President) in 2009. Taken together with university documentation, these perspectives provide a rich sense of emerging student engagement at the local level between mid-2007 and the present, as well as demonstrating the co-dependencies of institutional level issues and comparable national questions.

## The University of Salford Students' Union

The University of Salford Students' Union (the USSU) is formally constituted as in a partnership with the university. This is required by Part II of the United Kingdom's Education Act of 1994,<sup>36</sup> which gives the Council of all publicly funded universities the responsibility for both ensuring that a students' union is established and operates appropriately:

the governing body of every establishment to which this Part applies shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that any students' union for students at the establishment operates in a fair and democratic manner and is accountable for its finances (UK Government 1994).

As with students' unions across the UK, when elected into office student leaders are granted sabbatical leave from their course of study. USSU comprises these sabbatical officers, a Board of Trustees of whom the majority is elected by students and an independent management structure. The union's trustees and elected student leaders are accountable to the university's governing body (USSU 2014).

This said, and like most student unions in the UK, USSU has a high degree of effective autonomy, with accompanying responsibilities. The 12 trustees set strategic direction and oversee performance and achievements. The elected sabbatical trustees – the USSU President and four vice-presidents – are accountable for ensuring effective student representation. Each vice-president is responsible for a set of schools and

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35. Some names have been changed at the request of interviewees.

36. UK Government (1994), *Education Act*, available at [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/30/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/30/contents), accessed 12 November 2014.

works with elected student representatives for each academic programme that the university offers. In parallel with the role of the trustees and elected student leadership, the Student Council of 22 elected members discusses and decides policy motions for the union as a whole (USSU 2014). While the university provides the union with a substantial annual operating grant, the union is free to raise its own income from commercial activities. While previously student unions in the UK had been exempt from regulation, this exception fell away in the terms of the 2006 Charities Act and all unions with an annual financial turnover of more than £100 000 each year now fall under the direct regulation of the Charity Commission (Charity Commission 2014).

There is, then, a core tension in the way in which students' unions are set up in publicly funded universities in the UK. On the one hand, unions such as USSU are established by their university and are accountable to the governing body of their university. In addition to practical dependency on annual grant funding, the university's Council has an obligation in law to determine that the union is acting fairly, democratically and in the interests of all registered students. On the other hand, USSU has a direct accountability to the Charity Commission for its financial affairs, a political accountability to its student electorate, and is subject to resolutions of the Student Council. In many respects, this tension is analogous to the tension between management responsibilities and academic freedom across the university as a whole. While this complexity is often a wellspring of creativity and effective political action it is also a potential source of forms of dissent and conflict that are difficult to resolve. The implication here is that the substantive processes by which political issues are introduced, considered and resolved can be as important as formal outcomes. This, we suggest, is clearly demonstrated in the history of the development and introduction of the Student Charter at the University of Salford.

## **The Student Charter**

Given the complexity of these governance arrangements, it is not surprising that many British universities have some form of statement that recognises the rights and responsibilities of students, and that this has been set up with the involvement of their students' union. The first overview to be provided of these statements was provided in the January 2011 report of the Student Charter Group and under the auspices of the Department of Business, Industry and Skills. Jointly chaired by a Vice-Chancellor and the President of the NUS, the working group conducted a survey across all higher education institutions in the UK as well as interviews with a range of senior university administrators and elected student leaders. About 60% reported that they had some form of student charter in place and a further 20% that they were either considering or developing a charter (Student Charter Group 2011).

There were, however, differing senses of the value of the student charters that were in place. Perhaps not surprisingly, university administrations were positive about the benefits of their statements. The most common benefit was seen as managing student expectations within their university. In contrast, student union leaders were less positive. While they did not see student charters as harmful, by and large they had experienced their value as support for casework – in order to represent students in dispute with their university and therefore in challenging the university's

management of student expectations. The tenor of these responses is evident in the extracts from the six interviews with student union leaders published as an appendix to the task group's report (Table 1).

**Table 1: Extracts from interviews with student union leaders**

University A	"There had been no widespread student consultation. This may raise questions about the extent to which the document really feels like either a living or a shared document among students more widely... That concern continues into practice – the union reports that little practical use is made of the Charter beyond occasional reference in individual casework; it just 'sits on the website.'"
University B	"The University and Union at University B have been collaborating on a major overhaul of the Student Charter to modernise it and make it more important. The old 'Student Charter' will be replaced with a document entitled 'Our Commitment' setting out commitments on the part of the student and the institution. The old document was seen as institution-owned (even institution-imposed) and felt too much like a formal contract'."
University C	"The University C Charter is seen mainly as an institutional document, although the union was involved in the original 'concept' stage. Several hundred copies were printed, but the union's impression is that awareness of the Charter is generally pretty low. The union believes that in redrafting the Charter (which is believed to have involved some scrutiny by lawyers), the language was 'diluted so much that it is not really a helpful document', and there is concern that it 'doesn't promise anything.'"
University D	"There is a feeling that the Charter is an institution-owed document; the union can recommend amendments (and has in the past), but it is up to the institution to decide on them – there is no sense of negotiation involved, and the document is not seen as an 'agreement'. The Charter is well recognised by students and staff, as it is 'put everywhere', with thousands of printed copies available. It is used frequently in individual casework and the union is also planning to cite the Charter in representations to the institution about academic feedback this term, as it sets out minimum expectations in that area that union officers do not believe are being met universally."
University E	"The process of creating the Charter was quite inclusive, with extensive discussions between institutional managers and student representatives, but the final document does not feel like a joint effort (it uses institutional branding and fits the institutional 'uniform'). Over time, this has possibly become a factor in the union doing little to promote the document or its use – which is now largely confined to individual casework."
University F	"a strategic decision was made within the institution to treat students as partners in as many areas of the institution's work as possible. This implied major changes to the existing Student Charter, which was felt to be too one-sided in favour of the institution, and used as a tool against students especially in settings like academic appeals. A working group was established to review the charter, involving two union sabbatical officers, a union staff member and a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the university. There was wide consultation with students during the early work of the group. The group brought work forward through the formal committee structure of the institution and it was finally ratified by the senate and separately by the union's executive committee'."

Source: Student Charter Group Final Report Annex C, January 2011

While the Student Charter Group recognised this divergence of perspectives in its final report, it interpreted this as requiring closer attention by universities to “partnership working” with their students and student unions. The major purpose of a student charter should remain the provision of “Information for students when they are starting a course – and during the course – so they know what they can expect and what is expected of them” (Student Charter Group 2011). All universities should provide “short, clear statements - of student rights and responsibilities –so students know broadly what they should be able to expect, what is required of them, and what to do if things do not meet expected standards”. In providing guidance, the task group provided a checklist of 24 “issues” organised as 7 “topics”. These range from teaching and learning to sport and community volunteering, and are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Topics and issues for student charters**

<b>Diversity, Respect, Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Encouraging equality and promoting diversity – outlining obligations in a diverse community of staff and students</li> <li>▶ Mutual respect, courtesy and professionalism for other members of the community</li> <li>▶ Methods of two way communication between staff, students and student representatives</li> <li>▶ Respect for physical environment</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching, Learning, Research and Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Teaching, learning and research facilities</li> <li>▶ HEI support for student-facing staff (including continuing professional development)</li> <li>▶ Staff input and learner support, including personal tutors and supervisors</li> <li>▶ Students’ responsibilities/obligations as learners</li> <li>▶ Assessment and feedback guidelines</li> </ul>
<b>Finance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Essential course costs and estimate of additional costs</li> <li>▶ Payment options and deadlines</li> <li>▶ Financial advice services available</li> </ul>
<b>Complaints, Appeals, Discipline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Redress if students are not satisfied that commitments are being fulfilled</li> <li>▶ Complaints and appeals</li> <li>▶ Student discipline</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Development and Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Personal development, including employability</li> <li>▶ Professional accreditation (where appropriate)</li> <li>▶ Students and part-time work</li> </ul>
<b>Student Services (non-academic)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Health and welfare support services</li> <li>▶ Accommodation and security</li> </ul>
<b>Community, Sports and Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Obligations to wider community</li> <li>▶ Sports and social opportunities</li> <li>▶ Students and work</li> <li>▶ Volunteering</li> </ul>

Source: Student Charter Group Final Report, January 2011

When the Student Charter Group asked the University of Salford to respond to its survey in mid-2010, the university had been in the process of developing its first student charter; unlike the majority of other universities, it had not previously had any policy in place in this area. Not surprisingly, the publication of the final report of

the Student Charter Group in January 2011, which included a generic model charter, influenced the final outcome of Salford's Student Charter. Further focus and impetus was provided in March 2011 by notification from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) that it had scheduled a major review of the university for early 2013. The last QAA review had been conducted in 2007 before USSU had been restructured; the 2013 review would require completion, before the end of 2012, of independent evaluations by both the university and the Students' Union for submission to the QAA review team (QAA 2013).

The University of Salford's first Student Charter was completed by the end of 2011 and published in February 2012. Its overall approach followed the emphasis on partnership recommended by the Student Charter Group:

the Student Charter is intended to give you the confidence that the University of Salford is committed to making sure you get the best out of your time with us. It also outlines what we expect of you as a student and gives you links to the most important information you will need to have a great experience as a Salford student. The Charter was developed in partnership between the University and the Students' Union and applies to all undergraduate and postgraduate students. The key to the relationship between the University, Students' Union and student is communication. The Student Charter is the start and a summary of this dialogue (University of Salford 2012).

In its detail, however, the Salford Student Charter goes considerably beyond the "topics and issues" outlined in the generic framework recommended by the Student Charter Group, while also omitting some of the recommended areas. The contents of the Salford charter are summarised in Table 3. The document has a four-part structure: undertakings by the university, commitments by USSU, responsibilities of students, and a schedule of information that students can expect to receive.

In commenting on the process of developing the charter through 2011 the member of the university's senior leadership with overall responsibility for academic programmes, the quality of student learning and the relationship with USSU, stresses that he had wished to avoid a "contractual" model that cast the student as a customer entering into a contract in return for a fee paid. Instead, he was seeking a "covenant", to be understood as a set of mutual commitments and responsibilities. However Jane, President of USSU and a member of the working group that drew up the charter, is more ambivalent:

The relationship between the Union and the University during the development of the Charter was as much as it had been during my time as a Sabbatical Officer – we had great working relationships with a number of University members of staff, managers and senior managers and there was much discussion of partnership working but I'm not sure there was an overarching culture of partnership. It felt more like an unequal partnership with the Students' Union as the junior partner and the University still ultimately holding all the power. There were times during my term of office when I didn't feel empowered to offer the student perspective, particularly when it was a different viewpoint to that of University management. My actual experience of being a member of the Student Charter Working Group was an overall positive one, and as I mentioned above, my opinion carried much weight, which gives an indication of the partnership working which was evident most of the time. I was allowed to offer the student viewpoint and it was listened to but I should not have been the only student involved.

**Table 3: University of Salford Student Charter**

University undertakings	Student Union commitments	Student responsibilities	Information schedule
Require and encourage its staff to treat students and colleagues fairly and respectfully.	Support you and your fellow students to ensure you all receive fair and respectful treatment and are aware of your rights and responsibilities.	Treat all staff and students fairly and respectfully at all times.	Your final teaching timetable in a timely manner, normally by 1 August.
High standards of engaging teaching, support, supervision, advice and guidance.	Champion your student voice through the election, development and training of student representatives.	Attend and participate in induction, meetings with tutors/supervisors, timetabled classes, and any other scheduled activity.	A student guide covering programme and module details such as assessment criteria, contact hours, mode of delivery of the programme, examination arrangements and professional requirements (if appropriate) and a general University guide outlining assessments, regulations, academic guidance and support and appeals and complaints procedures.
Opportunities for one to one contact with a named member of academic staff to help you review and plan your progress.	Provide non-judgmental, independent and student-focused advice on academic and welfare issues.	Work in partnership with University staff and take responsibility for managing your own learning, in order to: actively engage in your programme; ensure you spend sufficient time regularly in private study; participate fully in group learning activities.	Guidance and feedback on good academic practice for Higher Education study.

University undertakings	Student Union commitments	Student responsibilities	Information schedule
Opportunities for you to participate in activities that will enhance your employability and personal development.	Represent the interests of you and your fellow students at local and national level.	Submit assessed work by stated deadlines, actively participate in feedback and attend formal assessments at a time determined by the University.	Effective and timely feedback on assessed work, normally within three weeks from the submission deadline.
Support for your participation in academic development and programme management, including elections of student representatives.	Encourage active student communities both within and beyond the University.	Be aware of and comply with the general and student guides ... the University's rules and regulations.	Reasonable advance notice of cancelled and re-scheduled classes.
Access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services.	Provide a diverse range of activity groups and opportunities to enhance your personal and professional development.	Give your School advance notice of any essential absences.	Programme costs, payment options and deadlines, and an estimate of necessary additional costs.
A high quality, effective and accessible physical and virtual teaching and learning environment.		Support your student representatives and participate in systems which will lead to improvements in the quality of learning and teaching.	
Continuing professional development opportunities for its staff.		Participate in University activities that will enhance your employability and personal development.	

University undertakings	Student Union commitments	Student responsibilities	Information schedule
Effective communication with and to students.		Respect the physical environment of the University, including accommodation and behave respectfully towards neighbours in the local community.	
		Pay promptly any charges made by the University.	

Source: *The University of Salford Student Charter, February 2012*

This difference mirrors the tension in the work of the national Student Charter Group, with the emphasis on “partnership working” in the majority of recommendations in the Group’s report and in the survey responses by university administrations contrasting with the greater ambivalence of NUS participants and student union leaders at all but one of the universities included in Table 1. These differences can be further understood by looking in more detail at the development of USSU following its reform in July 2007, at the wider context of student politics through this period and at the significance of “process” as distinct from “outcomes”.

## Politics as process

While the new Charities Act required all student unions falling under its ambit to be registered as charities by 2010, the new legislation did not in itself require any changes in the way that unions work or serve their student bodies; in this respect the 1994 Education Act continued to apply, as it does today. Andrew and James, respectively President and Chief Executive Officer for USSU, provide the context for the 2007 restructure of the Students’ Union.

Andrew notes that:

the Students’ Union before the governance review had been characterised by a lack of democracy - there was low participation, especially in elections at all levels. The sport clubs and the biggest societies dominated the elections, even if they did not represent the wider students’ demographic features. Therefore, the Union Council and the full-time officers represented their own groups’ interests. The Student Union’s main activities were focused on the commercial services. The Union’s image in the eyes of the wider student population and the university was of a drinking club, which elected its mates to positions, who then didn’t do the jobs they were supposed to do and were out of touch with most students.

James sees the key reforms as changes to decision-making processes. Before the restructure, student union leaders did not scrutinise or challenge decisions made by the university. Although there was a Student Committee (comprising four sabbatical

student leaders and five non-sabbatical student representatives) and a Student Council, there were rarely any challenges to decisions that the university made concerning students. In contrast, the changes introduced in 2007 resulted in USSU engaging with the university and questioning decisions. Now, student leaders want to know on what basis decisions are made and how they relate to the overall strategic direction of the university. Today, USSU is driven by a concern with “what the student wants”.

Andrew agrees with this view. Before 2007, the university did not take much notice of USSU when it came to important issues for the rights of students. In addition, there was a lack of collectivism: “Without the two core principles of democracy and professionalism in place, wielding the power of collectivism was impossible. The students were not involved or engaged with the Union and the university knew it. The Union, in effect, was a toothless lion”. As President at the time, he saw the main driver for change as breaking this “downward circle”.

While being concerned with representing the interests of students registered at the University of Salford, the USSU was also an integral part of regional and national student politics, both because of broader student interests and because it is an affiliate of the NUS. Issues began to heat up at Salford during the 2008/2009 academic year, when Yusuf was President and John was Vice-President, and the university began what was to be a series of wide-ranging staff redundancy exercises (YouTube 2009). In May 2010 a coalition government was elected in the UK and almost immediately it began a programme of radical reform to student fee structures and funding (Vasagar and Shepherd 2010). This was compounded by the Liberal Democrat partners in the coalition reneging on a pre-election pledge not to increase tuition fees. In late 2010 this came to a head in the proposal to almost triple student fee levels, leading to a large demonstration in London on November 10, with unanticipated confrontations with the police:

Protesters smashed windows and waved anarchist flags from the roof of the building housing the Conservative party headquarters as the fringe of a vast rally against university funding cuts turned violent. The scale of the London protest defied expectations, with an estimated 50,000 turning out to vent their anger at government plans to raise tuition fees while cutting the state grant for university teaching ... the vast majority of protesters were peaceful, and those at the front of the march watched videos and heard impassioned speeches against the cuts (Lewis et al. 2010).

The London demonstration was co-organised by the NUS, who declared:

we’re in the fight of our lives ... we face an unprecedented attack on our future before it has even begun. They’re proposing barbaric cuts that would brutalise our colleges and universities. This is just the beginning ... the resistance begins here (Lewis et al. 2010).

A large delegation of Salford students travelled to London to take part in the protests.

For John, the re-politicisation of national student politics was a welcome test of the efficacy of the USSU reforms. Would the newly re-constituted union engage with these issues, or it would it revert to being a “toothless lion”, a “drinking club which elected its mates to positions”? John says that he had been initially sceptical about the value of the 2007 reforms. Looking back, he feels that the relationship between the

student leadership and the university leadership in the first year was too close, and that USSU was overly concerned not to damage the new partnership. Consequently, the opportunity to join forces with the trade unions in opposing “Project Headroom” – the university’s staff redundancy programme – was welcome: “the Students’ Union has to be brave to confront the university”.

What emerges here is another manifestation of the tension in student politics between working in partnership with university management – the concept of a “covenant” – and standing in opposition to the institution when this is perceived to be in the interests of students. This, of course, is a widespread feature of student politics. In particular, the NUS found itself, in late 2010, both co-chairing the Student Charter Group and advocating “partnership working” and also rallying students to oppose the same government’s policies as “the fight of our lives”.

One way of reconciling this tension, we suggest – of seeing it as part of the normalisation of student politics at the institutional level – is in the difference between “outcomes” and “process”. By outcomes we mean products: policies, agreements, funding arrangements, elections, appointments and the like. By process, we mean the mechanisms of representation, consultation, negotiation and mediation that result in outcomes.

Seen in this way, we can better understand Jane’s ambivalence as a member of the working group that drew up the Salford Student Charter. She recalls, as noted, “great working relationships with a number of University members of staff, managers and senior managers”. She feels that “my opinion carried much weight, which gives an indication of the partnership working which was evident most of the time. I was allowed to offer the student viewpoint and it was listened to”. But although she readily endorsed the Student Charter when it was first published in early 2012, she is critical of the process that was followed:

Right from the outset there should be a clear partnership between the Students’ Union and the University when determining the process by which the Charter will be developed. Neither stakeholder should dominate and have complete ownership over the process. There should then be a clear stage of consultation with both students and staff – what do they want from a Charter, what do they see its purpose as, what should be included, what should not etc. Using all the evidence from the research, a small working group with equal representation from staff and students should develop the Charter, and this should be put out for open consultation in the University community. If any substantial changes are needed, these should be incorporated before the document is approved. Once the Charter is approved, there should be a significant communications plan as it is vital both staff and students know about the Charter for it to be effective. There is no point developing a Charter which is just another document which forms part of a box-ticking exercise.

It was, then, these criticisms of process that resulted in USSU launching a consultation with students for an alternative to the proposed charter. While accepting both the intent and the projected outcome of the Student Charter, USSU found that that failure to ensure appropriate consultation and representation undermined the legitimacy of the charter. This validated the emphasis of the 2007 reforms at USSU, which focused on enabling and encouraging widespread engagement with

the student body to provide legitimacy to the student union and its leadership. While the university's administration adopted the generic template proposed by the joint NUS/government Student Charter Group, USSU opted for a different model; a Salford Bill of Student Rights framed as a set of obligations required of the university to address perceived deficiencies rather than in the genre of "partnership working" (USSU 2011).

Through the first few months of 2011 USSU held a range of workshops engaging with more than a thousand students. The proposed Bill of Student Rights was launched in April 2011 and presented to the university's Learning, Teaching & Enhancement Committee the following month, where it was politely noted (University of Salford 2011). In making their case, USSU placed particular emphasis on the process of consultation they had followed, and the sources of students' opinions that had been incorporated:

the Students' Union believes that every student at Salford should be provided with a set of seven basic rights while studying at the University. ...The seven rights have been drawn up following comprehensive research and consultation with students over the past twelve months. Much of our information has come from the National Student Survey (NSS) results from the last academic year, looking at both the percentage results and the open comments to outline the areas for improvement. We have also made use of the University's own survey, the Salford Experience Survey (SES). As well as survey data, we have used feedback gathered by going out as a team talking to students and from key Students' Union services to inform the details of this document; namely the Students' Union Advice Centre, and the student rep system (USSU 2011).

**Table 4: Salford Bill of Student Rights**

Issue	Right
Hidden Course Costs	The right to know the full costs of a course before application
Assessment and Feedback	The right to quality, constructive feedback on all assessments within three weeks
Course-Based Careers Advice	The right to relevant, high-quality careers advice
Representation	The right to effective, independent representation at course, school and college level
Learning Resources	The right to appropriate, high-quality learning resources
Academic Practice	The right to advice and guidance on good academic practice
Timetabling	The right to well-managed and organised timetables

Source: USSU May 2011

The seven rights are summarised in Table 4. Taken at their face value – that is, as a set of outcomes – these issues are all within the scope of the generic student charter model recommended by the NUS to their affiliated branches at the beginning of the year. This close concordance of outcomes is confirmed by close comparison between

the schedule of rights in the Student Bill of Rights (Table 4) and the provisions of the Student Charter summarised in Table 3.

Of the set of seven student rights, three relate to the core provision of learning and teaching opportunities (the rights to: appropriate, high-quality learning resources; advice and guidance on good academic practice; quality, constructive feedback on all assessments within three weeks). These are for the most part met by university undertakings in the Student Charter (the undertakings to provide: a high-quality, effective and accessible physical and virtual teaching and learning environment; access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services; effective and timely feedback on assessed work, normally within three weeks from the submission deadline). Two of the student rights relate to the provision of key services (the rights to: relevant, high-quality careers advice; well-managed and organised timetables). These are also met by university undertakings in the Student Charter (the undertakings to provide: access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services; a final teaching timetable in a timely manner, normally by 1st August). The Bill of Rights requires “the right to know the full costs of a course before application”. The Student Charter covers this in the provision that information will be provided for “programme costs, payment options and deadlines, and an estimate of necessary additional costs”. Finally, the Bill of Student Rights requires rights of representation – “the right to effective, independent representation at course, school and college level”. The Student Charter requires this through the work of USSU and its accountability to the university’s governing board in terms of the 1994 Education Act; the commitment to “champion your student voice through the election, development and training of student representatives” and to “represent the interests of you and your fellow students at local and national level”.

There are two points of difference between the outcomes sought by the Bill of Rights and the Student Charter. The Bill of Rights requires that all student feedback be received within three weeks, while the Student Charter stipulates that feedback will normally be within three weeks of the submission deadline. The Bill of Rights specifies that there should be course-based careers advice, while the Student Charter subsumes this within general guidance services. While these are important, they do not in themselves explain the degree of political divergence that caused USSU to divert from the NUS’ position and campaign for an alternative to the university’s preference for a Student Charter based on partnership working. This must rather be seen as due to perceptions of shortcomings in the processes of consultation, negotiation and agreement. According to Jane again:

I don’t think the way in which the Charter was developed was a particularly good way of doing it. I was the only student representative in a working group of about ten and there were a number of issues which were discussed and points I disagreed with but I sometimes felt “outvoted” by the members of staff as there were more of them. One particular issue we discussed was whether or not the University should commit to “engaging teaching”. I firmly believed it should as all teaching should be engaging but there were a number of staff members in the group who wanted this word deleted. We even took a vote during the meeting on the issue. The outcome of the vote was to remove the word but then one member of staff reflected on the fact that I, as Students’ Union President, represented 20,000 students and therefore my vote should carry more weight and so it was decided that the word “engaging” could stay in the Charter. Whilst

it was great to see staff understanding my point of view and who I represented, I felt it was silly we were in that position at all. There should have been wider consultation with both staff and the student body and on something as important as this, I should not have been the only student voice throughout the process.

Jane's perspective, as both participant and President of Salford's Students' Union, can be put in its more general perspective by returning to the six viewpoints of student leaders at other universities, collected by the Student Charter Group and given in Table 1. Student leaders at five of these universities shared Jane's equivocal point of view. The sixth – at University F – was far more positive, as noted earlier:

A strategic decision was made to treat students as partners in as many areas of the institution's work as possible. This implied major changes to the existing Student Charter, which was felt to be too one-sided in favour of the institution, and used as a tool against students especially in settings like academic appeals. A working group was established to review the charter, involving two union sabbatical officers, a union staff member and a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the university. There was wide consultation with students during the early work of the group. The group brought work forward through the formal committee structure of the institution and it was finally ratified by the Senate and separately by the Union's Executive Committee.

It seems a reasonable assumption that a key differentiator was the representation and balance in University F's working group: a Pro-Vice-Chancellor, a union staff member and two elected student leaders. Ratification was by both the Senate and by the student union Executive Committee, rather than by the Students' Union bringing a proposal to the Senate, with the Senate holding the authority to accept or reject it.

Considered overall, then, Salford's experience in developing its Student Charter shows that appropriate and effective processes can be a necessary condition for achieving the best possible set of outcomes. While the university now has a Student Charter in place, it has yet to achieve the full value of a covenant for full partnership working. And while the desired outcomes set out in the charter are comprehensive and central to the interests of students, their utility is closer to the "checklist" approach described by most student leaders in response to the Student Charter Groups 2010 national survey. For James, this means that the charter has little practical value:

the university has an obligation to deliver a high quality academic experience. In practice, the Student Charter is only a paper exercise produced by the university and does not work. No student cares about it. It does not have any impact on student experience.

While Jane and other student leaders do not agree with James's comprehensive dismissal of the exercise, his summary comment does underline how important appropriate processes are.

## **Conclusion: local perspectives, general implications**

This case study has shown how local, intra-institutional issues interact with national policy positions and political campaigns. By tracing the development of the University

of Salford's Student Charter, founded in the reforms to the Students' Union in 2007 and shaped according to the requirements of a pending university-wide review by the QAA, we have seen how a general trend in student engagement has manifested within the specific context of a single institution: "all politics is local".

The case study has also highlighted inherent tensions in the concept of partnership working. These tensions originate in the legal construction of student representation in the UK, codified in the 1994 Education Act. Student unions are expected to be representative of their constituencies and fully democratic in the ways that they work, but are also accountable to university governing bodies that may make decisions that are contrary to the wishes of a majority of students. Indeed, were these tensions not to manifest themselves, this would suggest that a students' union was not functioning appropriately. Given this, the steady emergence of explicit tensions in student politics at Salford, following the reform of the Students' Union in 2007, is evidence of a student representative body in good and ever-improving health; a lion with teeth can be expected to bite. Similarly and at the national level, that the NUS could have its President, in November 2010, both working in partnership with government and urging manifest opposition to the same government's policy proposals is evidence of student politics working effectively within the constraints and opportunities of prevailing circumstances.

This said, our case study also suggests a failure to fully appreciate the importance of processes in their own right, as necessary conditions for outcomes that are fully acceptable to both university administrations and to student representative bodies. We have shown how lack of perception that there had been adequate attention to the processes in developing the University of Salford's Student Charter prompted an alternative Student Bill of Rights. Another way of putting this is that over-eagerness to introduce anticipated outcomes, however favourable and consensual they may be, may undermine the desired result. Similarly and again at the national level, the composition of the national Student Charter Group and the results of its consultations resulted in a less than enthusiastic endorsement by the NUS.

An overall purpose of this volume is to examine the challenge that student unions face in upholding their organisational autonomy and in maintaining freedom from interference by university administrations and governments. In the British context, as we have shown, this means managing the tension inherent in the enabling legislation of the 1994 Education Act. How effective has USSU been in claiming the freedom to decide, democratically, how and for what purposes it will use the means available to it to achieve the ends desired by its student constituents? Here, to close, are perspectives from three USSU presidents who have lived out these challenges in the five years between the 2007 reforms and the adoption of a formal Student Charter.

Looking back, Andrew (President between 2006 and 2008) stresses the importance of continual consultation with students, advocacy for students' rights and making every effort to hold the university to account:

although some issues are resolved by demonstrations and protests, few are. The day-to-day issues that impact students in a big way are far easier solved through meetings and collaboration with the university. Building these relationships requires that there at least be a respected professional organisation at work

behind them. To be taken seriously by the university, the Students' Union has to develop professional skills. But collectivism is the Students' Union's best weapon – the "hanging dagger" of direct action is the one thing a Students' Union has as leverage over the university.

Yusuf sees USSU as the voice of the student both on campus and outside. The union's job is to promote and defend the rights of students, representing the student both academically and socially.

How can this be given practical effect? Jane stresses the importance of credibility:

all partners publically agree to making commitments to working a certain way, and if any partner is not delivering what they said they would, they should be held account for it. This can be done in a very public way or could be kept more private and internal in the University. The point is, there should be discussion as to why commitments are not being met and what steps are being taken to ensure commitments are met in future. Whilst I do not want to see a charter become a "shopping list" by which students "check up" on the University, there is no point having a student charter if nothing is done or said when one partner does not deliver on their commitment.

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## Chapter 14

# Innovative forms of student engagement: how virtual co-operative communities counterbalance the exclusion of students from active learning and governance

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*Petr Pabian*

### **Abstract**

I argue in this chapter that student engagement can take many forms, some of which may be overlooked by researchers and even prohibited by higher education institutions. Using the example of student virtual co-operative communities at Czech universities, I demonstrate that especially in situations precluding meaningful student engagement in active learning and/or in governance, overlooking innovative forms of student engagement may lead to the misguided conclusion that students are passive, disinterested and disengaged. Students' communal engagement enables them to study in environments that are often ill-suited to learning and empowers them in institutions dominated by academic oligarchies. Therefore, in order to understand or even support student engagement, we need to pay more attention, first, to the very specific contexts of students' lives and studies, and second, to the political and economic contexts shaping higher education.

**Keywords:** student engagement; virtual communities; ethnography

## Introduction

Between 2011 and 2013 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at one university department in the Czech Republic where the students were engaged neither in student-centred learning nor in governance processes. Such a situation is not exceptional in Czech higher education, where learning is ignored by virtually all actors and students do not address this situation through the existing governance processes. The ethnographic fieldwork enabled us to realise that despite this, students are neither disengaged nor powerless: they commonly establish informal but durable “co-operatives” that have substantially challenged and changed their higher education institutions.

In this chapter, I first describe the methodology of the ethnographic fieldwork as well as of my other recent research, on which I draw here. Then I describe the educational configuration prevalent in Czech higher education that relegates learning to an inferior position and does not provide environments conducive to student learning engagement. Next I depict governance processes at Czech departments and universities to explain why they do not offer dissatisfied students meaningful means of engagement in order to achieve a change of the educational configuration. Instead, as I explain in the final section of the chapter, students develop innovative forms of communal engagement that have a profound impact on both their studies and their institutions.

## Ethnographic and other research at Czech universities

This chapter builds mostly on data from the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted at the engineering department of one Czech university from the autumn of 2011 until the beginning of 2013. During the same time, my colleagues and I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork at four more departments at other Czech higher education institutions: one in the humanities, one in the sciences and two in business studies (one at a public and one at a private institution). During this fieldwork, we observed teaching and learning situations, departmental meetings, collaborative research work and informal gatherings of both academics and students, with whom we talked informally during and in between these observations and also conducted formal interviews. In this chapter, I draw primarily on my own research at the engineering department and the research of three colleagues at the business department at a public university. At these two departments, we were able to gain access to all situations crucial for the topic at hand: access to not just teaching situations but also to exams, including the final exams that carry great importance in Czech higher education; and especially access to the students’ co-operative communities.

Moreover, in describing the educational configuration prevalent in Czech higher education, I use data not only from the five departments we studied ethnographically but also from my experience as an expert in the development of the Czech qualifications framework and quality assurance system. In these two projects, I had the opportunity to meet regularly with academics from 19 faculties and departments in a wide variety of mostly professional fields. During these meetings, we discussed the implications of the outcomes-based qualifications framework and learning-based

quality enhancement for the educational practice at their departments. In this way, I gained considerable familiarity with how academics (some of them in managerial positions) perceive their teaching environments (see Hnilica, Pabian and Hájková 2012).

To complete the picture, I draw on two studies on student involvement in governing Czech higher education. The first is a qualitative interview study of governance processes at the departmental and faculty level. This study involved semi-structured interviews conducted at two universities: one of them at a faculty of technology and the other at a faculty of education. At both faculties, we conducted two interviews with departmental heads and two with student members of the faculty's academic senate (Hündlová, Provázková and Pabian 2010). The second study is a policy analysis of student involvement in governance processes primarily at the national and institutional level (Pabian, Hündlová and Provázková 2011). Needless to say I take care to preserve the anonymity of all institutions mentioned in the chapter.

## **Educational configuration excluding student engagement**

Czech higher education policy in the last two decades has focused on aspects other than student learning. Funding of "educational activities" (separate from funding research) has long been almost exclusively determined by student numbers; the debate has shifted mostly within this frame from a focus on enrolments to the inclusion of graduation indicators (Pabian, Melichar and Šebková 2006). Only in recent years have concerns with "quality" entered the policy debate. The most pervasive argument has centred again on student numbers, following the "more means worse" logic employed by both the majority of academics and policy makers (Melichar 2006). Following persistent complaints about too many incompetent students from academics and their representative bodies, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports agreed to provide the same amount of funding to the institutions even for decreasing numbers of students. Later, a concern with "employability" emerged as an important policy issue, but one that has been defined solely by the unemployment rates of higher education graduates. Most recently, the Ministry has developed so-called "quality indicators" to finance education but these too ignore learning, concentrating instead on academics' research credentials and publications plus the mobility of academics and students (Koucký 2013).

Such policy and funding mechanisms provide strong incentives for higher education institutions to withdraw their attention from student learning. At the institutions we studied ethnographically as well as at the other institutions I consulted with as an expert, this very often means "processing" as many students as possible with as little expenditure (of both money and people) as possible. New university buildings constructed during the last two decades embody this approach as they invariably contain large "lecture theatres" with chairs and tables bolted to the floor. The financial and human resources saved in this way can then be directed to activities that bring further financial rewards for the institution, especially to the encouragement of more research outputs that the extremely simplistic performance-based Czech research "assessment" system directly translates into research income (Šima and Pabian 2014). Not only financial but also career considerations push academics away from teaching and learning because promotion to the academic positions of

doctor, “docent” and professor are inescapably dependent on research publications, while the quality of teaching (let alone student learning) plays no role (Melichar and Pabian 2007). Several institutions, including my own university and the one at which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, have tied teaching workloads to the amount of publications: academics can free themselves from part of their teaching workload if they publish more than others (which is highly ironic given the dominance of the Humboldtian notion of the necessary unity of teaching and research). In contrast, tens of academics confirmed to me that the quality (or not) of their teaching plays no role at their department; as one enthusiastic teacher told me: “Nobody cares about that, not at all.” (Ethnographic interview, April 2012).

For students at the departments we studied this configuration leads predominantly to educational processes revolving around the replication of knowledge, thus offering students few opportunities for meaningful learning engagement. Frontal instruction, that is teachers lecturing from the front of the classroom, is the dominant form of teaching, especially in the large auditoriums where the room layout seriously hinders any other form of communication. Nevertheless, frontal instruction dominates also the teaching of small groups (once during my fieldwork, I attended a session in which the teacher lectured for an hour and a half to three students). Frontal instruction also for small groups is supported by the layout of classrooms with the “lecturer” at the front and the “audience” in consecutive rows of tables, which are never moved even if not bolted. The one-directional “transmission of information” is further supported by the ubiquitous presentational technology that is most often used to put on screen discrete and finite pieces of text. As one of the teachers at the private business department explicitly put it, the lecturers expect and are expected to present answers to exam questions during lectures (Ethnographic interview, May 2012).

Consequently, students are expected to replicate the correct answers during exams. This was made most explicit at one moment during an oral final exam at the engineering department when one of the examiners asked a question, refused to accept two successive answers from the student, and finally greeted the third answer with the words, “Yes, this is what I wanted to hear” (field notes, May 2012). Very common during the final exams at the department were questions requiring students to enumerate (e.g. advantages and disadvantages of a given technological solution). In these cases, quite often either students or examiners made clear to the observer that they replicate items from a memorised list by enumerating the items on the fingers of a hand – at one moment, as many as three examiners checked the answers by counting the items against their fingers (field notes from final exams, January 2012, May 2012, January 2013). Thus it was not only during written tests (of which there was no shortage) but also during oral exams that students were most often asked closed-ended questions and were expected to select the appropriate answer from the information provided during the lectures.

When students are faced with the requirement to replicate, they most often opt for one of two strategies: they either memorise the answers or copy them during the exam (from other students or from prepared materials). The first strategy was the most common for oral exams, at which a question would only rarely require anything other than regurgitation of memorised prefabricated answers. When such questions are asked, it is often obvious that they do not really count towards the result of the

exam, as in the following example from the public business department: "This is not a textbook question so it wouldn't matter if you didn't know the answer..." (field notes, January 2013). Replicating memorised answers is enough as long as the replication is sufficiently accurate. Obviously, the latter strategy of copying answers increases the chances of accurate replication and is therefore very common at least at the engineering department (where we succeeded in gaining the trust of students to the degree of being let in on these prohibited practices). At every written exam I observed at least one student engaging in copying and at several exams every single student engaged in it. Sometimes students copied just a few bits from fellow students but sometimes they prepared comprehensive summary materials beforehand. Once I observed students photocopying a complete answer sheet for everyone a few hours before the exam (containing not just questions but also correct answers). These activities are commonly morally rejected as "cheating" but such a rejection would completely miss that they are integral to an educational configuration based on the replication of knowledge.

Paradoxically, neither teachers nor students are happy with these two strategies. Virtually all teachers disapprove of copying while their attitude to memorising is nicely summed up by the following comment made by an engineering teacher to students: "I dislike it when students just memorise the numbers, because the numbers weren't just made up. You need to be able to explain the reason why there are such and such numbers" (field notes, December 2011). Yet it is not just the teachers who are dissatisfied because students are very well aware that when they memorise and copy they are not actually learning anything. And most of the students we talked to really wanted to learn and understand something useful and meaningful, as when one of the engineering students complained that had she at least once seen the entire technological process from beginning to end, she would perhaps have had a chance to understand it and would not need to just memorise someone else's notes about it (field notes, May 2012). Especially in the professional departments, students often voiced their dissatisfaction with the education they were receiving, considering it not useful and relevant enough for their future professional practice.

## **Governance arrangements excluding student engagement**

Yet students at the departments we researched do not engage in the university governance processes to achieve a change in the educational configuration centred on the replication of knowledge. This may seem paradoxical given the fact that Czech universities give students a significant role to play in the official governance processes: for instance, at least a third of seats in the academic senates at both university and faculty levels. Yet these official governance processes, in practice, work in ways that allow the universities to be actually governed by an academic oligarchy, which is inimical to student engagement.

During more than a year of fieldwork at the engineering department, I did not hear students mention the academic senate even a single time. This finding is in accordance with questionnaire surveys showing that less than one fifth of students considered student representatives in the academic senate important for the defence of student rights and interests, and that the overwhelming majority of students did

not know even a single member of the senate at either the faculty or the university (Prudký, Pabian and Šíma 2010; Pabian, Hündlová and Provázková 2011). Academic senates and official governance processes therefore do not play important roles in engaging students.

When we conducted a qualitative study (at two faculties) of decision-making mechanisms at the departmental and faculty levels, we came to a related but even more general conclusion: that the official governance bodies and formal processes play a surprisingly marginal role in actual decision making (Hündlová, Provázková and Pabian 2010). In the area of curricular governance, Czech higher education legislation stipulates that the degree programmes be approved by the faculty's academic council after a discussion in the academic senate. In practice, curricula are created by senior academics from the departments responsible for the programme and then only formally approved by both bodies. Both students and academics we interviewed clearly indicated that even when students occasionally presented proposals to modify the curricula, these suggestions did not lead to the suggested changes. One of the teachers said: "We addressed several specific proposals but, in fact, we rather had to explain why these proposals can't be implemented" (Interview, June 2010). One of the student representatives in the faculty senate even said she did not know that students could participate in making changes to the curricula (Interview, June 2010). Another student representative, on the other hand, talked about her efforts to advocate changes but also concluded that students could not influence the curricula: "Based on my experience here as a student, they can't. This is an incredibly ossified system. It's not flexible and it's difficult for students to be heard on these issues" (Interview, June 2010). Interviews with teachers confirmed this picture, as a teacher representative to the academic senate concluded: "I can't recall any [student] proposal that we would implement" (Interview, June 2010). No wonder that students do not hurry to engage in such a futile exercise.

At both faculties, students are more active in the student assessment of teaching; actually, at both faculties this is a largely student-run undertaking. Student representatives initiated the existing systems of student assessment, which was then implemented thanks to the support of faculty management; these two groups co-ordinate the development of the questionnaire as well as data collection and analysis. The only exception in the entire process is the responsibility for taking action based on the results, which rests in the hands of individual teachers and heads of departments. The latter do not otherwise participate in the assessment and do not trust the system, therefore generally (with very, very few exceptions) do not take action based on student assessment. Their argument rests mostly on very low student participation, which not only at these faculties but generally at Czech universities rarely exceeds 20%. However, this is part of a vicious circle: teachers do not take action based on the results because few students participate; students do not participate because teachers do not take action (Hündlová, Provázková and Pabian 2010). At the engineering department where I did ethnographic fieldwork, I heard no student or teacher discussing the results of student assessment, let alone taking action on them. Even here student engagement ultimately proves futile.

There is one more reason why engagement in governance processes does not lead to changes in the educational configuration at Czech universities. As described above, a crucial role in the configuration is played by actors or factors beyond the reach of student representatives: higher education policies, public funding of teaching and research, academic career structures and university buildings. In a higher education system dominated by an academic oligarchy, Czech students have been most successful (that is, moderately successful at best) in promoting changes related to student “services” (e.g. boarding), both at national and institutional level (Pabian, Hündlová and Provázková 2011).

## **Innovative forms of student engagement**

As a result, many students are dissatisfied with an educational configuration that prevents them from active engagement in their learning (forcing them to replicate knowledge instead) and at the same time they are prevented from successful engagement in the governance of learning and teaching (subjugating them to an academic oligarchy). Nevertheless, the students we met during our ethnographic fieldwork were neither passive nor powerless; most notably, they engaged in innovative forms of co-operative communities that enabled them to negotiate an educational configuration centred on the replication of knowledge, profoundly influencing their institutions in the process.

These communities serve mainly two functions: first, for the sharing of study materials (e.g. lecture notes, scanned textbooks) and assignment aids (crib notes, past and even current tests and papers), and second, for evaluating teachers and courses (using both ratings and reviews/comments). While the first function helps students specifically to cope with the requirements to replicate information, both of the functions empower students to overcome (some of) the shortcomings they are unable to alter through the official governance channels, for instance the flawed official student assessments or incomplete information about courses. These communities take place mostly in Internet virtual spaces (mostly restricted-access websites) that enable asynchronous communication, thus overcoming the instability inherent in student flows through higher education. While in the past access to this information was facilitated by face-to-face communities (e.g. sororities and fraternities) and access to it was therefore limited to members of these communities, in virtual spaces they are easily made available to all students (and not just students, as our own access to them makes clear). At one of the universities where we conducted fieldwork and where such a “co-operative” is exceptionally well developed, all students and graduates we interviewed reported having used the website that at the time of our fieldwork contained about 30 000 study materials and assignment aids and 120 000 teacher evaluations (Stöckelová and Virtová 2014).

The first function in particular would be most often morally condemned as “cheating”, but as noted this would miss both how integral it is to the prevalent educational configuration and especially how innovative a form of student engagement these communities represent. The “strain theory” of sociologist Robert K. Merton (1938) offers an alternative conceptualisation: students using these websites accept the goals of higher education (grades and degrees) but because they find the institutionalised

means insufficient (for reasons discussed above) they develop innovative means to achieve the goals. As expected, these innovative means are “conventionally proscribed but frequently effective” (Merton 1938: 678). This contrasts with using only institutionalised means to achieve the commonly accepted goals, which Merton terms “conformism”.

Most obviously, the sharing of study materials and assignment aids empowers students in configurations centred on the replication of knowledge, in which students are normally subjugated to the authority of teachers who decide what answers are right or wrong. At the engineering department, the only exception could be the final thesis, for which students are expected to use an “independent creative approach” to solving a real-world problem. However, an analysis of thesis defences reveals that students, even in this situation, are subjected to the authority of teachers rather than allowed to enter into a professional debate as emerging colleagues, on equal terms. The defence starts with a student presentation of the thesis but most of the time the examiners are not listening to it: sometimes they are browsing through the thesis (because they had no time to do it in advance) but quite often they are also snacking, talking amongst themselves and may even leave the room. After the presentation, most of the examiners’ questions focus on “incorrect” partial technical details rather than on “creative” attempts to solve the problem as such. Students perceive the examiners’ approach as a devaluation of their work and resent both the examiners’ inattention during presentations and also their questioning of insignificant details (field notes, January 2012, May 2012 and January 2013). So when students have the opportunity to gain leverage against their teachers’ arbitration, they use it: at the last session of a seminar, for example, when the teacher is giving individual feedback to students, including a recommendation on whether to take the final test later the same day, the rest of the students at the back of the classroom are already downloading the day’s test (complete with answers) from the community website shared by students who have taken the test earlier (field notes, March 2012). Similarly, when the official student assessment of teaching is dysfunctional, the evaluation of courses and teachers on the students’ websites is a way to make teachers accountable to students (Stöckelová and Virtová 2014).

Co-operative communities also empower students in the “art of college management”: balancing studies with paid employment, relationships and college life. When students are faced with up to 15 different courses per year, they face the pressure of “shaping schedules, taming professors, and limiting workload” (Nathan 2005). Student community websites offer much-needed information, especially in the latter two areas. Evaluations of teachers at the websites offer useful hints about the traits and quirks of individual teachers that students can use to “play them”, for example when seeking an extension of a deadline. But the most useful feature, mentioned by several students in interviews as well as by a number of users on the websites, relates to managing workload. In contrast to the official information in the course syllabuses, course evaluations on the student websites contain detailed information about the actual requirements, as attested by the following comment from a public web article: “Thanks to the evaluations I get to know that a person presented by the school as a senior lecturer with many university degrees and publications gives ‘A’

grades to everybody, doesn't require attendance at classes or any other activity at seminars" (Stöckelová and Virtová 2014).

Student co-operative websites significantly shape educational and institutional configurations in various and ambivalent ways. On the one hand, they may expose deficiencies and enable institutions to rectify them; on the other hand, they may enable and empower students to study successfully despite the deficiencies, thus eliminating any reason to address the deficiencies themselves. The business department under study changed testing practices in its flagship course in response to the student website: from original oral exams at which students regurgitated study materials downloaded from the website, "understanding nothing", to written case studies requiring students to solve complex real-world problems, while all case studies are published on the departmental website after the test. As a result, exam studies improved and hardly anyone bothered to upload the case studies to the student website. The head of the department triumphantly concluded: "Finally, we won over the website". However, it is just as plausible to argue the opposite: the website won over the department, changing their practices to remove some of the reasons why students maintain the co-operative websites (Stöckelová and Virtová 2014). On the other hand, at the engineering department we witnessed malpractice facilitated by the co-operative website in relation to a course taught by a lecturer who most of the time strayed off-topic, besides cancelling classes and testing topics not on the syllabus. Before the exam, we asked students how they studied for the test in such a course, and one of the students answered laconically: "You can't learn this." And indeed, during the test every single student used one or more copying strategies: from crib notes on paper or their phones to looking over or talking to their neighbours (field notes, December 2011).

## **Conclusion: changing student engagement, changing higher education**

I have argued in this chapter for expanding our notions of student engagement. Too often, this term is used by academics and student affairs professionals and includes only those activities organised or tolerated by higher education institutions. I have argued that in important ways student engagement can include also "innovative" activities in the Mertonian sense, that is those considered illegitimate by institutions. Using the example of student co-operative communities at several Czech universities, I have tried to show that especially in situations precluding meaningful student engagement in active learning and/or in governance, overlooking innovative forms of student engagement may lead to the misguided conclusion that students are passive, disinterested and disengaged. In fact, students' communal engagement enables them to study in environments that are often ill-suited to learning and empowers them in institutions dominated by academic oligarchies. This leads to one more important conclusion: research on student engagement or policies to support student engagement need to take into account questions of power. When students are the least powerful actors in higher education and when they are prevented from meaningful engagement in legitimate ways by educational and governance configurations beyond their reach, it is no wonder that they find innovative ways to engage with their studies and their institutions.

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## Chapter 15

# The evolution of public discourse on higher education financing in Europe: students' unions and European processes

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*George-Konstantinos Charonis and Robert Santa*

### **Abstract**

Commitment to public funding of higher education has weakened in countries across Europe since the start of the Bologna Process, as cost sharing is becoming increasingly popular. Although higher education financing remains a national competence and it is difficult to single out any individual stakeholder's influence in the financing debate, this chapter investigates the way in which the European Students' Union (ESU) has tackled the rise of neoliberal ideas in education financing policy. Through desk research and several semi-structured interviews, it is argued that ESU has indeed been a vocal stakeholder throughout the debate. However, as a confederation of national students' unions with often-divergent opinions on the subject of financing, student discourse has focused specifically on the issues of fees and student support, with mixed results.

**Keywords:** higher education financing; Bologna Process; ESU

## Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the way in which ESU (formerly the National Unions of Students in Europe, ESIB) has dealt with the topic of higher education financing over the last 13 years. Specifically, the chapter will investigate the way in which ESU has defined and redefined its discourse on financing and how it has succeeded in influencing the nature of such discourses in the general European-level policy debate. The nature and evolution of these discourses and the impact that they in turn have had on ESU positions is also discussed.

Trying to identify the exact impact of ESIB/ESU positions is rather difficult, as there is no formal recognition of the merits of one organisation or another as regards various shifts in political discourse. Intuitively, it can be assumed that positions that have been pioneered by students have been included in the agenda largely on the basis of their merit and activity, but financing is a broad domain, in which the number of interested stakeholders is rather large. To contextualise the topic further, it should be noted that the debate on financing at European level is often more philosophical than normative in nature, given the fact that education – and especially education financing – is a policy topic that remains firmly embedded in national governmental responsibilities.

Difficulties also exist in identifying the main engines for change in financing policies and thinking across the continent, both at national and at European level. The financing debate in Europe has become increasingly high profile over the past decade. While many of the political changes occurring with regard to higher education have been pushed by the development of the Bologna Process and growing work by supranational actors such as the European Commission (EC), the move towards promoting cost sharing (in which the main cost sharers are the state and students or students' parents) is part of a global trend which student movements around the world have been struggling to influence.

## Methodology

It is important to note that both authors have been active within ESU and have dealt with the topic of education financing as part of their mandates. Given the fact that the “inside” view often frames one's perceptions in somewhat distorted ways, working on this chapter started with an exploratory look into existing literature, policy documents, publications and communiqués. This work was backed up by informal discussions with relevant contacts that could provide first-hand accounts on policies, discourses, discussions and negotiations on the topic of higher education financing within the European policy arena.

For the purpose of this chapter, two main sources of information were utilised. First, we conducted a review of literature that tackles cost sharing, stakeholder participation in cost sharing and tuition fee debates. In addition, we also reviewed policy literature originating from the EU and the Bologna Process, ESU documents and position papers, as well as statistical reports. The ministerial commitments to higher education financing through the Bologna Process have been summarised in an ESU publication (ESU 2012: 46-8).

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews, covering both ESU representatives and a number of externals, including key people involved in policy making or research on higher education financing topics. While the number of interviewees is limited (six interviews were conducted in total), thus rendering the responses statistically insignificant, they have been of tremendous value in helping identify the trends, factors and positions behind European-level debates on financing and helping to identify which forces were perceived to be relevant in influencing the said debates. The guiding questions used for the interviews included those about personal involvement in the Bologna Process; discourses, positions and strategies regarding the issue of financing of higher education within European processes; and results in the policy processes. Interviews were conducted with: Ligia Deca (ESU alumna, Chairperson, 2008 to 2010, Head of the Bologna Follow-Up Group Secretariat for the 2012 Ministerial Summit); Thomas Estermann (EUA); Magnus Malnes (ESU alumnus, Academic Affairs Committee, 2010 to 2012); Dominic Orr (German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies – DZHW); Rok Primožič (ESU Chairperson, 2013 to 2014), and a representative of the Higher Education Department, DG Education and Culture at the EC, who preferred to remain anonymous.

One particular conclusion resulting from the interviews that influenced the approach to this chapter was the perception of a very limited scope for European-level debates on financing, cost sharing and funding diversification, given the fact that the policy topic remains in an area of definite national competence. This conclusion helped in reshaping the scope of this chapter.

## Origins of the debate on financing in Europe

Before looking into ESU's contribution, an overview of wider economic contexts and the wider origin of the idea of cost sharing (a politically correct way of defining tuition fees, but also other financing tools) should be provided.

The main driver of this change has most likely been economic. There are multiple theories around the impact of the real economy on funding and observable trends. One such trend that probably precedes the rapidly growing debate on revenue diversification is the "inflation" in per-student educational costs. Or, in other words, the growth of costs related to educating a single student through the duration of a degree (Johnstone 2007). This trend has been fuelled, and its impact magnified, by ever-increasing rates of participation in higher education across Europe and indeed the whole world, a phenomenon known as massification. In the EU-27,<sup>37</sup> for example, the number of students grew by over 25% from 2000 to 2011, with 4 200 000 more students in 2011 than at the end of the previous decade).<sup>38</sup>

When looking into any debate on financing, one also has to look at wider economic conditions across the continent. For the most part, Europe is a relatively stagnant

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37. The article uses the EU-27 as a reference (as opposed to the EU-28) because not all datasets used included Croatia (the 28th EU member, since 2013).

38. See <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&ocode=tps00062&plugin=1>, accessed 4 October 2014.

continent with weak economic growth compared to many of the other developed regions and countries of the world (with the possible exception of Japan). Most European countries tend to run significant deficits, often at odds with EU regulations that place caps on such imbalances (at least for eurozone states).<sup>39</sup> Given these conditions, it is important to note that there is research indicating that since the oil crisis of the 1970s, a direct correlation has existed between general economic cycles and education financing. Recessions or “sluggish” periods in economic dynamics seem to mean lower levels of financing for education (Carpentier 2007). Hence, despite a growing discourse emphasising the general, societal benefits of education, government financing policies do not seem to act upon such considerations when allocating budgetary resources. Whether this is related to the ascendancy of neoliberal models of thinking or to increasing risk-fatigue towards temporary increases in deficits is up for debate, but the existing mindset indicates some of the barriers to be expected in consolidating educational budgets in the current economy.

The interview participants pointed to a trend towards more cost sharing, which predated the global financial crisis and the ensuing economic troubles:

They were trying to shift from public responsibility and funding over to students and private funding to a large degree. Before the financial crisis there were largely incentives-based arguments, suggesting that students would become more effective, that higher education would be more autonomous, or that it would improve higher education systems (Malnes interview).

Some of the debates around funding were linked to the issue of quality or focused on:

the more holistic approach of looking at how you finance higher education institutions as a whole, a more balanced view between the teaching and research missions of institutions, how you deliver competitive and performance-based funding, additional income sources for institutions, not just the question of fees but other sources of funding (Estermann interview).

Such attitudes on the part of governments suggest that funding was to some extent seen as a tool that could make universities react like a “Pavlovian dog” to the “on” and “off” stimuli coming from financing policy.

That funding trends were different prior to the economic crisis is made clear by the shares of Gross Domestic Product represented by private expenditures on education. The share across the EU-27 grew from 0.56% in 2000 to 0.69% in 2005 and to 0.82% in 2011.<sup>40</sup> The rate of increase was very sharp in the United Kingdom and mostly more moderate across the rest of the continent (with a few countries, including Germany, seeing a relative decline). Overall, across the EU the share of private-to-public expenditure on education shifted from 1:9 to over 1:7 over the course of the decade. Given that primary and secondary education is legally recognised as free across the continent, it is safe to presume that the bulk of these increases went into higher education.

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39. See <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tec00127&plugin=1>, accessed 4 October 2014.

40. See <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00068&plugin=1>, accessed 4 October 2014.

Before looking into ESU's positions, their evolution, and the impact that ESU has had on European discourses on financing, the positions expressed by other stakeholders and actors should also be discussed.

The most important actors when it comes to national policies on financing are national and/or regional public authorities (should education be devolved to regional levels). Of course, the positions of governments often change based on the ideologies of the representatives in power, political calculations and other factors. As described by one interviewee, a clear example of this was Germany, in which the idea of fees was considered but largely scrapped for political reasons (Orr interview). Other countries, for example the UK (or England and Wales, to be more specific), were consistent in pursuing the idea of fees across party lines. The variation in national positions meant that there was never a true European consensus on the issue of higher education financing. This was probably one of the factors behind the marginalisation of the debate on higher education financing at European level, as an issue governed by consensus politics tends to avoid bringing "hot potatoes" to the table.

Among stakeholders and interest groups, Education International has had the most consistent and strong position on the issue of fees, being in favour of education remaining a public good (Primožič interview). On the other hand, actors such as the EUA have tried to keep a balanced position, taking the view that realities in financing are changing and seeking to guarantee a balance between the introduction of new financing paths and the traditional commitment to public funding:

At EUA we can claim to have played a very strong role in that, to promote diversified funding and the need for the right framework and conditions to support this. This has also entered the debate at European level (Estermann interview).

Given that Bologna co-ordination structures (such as the Bologna Follow-Up Group,) do not take active political positions themselves, the most prominent pan-European stakeholder with a stake in education is the EC. The EC has taken tentative steps in the area of education, but has made only subtle changes to its position as it worked on preparing the Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education. In fact, it has tended to have a rather balanced position, accepting greater diversification of funding as a ground reality, but avoiding strong claims or recommendations in an area that is not within its formal remit (Primožič interview).

Overall, we can see that most pan-European organisations and stakeholders have taken a very cautious approach to the issue of funding diversification via cost sharing. Either powered by the need to cater to a diverse constituency or by the desire to avoid unnecessary conflict, this has prevented strong ruptures in the policy dialogue and has mostly meant a smooth and gradual transition in discourses on financing.

## **Ministerial communiqués**

This section provides a brief overview of European-level higher education financing discourse as presented in the Bologna Process through ministerial declarations and communiqués. A separate section on the communiqués is included because of the significant student involvement in drafting them, both through ESU representatives

as well as through student representatives in national delegations to the ministerial conferences.

The 2012 ESU publication “Bologna with student eyes” provides an overview of the key commitments made by ministers of education in relation to the financing of higher education from the launch of the Bologna Process until the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of 2010 (ESU 2012: 46-8). The table has been updated to include the relevant text on financing from the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012. As noted in the publication (ibid.: 46):

There are varying degrees of emphasis on the view of HE as a public good across Bologna Ministerial Communiqués. However, every communiqué from Prague (2001) to Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009) – apart from London (2007) – but including the Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the EHEA (2010) affirm the view of HE as a public good and public responsibility. Beyond general statements of HE as a public good, financing is often linked with the social dimension and mobility, both implicitly and explicitly.

The commitment to higher education as a public good and public responsibility has undoubtedly weakened over time. While the Prague Communiqué (Bologna Process 2001) states that Ministers “supported the idea that higher education should be considered a public good and is and will remain a public responsibility” the “need for sustainable funding of institutions” appears in the Bergen Communiqué (Bologna Process 2005). The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (Bologna Process 2009), the first Communiqué following the onset of the economic crisis, includes a strongly reaffirmed commitment to higher education as a public good and public responsibility (ESU 2012: 46-8). Nevertheless, Ministers stated, “Public funding remains the key priority in guaranteed equitable access but diversified funding sources and methods should be investigated” (Bologna Process 2009, paragraph 23).

The Budapest-Vienna Declaration (Bologna Process 2010) declares that ministers “reaffirm that higher education is a public responsibility. We commit ourselves, notwithstanding these difficult economic times, to ensuring that higher education institutions have the necessary resources within a framework established and overseen by public authorities.” No explicit reference to diversified funding sources or sustainability is made at this point of the Communiqué, however the text is carefully phrased as “a framework established and overseen by public authorities” (Bologna Process 2010) without further explanation or firm, unequivocal commitment to increased or even continued public funding at current levels.

Finally, the latest Communiqué from the Bucharest Ministerial Conference arguably contains the weakest commitment to higher education funding as a public responsibility as compared to its predecessors. The ministers of education declared “we commit to securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education and drawing on other appropriate sources, as an investment in our future” (Bologna Process 2012). Moreover, while confirming their commitment to maintaining public responsibility for higher education, the ministers acknowledged “the need to open a dialogue on funding and governance of higher education,” while recognising “the importance of further developing appropriate funding instruments to pursue ... common goals” (Bologna Process 2012). Even the current text as it stands in the Bucharest

Communiqué was one of the most contentious and hotly debated topics during the Ministerial Conference, with some ministers arguing in favour of a more general wording that refers to funding without explicitly specifying “public” or “private”. While the final text in the Bucharest Communiqué was not considered ideal at the time for ESU, it stands for something current and former representatives can claim credit for. This is discussed in more detail in the following section on ESU’s positions and influence in the higher education financing debate.

## **ESU policies, positions and influence**

This section will first look at ESU’s discourse on higher education financing over time, then discuss the organisation’s influence in the financing debate as perceived by the individuals interviewed for the purposes of this chapter.

### **Policies and positions**

Some of ESU’s earlier positions on the topic of financing include the 2005 policy papers on the commodification of education and on the financing of higher education (ESU 2005a, 2005b). More recently, a policy paper on public responsibility, governance and financing of higher education was adopted in 2013 (ESU 2013a). Financing did not appear as a stand-alone chapter in the periodic stocktaking report “Bologna with student eyes” until 2010 with “Bologna at the finish line” (ESU 2010), followed by the 2012 edition of the publication (ESU 2012). Nonetheless, references to higher education financing particularly in relation to fees, student support and mobility can be found in the 2003 (ESU 2003: 28), 2007 (ESU 2007: 11) and 2009 (ESU 2009: 27-8) editions of the publication. The most extensive engagement with the topic of financing came about between 2010 and 2012 when ESU ran the Financing the Students’ Future (FinSt) project.<sup>41</sup>

There are certain key topics that can be found across the relevant policy papers and “Bologna with student eyes” publications regarding financing. These can be summarised as follows: the conception of higher education as a public good and therefore public responsibility is a fundamental, guiding principle. Higher education is essential for personal as well as societal development and cannot be primarily regarded as a tool for economic growth.

#### **Support to higher education institutions**

- ▶ There is a widening funding gap in higher education; massification of higher education in student numbers has not been accompanied by increased financing.
- ▶ Alternative or diversified funding sources must be considered with extreme caution. They must not be used to legitimise a reduction in public spending on higher education, or the introduction or extension of cost sharing in the form of student contributions. Alternative funding sources must not influence or dictate the teaching and research activities and outcomes undertaken by higher education institutions.

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41. More information on the FinSt project is available at <http://esu-online.org/projects/archive/finst>, accessed 4 October 2014.

- ▶ Output and performance-based funding should not create funding incentives that compromise the quality of higher education or the student experience, and should take account of the diverse and varying missions of higher education institutions.

### Support to students

- ▶ Tuition fees pose a barrier to accessing higher education, adversely affecting the aims and targets set for the social dimension in the Bologna Process.

Financing constitutes the largest barrier to student mobility; further funding is required to reach Bologna Process targets.

Despite the fact that the period from 2005 to 2013 included a project on financing and more internal debate on the issue, the concepts and arguments forming the core of ESU's discourse on the subject have remained largely unchanged. The fact that ESU's discourse remained fairly constant was also mentioned by two of the interview participants, with one of them adding:

I don't think the fundamental discourses of for example ESU or EUA have really changed significantly, because of their position as interest groups defending their members. I suppose there is more done in ESU [than there had previously been done], there was a move with the FinSt project to do more on funding explicitly, etc. (EC representative interview)

When the financial crisis struck and most national budgets began to contract under a vicious circle of austerity and declining incomes, ESU was caught in the rather awkward position of advocating greater public funding, despite the option being off the table given conditions on the ground. The position reflected the desire of most member unions to keep a claim to as much public funding as possible and, indeed, some saw the possibility of linking education to a possible "readjustment" of societies in each country on the basis of a more educated population. Nonetheless, one ESU alumnus stated that ESU's discourse has indeed changed to include the wider benefits of higher education for society and to argue for education as a wise investment out of the crisis, as opposed to education for the sake of education (Malnes interview). The interviewee added, "There had been some discussion on the term 'investment' in higher education, but now it is not controversial and ESU uses the term quite frequently". This slight readjustment can be seen as a mechanism by which ESU has tried to remain a relevant stakeholder despite fairly radical initial political positions.

As far as assessments of progress within the Bologna Process are concerned, a certain level of repetitiveness is present across ESU's stocktaking reports. This can be attributed precisely to the perception that progress is not being made in relation to the targets that are set. "Bologna with student eyes 2012" examines the extent to which concrete measures had been implemented across the EHEA to ensure that the priorities and aims set by the ministers for education (and the financing changes associated with them) were actually realised or pursued in practice. The analysis, which draws on a variety of sources including information from national unions of students as well as Eurydice (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2014), EUROSTUDENT (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012; Eurostat/EUROSTUDENT 2009) and

EUA reports (Estermann and Pruvot 2011), concludes that there is a contradiction between political commitments and measures (not) taken as well as policies implemented on the ground. In short, ESU's position is that much more needs to be done if the targets set through the Bologna Process/EHEA are to be met. This tends to be a general ESU conclusion across various Bologna Process topics and targets beyond financing, as it is felt that by and large, year upon year countries fail to implement what they have committed to.

As previously mentioned ESU ran a project on financing from 2010 to 2012. The aim of the FinSt project was to develop a more nuanced position on financing, one based on research, as well as to build the capacity of national unions of students to actively engage in and influence national-level financing debates. To this end, a "Compendium on financing of higher education" (ESU 2013b) as well as an action toolkit for national unions (ESU 2013c) was produced. The compendium contains a short overview and a comparative analysis of funding systems across Europe, chapters on key issues relating to financing, as well as future funding scenarios. Key headline conclusions include:

- ▶ higher education funding systems across Europe are extremely diverse, thus comparisons can be difficult;
- ▶ students in different countries do not have the same level playing field; countries with higher tuition fees do not necessarily offer higher levels of student support;
- ▶ the conception of higher education as a public good and public responsibility is changing; there is increased discussion of the private benefits of higher education:
  - most countries are using cost sharing and there is a trend of shifting the burden of study costs to students;
  - the funding gap is widening.

The project therefore provided ESU with insight into exactly how diverse funding systems across Europe are. It became clear to ESU that the threat to higher education as a public good and public responsibility was becoming more pronounced, mainly as a result of drastic cuts to higher education budgets during the economic crisis that started in 2008 and continues to this day in a number of European countries. Several participants mentioned that the worst effects of the cuts and crisis are not yet reflected by data, as data typically lags a few years behind policy at the moment of its implementation. ESU tried to incorporate most of these concerns in its positions and discourse on funding.

Dominic Orr from the DZHW commented on ESU's discourse:

The student position the way I understand it is one where there is a certain animosity between two possible positions. The one says that we are always against tuition fees... even if we say fees are low, we start going down a slippery slope. Once you start with a tuition fee scheme the costs will just increase. At the same time ESU has also recognised that there is always the argument of being in the room and being able to discuss things. And if they just take a very confrontational position then sometimes it will be difficult to make any points that will be listened to... So it's a question of, is it ESU as a lobbyist? Or is it ESU as a group that would like to try and shape policy? So depending on the type

of hat ESU representatives are wearing at a given point, they will either take one or the other position (Orr interview).

When asked about ESU's discourse on financing, the ESU Chairperson from 2013 to 2014 commented on the situation surrounding the EHEA Ministerial Conference in Bucharest (2012). ESU did not push for a discussion on financing beyond mention of public good and public responsibility as well as the need for funding to come from public sources (Primožič interview). Sticking to a broad discussion on the topic was considered a realistic agenda, given the diversity of interests and views present at the conference:

We did not have an agenda to put a lot of requests on financing in documents. Many countries already have fees, but other factors need to be taken into account, for example diversity of student support funding/models. We need to avoid "the lowest common denominator" being pushed through as a model at European level (Primožič interview).

One of the challenges for ESU, which was raised by two interviewees, is the fact that since it is an umbrella of national unions from across Europe, the views of its own members often differ. ESU, ironically, is bound by some of the same challenges facing the EC – a high diversity of opinions and positions among constituent members. While recognising the FinSt project as a positive step for ESU and its members, Thomas Estermann from the EUA commented that the positions of national unions might often be influenced by national heritage and national culture, and that the challenge is therefore "to bring together the diversity of national systems". This is reinforced by ESU alumnus Malnes, who commented on the fact that there was a debate within ESU regarding the master's loan scheme proposed and finally adopted as part of the Erasmus+ programme: "There were discussions internally in ESU on whether to improve the proposal or to have it scrapped altogether, and most members wanted it scrapped." The EC representative reiterated the problems that arise due to ESU's far-reaching membership, further explaining that:

It is very difficult to have a clear line at European level other than a complete rejection of fees, which in the reality of Europe is not going to happen because the majority of member states have fees. There is a very big focus from students on the fees angle, whereas in the Commission, we see this as a minor part of a more general discourse (EC representative interview).

There is therefore a view that ESU focuses on a very specific part of a much broader discourse on financing, a sentiment also echoed by Estermann, who pointed out the need for a more differentiated discourse that takes account of realities as a priority for all stakeholders.

It can be concluded that ESU does indeed often focus its attention and discourse on the topic of fees and increased public investment, particularly in the Bologna Process. A reason for this is partly the diversity in funding systems across Europe as well as the differing positions of its own member unions on the issue of financing and fees in particular, as previously mentioned. The issue which ESU has had the greatest capacity and legitimacy to discuss in the financing debate has been precisely the

question of public good, public responsibility and increased investment, largely as a result of the positions of its own members.

## Influence in the financing debate

As noted earlier, it is rather difficult to measure the influence of any given stakeholder in the financing debate, beyond individual perceptions (Orr and EC representative interviews). Interview participants were asked whether they believed ESU had had any influence in financing discourses, and if so what this influence was.

In the EU context, education is a national competence. Higher education is therefore dealt with by national governments, and higher education policy is implemented at national or subnational level. The majority of interviewees acknowledged this, identifying national governments as the stakeholders with the most influence on higher education financing while highlighting the difficulties ESU faces in trying to effect change in national-level debates as a European-level organisation. Nonetheless, as Primožič explains:

We have managed, with some countries, to outline the problems that they have, and the need for more public money, or for reducing cuts. We have managed to work with CREUP [Spain], for example, to help avoid cuts in Erasmus, at least for people who are already in mobility (Primožič interview).

While ESU successfully lobbied ministers at the Bucharest 2012 Ministerial Conference for explicit reference to “securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education and drawing on other appropriate sources” (Bologna Process 2012), Primožič explained “that was already a compromise given the UK position and the position of some smaller countries”. ESU alumni Deca and Malnes, who mentioned that “in the Bologna Process framework, ESU was able to swing that [debate] and the Communiqué”, also view this as a significant achievement nonetheless. Estermann also considered that:

ESU is an important actor on the question of fees ... and has had a very strong impact on keeping the discussion on who should fund HE and in which way very lively ... which certainly has a strong impact on forcing different actors to reflect and think about certain elements of how to fund HE (Estermann interview).

One of ESU’s greater successes, echoed by several interviewees, has to do with the organisation’s representation at various levels across European and international-level fora and meetings. ESU participated in the drafting committee for the 2009 Bonn Declaration at the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, successfully including a call for global public investment in education (Deca interview). In spite of certain perceptions that ESU focuses primarily on the issue of fees as discussed earlier, Orr claims that ESU’s involvement in numerous policy discussions has had an effect, largely as a result of the fact that the organisation has not focused solely on its position against fees.

However, the representative of the EC has a somewhat different perception:

The presence of ESU is helpful in having student representatives. But on the funding issue some of the points they would make are already well-established

points, such as the social impact of providing student financing and introducing fees (EC representative interview).

It is worth noting that the EC representative suggested a higher level of influence on the Commission of ESU would not necessarily be fruitful in itself, as the Commission does not greatly influence national government discourses on higher education funding, but rather provides guidance, suggestions and recommendations, without dictating specific policies.

Four of the interviewees explicitly referred to the FinSt project as a positive effort on behalf of ESU to constructively engage in the financing debate. Comments included the following:

With the FinSt project there was more of an effort to try and look more closely at the issues in order to have a more differentiated opinion. (Orr interview)

I could not say how efficient the previous discourse of “financing from public sources” was, as I think that national unions needed a more nuanced discourse ... The approval of FinSt [was one of ESU’s biggest successes] as this helped us build a capacity we lacked before (Deca interview).

The outcomes of FinSt were accepted by a lot of stakeholders, plus our work to stake the claim that HE is a public good was generally accepted. The *University World News* often quotes our stands. I am proud that we still get noticed for our opinions, even if a bit repetitive and idealistic according to some (Primožič interview).

The representative of the EC, however, indicated that the outcomes of the FinSt project came as little surprise, as there was not a significant differentiation from previously stated ESU positions, despite the research carried out as part of the project.

When finally approved, the master’s loans scheme within the Erasmus+ programme formed one of the more controversial and hotly debated proposals, as a result of ESU’s position on the subject (Malnes interview).

Another point noted by interviewees included the fact that although ESU has had an impact on the financing debate, it has not been as strong as the impact in setting the mobility benchmark (Deca interview). Malnes elaborated on this, explaining that:

As a European umbrella organisation the most important influence of ESU has been building, brick by brick, at a European level, aims of having increased student mobility and European programmes financing such mobility, such as Erasmus+, and giving leverage to that policy both in the Bologna Process and EU. That is where students will see a real impact, on funding of mobility programmes (Malnes interview).

This was particularly seen to be the case as the Bologna Process and the EHEA have a rather small impact on day-to-day higher education policy making at national level (Malnes interview); it was felt that ESU had more to gain by focusing on financing in the context of student mobility.

Moreover, it was mentioned that in the broader context of ministerial meetings in the Council of the European Union, beyond the context of education, conclusions are far less ambitious regarding the public responsibility in financing higher education: “There are multiple compositions and settings and conclusions can vary depending

on the interests of ministers at a given meeting” (Malnes interview). As an example of this, an important yet little-known Council conclusion from the ministers of finance called for more private investment and tuition fees for students (Council of the European Union 2009).

A general difference in opinions between the EC representative and other interviewees can be observed. As the positions are personal perceptions it is difficult to determine whether one position is more “correct” than the other, and to what extent they are truly representative of stakeholder perceptions of ESU’s positions and influence as an organisation. Nevertheless, the opinions presented by the individuals interviewed for the purposes of this chapter can be regarded as broadly indicative of the way in which different stakeholders understand ESU’s positions and influence in the financing debate.

## Conclusion

One of the first visible conclusions relates to the nature of the shifts in policies, discourses and positions on the topic of higher education funding, which is mainly influenced by national and global trends. The idea of cost sharing (and the acceptance of the associated terminology) has been making rapid progress in the past two decades or so, despite the positions of various stakeholders trying to mitigate the trend.

Despite its evolution, the discourse on higher education funding at European level often remains just that, a discourse. The degree to which states are willing to allow for European-level interference on so national a competence remains fairly limited, while views on the topic vary among governments. The number of strong and resolute advocates at European level remains low.

Given these two major factors, we can conclude that ESU’s capacity to influence the debate on higher education financing remains fairly limited. Inasmuch as it manages to shift the discourse, this is partially facilitated by the fact that changes in wording in European-level political statements and positions have little impact at national decision-making level.

Of course, the merits of staving off the use of more radical types of wording at European level are not to be disparaged, given that policy borrowing and use of European models to justify domestic policy is quite widespread. Preventing the full legitimisation of cost sharing, especially to the extent to which it would imply reduced public commitment to higher education financing, is a valuable result in itself and one that can help in fighting the increasingly hegemonic neoliberal discourse at European level, and help head off the reinforcement of such discourses at national level.

ESU has maintained an overarching position of commitment to public funding, focusing mostly on higher education as a public good and public responsibility while maintaining an opposition to cost sharing, particularly where these costs are borne by individual students and their families. However, it has moderated and balanced its claims in the context of the economic crisis in order to stay relevant and stay “at the table”. This has probably helped create a distinction between ESU as a legitimate stakeholder with a constructive position and other voices – more radical and ideological – that have not managed to get their messages through in the policy arena.

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## Chapter 16

# ESU Student Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance: a mechanism for involving students in quality assurance in Europe

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*Asnate Kažoka*

### **Abstract**

In 2009 ESU, the umbrella organisation of national unions of students in Europe, established a pool of students with quality assurance (QA) knowledge and experience. The main aim of creating the pool was to train student representatives to participate in international reviews of programmes, institutions and agencies in Europe. The establishment of the pool was triggered by the increasing number of international quality assurance procedures and closely connected with policy developments in Europe since 2001, when students were recognised as competent and constructive partners in shaping the EHEA (Bologna Process 2001), and especially since 2005 when the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area were adopted. In 2012, the ESU Student Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance was validated as an official structure of ESU. Since the establishment of the ESU QA Pool in 2009 it has responded to calls for several hundreds of student experts for both quality assurance reviews and exercises for strengthening institutional capacity. Members of the ESU QA Pool have shared their knowledge at the national level and actively participated in higher education policy-making processes at European level.

**Keywords:** quality education; student participation; European Students' Union; external quality assurance

## Introduction

ESU is the umbrella organisation of 47 national unions of students in Europe. One of the aims of ESU is to promote the educational interests of students in Europe, so it works to bring together, resource, train and inform national student representatives on different policy developments at European level. Since its foundation in 1983, ESU has worked on student participation in the quality assurance of higher education. From the 1990s onwards, the role of students in the quality assurance of higher education has been recognised across Europe as both necessary and desirable (Cockburn 2006) and student involvement is regarded as highly beneficial (Crosier, Purser and Smidt 2007). Stakeholders admit that student involvement in external quality assurance processes is important because it helps improve those processes. Students often provide new solutions, and this is reflected in enrichment of the evaluation reports, which have expanded on and included aspects previously not taken into account (Galán Palomares 2012).

Combined results of studies done within the ESU QUEST<sup>42</sup> project show that the current role of students in quality assurance can be characterised by four aspects (ESU 2013a; Galán 2012):

- ▶ involvement at institutional level (e.g. filling in student questionnaires, preparing self-assessment reports);
- ▶ involvement in external procedures (e.g. being members of external review panels);
- ▶ involvement in policy making (e.g. being consulted by policy makers, providing information on different issues, disseminating information);
- ▶ involvement at European level.

There are several milestones for student involvement in quality assurance in Europe. The first was the adoption of the Prague Communiqué in 2001, when students were recognised as competent and constructive partners in shaping the EHEA. This was also the year the so-called E4 group,<sup>43</sup> based on the European principle of stakeholder involvement in quality assurance was established. It can be said that the involvement of ESU within the E4 group was the catalyst that promoted student participation at European level. The turning point for involving students in quality assurance, however, was the Bergen Communiqué (Bologna Process 2005) and the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in 2005. Research carried out by ESU (ESU 2009) concluded that there was an apparent correlation between proper implementation of the ESG and a high level of student participation in quality assurance. Following the adoption of the ESG both student organisations and quality assurance agencies in many European countries began to explore the implementation of student participation in quality assurance (Esteve Mon, Galán Palomares and Pastor Valcárcel 2010). They were looking for ways to create and maintain communities of students who would

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42. Quest for Quality for Students is a project co-ordinated by ESU between 2011 and 2013, see [www.esu-online.org/projects/current/quest](http://www.esu-online.org/projects/current/quest), accessed 4 October 2014.

43. The EUA, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), ESU, and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

be able to participate in reviews. As a consequence, student expert pools on quality assurance were established in many countries.

ESU has been strongly in support of the creation of national student expert pools as a tool to ensure more active student participation. All students, even without specific knowledge, can be involved in internal quality assurance processes. But when it comes to student participation in external quality assurance, there is a more or less concrete profile of the student who is going to be involved. Most of the involved students are or have been student representatives either at the institutional or national level. Their insight and knowledge of the higher education system is relevant and important for meaningful participation (Galán Palomares 2009).

Although there are many examples of successful and coherent student participation in external quality assurance, there are still challenges and barriers to complete an effective student participation and a holistic approach to student participation is lacking. Sometimes students face barriers even if they are considered one of the key factors in promoting a quality assurance culture (Surssock 2011). Some agencies might not be satisfied with the service of students due to lack of communication as to what was actually expected from the students (Wiberg 2006); some agencies state that it is not possible to find students willing to be involved. There are large differences in the level and quality of student involvement in quality assurance among the countries of the EHEA, because in some countries there are no strong traditions of student participation, and also because the agencies do not always have established procedures for recruiting students nor do they invest much energy in recruitment and training.

In 2009 ESU set up an international pool of students with quality assurance knowledge and experience. The aim was to create a platform where student representatives from different countries in Europe could be trained about quality assurance in higher education and involved in international quality assurance procedures. The initiative came both from students and stakeholders as ESU and national unions of students became more involved in quality assurance policy. The main catalyst was the increasing number of requests for international student reviewers from quality assurance agencies and networks in Europe.

Since its establishment, the ESU Student Experts' Pool on Quality Assurance has developed its structure both internally and within ESU. In April 2012, it was validated as an official structure of ESU. The ESU QA Pool functions according to the goals and policy directions of ESU and an internally agreed strategy, and it is managed by an independent Steering Committee (first selected in 2012) in co-operation with the ESU Executive Committee. The Steering Committee is accountable to the ESU Board as the main decision-making body in ESU and reports to the Board at least once a year. The Steering Committee is currently responsible for training its members, nominating them to reviews and promoting the ESU QA Pool. Since the establishment of the ESU QA Pool, it has co-operated with more than 10 different quality assurance agencies and responded to calls both to create quality assurance strategies and to participate in programme, institutional and agency reviews in Europe. Members of the ESU QA Pool have actively participated in higher education policy-making processes at European level, trained other student representatives, and initiated the creation of national student expert pools.

At European level, ESU has had a leading role in introducing student involvement in quality assurance, for example when it comes to the involvement of students in evaluation of quality assurance agencies and European-level policy-making activities (e.g. the revision of the ESG). Currently ESU's role lies mostly in maintaining and further developing student involvement and the ESU QA Pool is one of the strongest tools it has available to this end.

## **Establishment of student experts' pools**

The idea of a student experts' pool on quality assurance was not a completely new concept in Europe before the establishment of the ESU QA Pool. A few well-developed national pools on quality assurance (e.g. in Germany) existed, and the ESU QA Pool was a catalyst for the creation of more national student experts' pools (e.g. in Latvia and Lithuania). These national pools offer training, promote student involvement, provide students for inclusion in quality assurance processes, and help to provide and disseminate information to the student body to raise awareness of quality assurance. On the one hand they serve as a database of competent students who can join external review panels. On the other hand they constitute a community to encourage peer learning among members.

A student experts' pool is a community of trained student representatives with specific competences. Pools are usually connected to (dependent on) a more formal structure (e.g. the NUS). Most pools are focused on competences in quality assurance and there are only a few exceptions, for example the ESU pool of trainers that is currently being established with the aim of providing trainers for training about general student representation issues. The development of most national student expert pools started at the same time as the establishment of the ESU QA Pool, following the policy documents that supported increased student participation in quality assurance (the Bergen Communiqué and the ESG). National unions of students had been establishing or supporting the creation of student pools at the national level as part of strategy-building in order to strengthen student participation in quality assurance processes in their countries.

A survey carried out by ESU in 2011 (ESU, 2013a) revealed that student expert pools function in 18 ESU member countries out of 30 who answered the questionnaire. As the survey was carried out in 2011 there are some more student pools that have been established or changed their status recently and were not included in the survey (for example, Austria). Only few of these pools existed before 2005 and most of them were founded between 2005 and 2009. National pools mostly operate at national level with only a few exceptions, for example, the case of Austria, Germany and Switzerland where student expert pools co-operate with each other and can provide experts for reviews in the other two countries (mostly because of German language being widely used in the quality assurance processes in these countries and also cross-border co-operation between the quality assurance agencies).

Experts' pools function in three ways. They can be managed by a national union of students (as in Romania), a quality assurance agency (as in the UK), or by an independent structure (as in Germany). The national pool of student experts in Romania, ANOSR,

was established in 2007. Since then, it has been responsible for preparing content and conducting training for students who want to engage in quality assurance. Having full ownership of its student pool, ANOSR is responsible for nominating students for the different reviews carried out by ARACIS, the Romanian quality assurance agency. ARACIS involves its student experts in various training and scientific events on quality assurance (ESU 2011). In the UK, the pool of student reviewers is managed by the country's higher education quality assurance agency, the QAA. The QAA started inviting student reviewers to external panels in 2009, and it is responsible for selecting student reviewers (through free competition), training and nominating them. In Germany, since 2001 all students involved in the quality assurance system belong to an experts' pool. The pool is the only legitimate body, and it is allowed to delegate students to every position connected to the German quality assurance system. It is responsible for providing regular training to allow the students to keep themselves up to date and share their experiences. The pool is maintained by three organisations – the union of students of the federal states, the general assembly of study programmes of Germany and the fzs (the national union of students in Germany, which is the only organisation of these three which is officially registered). The pool is managed by a general assembly, which elects the executive committee of the pool. The executive committee is responsible for the everyday work and representation of the pool. The pool has two employees and is mostly financed by agencies that commit themselves to a fixed amount on a two-year contract (ESU 2013a).

The functions and structures of national student experts' pools across Europe display great variation – there are different governance structures, different responsibilities and different funding opportunities. The only thing in common is the idea of promoting increased student participation in quality assurance at national level and maintaining and educating a community of students interested in improving the quality of their studies.

## **Establishment of the ESU QA Pool**

The establishment of the ESU QA Pool was closely connected with the increase of international co-operation in the field of quality assurance. One of the first meaningful pan-European initiatives was the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP), launched in 1993 by the European Rectors' Conference, now the EUA. The aim of the programme was to offer external evaluation with international experts mainly to EUA member universities. The IEP was always closely connected with the EUA, with whom ESU collaborated in the E4 Group since 2001. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was launched in 2000 with quality assurance agencies as members. In 2001, the chair of ESU and the EUA were invited to the ENQA General Assembly to exchange views on European quality assurance, leading to the formation of the E4 Group (ESU 2012a).

The importance of pan-European initiatives increased significantly with the introduction of the Bologna Process. In 2005, the ESG were produced by the E4 Group. Among others, paragraph 3.7 emphasises student involvement, stating that "External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies" should include "an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s)" (ENQA 2005). The guidelines for national reviews of ENQA member agencies were

published soon after and included students (along with quality assurance experts, representatives of higher education institutions and other stakeholders) as proposed members of panels. It was stated clearly that a student member proposed by ESU would always be included in the expert panel of ENQA co-ordinated external reviews of member agencies (Helle 2006). In 2008, the E4 Group launched the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) with the aim of improving the quality of European higher education and promoting greater student mobility. Since 2005, student involvement in quality assurance has been promoted by almost all policy developments in higher education – in quality assurance at national level, international level and higher education governance. The reports “Bologna with student eyes”, produced by ESU (2005, 2007, 2009, 2012) show that more and more agencies are involving students in external review procedures. There is an increasing demand for international student expertise (e.g. student representatives are working for the CeQuint project of the European Consortium of Accreditation).<sup>44</sup> Students are trusted with more important positions (in 2013, the chair of the European Quality Assurance Forum, organised by the E4 group, was for the first time a student).

In 2005, the IEP decided to try involving students in their review panels. The first pilot procedures with students nominated by ESU participating in the IEP began the same year (Zhang 2013), though the ESU QA Pool had not yet been conceptualised. Following successful co-operation with the IEP and the ENQA between 2005 and 2009, expecting an increase in demand for international student experts, ESU decided to formalise a pool of student experts. It was only logical that ESU, as the umbrella organisation of national unions of students, should be co-ordinating student participation in international quality assurance procedures, and already existing national student expert pools supported the creation of the ESU QA Pool.

In 2009, ESU organised the first study session for training students in order to participate in external quality assurance procedures. As a result of the study session the ESU QA Pool was formed. In 2011, the steering mechanism of the ESU QA Pool was set up. The ESU QA Pool was validated as a separate ESU internal structure by the ESU Board in April 2012. Since 2012, there has been a growing interest from potential members (more than three qualified applicants for every available place in the pool in 2013). Many stakeholders (mostly quality assurance agencies) have begun to approach the ESU QA Pool directly when they want to recruit international student experts for their reviews. Members of the ESU QA Pool are participating as trainers in local, national and international training events. There has also been a continued increase in requests for ESU’s presence at different quality assurance events (e.g. conferences of national quality assurance agencies) or in nominating students for quality assurance reviews organised by different agencies, for example AQ Austria. Along with the establishment of the ESU QA Pool, ESU has tried to develop different practical capacity-building tools to strengthen student participation in quality assurance processes at national and international level (e.g. the handbook, toolkit and the concept of quality education

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44. Project by the European Consortium of Accreditation, which aims to assess the quality of internationalisation in higher education, see <http://ecahe.eu/home/about/projects/cequint>, accessed 5 October 2014.

from the viewpoint of students). These tools are being used both by the ESU QA Pool and by national student expert pools. Most were designed within the QUEST for Quality for Students project<sup>45</sup> launched in 2011.

## **Description, mission and vision**

The ESU QA Pool comprises committed and well-prepared students who can contribute to the improvement of higher education provision in Europe through quality assurance. Its main area of work is to co-operate with international quality assurance agencies and networks (e.g. the EUA, ENQA and national agencies where international student panel members are sought). The main aim of the pool is to promote involvement of students in quality assurance of higher education by nominating students to take part in quality assurance reviews and activities as requested by partners (institutions, agencies, etc.). Other aims of the ESU QA Pool include facilitating multiplication of internal knowledge and expertise (that is developing a toolkit on methods for collecting feedback, and organising national and regional training) (ESU 2013b). The pool development plan from 2013 to 2016 states the vision of the ESU QA Pool thus – “ESU’s quality assurance student experts’ pool is recognised in the EHEA as a driver in increasing student participation in quality, and it operates in a sustainable way” (ESU 2013c).

There are two missions for the ESU QA Pool. First of all, it is a platform for internal development of ESU and national unions of students. The other mission is to maintain and train a society of student experts who are able to perform different quality assurance tasks, to not only participate in programme/institutional/agency reviews but also in the creation of internal quality assurance strategy or to evaluate existing quality assurance strategy.

## **Structure and composition of the pool**

Members of the ESU QA Pool are selected based on their qualifications and they need to be either students or active student representatives. The ESU QA Pool aims to have a membership that is balanced by gender, geographical background, field and level of studies, and the diversity of ESU member unions. It is open to all currently enrolled students and those who have graduated up to a year previously but nominees from ESU member unions are given priority. The ESU QA Pool recruits new members once a year. Members need to renew their membership each year.

Calls for membership are always open and distributed to all ESU member unions and also published in ESU communication channels to make the application procedure open to every student who might be interested to apply. Importantly, the ESU QA Pool always has members both from countries where student representation and student participation in quality assurance is well developed and from countries where students are underrepresented. In 2013, for example, the first members from Armenia, Georgia and Israel were recruited, though Germany and Finland have been

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45. The QUEST toolkit is available at [www.quest.esu-online.org](http://www.quest.esu-online.org), accessed 4 October 2014.

represented since the pool's establishment. Even students from countries with good representation can have different levels of expertise; this principle is very important for the mission of the ESU QA Pool to be the platform of ESU's internal development. Most current and former members have been active or are active in their national unions of students and know the channels through which they can influence decisions to further promote student participation.

The main criteria for being involved in the ESU QA Pool are experience in student representation and/or previous experience in quality assurance procedures (at university level or at national level). The two most common types of experience are involvement in student unions at local (university), national or international level, and membership in the decision-making and governance structures of universities and national and European-level bodies on behalf of students (e.g. faculty councils, boards of national quality assurance agencies). Previous experience in quality assurance is not the main criterion if the applicant comes from a country where student participation in quality assurance is not developed but demonstrates a genuine motivation to be involved in quality assurance. The other selection criteria for the ESU QA Pool include excellent command of English (knowledge of any additional languages is considered an advantage) and a willingness to share knowledge (e.g. through organising national training in one's home country, or through the preparation of articles, scientific papers).

Members are selected by the ESU QA Pool Steering Committee and calls administered by ESU for participation in quality assurance reviews and other events are sent to members only. In 2013, there were 64 members (32 male and 32 female) representing 28 countries. The balance of members by study level was as follows – 34 with bachelor's degrees, 18 with master's, 4 with both bachelor's and master's, 6 with PhDs, and 2 with other qualifications (integrated studies). The majority of members represented the social sciences (e.g. political science, economics) but the representation of natural sciences, technological sciences and the arts was also ensured.

## **Management of the ESU QA Pool**

As noted, the ESU QA Pool is managed by an independent Steering Committee. The Steering Committee consists of three members of the pool, a member of the ESU Presidency and a member of the ESU Executive Committee.<sup>46</sup> The three members of the pool are selected by the previous ESU QA Pool Steering Committee through an open call and approved by the ESU Executive Committee. The composition and selection procedure of the Steering Committee ensures that the activities of the pool are in line with other activities in ESU and ensure continuity (there is an interval between the selection of the three members of the Steering Committee and the two members from the ESU Executive Committee). The members of the Steering Committee are selected from among interested and qualified members of the ESU QA Pool (with an open call to all pool members).

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<sup>46</sup> See the structure of elected representatives in ESU at [www.esu-online.org/structures/electedrepresentatives](http://www.esu-online.org/structures/electedrepresentatives), accessed 6 October 2014.

The Steering Committee is responsible for the management of the everyday activities of the ESU QA Pool. It is meant to help the ESU establish a functioning and dynamic pool and maintain its further development. Its main roles are in the following areas:

- ▶ selection and nomination of students for external review processes;
- ▶ facilitation of internal communication and expertise;
- ▶ training and development;
- ▶ promotion of the ESU QA Pool (external visibility of the pool).

The areas are defined in consultation with ESU QA Pool members and work is organised according to these areas. The work of the Steering Committee relies on the following principles: a certain level of independence of the pool (in relation to other ESU structures); clarity of the mandate (communicated to the ESU Board and external stakeholders); and ongoing development of the pool. The work of the Steering Committee is organised mostly virtually, with several face-to-face meetings per year. The level of independence of the pool means that most of the issues that the pool works with are dealt with within the pool. The Steering Committee already includes members of the ESU Executive Committee and therefore there are only a few situations that require the involvement of the whole ESU Executive Committee, for example for the formal adoption of internal management documents. The pool is also moving towards creating an internal budget flow, so financial independence from ESU is anticipated. Continuity of management work is ensured by a system to hand over responsibilities. Members of the outgoing and incoming Steering Committee meet at the beginning of the new mandate to introduce the new Steering Committee to the work that has already been done and to discuss plans for the future.

### **Selection and nomination of students for external review processes**

The Steering Committee selects and nominates members of the pool for participation in quality assurance processes. These include external reviews of programmes, institutions and agencies, and enhancement visits of different higher education institutions. Selection of nominees is done in accordance with the established criteria and guidelines for selection. The selection and nomination process is mostly organised on a request basis – an agency or institution interested in inviting a student expert approaches the ESU QA Pool with a concrete request and the Steering Committee sends a call to pool members. Currently a system of proactive co-operation is being established wherein the Steering Committee itself approaches agencies and offers student experts for review procedures.

When making decisions about nominations the Steering Committee takes into account several factors. The main principles in the selection and nomination procedure are to ensure the best possible match with the requirements of the agency, to ensure equal opportunities for all pool members, and to develop the competences of less experienced pool members. All these principles are taken into account when making decisions; for example, if there are two pool members with similar qualifications, the Steering Committee will nominate the member who has had less international review experience as a member of the pool (that is has been nominated to fewer

international quality assurance procedures). There are two types of request. Most are quite general: for example, an agency will request a student with a specific academic background, with previous experience in student representation and quality assurance, and fluency in English. Other requests include very specific requirements: for example, an agency might request a female expert with a background in physics, preferably from Spain or fluent in Spanish. The ESU QA Pool usually does not provide experts for national quality assurance procedures if a functioning national student experts' pool or similar structure exists. In such cases international student experts can be nominated only if rare and specific competences are required or the agency that requests experts has specific reasons for not using national student experts, such as a conflict of interest.

## **Facilitation of internal communication and expertise**

The Steering Committee is responsible for facilitating and maintaining communication within the ESU QA Pool and also for keeping members informed of quality assurance policy developments and practice at European and national level. ESU QA Pool members are encouraged to ask for support for their initiatives. This could be the organisation of a regional quality assurance training, or the sharing of best practices by other pool members (e.g. information on student participation in quality assurance in another country). There is still room for improvement, however: the Steering Committee intends to maintain an internal newsletter where pool members can obtain information about the activities of the ESU QA Pool and news from the Steering Committee. It also plans to improve the system of collecting and sharing members' feedback on their experience of reviews and events, and involve members in providing input for the different policy areas ESU is working on.

## **Establishing and running the training and development cycle**

The ESU QA Pool Steering Committee is responsible for organising international training sessions for pool members and preparing training templates for national training, while also supporting the organisers of national training. Training sessions are organised according to the potential lack of competences identified by student representatives and stakeholders; a survey by ENQA (Dearlove 2006) enumerates the qualities that quality assurance agencies expect from students. Besides being a current or recently graduated student with subject-related knowledge and experience in quality assurance, members are expected to have analytical skills, report-writing skills and communication skills.

There are two aims of training programmes in the ESU QA Pool. The first is to provide training for those members who are new to the pool. New members are often very different from long-term members. As noted earlier, some come from countries where student participation in quality assurance is not well developed, and in fact they might even be the first students to promote student participation in quality assurance in their country. It is crucial to educate these students about what ESU does, what the international developments are, and what the status of students is

within this arena. The development of soft skills and practical experience in simulating review procedures follows. Topics covered during the training include legislation/standards of relevance to the quality assurance process; an overview of procedures and objectives; international developments; case studies; panel members' roles and responsibilities; ethics; practical skills (report writing, research skills including interview techniques and documentary analysis); and time management.

Another aim of the training is to give pool members an opportunity for networking. It is very difficult to maintain an expert community and facilitate internal interaction through virtual communication alone. As there are over 60 members in the ESU QA Pool, originating from many countries, it is also difficult to finance networking activities for all members. The annual training of the pool is an opportunity to gather everyone together and exchange experiences, while also participating in the training of new members. Lately, the ESU QA Pool has become more involved in the preparation and delivery of national and regional quality assurance training sessions. During this training, members of the ESU QA Pool educate student representatives about student participation in quality assurance both in Europe and in the host country. This *modus operandi* has proven successful as it allows the ESU QA Pool to reach more students and also provides members with an opportunity to share their knowledge. In 2013, eight such training sessions were organised. National unions of students could apply to host training, with two pool members nominated to deliver each training (one expert from the host country and an international expert).

## **Promotion of the pool**

The main aim in promoting the ESU QA Pool is to make it attractive to possible partners and stakeholders of ESU, but also to enable ESU members to make maximum use of its capacity. Several ways of promoting the pool have been identified, such as establishing a functioning database which would be accessible to stakeholders and ESU members, and describing the profile and qualities of the ESU QA Pool to create a portfolio that can be disseminated and used to promote the pool at different events such as the European Quality Assurance Forum. Another important way of promoting the pool is keeping in touch with all ESU representatives in the governing bodies of different quality assurance networks and ESU partners, for example, the E4 Group.

## **Strategic development**

Areas for strategic development of the ESU QA Pool are identified by the Steering Committee in co-operation with the ESU Executive Committee and members of the pool. Currently there are two main documents that regulate the management of the pool. There is a long-term development plan for the years 2013 to 2016 and an action plan for 2013 to 2014. These documents were designed by the Steering Committee. In order to understand how strategic management in the ESU QA Pool functions, it is important to understand the general structure of decision making and implementation in ESU. The ESU QA Pool is an internal ESU structure responsible for most of its quality assurance competences, but at the same time elected representatives

in the Executive Committee are directly responsible for developing strategy for ESU's activities in the field of quality assurance. For example, if ESU decides to participate in a new initiative on quality assurance, the decision to participate will be made by the Executive Committee and members of ESU QA Pool will be informed, asked to consult and be used as a resource (managers, trainers, researchers, etc.).

While ESU's strategic development influences strategy for the ESU QA Pool, the pool itself faces internal challenges similar to those faced by other such student experts' pools. External issues (e.g. increasing co-operation with external partners) are identified in consultation with the Executive Committee or following the decisions of the ESU Board. Internal challenges (e.g. networking among pool members) are identified mostly by collecting opinions from members.

Currently, strategic development is organised in three main directions (as defined in the strategic plan for 2013 to 2016). The directions are partner management, expert management and the profile of the pool and sustainability. Partner management includes work with existing partners and potential partners (everyday communication, identifying and maintaining contact with potential partners, agreeing on co-operation terms, attending events organised by partners). Expert management includes work with pool members (facilitating communication and networking among members, issuing calls for participation in quality assurance activities and selecting members, designing and organising training, maintaining internal databases). Pool profile and sustainability covers the development of branding for the pool, creating strategy for promoting the pool, and planning finances.

Work directions are divided among the members of the ESU QA Pool Steering Committee. For partner and evaluations management, the main priority is to clarify and develop sound practices and procedures for collaboration and communication with partners, for example through the introduction of written agreements. For expert management, the main priority is to develop an effective training mechanism and system for dealing with calls for student experts. For the pool profile and sustainability, the main priority is to develop an effective financial planning system.

The main challenges in strategic management are establishing and maintaining the profile of the pool, ensuring continuous development and continuity of actions, finding sufficient financial resources to maintain the pool, and finding ways to share knowledge with other students. One of the challenges is the continuity of the ESU QA Pool. ESU is a student-run organisation with only a few permanent employees. All the other human resources in ESU and its pool change with annual elections/selection. The main risk is the coherence of previous agreements. A completely new challenge, and one that grows as the pool develops and gains recognition, is the inclusion of a wider range of students in the pool – this requires co-operation with student organisations representing students from specific domains and expansion of the pool. Another challenge is financial sustainability and independence. Proper functioning of the pool requires a lot of resources for networking activities and training. As the regular income from the membership fees of ESU is directed towards covering the basic expenses of ESU there is no regular source of funding currently directed to the ESU QA Pool.

## Partners and examples of co-operation

Since its establishment, the ESU QA Pool has created and strengthened relationships with more than 10 partners across Europe. The initial partners of the ESU QA Pool were the IEP and the ENQA. Currently, all institutional review panels by the IEP and agency review panels for the purposes of determining membership in the ENQA and/or inclusion in the EQAR include a student member nominated by ESU. Potential panel members are nominated by ESU and agencies have the final right to refuse the nomination and request another and allocate the nominees to specific review panels. The list of organisations that the ESU QA Pool has collaborated with to date includes AQ Austria, NVAO (the Netherlands), SKVC (Lithuania), AEQUES (Belgium), EKKA (Estonia), FINHEEC (Finland), AQAS (Germany) and KAA (Kosovo).<sup>47</sup> Discussions with potential partners are constantly ongoing. One of the most successful examples of co-operation is with the IEP.

## Institutional Evaluation Programme

The IEP is an independent membership service of the EUA which has provided external evaluation services to higher education institutions since 1994. The aim of the IEP is to evaluate institutions in the context of their specific goals and objectives with the aim of quality improvement. Students have been present as team members for all IEP evaluations since 2009. The IEP started considering the inclusion of students in its evaluation teams during 2005-06. Eight students participated in IEP evaluations during the pilot phase (2006-08), though only in those evaluations where the institution asked for a student evaluator and the team chair agreed. Since the academic year 2008-2009 the practice of including students in review panels has been extended to all IEP evaluations without exception. All the students participating in IEP evaluations since the pilot phase have been selected through ESU and in 2008 the IEP Steering Committee decided that students in the IEP would be recruited in the first instance through ESU (Zhang 2013).

In 2009 the IEP (in the person of the Senior Programme Manager responsible for the IEP) and ESU signed a Memorandum of Understanding that defines procedures related to student participation in the IEP. The memorandum stipulates that the IEP will take the final decision on the selection of students, will invite the selected students to the annual seminar it organises for its pool members and will decide on the composition of individual evaluation teams. The agreement also states that student members of the individual teams will be treated in the same manner as all the other team members regarding their rights and duties. Communication between ESU and the IEP is organised through a communication and feedback analysis meeting each year. In 2013, the IEP conducted surveys with the aim of examining student participation in the IEP (Zhang 2013). The research shows that it might be possible to improve the conditions of student participation by improving students' and their

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47. All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

team members' understanding of the student's role. This would include clarifying how students are expected to contribute and also communicating clearly what the recruitment process aims to achieve. The agreement between ESU and the IEP states that the IEP Steering Committee has to include a student representative nominated by ESU. Since 2009, three members of the ESU QA Pool have represented students in the IEP Steering Committee.

## Conclusion

Student participation in quality assurance has increased significantly since the first policy developments and especially since the adoption of the ESG. Along with increased student participation in quality assurance procedures at national level there is an increase in pan-European initiatives and more quality assurance agencies and networks operate across national borders. Student participation in international quality assurance processes is an important achievement in student representation and can be seen as an excellent way to strengthen student participation in quality assurance in general. With increasing student participation it is very important to ensure that students have all the tools for meaningful and productive participation so that they are able to influence processes, and not just participate formally.

Student expert pools are tools for organising structured student participation – these pools can function both as mechanisms for training and nominating students to review panels and as platforms for knowledge exchange. The ESU QA Pool is one of the main initiatives that ESU has taken in the direction of ensuring student participation in quality assurance and it still has unused potential. Despite the challenges in strategic development, the ESU QA Pool is a unique mechanism for student participation in international quality assurance procedures and an example that inspires and promotes student participation in quality assurance in general.

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Part III

## **Student governance**

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## Chapter 17

# We are one, but we're not the same: explaining the emergence of hybrid national student unions

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### **Abstract**

Based on a typology provided by Manja Klemenčič, national unions of students can be conceptualised as either student associations as social movement organisations, or student associations as interest groups. While the first group is characterised by loosely network-like organisations with limited sets of resources, the second is characterised by hierarchically ordered structures with strong centralised coordination. This chapter uses approaches from institutional theory to argue that student organisations with a network-like character that interact with the Bologna Process-inspired corporate-pluralist policy making and steering approaches at the national level might show characteristics of both types of student organisation. To illustrate the emergence of these hybrids the chapter uses the development of the German national union of students, fzs, as a case study.

**Keywords:** student unions; institutional theory; higher education governance; Bologna Process; Germany; higher education steering

## Introduction

National unions of students (NUSs) are national representative bodies of students composed of a membership of either individual persons or local student unions. In Europe, NUSs have become core stakeholders in higher education policy making, especially in the framework of the Bologna Process. Since the Ministerial Conference in Prague in 2001, students have been accepted as an official stakeholder in the Bologna Process and national governments are incentivised to include students and other stakeholders in the policy-making process (Middlehurst and Teixeira 2012). At the level of the Bologna Process, this led to the promotion of a corporate-pluralist approach to policy making (Elken and Vukasovic 2014; Gornitzka and Maassen 2000; Jungblut and Vukasovic 2013), while at the same time national modes of governance in the Bologna area still vary (Amaral, Tavares and Santos 2012; Middlehurst and Teixeira 2012). This adoption of a specific model of policy making at the level of the Bologna Process creates a normative pressure within national policy arenas (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). For the NUSs this means that on the one hand, the political importance of national representative structures of students is boosted. On the other hand, this might prove to be a challenge for the NUSs, since inclusion in a corporate-pluralist steering model calls for certain professional organisational features. This is due to the fact that “sitting at the table” in the policy-making process demands that an organisation characterised by a comparatively high turnover in its leadership be able to participate steadily and ensure the institutionalisation and proper transfer of knowledge, which often requires some sort of administrative backbone. In cases where the membership favours a more movement-like NUS structure, this creates the danger of tensions between the student organisations’ logic of membership and logic of influence (Schmitter and Streeck 1999).

Not all NUSs are equally structured or show the same characteristics in terms of their values, missions or means of influencing the policy process. In an introductory article to a special issue of the *European Journal of Higher Education*, Klemenčič (2012a) provides a typology for national systems of student representation and different types of student union organisations. She clusters NUSs in Europe into two groups: (a) student associations as social movement organisations and (b) student associations as interest groups. While the first group is characterised by loose network-like organisations with limited sets of resources, relying heavily on volunteers and using mainly non-institutionalised forms of political claim-making, the second group is characterised by hierarchically ordered structures with strong centralised co-ordination, secure funding and professional administrations, relying mainly on lobbying and political advocacy as modes of action (ibid.: 8).

We will use the typology proposed by Klemenčič as a starting point to argue that while it applies to NUSs in some countries, it does not cover all possible cases. As Klemenčič (ibid.: 9) points out herself, some organisations fluctuate between these rather ideal types or show characteristics of hybrid forms of organisation. In the following pages we will use arguments stemming from institutional theory to explain the emergence and existence of hybrid forms of student representative structures at the national level. Using both the concept of (a) path dependency and inertia of organisations (Mahoney and Thelen 2010) as well as (b) clashes of institutional

logics (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012), our argument centres around the idea that especially in countries where the corporate-pluralist steering model derived from the Bologna Process interacts with an NUS, which is characterised more as a social movement organisation and thus has a specific logic of membership, we will be able to find hybrid student organisations. After arguing conceptually for the existence of these hybrids we will use the German national union of students, the *freier Zusammenschluss von studentInnenschaften* (fzs), to illustrate the case of a hybrid organisation.

The following section will present the concepts of path dependency and inertia of organisations as well as clashes of institutional logics and different processes of change of organisations. Based on this we will present a conceptual argument as to why and how these features of organisations, in the case of NUSs in Europe, can potentially lead to the emergence of hybrid structures. In the second section we will use the development of fzs as an example of such a process, which also illustrates how a student organisation can get trapped in between contradicting expectations. Finally, we will use the conclusions to summarise our findings and point to areas of further research.

## **National unions of students from an institutional theory perspective**

Student representative structures in every country have specific organisational features, which they develop based on their organisational history as well as the internal and external policy dynamics they are involved in. On the one hand, NUSs have a formal organisational structure, often regulated through by-laws, with specific duties assigned to bodies like a general assembly or an executive committee. All these structures can in an institutional perspective be regarded as institutions. On the other hand, NUSs also have a set of goals, missions and policies, as well as beliefs and values that define the common spirit of the membership and thus the organisation as such; these features can also be regarded as institutions. Both the more formal structural institutions as well as the more informal value-based institutions define the organisation and regulate what it can or cannot do (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Greenwood 2008). A representative student organisation can, just as any other organisation, thus be regarded as a set of its institutions.

Today the environment in which NUSs act is comprised of three partially interacting levels. On the basic level is the local membership of an NUS, be it individual students or local student unions, which forms the basis of the organisation and acts in the NUS's decision-making bodies based on its own goals, missions, values and ideas, which have been created based on their local perception of higher education. On the next level is the national higher education policy arena. This is the level at which the NUS is mostly active as it is often the sole actor representing students here. Thus the NUS interacts with national ministries, other stakeholder organisations such as rectors' conferences or state agencies like quality assurance agencies, all of which approach the arena with their own values, aims and ideas. The national higher education policy arena is also influenced by the highest level, which in Europe is the level of the Bologna Process. Here several European-level stakeholder organisations

as well as national governments come together and discuss higher education policy and in so doing create a normative pressure towards a certain convergence of the national policy arenas (Frølich et al. 2013).

Following the work of Schmitter and Streeck (1999), who analysed interest organisations of the business sector, one can distinguish two audiences that organisations representing certain groups have to cater to: (a) their own members, based on what Schmitter and Streeck call the logic of membership, and (b) those political actors that are important for the represented group, what Schmitter and Streeck call the logic of influence. It is the interplay of these two logics that shapes the organisational dynamics of a given representation structure.

National student organisations can thus be seen as being involved in a permanent two-level game, where on one level they have to interact with their membership and on the other level they have to interact with public authorities and higher education governance structures (Klemenčič 2012a). The existing organisational features of the different NUSs in Europe developed historically, based on the local interplay of the logic of membership and the logic of influence (Klemenčič 2012a). The existence of a normative pressure from the Bologna Process to adopt a corporate-pluralist policy-making routine also at the national level, especially since the mid-2000s, has in some countries led to a shift in the logic of influence for student organisations. Since a corporate-pluralist governance arrangement is more compatible with interest group-like organisations that demonstrate a great deal of professionalism, NUSs with memberships that focus strongly on the social movement aspect of a student organisation might experience a growing conflict between the logic of membership and the logic of influence. This can cause contradicting pressures for organisations and diverging calls for organisational reactions. In turn this might lead to the creation of hybrid types of national student organisation, which are situated between the two types proposed by Klemenčič (2012a).

Institutional theory offers two conceptual approaches that can help explain the emergence and existence of hybrid organisations of NUSs. The first, path dependency and inertia of institutions, focuses heavily on structural aspects and the slow and incremental ways in which change can occur (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). The second, conflicting institutional logics, focuses more strongly on actors and the interaction processes between different systems of values and beliefs and the way an organisation is able to cater to and handle conflicting logics (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012).

## **Path dependency and inertia of institutions**

When looking at student representative associations through the analytical lens of institutional theory the first focus is on the existing structures of these organisations and the question of how these structures shape future development, including the possibility of organisational change. Following the definition presented by Mahoney and Thelen, institutions can be regarded as “*relatively enduring* features of political and social life (rules, norms, procedures) that structure behaviour and that cannot be changed easily or instantaneously” (2010: 4, italics in original). This definition points

to a core feature of institutions: their stability and resistance to change. Thus, when regarding NUSs as sets of institutions one also has to focus on this specific feature especially regarding NUSs' structures, policies and procedures.

The inertia of institutions is based on the idea that decisions made and institutions generated in the development of student representative organisations in the past generate path dependencies today. These path dependencies limit the possibilities of actors within the organisations to change its existing rules, procedures and norms. Path dependency thus describes the need of actors within a given organisation to orient their actions, proposals and attempts to change the institutions of the organisation to existing institutions that have been agreed on before.

The level to which existing institutions bind actors who are trying to pursue change in organisations depends on two factors: (a) veto possibilities in the given political context and (b) the level of discretion in interpretation and enforcement of the institutions targeted for change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 18ff.). The first of these two factors depends on the structure of the organisation within which an institution has been targeted for change as well as the number of veto points and the strength of veto players seeking to block change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Tsebelis 2002). Strong veto powers include the ability of actors to prevent changes in formal and informal rules as well as in the enactment of the rules, while a multitude of veto points describes a situation where many different actors have to agree to make change possible even though their veto power might be more limited (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 19).

The second factor, the level of discretion in interpretation and enforcement of the institution that is to be changed, addresses the extent to which an institution can be reinterpreted in its meaning without the need for formal change through actors within the organisation (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 20ff.). If an existing institution is only defined loosely and is open to on-the-spot reinterpretation by actors it opens up possibilities for adjustment. Furthermore, if actors have a high level of discretion in the enforcement of a rule there is less need to change the institution as such when pursuing change in the institution's functioning.

Depending on the level of veto power or points and the degree of discretion in interpretation and enforcement of the institution, four different types of gradual change processes can be identified (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 15ff.):

1. Displacement: this is a situation where existing institutions are removed and new ones are introduced. Such possibly abrupt change happens in situations with weak veto possibilities and only low levels of discretion in interpretation and enforcement.
2. Layering: this is a situation where new institutions are introduced to amend existing ones without abolishing the latter. This type of change process happens when there are strong veto possibilities and low levels of discretion in interpretation and enforcement.
3. Conversion: this takes place when institutions remain formally the same but their interpretation and enactment by actors within the organisation are different, allowing them to actively use existing ambiguities in the institution to re-shape its enactment. This happens in situations with weak veto possibilities and high levels of discretion in interpretation and enforcement of institutions.

4. Drift: this occurs when formally, institutions remain the same and only their impact changes as a result of shifts in environmental conditions. This happens when there are strong veto possibilities but also high levels of discretion in interpretation of the existing institution.

Of these four possible gradual change processes displacement is the only one that replaces the existing institution with a new one, allowing for a clean break. In contrast layering, drift and conversion combine the existing institution with new elements in different ways. In relation to the typology of national student organisations presented above (Klemenčič 2012a) and the pressure from the Bologna Process towards a corporate-pluralist policy-making approach, it may be expected that in cases of drift, conversion or layering as change processes related to this interaction, the possibility for the emergence of hybrid student organisations that show characteristics of both “pure” types is high.

## **Institutional logics**

A second institutionalist take on change processes in organisations and the possibilities for the emergence of hybrids is the idea of institutional logics. This approach focuses more on the relationship among institutions, actors and organisations (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012). An institutional logic is defined as:

the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values and beliefs, by which individuals and organisations provide meaning to the daily activity, organise time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012: 2).

In this sense institutional logics are frames of reference that condition actors and shape the possibilities to act and implement change in institutions. Following this approach one possible source for change dynamics is the appearance of a new institutional logic that challenges the existing one and thus also calls for changes in the existing institutions (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012). The level of change as well as the change process then depend on the interaction between the two contesting institutional logics as well as the behaviour of actors.

In relation to national representative student organisations, these conflicts of institutional logics can occur due to the fact that these organisations are structurally embedded and interact both with their members as well as the national and indirectly the European higher education policy community. This two-level, or in some respects even three-level game, opens up the possibility for interactions of several contradicting institutional logics, potentially creating conflicts between the logics at different levels. While on the one hand the members of the given NUS have a specific institutional logic that they want to see reflected in their representative organisation, the national higher education policy arena, on the other hand, is determined by its own institutional logic, which in turn may be challenged by the institutional logic promoted in the frame of the Bologna Process. In cases where these logics contradict one another the potential for clashes is high and NUSs might be pulled in two diverging directions at the same time. This idea is similar to the concept of the logic of membership and the logic of influence (Schmitter and Streeck 1999) and the idea that NUSs have to strive for both inward and outward legitimacy.

As has already been pointed out, the Bologna Process introduced a unifying concept based on a corporate-pluralist approach to policy making, which is also advocated for the national policy-making arenas. Especially in cases where the membership of an NUS follows an institutional logic similar to what Klemenčič (2012a) describes as a social movement organisation, there can be a clash with the institutional logic promoted by the Bologna Process, if it is taken up by the national policy-making arena. If such clashes happen, the NUS has to find a way to align its institutions so that it is compatible with both logics, so as not to jeopardise either its membership or its influence on policy making. If successful, this process of alignment with two contradicting institutional logics is likely to lead to the creation of an organisation that shows characteristics of both of Klemenčič's types, and which could therefore be characterised as a hybrid.

In situations where there are clashing institutional logics at the level of the membership and the national higher education policy arena, actors within the NUS attain a key role. Through their awareness of the different institutional logics and their intentional actions towards the institutional structure of the NUS they can use institutional work to infuse change (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca 2009). This can either lead to the maintenance or disruption of existing institutions or the creation of new institutions. However, since the institutional work of actors within the NUS also means interaction with both the existing institutional structure as well as the institutional logics of the members and the national policy arena, it is also more likely that this process of multiple adaptations will lead to the emergence of hybrids.

The process of alignment of the NUS's institutions or its own institutional logic with the logic of its members and the external policy arena might take some time and run through different phases. However, there will be a moment when a medium level of institutionalisation of a new institutional logic is reached within the NUS, when there will be a breaking point.<sup>48</sup> At that point in time it is either possible to implement the necessary changes in the organisation or the process of institutionalisation of the new logic will fail, in which case the organisation remains as it was (Colyvas and Powell 2006).

All in all, both institutional perspectives presented here, the more structural path dependency concept and the more actor-oriented institutional logics approach, provide reason to believe that the interaction among national student organisations, their membership and the national policy arena might lead to the emergence of hybrid types of student organisations. This is especially true for the interaction between NUSs that are so far characterised as social movement organisations (with members with matching characteristics), and the more corporate-pluralist policy-making approach advocated for the national level through the Bologna Process. The following section will highlight some of the above considerations using the development of the German fzs as a case to empirically illustrate what so far has been mapped conceptually.

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48. This breaking point is situated at a medium level of institutionalisation since at a low level it is still possible for the old, agreed-upon logic to co-exist with the new one. Only at a medium level will the change become visible and potential opposition become more active.

## The emergence of a hybrid student organisation in Germany

The multi-level system of German higher education policy making brings an additional layer into the environment of student representation. The level of the German federal states or *Länder*, which is the main level of policy making in higher education, adds actors and influences to the already mentioned three-level system of the local, national and Bologna Process levels. The national level does not directly interfere in higher education policy making, but it has duties regarding interstate co-operation and, in co-operation with state level actors, the duty of international representation in the Bologna Process. At the national level, fzs is the only representative organisation of students that is based on the membership of local student unions and interacts with representations of students both at the state level and at the European (Bologna Process) level (Jungblut and Weber 2012).

The historical roots of the organisation, the high importance of student strike movements and its co-operation with other social and educational movements encourage us to assume fzs is a social movement-type of student organisation that favours more “activist” student representatives (Keller 2000; Klemenčič 2012a). However, the greater inclusion of student representatives in national policy making through the Bologna Process increased the demand for professionalisation, especially concerning representation to the outside and inside communication to an increased membership. This led not only to shifts in the membership and representativeness of the organisation, but also provoked ongoing changes to the internal working structures and modes of external representation. Additionally, the basic concept of the organisation – stated in the founding manifesto – has been challenged both from within and outside the organisation (Jungblut and Weber 2012; fzs Geschichte). A discussion of the founding manifesto and the structural changes provide two important examples of the organisation’s institutional change, and help to understand how the organisation has reacted to conflicting logics and pressure from the inside and the outside.

### The on and off of manifesto discussions

The founding manifesto of fzs was adopted by an assembly of 29 local student unions in 1993 (fzs Geschichte). The declaration aimed literally for an umbrella organisation for all local student unions, but included strong ideological leftist positions that required at least some agreement from local student organisations and brought fzs close to a partisan organisation (fzs Gründungserklärung 1993). This ambiguous declaration revealed the disagreement of the members on the basic idea of a national student organisation: specifically, in terms of its organisational character, the question of whether it should be a “neutral” umbrella organisation or ideologically aligned has remained a source of tension in the organisation. In 2001, a formal decision was made to establish an ideologically neutral student organisation open for membership of all local unions. Structural changes in the voting system were adopted to make the organisation more attractive for local unions of big universities that would pay a high membership fee (Jungblut and Weber 2012: 8ff.). This decision was motivated by the growing need for a unified voice of students at the national level. Even though no specific reference was made to the Bologna Process, the decision took place as the

Bologna Process was shifting, also at the national level in Germany, towards more student involvement (KMK and BMBF 2005; Klemenčič 2012b).

These developments at the Bologna Process level and subsequently also at the national level increased the demand for a national student union representing students in a professionalised manner. This representation is connected to the level of membership, so it was seen as important to boost the numbers of members. The logic of influence therefore motivated changes within fzs that led to a growing membership and that served to attract those potential members (e.g. local unions from big universities) that could add significantly to the representativeness of fzs. At the same time, the logic of membership also works in a different way. A similarity in members' interests eases internal discussions and policy development; a smaller membership is generally easier to organise and harmonise. A larger, more heterogeneous membership has the potential for more internal conflict due to more diverse interests and policy preferences. Additionally, changes in core policies are only possible from within the organisation, since the general assembly has to adopt changes in policy or statutes. Therefore, members needed to develop an interest in including more (and probably diverse) local unions to increase the representativeness of the organisation at the expense of internal homogeneity.

A similar argument was used recently when a local union proposed changing the nature of the organisation to an ideological "left and emancipatory" organisation (fzs Min MV46/47). The main argument for the proposal was that fzs was already taking part in ideologically bound networks and campaigns, for example against sexism, racism and homophobia as well as the Blockupy movement,<sup>49</sup> but could not completely address strong ideological issues since it wanted to remain open to all local unions.

This single motion reveals organisational inertia and gradual institutional change through a mixture of "drift" and "conversion" (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 16ff.). The concept of an ideologically neutral student organisation has been the basis for the work of the fzs on paper. However, the reality of a distinct membership from a mainly centre-left political background changed the conditions of the organisation, and following a decrease in membership in 2008 fzs was left without some of the more pragmatic (less ideological) unions from the bigger universities (Jungblut and Weber 2012). The impact is different for the structural and the policy area: a change of statutes that would allow for some ideological "screening" of potential new members would face a high level of veto players; the general assembly would need to adopt such a change with a two-thirds majority of votes. But decisions on campaigns and day-to-day political co-operation are usually made at the executive level, and this is more subject to change. This leads to some conversion in the reality of the basic concept of the institutions, which causes tension among those members that do not agree with this conversion.

The non-settled nature of the basic concept of the organisation is visible at times when significant membership losses endanger the organisation. This risk is not only internal, as when remaining members start to question the relevance of the

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49. "Blockupy" is a social movement that emerged in the aftermath of the "Occupy Wall Street" protests. It is critical of the EU's response to the financial crisis as well as capitalism in general (see <http://blockupy.org/en>, accessed 5 October 2014.)

organisation, but is also external, concerning the acceptance of the organisation by other actors in the higher education policy area. The underlying conflict over what type of a student organisation fzs is therefore remains unresolved.

## **Internal changes for external representation needs**

The year 2001 brought not only a temporary breakthrough in the debate surrounding the founding manifesto, it was also a starting point for a lasting discussion about the best working structures. In the beginning, the executive committee was mainly responsible for policy development. Several elected officers and additional working groups which were open to volunteering students from local member organisations supported its work. In the following years discussions led to changes and re-evaluations of the working structures, from an open working group approach to a fixed structure, with committees of elected officials for different policy areas. A final decision was made in 2005, when committees with elected officials were fixed in the standing orders. The regulations still allowed the establishment of working groups in smaller policy areas and the recruitment of additional officers and temporary staff when needed. Throughout the process of structural change, the executive committee was entrusted with more power regarding everyday work, the hiring of temporary staff and the external representation of the organisation. Also, professional staff was hired to support the organisational tasks and legal duties of fzs. The headquarters were moved from the old West German capital of Bonn to the new capital Berlin to ensure close connections to political decision makers at the national level (Jungblut and Weber 2012).

The final decision on the working structure had to be passed with a two-thirds majority in the general assembly and therefore needed to overcome strong veto opportunities. This was circumvented in the beginning by creating a temporary working structure, which due to the formulation of the by-laws only needed a simple majority, and attaching an obligatory evaluation. While the old structures remained officially in place, the new structure was used in parallel in practice. At the same time, the level of discretion was relatively low during this time. Thus the organisational changes happened through a mode of “layering”, leading only after some years of practice to substantial change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 16ff.). The old structures of open working groups that were important for the network-like structure of local student organisations were never abolished, though a more professionalised structure was added as a layer to the organisation, serving the need for professional work and representation.

The lasting processes of changes in working structure and external representation show how competing organisational logics influenced organisational change. While the membership of fzs demands participation in internal policy development and decision making as its main interests, the external demand for efficient processes and qualified content development requires professional structures that create stability and can cover a high workload. But this professional ability to influence is also in the interest of the membership that seeks influence in policy making. These conflicting and sometimes contradicting logics are indicated by the concept of working groups that are open for interested volunteers from the student movement and beyond versus the competitive committee structure that needs a small number of highly devoted elected officials.

However, these changes remain contentious. The last few general assemblies have seen motions of members who wanted to change the working structure in different ways. In 2012, a motion was put forward to change the working structure back to that of a pure working group arrangement open to everyone, abolishing all thematic committees with elected officials. The motion was rejected by the general assembly, but the rationale of the motion showed that the old arguments remain alive: the motion argued that the establishment of open working groups would ease participation for everyone interested without the hurdle of elections. The majority followed the opposite argumentation that elected committees ensure reliability and add to a more sustainable commitment of the elected (fzs Min MV42). A year later, another proposition was made: every content committee should elect a co-ordinator. This motion was eventually passed (fzs Min MV44). It added voluntary (but moderately paid) positions between the voluntary committee members and the executive committee as a compromise between the demand for professionalised working structures but still mainly voluntary “activist” policy making by the elected, but unpaid committee members and everyone interested in participating in the committee meetings.

These last changes also seem to bridge different concepts and ideas of the organisation through a layering model of change: the basic structures will not change and will leave space for wider participation in policy making that is typical for student organisations as social movements. At the same time, opportunities for more professional structures are enabled and changes can occur over time. This layered organisational structure combines the historical (or past) network-like structure of fzs, where the participation of local members and volunteering students in policy making was an important factor, with the demands that have appeared more recently with the inclusion of the organisation in Bologna Process policy making at the national level.

## Conclusion

The developments of the Bologna Process led to several adjustments in the policy making and governance structures of higher education at the international level, creating normative pressure on actors in the participating countries. In the case of NUSs, this helped on the one hand to boost the role of student representation. On the other hand, this also created pressure on the organisations to pursue internal change, since participation in a corporate-pluralist steering model such as the Bologna Process requires some professionalisation of the participating organisations. The typology of Klemenčič (2012a), identifying student organisations as either network-like associations or professionalised interest groups, provides a good starting point to describe the differences in student representation in the Bologna countries. However, it does not cover the development of student unions that results from the pressure of change on network-like student associations that start participating in the corporate-pluralist steering model of national higher education policy making.

The German national student union fzs is a good case study for this type of development. Rooted in a network-like student association, it began to participate in the official bodies of the German Bologna Process policy-making structures over a decade ago. This participation required some professionalised working structures that the organisation had not provided until then. The following years saw the

back and forth development of the organisation, wherein membership interests and professional requirements from the outside collided frequently. Changes were made to increase the professionalised output of the organisation, but the important structural changes were always implemented in a way that allowed the retention of a more network/volunteer-oriented organisation at the same time. This resulted in an organisation that can neither be identified solely as a network-like association nor as a fully professionalised interest group. It manifests aspects of both, and is a hybrid type of student organisation.

The on and off of structural changes and the continuing debate surrounding the founding manifesto of fzs show that changes towards a more professionalised organisation meet significant opposition from the membership. At the same time, external requirements (and at least a current majority of the membership) hinder a return to a purely social network-like student association. This conflict between internal and external interests results in costs for the organisation, as members withdraw their membership as a reaction to organisational changes, something fzs has experienced throughout recent years (Jungblut and Weber 2012). The ongoing debate on structural aspects as well as attempts to discuss the founding manifesto require not only significant amounts of time in general assemblies, but also leave the organisation in a somewhat unfinished state that affects the involvement of the organisation in official policy making. In the case of fzs, one can see a case study of organisational stress and conflicts caused by the contradictions between the external requirements of a corporate-pluralist steering model of policy making and the internal logics of an formerly network-like student association.

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## Chapter 18

# Student engagement in higher education policy making: a view from the Polish representative in the Bologna Follow-Up Group

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*Bartłomiej Banaszak*

### **Abstract**

Student participation is one of the main principles of the European Higher Education Area. Recognising students “as equal partners” has to be followed by a shift in thinking, especially in those systems in which student participation has not been a part of academic culture. This change also needs the support of students who should prove themselves to be “competent, active and constructive” partners (Bologna Process 2001). This chapter describes the development of the national representation of Polish students through the Students’ Parliament of the Republic of Poland (PSRP) into a professional organisation, from the perspective of a national representative in the Bologna Follow-Up Group and a former student activist. It shows PSRP’s growing expertise, demonstrated during debates on strategic developments of the higher education system, as well as during discussions on students’ rights, the student financial support system, quality assurance and the issue of student participation. This development is the main reason for growing recognition of PSRP as an equal partner and a professional stakeholder organisation.

**Keywords:** student representation; student engagement; higher education governance; professionalism; Poland; students’ rights

## Introduction

The advantages of student involvement in higher education policy making cannot be overestimated. Student participation is crucial simply because decision-making processes in higher education at the departmental, institutional and national level need the perspective of a learner and a future graduate. Without this perspective, academia would not be able to critically assess whether the main purposes of higher education related, *inter alia*, to personal development and preparation for employment, are fulfilled (Council of Europe 2007). Student participation shapes attitudes of engagement on the issues important for a certain community. It develops competence in such areas as leadership, teamwork, decision making and initiative. It offers the possibility of learning how the ability to influence reality can motivate action. Thus, involving students in higher education governance and policy making is one of the most important ways in which academia can contribute to social capital enhancement. This is also how another of the main purposes of higher education – preparation for active citizenship in democratic societies – can be fulfilled.

Student participation is one of the priorities of the Bologna Process. During the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education held in Prague on 19 May 2001, the Ministers stated that:

the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed ... Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions (Bologna Process 2001).

The Polish experience of student participation in higher education policy making at the national level shows that the commitments made by the ministers and regulations recognising students “as equal partners” have to be followed by a change in thinking, especially in those systems in which student participation has not been a part of academic culture. This change needs also the support of students who should prove themselves to be “competent, active and constructive” partners. The Polish higher education system managed to achieve this mental change especially in the area of student participation in governance at the national level and in external quality assurance. However, this would not have happened without the contribution of student representatives who have demonstrated their professionalism and made a number of good decisions.

## Development of legal provisions on student participation in higher education governance

Student self-government (SSG) is the organisational formula through which Polish students can participate directly in higher education governance at departmental, institutional and national level. The first student self-governing organisations were established in 1980, with the first at the University of Warsaw. They were set up next to such non-governmental student organisations as the Independent Students’ Association, which contributed in the 1980s to the abolishment of the communist

regime, and numerous other student NGOs. In contrast to student NGOs, an SSG is by law formed of all the students of a higher education institution, therefore each student has a chance to vote and run in elections. Each SSG body is directly or indirectly elected in a procedure in which all students can vote. Therefore SSGs cannot be seen as competing with student NGOs but rather as a different organisational structure, and both can equally involve NGO activists as well as students who are not active in any other organisation.

In the early 1990s, representatives from numerous SSGs established the Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Samorządów Studenckich (OPSS, the all-Polish Agreement of Student Self-Governing Organisations) as an answer to the law on higher education adopted in September 1990, which referred to an all-Polish representation of student self-governing organisations. The OPSS in fact did not have any meaningful achievements and was focused mainly on internal organisational problems, quite often of a grotesque nature. In 1995, the OPSS was gradually closed down and a new organisation – the Parlament Studentów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (PSRP, the Students' Parliament of the Republic of Poland) – was established (Antonowicz, Pinhero and Smuzewska 2014).

The PSRP is an umbrella organisation for SSGs and is currently the main stakeholder organisation representing students at the national level. Each higher education institution's SSG can have a delegate at the General Assembly of the PSRP, on the condition that they represent an SSG from an institution having at least 1 000 students. SSGs from smaller higher education institutions, with some exceptions, have to make agreements with each other to achieve jointly the level of 1 000 students and send a common delegate.

Legal provisions that were in force before 2005 already assured some students' rights as regards their participation in higher education governance. Apart from the aforementioned regulation on student representation at national level, students had their representatives also on the General Council for Higher Education, which is a representative body for the whole academic community. Their participation in collegial bodies at the institutional level was also ensured although the level of participation was not specified.

The law on higher education adopted in 2005 was a breakthrough regarding legal recognition of student participation in higher education governance. The PSRP was recognised as the sole representative of all students in Poland regardless of the type of institution and mode of study. The new law also specified definite rules concerning the representation of students and doctoral students in senates and other collegial bodies, in which students had to account for a minimum of 20% of the body's membership. This has been a major challenge for students themselves, as at numerous higher education institutions, especially at those focused on part-time programmes, it has proved difficult to elect a sufficient number of committed student representatives.

This law also gives students exceptional power as regards electing the leadership of public higher education institutions. As mentioned, students and doctoral students are to make up a minimum of 20% of the electoral body. Student representations quite often vote en bloc, having a decisive impact on the results of the election of rectors. There are also special provisions concerning the election of the deputy rector responsible for student affairs, as the candidate has to be accepted by the

majority of student representatives in the electoral body (Banaszak 2013: 132-3). The law also recognises student participation in external quality assurance. The PSRP President is by law a member of the Polska Komisja Akredytacyjna (PKA, the Board of the Polish Accreditation Committee), which was called the State Accreditation Committee until 2011.

Regulations on the PSRP ensure that the national student representation is asked for an opinion regarding all draft regulations concerning students. Obviously such a regulation does not mean that student involvement in policy making should be limited to so-called “student issues”. The concept of student participation, in the way it is formulated in Bologna Process documents, does not allow for such an interpretation. Avoiding such a limitation is essential, especially in the debates on thorough reform agendas. Students will not be able to play the role of an “equal partner” in such debates if they limit their contribution to specific provisions, neglecting a systemic approach.

In the past decade, Poland has witnessed a number of broad and structured debates over reform proposals concerning higher education. In 2005, the Polish Parliament adopted a law on higher education, the draft of which had been elaborated by an expert group working under a mandate given by the President of the Republic of Poland. In 2008, the consultation process on the new reform agenda was launched, which resulted in an amendment to the law on higher education adopted in 2011. Simultaneously, both the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the rectors’ conferences launched debates on the strategies for the development of higher education. In 2012, the ministry published a new reform proposal which encompassed procedures for the recognition of prior learning, further diversification of higher education institutions and a new concept of tracking graduates’ employment outcomes based on administrative data.

As noted, such debates require thorough and coherent positions on the part of particular stakeholders. If student representatives were to focus solely on so-called “student issues” (it is also not so easy to define what “student issues” mean), one of the most important perspectives – the perspective of a learner and future graduate – would be fragmentary. The PSRP managed to cope with this challenge exceptionally well during the debate over the reform of 2008-11, when, already in mid-2009, it strongly supported a paradigm shift in higher education based on learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks, and demanded the abolishment of the central list of the names of study programmes and national standards of curricula as the first stakeholder organisation.

On the other hand, the Polish experience of student engagement in higher education governance at the national level shows that there are a number of issues in which student representatives are particularly interested, including, at the national level, regulations concerning student participation in governance, student rights and their safeguards, the student support system, and teaching, learning and quality assurance.

## **Student participation in governance**

The commitment made in Prague by the Ministers responsible for Higher Education was probably very helpful for students struggling in the period 2003 to 2005 for meaningful involvement in higher education governance. The PSRP President was invited by the Polish President to the expert group that developed the proposal for

the draft law on higher education. Students' demands concerning representation in governing bodies at the institutional level were being systematically upgraded and finally, the Polish Parliament agreed on a 20% level of participation in collegial bodies at the institutional and faculty level. New provisions concerned both public higher education institutions and non-public higher education institutions.

The PSRP gained official recognition as the sole representative of all students in Poland and the right to give opinions on all draft regulations concerning students. Practically a students' parliament, it strengthened its position as the official voice of all students across the country. However, the legal status of the PSRP remained unclear as it was still not a legal entity and the organisation needed the support of other partners on legal issues and financial operations. During the debate on the reform of higher education which started in 2008, the PSRP emphasised that this situation was a danger to its independence. The amendment to the law on higher education adopted in 2011 granted the PSRP a legal personality.

## Students' rights

The concept of students' rights is very broad. The Students' Rights Charter adopted in 2008 by the European Students' Union (ESU) serves as a reference tool encompassing fundamental students' rights regarding such areas as access to higher education, student involvement, social and academic aspects of studies as well as the right to privacy and access to knowledge and information (ESU 2008). The Polish higher education system is characterised by massification in terms of student numbers and the number of institutions, including private higher education institutions which mushroomed in the 1990s and followed an entrepreneurship model based almost solely on tuition fees. This specificity requires particular attention to the tools safeguarding students' rights, which can be drawn from certain regulations, especially the law on higher education.

Student representatives have a particular responsibility for drawing attention to violations of students' rights. The PSRP made a very good decision in 2003 in establishing a new autonomous body within its structure – the Ombudsperson for Students' Rights. The Ombudsperson deals with students' complaints, *inter alia*, by giving advice, intervening at higher education institutions and sometimes participating in administrative court proceedings. Thanks to this, the PSRP effectively sheds a light on those aspects of studies in which students' rights are violated most frequently, namely dishonest practices of institutions against students. The entrepreneurship model of numerous private institutions is based mostly on tuition fees. Unfortunately, some institutions which have financial problems give in to the temptation of charging students additional fees and arbitrarily increasing tuition fees, or putting forbidden clauses into agreements with students as a result of which a student is clearly disadvantaged in relation to the given institution. This problem also concerns public institutions and relates to tuition fees for part-time studies and administrative fees charged by each institution. The second significant source of problems is the student support system, as higher education institutions do not always follow regulations, which results in a student being put in an unfavourable position. Another area in which students' rights are sometimes breached concerns decisions made by an institution's leadership or

administrative staff in relation to academic aspects of studies which do not follow the administrative code or are simply against the regulations of the law on higher education.

The PSRP presented quite a strong and coherent opinion on empowering students through civil law agreements signed by the student and the institution, regardless of the type of institution or study mode, including the regulation of the exact kind of tuition fee the student may be charged. New provisions concerning this aspect were introduced in 2011. The PSRP was also given by law the new task of co-ordinating a programme of training on students' rights for all newly admitted students. The latter provision, on the one hand, means further empowerment of the PSRP as the student representative organisation; on the other hand, it poses a serious logistical challenge to the organisation. The activities of the student representation in the area of student rights and the information gathered by the PSRP are also sometimes helpful to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in its supervisory role in the higher education system.

## **The student financial support system**

The PSRP is deeply involved in the discussion of student financial support. The organisation is proud of its contribution to the establishment of the current grant system and its leading role in creating the system of student loans (Kulczycki 2010: 1). A national student representation is indispensable in discussions of developments in the grants and loans system. These concern students' opinions as voiced in the frameworks on the higher education reform agenda as well as detailed discussions on legal provisions and practices regarding distribution of student financial support.

National student representatives very often have practical experience in the process of distributing student grants. Simply put, they know the rules of the system. According to the law, at the request of SSGs grants are allocated by committees appointed by the dean or the rector. The committees shall be comprised of a majority of student representatives, who should also have a thorough knowledge of the social needs of the students they represent.

The PSRP has usually been the driving force in the case of changes in the student loan system. Its opinions, as well as the reports by the Ombudsperson for Students' Rights, are an important source of information regarding the diagnosis of possible shortcomings of the system as well as an inspiration for changes in the student welfare system.

## **Student participation in quality assurance**

Student opinions on the learning and teaching process are an indispensable aspect of the internal quality assurance system. Quality assurance at the institutional level cannot work properly if it does not take the learner's perspective honestly into consideration. National regulations on internal quality assurance systems tackle the issue of student opinions on the quality of teaching. The PSRP has been quite active regarding regulations on student questionnaires, which are the key tool for students to voice their opinions on the quality of the teaching and learning process.

Following the decision on including the PSRP President on its Board, the PKA jointly elaborated with the PSRP a model of student involvement in the PKA's external quality

assessment, which began to be implemented in 2005. The leadership of the main national stakeholder organisations was quite convinced of the value of student participation in quality assurance as the thorough assessment of programmes needed the learner's perspective. However, while involving students in the external assessment, the PKA leadership had to cope with a strong mental barrier as for many academics the possibility of being assessed by students was still difficult to accept. In order to gain credibility for the concept of student participation in the assessment, the PKA and the PSRP had to establish a model of student participation in the assessment which would ensure a high level of expertise among student members of the panel. The final model is based on the student expert pool which is managed jointly by the PKA and the PSRP. In order to enter the pool, candidates have to go through a three-stage recruitment process (including the verification of experience, a test on the issues related to higher education including the law on higher education, and an interview aiming at checking both knowledge and communication skills).

Professionalism is a very important aspect of student participation in external quality assurance. The PKA can be sure that the recruited experts present a high level of expertise and are qualified to take part in the quality assessment process. The experts participate in training and meetings devoted to evaluation of their work. They have to be disciplined – if the quality of their activities is low or they do not observe certain rules, especially those concerning deadlines, they are expelled from the pool. Student experts are obviously remunerated for their participation in site visits and since 2011 they have been treated as equals to other participating experts.

## **Professionalism**

The effectiveness of student engagement in higher education policy making depends very much on the sense of professionalism shared by student representatives. A professional student representation addresses the serious problems faced by the student body, and is able to contribute to discussions on regulations and present a student perspective on the issues. Professional student representatives should have a solid knowledge and understanding of the higher education system and feel what a student perspective means.

The level of effectiveness is much weaker if the student representation does not demonstrate a certain level of expertise and cannot express coherent opinions. A student representation is definitely not professional if it focuses only on the internal affairs of an organisation or on organising entertainment while neglecting the tasks related to voicing opinions on academic affairs and other issues concerning students. Professionalism can also be weakened if the members of a student representative organisation actively support just one political party, as this increases the risk of representatives equating or mixing students' interests with party political agendas.

On a number of occasions, the PSRP has proved its professionalism and made good decisions. This is probably the most important reason why the important role of students at the national level is not questioned. National student representatives have gained credibility as "competent, active and constructive" partners in the eyes of all stakeholders taking part in higher education policy making.

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## Chapter 19

# Students' rights: shaping the student movement at national and European level

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*Gabriela Bergan*

### **Abstract**

The role students play is key to a functioning higher education system as well as a functioning society and this role is defined by student participation. The purpose of this chapter is to look at how students' rights influence the way students unions organise themselves. It also provides a comparative analysis of the state of students' rights in Europe. A study of the different laws on education and national students' rights charters, interviews with representatives of the national unions of students, and an analysis of the main campaign themes carried out by student unions provide information about the state of students' rights across Europe and how the terminology of "students' rights" is understood across the continent. The different focuses that national unions of students have, due to the reality of their student's rights, emphasise the differences to be seen across Europe when it comes to the participation and organisation of students in higher education and in society. Students play the role of active citizens at the national level, but with the internationalisation of higher education, students also have a role to play at global level. The best tools for students to harmonise their rights across Europe are solidarity campaigns and the Students' Rights Charter.

**Keywords:** students' rights; students' participation; students' union; solidarity; Europe; European Students' Union; ESU

## Introduction

The role of students is key to the functioning of higher education. This important role is connected to student participation, which is conditioned by the situation of students' rights. Students' rights are not only connected to student participation in the governance of higher education, but also to their role as active and engaged citizens in democratic societies. Therefore this chapter will refer to the student movement as the different forms of student political organisation and activities. However, it will focus mainly on student unions, which act more like "governments" within their academic community. Students organise themselves to have their rights respected in order to have a satisfactory higher education experience that will prepare them to find a job relevant to their field of study, but also to prepare them to become active citizens. This purpose of higher education can only be fulfilled if students' rights are understood, promoted, respected and ensured. Students' rights should be understood in a broad sense. They comprise all the rights that directly or indirectly enable a student to accomplish his or her studies and personal development under dignified conditions.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the state of students' rights across Europe and analyse how students' rights condition their participation and the student movement both at the national and European level. The chapter will also show how the student movement is directly linked to students' rights as students' unions are the bodies best able to ensure and promote students' rights for all students.

Students' rights are human rights and are therefore universal. However, students across Europe do not enjoy the same rights and have to struggle daily to have their rights respected. This chapter is built around three sections and provides a comparative analysis of students' rights in the different regions of Europe. The first section aims at understanding what students' rights mean. The main difficulty for students when fighting for their rights is that there is not a single vision of what students' rights are. Their role is often circumscribed by the definitions of different stakeholders. Therefore, this chapter looks at the vision of every stakeholder, including students, of students' rights and the evolution of this understanding. The second section looks at how students' rights are ensured by the public authorities and by students. Given how little literature exists on the topic of this chapter, interviews with student representatives as well as a study of national legislations on higher education were undertaken. They provide a good overview of the most and least respected rights in Europe. Finally, the last section of the chapter analyses how students' rights can be defended. This section explains how students' rights shape national student movements and the European student movement.

## Different understandings of students' rights

Students' rights exist but they do not mean the same thing for everyone. As a consequence, different views influence their development, though the view that students themselves have of their rights defines a big part of the student movement.

When talking about student representation, Klemenčič (2011: 14) argues that:

basic rights and responsibilities of students tend to be homogenous across the European HE system, [but] there are notable differences in actual practices

of participation in institutional governance, as well as of modes of student representation more broadly.

Luescher points out that “these differences reflect different conceptions of students by the higher education institutions” (Luescher, as quoted by Klemenčič 2011: 14). Using the same type of argumentation, differences in students’ rights in practice can also be explained by the different views higher education institutions and other stakeholders have of students, and by extension, of students’ rights.

Some consider students solely as members of the academic community. Students, along with the other members of the academic community, feel a responsibility towards their institution and will commit to it. This narrow vision implies that students feel responsibility only for academic matters and should only be part of decision making when it comes to academic matters. The danger here is that students will be allowed to fight only for their academic rights. But students’ rights encompass a much larger sphere, given that students play a role not only in the academic community but also outside of it. Higher education has to be considered in a long-term context; students spend a limited amount of time in their higher education institutions and know that their present students’ rights will affect their human rights once they are out of the higher education system. Nevertheless it is correct to say that the academic rights of students are among the core aspects of students’ rights. Academic rights have a more immediate impact on students than other rights and this may be why some see academic rights as the only students’ rights. Even here, though, students struggle to gain recognition.

Higher education institutions and other stakeholders sometimes see students as stakeholders. However, it is important that students be considered equal stakeholders, meaning that they have the same weight in the decision-making process. The Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the Berlin Communiqué expressed the view that “students are full partners in higher education governance” (Bologna Process 2003). This is particularly important in terms of students’ rights because students understand their rights better and know which of their rights are essential for them to evolve as students and citizens. If students’ rights are defined without the students, there most certainly will be a gap between the vision of stakeholders (minus students) and the reality students live.

Others consider students full citizens.<sup>50</sup> This concept of the student is not very widespread and has big consequences for the definition of students’ rights and how students will organise according to the rights they have recognised and ensured. The vision of students as full citizens is closest to the students’ vision and more specifically to that of the European Students’ Union (ESU), which emphasises the fact that students have a role outside of higher education institutions. Students do not only fight for their student and human rights inside their institution and

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50. The view of students as full citizens is the largest vision that stakeholders have about students. It does not usually contradict the view of students as members of the academic community, as those who underline the role of students as members of the academic community also subscribe to the view of students as full citizens. But the view of students as full citizens contradicts completely the view of students as consumers. In fact, the view of students as consumers contradicts all the other visions mentioned in this part of the chapter.

higher education system, but also outside of it as full citizens. However, they do this in their capacity as students. Students thus express themselves not only about academic matters but also on all matters that relate to them, as students and citizens, and that will have an impact for them later, as active citizens, once they finish their studies.

Finally, students are considered to be consumers by certain higher education institutions and stakeholders. With this concept, there is no provision for the most commonly accepted student right, the right to student representation, self-government and involvement in the higher education institutions' governance. This is explained by the fact that if one is a consumer, one consumes a final product and has a say on the final product only, but not on how the product is produced. However, students go through a cycle when they enter higher education and need to express their opinions and decide on matters that will affect them. ESU reaffirmed this in the Budapest Declaration: "Students are not consumers of higher education but significant components within it" (ESU 2011). The vision of students as consumers does not allow students' rights to be self-evident and respected, and reduces them to mere "consumers' rights" limited to the right to information and the right to reclaim. Students are thus only able to react, not to act. This also goes against the purpose of education of preparing students to be active citizens as opposed to reactive citizens, which is an antithesis in itself. In fact, if someone is only entitled to react and only allowed to vote on accepting or rejecting the propositions made by others without further involvement in civic life, it is fair to question whether this person can be considered a citizen. It is important for students to acknowledge what vision the different stakeholders have of them, but it is also essential to confront these visions with the one that they have of themselves.

## **ESU's vision of students' rights**

ESU believes that students should be considered equal stakeholders, meaning that they should have the same say as other stakeholders in the decision-making process. But ESU also sees students as citizens and as the future generation that will have to (re)define society. The Council of Europe shares this view, as emphasised in the book published in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series *Reimagining democratic societies: a new era of personal and social responsibility* (Bergan, Harkavy and van't Land 2013). Reimagining democratic societies is a task higher education must engage in, and it must engage in this task by including students. It is in this light that students' rights have to be understood. Since students are not only students, but also individuals developing personally at university and citizens already able to vote and lead change, students' rights cannot be limited to life inside higher education institutions only.

ESU believes that students' rights fall within the broader spectrum of human rights. Students fight for their students' rights, but most of the time they also fight for their human rights in their capacity as students. Therefore it is important that students' rights not be limited to academic matters only. In fact, students' rights comprise all rights that touch on any aspect that will affect a student's study and life circumstances and allow him or her to complete a quality higher education,

develop personally and play the role of an active citizen in society. Moreover, as ESU declares: “we the students hold these rights to be self-evident” (2008: 1).

There has also been some development inside the student movement on the definition and importance of human rights and students’ rights. Most of the work of ESU and the NUSs is still very much related to structures and reforms of higher education, and student representatives work very hard to make their voice heard and ensure that they are consulted in the same way as other stakeholders: “[a]t the same time, basic student and civil rights continue to be a priority, even 20 years after the fall of European communism” (Øye 2011: 17-18). The European student movement does not fail to show solidarity and come together when students from a foreign country, sometimes even beyond Europe, face threats to their students’ rights. For example, in recent years, European students have joined the fight of Belarusian, Chilean, Armenian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian students for the respect of their basic human rights, students’ rights and their right to a free and quality education.

With time ESU has developed a formal understanding of students’ rights. It adopted the Students’ Rights Charter in 2008 (ESU 2008). This document clearly reflects the comprehensive vision students have of their rights. Indeed, students’ rights concern, as the charter says, equally “access to higher education”, “student involvement”, “social aspects of studies”, “academic aspects of studies” and the “right to privacy and access to knowledge and information”. As one can observe, the “academic aspects of studies” are only one of the many aspects that affect a student’s life, and therefore a student’s rights.

Since the adoption of the Students’ Rights Charter, ESU has continued to reflect and prioritise students’ rights in its work. The promotion and safeguarding of students’ rights has become an ever more visible part of the student movement. Students have always fought to have their right to education considered a human right applicable to all, and many obstacles remain in making higher education accessible to all. But it is even more evident that no one would be able to pursue an education without the respect of all the other human rights that can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This is because human rights are universal, inalienable and indivisible. If one right is not respected, other rights are violated as well. It is in this light that ESU has given ever more importance to human rights and students’ rights by modifying its internal structure and creating a position of Coordinator for Human Rights and Solidarity. ESU and its member unions feel responsible for promoting human rights, monitoring the state of human rights among students and responding to any threats to human rights in the education sector and beyond through solidarity actions, campaigns and dialogue with relevant institutions and organisations.

Students’ rights are fundamental rights and are ensured by the different national legislations. But the national legislations do not always reflect the vision students have of their rights and the reality is sometimes far from the letter of the law. The next section looks at what students’ rights are effectively ensured and by whom, and what actions are taken when students’ rights are not fully respected.

## How students' rights are ensured

### Students' rights ensured by the state through national legislation

The state is responsible for ensuring the rights of its citizens and residents on its territory. The state is in addition also responsible for ensuring students' rights as higher education is a public responsibility and this responsibility falls on the public authorities. Indeed, the Council of Europe's recommendation on the public responsibility for higher education and research (Council of Europe, 2007) details the responsibility of public authorities for meeting the multiple purposes of higher education, for the framework within which higher education and research are conducted, for ensuring equal opportunities in higher education, and for financing and providing higher education and research.

Students' rights are often referenced in documents such as national students' charters and the internal regulations of universities. However, these documents are not legally binding, so students risk not being able to appeal in case their rights are violated. Legislation is the only viable way to ensure students' rights and to punish perpetrators if these rights are not respected.

Most European countries include students' rights and duties in their national legislation on education or higher education. But this is often not enough to say that students' rights are comprehensive and respected in Europe. When comparing the different national legislations, it is clear that the emphasis is often put on the same aspects of students' rights. Since the Students' Rights Charter is the students' reference regarding students' rights, this section compares national legislation to the charter to identify what standards are met and what are not.

The majority of European countries, in their national legislations, identify students' rights in relation to student participation, the social support needed to complete their studies, and the academic recognition of comparable qualifications. Those rights seem to be considered the most important students' rights at the national level and are the most widely recognised. This is in keeping with Articles 10, 11, 16 and 27<sup>51</sup> of the Students' Rights Charter.

A reasonable number of European countries ensure an inclusive higher education, freedom of expression and the flexibility of study programmes as well. These rights are less broadly recognised but are still recognised by approximately one third of the 26 countries studied here. These countries are in keeping with Articles 1, 14 and 23<sup>52</sup> of the Students' Rights Charter.

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51. 10: All students have the right to organise themselves freely in legally recognized entities. Students must not suffer academic, financial or legal consequences stemming from such involvement.

11: All students have the right to co-governance in all decision making bodies and fora relevant to their education directly or through democratic representation.

16: All students have the right to adequate social support that meets their needs on an individual basis.

27: All students have the right to fair recognition of comparable qualifications.

52. Article 1: Everyone has the right to an inclusive, high quality education free of charge.

Article 14: All students have the right to freely express themselves and this should not be limited to academic matters.

Article 23: All students have the right to a flexible study program.

National legislations are coherent in putting the emphasis on the social and academic aspects of students' rights, but this coherence evaporates with regards to the other articles of the Students' Rights Charter. These are only guaranteed by a few countries, and in some cases by only one. Students' rights, however, should be seen as a whole; countries cannot choose in their legislation to protect some rights and neglect other rights. It is the non-respect of these rights by the public authorities that pushes students to organise and take actions to defend, promote and ensure their rights themselves.

## **Students' rights ensured by students: campaigns and actions by NUSs**

Another indicator to measure respect for students' rights and how this issue shapes the student movement is to look at the main campaigns and actions carried out by NUSs since the Students' Rights Charter was published. This reveals the regional differences and concerns across Europe, but primarily illustrates the dissonance between what is stated in national legislations and realities on the ground.

The campaigns carried out by NUSs prove that students' rights are not respected and that there is a need to fight for them, but they also show that students' rights evolve and are ever more comprehensive. This section looks at campaigns and actions carried out by NUSs from Armenia, France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Serbia and the United Kingdom.

Students' rights cannot be taken for granted and the action of the different NUSs demonstrates this point. It is easy to see that there are recurrent themes; European students from different countries seem to face similar problems. The most common include educational costs, corruption, problems faced by disabled students, students' financial conditions and racism. However, some problems are more common in some regions of Europe than in others, revealing core differences among European students.

NUS campaigns and projects mainly focus on access to higher education, the social dimension of education and the academic aspect of education. There is generally a balance among these three fields. However, it is clear that NUSs from the Southern Caucasus and South-Eastern Europe have to campaign more for their academic rights than NUSs from the Nordic countries and western Europe. Research on NUS campaigns as well as interviews with the presidents, chairs and international officers of ANSA (Armenia), PSRP (Poland), SKONUS (Serbia) and SUS (Serbia) have allowed us to establish that younger NUSs from more recent democracies are more concerned with the academic rights of students and NUSs from the Nordic countries and western Europe are generally more concerned with the social rights of students. We will now provide concrete, representative examples of student campaigns from the different regions of Europe to provide the best possible overview of students' rights in those countries where ESU has member NUSs.

NUSs in Armenia and Serbia have campaigned mainly on the quality of higher education, on the importance of genuine student representation and against corruption in higher education. The vice-chair of Armenia's ANSA Sargis Asatriants explains, "Different organisations and non-formal student groups which initiated student

movements in Armenia still need to be recognised by governmental institutions so that their voice will be heard.<sup>53</sup> International officers from Serbia's SUS (Tijana Isoski)<sup>54</sup> and SKONUS (Danijela Varat, 2013)<sup>55</sup> explain as well that campaigns on proper student representation are important as the situation in Serbia is similar to that in Armenia. The student population does not believe that they can bring about change and lacks a culture of voluntarism. The fact that some student organisations are politicised also discredits the actions of these organisations and contributes to the lack of trust from grassroots students. In addition, NUSs in Serbia are fighting to strengthen the role of students in the rewriting and editing of the law on student organisation. This shows that the voice of students is not taken sufficiently into account even for matters that concern students directly.

Both countries share the same concerns regarding corruption in their higher education systems. Lack of transparency is the major obstacle to a quality higher education and fair treatment of all students. This is probably the most difficult problem students face. To address this issue, ANSA Vice-Chair Asatriants explains that "student self-governing bodies which are ANSA full members created special anti-corruption committees which carry out monitoring for a more transparent and honest educational process. Students can freely apply to these committees whose task is to monitor and find out the cases of corruption. In the context of fighting corruption effectively ANSA usually provides a special phone number to students 15 days prior to the semester examination period." In addition, it is not rare to see students post posters on bus stops denouncing the professors they consider to be the most corrupt.

In the past year, ANSA has also conducted big campaigns and activities related to the quality of higher education in Armenia. As a result of its campaigns, ANSA issued a concept chapter to the government and has strengthened co-operation with the national quality assurance agency, ANQA. Now, ANSA student experts are invited by ANQA to take part in the whole process of evaluation of higher education institutions.

The issues discussed above are characteristic of the Southern Caucasus and South-Eastern Europe. In contrast, the fight against tuition fees and for access to higher education has been prioritised by other European students in recent years. With austerity measures caused by the global economic crisis, many governments have reduced their budget for higher education and launched a trend towards raising tuition fees.

UNEF, in France, has focused on the fact that 36 French universities charge illegal tuition fees (Bultel 2013). In July 2010, UNEF published a report online claiming that many French universities ask for higher tuition fees than they should and get around the law by enrolling students in programmes leading to a university diploma (free) and a national diploma (costly) at the same time, for example (Laurence 2010). UNEF also denounced the fact that tuition fees seem to rise every year, while making enquiries about students' worsening living conditions. FEF (Belgium) is strongly involved in the issue of tuition fees as well, with two major campaigns: ResPACT and Sauvez Wendy.

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53. Personal communication, November 2013.

54. Personal communication, November 2013.

55. Personal communication, November 2013.

The first relates to free education, as required by Article 13.c of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNCHR)<sup>56</sup> but not respected in practice; the second to dropping fees, as a continuation of the first campaign. Elsewhere in 2013, NUSs from Finland (SAMOK and SYL) jointly demonstrated against the rise in tuition fees for non-EU students in Finland and negotiated with the government. The UK's NUS also demonstrated massively in 2009 and 2010 when the government raised tuition fees up to £9000 per year. More recently, from April to September 2013, ANSA led massive protests when the Armenian Government announced a rise in tuition fees of 50% to 80%, according to Asatriants, an amount completely out of tune with the economic reality of the country and its inhabitants. These protests were supported not only by students but by other parts of society as well.

Every NUS carries out campaigns on the social dimension of higher education, but NUSs from northern and western Europe are particularly concerned in this regard. NUSs in these regions seek financial independence for students and carry out actions for the integration of students from migrant and minority ethnic backgrounds, disabled students and students from a lower socio-economic background.

A lack of financial independence is the main obstacle for students in Poland. The national provisions in this area are vague, therefore the PSRP campaigned for an online platform<sup>57</sup> that centralises all the financial aid that a student can apply for. NSO (Norway) campaigned in 2013 for students to receive support across 11 months instead of 10, which was insufficient to cover study costs and excluded students from a lower socio-economic background. Since 2011, FAGE (France) has been building small supermarkets targeting students with grocery and other items at reduced prices through the project AGORAé (FAGE 2014). This project has been put in place in six cities, and seeks to reach students in precarious living conditions in France so those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not excluded from higher education. In addition, AGORAé also provides spaces for students to create social links, obtain advice and counselling, and participate in various activities.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) has been very active in campaigning for disabled students. Every year, in the framework of its equality campaign, part of the campaign is dedicated to disabled students. The aim is to improve disabled students' conditions within higher education institutions, raise awareness among students of their rights and among lecturers of their responsibilities, lobby for more funding and establish relations with organisations supporting young people with disabilities. The USI does not only focus on visible disabilities and therefore initiated the More Talk, More Action campaign and toured Ireland's higher education institutions to raise awareness about mental health and encourage students to talk about it (USI 2013).

Fewer NUSs have initiated actions for students from a migrant or ethnic minority background, but the issue is gaining importance. The NUS UK's Race for Equality is a good example of the fight against discrimination against Black students, encompassing in this action members of the African, Arab, Caribbean and Asian communities (NUS

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56. Article 13.c reads: "Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education".

57. See <http://prawastudenta.edu.pl>, accessed 7 October 2014.

UK 2011). The campaign led to the publication of a report based for the most part on surveys and focus groups, with student-led solutions. Continuous actions have taken place with regard to Race for Equality. fzs (Germany) and UNEF (France) also carry out actions for equality and in particular organise and participate in festivals against racism annually (fzs 2014; UNEF 2011).

All these different examples of campaigns and actions from NUSs across Europe show that priorities are not the same everywhere and that there is a general trend for students from eastern Europe to focus more on the academic rights of students. Students from western Europe are able now to focus more on the social aspects of student life as their academic rights are mostly respected and recognised. These examples also demonstrate the evolution of what students consider to be their rights. Ultimately, all these examples prove that students are the main guardians of their rights and that if so many actions and campaigns are being organised, it is because the other stakeholders do not guarantee the recognition and protection of students' rights. The lack of respect for students' rights as well as the different visions stakeholders hold about students shape the student movement and its practices, as different types of action are needed to uphold different kinds of rights.

## **Defending students' rights at the European level**

Students have to organise differently depending on whether they are defending their academic rights, their social rights or the recognition of broader issues to do with society or politics. Means of collective action certainly depend on the historical, cultural and social context of a country; however, those students from countries where students' rights are less respected tend to use stronger means such as protests. All student representatives interviewed for this chapter prioritise negotiations, debates and hearings to reach their goals. However, these are not always the most efficient means in eastern Europe and South-Eastern Europe. Often, protests are the last recourse of students as well as the most effective way to raise awareness, despite the risks involved in countries such as Belarus, Ukraine and Armenia of being arrested and expelled from their higher education institutions. In these situations, solidarity from students across Europe is very important. The non-respect of students' rights thus also shapes the student movement at the European level. Students need to carry out collective actions, support each other, and learn from each other by sharing their experiences and practices if they are to attain a universal level of students' rights.

Since the state of students' rights varies greatly from country to country, there is a real need for an effective student movement at the European level. Indeed, as ESU's experience shows, the students' voice within a given country is sometimes not strong enough to effect change, and external pressure from fellow students across Europe may be necessary to influence decision makers. ESU can provide this external pressure and operates through solidarity letters sent from NUSs, press releases, campaigns and on-site visits, among other actions. Some examples are the solidarity actions carried out by ESU to support Belarusian students in 2010 when they were repressed by their government for protesting against the presidential elections that were widely seen as rigged; Chilean students in 2011 and 2012 demanding free quality education; and Ukrainian students protesting to get their government

to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013. The Chairperson of ESU also visited Hungary to support students for educational reform, and the Human Rights and Solidarity Coordinator visited Armenia to support students in their fight against tuition fees.

All student representatives interviewed underlined the importance of their NUS being part of ESU. They benefit from ESU's experience as a strong network defending students' rights in their countries, and the greatest benefit is to share experiences and best practices. Also, ESU publications and statements help NUSs lobby their governments on certain issues, underlining that their concerns are European concerns as well. This solidarity is possible because ESU member NUSs share common interests and problems. A given issue may be raised in some countries, and this is often a sign that it will be a concern in other countries. NUSs can thus prepare to respond to the same problems together, and their co-operation can even work as a prevention mechanism.

Finally, a European student movement and solidarity actions also confer to students' rights the global and universal dimension they carry.

### **The Students' Rights Charter: a tool for harmonising students' rights in Europe**

This chapter has argued that students' rights are universal and that they need to be safeguarded in common at the European level. The Students' Rights Charter is one of the strongest tools for students at the European level and should be understood as such. It should also be understood that it is essential to ensure students' rights at European level as students are more mobile. Also, as a citizen of the EU for example, a student has rights at the national level but also at the European level. Therefore, his or her status and rights should be defined at European level. Indeed, the Students' Rights Charter was adopted with the aim of listing students' rights to promote them at national and European level, as no country ensures all students' rights in their national legislation or in practice.

One of the main issues regarding students' rights is the lack of a common definition and understanding of it when it should be self-evident. Therefore, the first aim of the Students' Rights Charter is to provide a common vision of students' rights, being:

a tool to strengthen students' rights by raising awareness and lobbying to homogenise regulations at the European level, and to build the capacity of existing and especially of emerging student movements (Bergan 2011: 69-70).

This chapter also underlines the fact that students' rights are not fully ensured and vary significantly across the different regions of Europe. The Students' Rights Charter represents a good tool but it has to be used efficiently. Training and discussions with students revealed simple steps to promote students' rights. The first step that was taken was to have annotations for each of the 35 articles composing the Students' Rights Charter to ensure that all readers and stakeholders understand in the same way how specific articles articulate specific student rights. In addition to the annotations to the articles of the Students' Rights Charter, the document provides precise best and worst practice examples. This simple step is an extremely important one, as the

worst practice examples provide proof that students' rights are being violated while the best practice examples indicate how these rights can be respected.

One of the focuses of the 21st European Student Convention in Budapest in February 2011 was students' rights and the Students' Rights Charter. The outcomes set the course for more actions to allow a more efficient use of the Students' Rights Charter. First, even if students' rights are universal, education is a national prerogative and strategically it is necessary to lobby for students' rights at the national level. Each NUS defines its strategy according to its specific priorities, environment, capacity and needs, with the support of other NUSs. Therefore one of the most important decisions was to translate the Students' Rights Charter into national languages. It was also decided that NUSs have to lead campaigns and lobbying actions in order to promote the Students' Rights Charter and demand that it is upheld. Finally, students insisted on the need to collate more best and worst practices as this is tangible proof that action can be taken and that there is still a need to promote students' rights.

It is very encouraging to see that some NUSs have already taken the initiative and consider the Students' Rights Charter a useful tool. As ASU (Azerbaijan) reported:

There is no legislation protecting students' rights in Azerbaijan. Each higher education institution has its own charter for regulating all internal issues. Students' rights and duties are described in the internal charters. But sometimes students are not aware of their rights or they do not know how to defend them. In case of violation of rights (e.g. expelling students without communicating the reason), the main responsibility for action lies on students' organisations, student unions and human rights' NGOs (Aslanov 2011: 70-71).

This clearly proves that there is a legislative gap and a lack of a unified understanding of students' rights. ASU subsequently carried out a campaign funded by the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation, Propaganda for Students' Rights in Azerbaijan. In the outcomes of the campaign, ASU noted that the most important steps were the sharing of best practices, the translation of the Students' Rights Charter into the national language, the conducting of different seminars and awareness-raising actions for students and other stakeholders and finally, international co-operation, in terms of getting support from other countries and replicating actions that had proven effective elsewhere. Students in Hungary, too, promoted the Students' Rights Charter through their NUS, HOÖK, by lobbying to have the delineated rights included in the new higher education law that their government was drafting. Once again, the importance of best practices was stressed:

in order for the points of Students' Rights Charter to lie down into the national legislation and institutional regulation of the universities ... the continuous exchange of experience and collection of best practices regarding implementation of SRC [Students' Rights Charter] are necessary (Gaspar 2011: 72).

## Conclusion

The sheer variety of visions for students' rights is the very first challenge student activists face. Although every stakeholder acknowledges students' rights and over

the years the vision of students' rights has evolved, including among students, the lack of a common understanding threatens students' rights. Furthermore, with the idea spreading that the student is a consumer, students' rights are being reduced to consumers' rights. Future societies will not be built by passive consumers, but by active students and citizens. Currently, it is this consumerist vision that students have to fight against to impose the vision that a student is a full citizen who will influence and even make decisions in society later. Students are a driving force for change and cannot be limited to their role as students within the university. History is full of examples where students have led civil movements to demand and eventually install democracy, whether in the Soviet era or currently with the Euromaidan movement or the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong.

Students fight as much to impose a common vision of students' rights, as to ensure them. The question of who is responsible for protecting students' rights is then a legitimate one. As higher education is a public good and a public responsibility, the public authorities are responsible for ensuring students' rights. Public authorities have taken on this responsibility as all national legislations on higher education refer to some students' rights. These legislations are binding for the state and it is possible to seek legal recourse where these obligations are not honoured. However, as there is a dissonance on the definition of students' rights, national legislation never ensures the totality of students' rights and focuses mainly on the academic aspect of students' rights; it should not be possible for states to choose which rights to ensure and which rights not to ensure. But the responsibility for ensuring students' rights does not lie only with the state but with each student and individual. Students' rights cannot be taken for granted and students have to make sure that their rights are not undermined and that legislation evolves accordingly with a broader vision of students' rights. Students themselves are responsible for safeguarding their rights.

The responsibility that students bear has a direct impact on how the student movement takes shape. Students' rights are not uniform across Europe and students undertake different actions to promote the rights that they need the most. When social rights are demanded, the nature of the rights that students are fighting for combined with the socio-political context means negotiation is the preferred means of action. More violent actions are taken where students' rights are less respected, which also reveals the harshness of the conditions these students face. Their protests are often silenced and they thus call for solidarity to their fellow European students to speak for them when they do not have a voice. The numerous solidarity actions carried out by ESU and their member NUSs prove the necessity of standing together for students' rights, and also that student rights' movements at national level influence the student movement at the European level. As the European student movement builds its strategy around the students' rights issue, it is interesting to see that European students, apart from showing solidarity with each other, work continuously on enabling respect for students' rights for all and agree on the rights enshrined within the Students' Rights Charter. Students will continue to fight for their rights, but as long as there is no common understanding beyond the student community of what students' rights are, they will continue to face obstacles.

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## Chapter 20

# The policy influence strategy of student representatives: a comparative, case-based survey in Flemish University Colleges (Belgium)

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*Michiel Horsten*

### **Abstract**

The policy influence strategy of student representatives in Flemish (Belgian) University Colleges is mainly constructive, as judged from four contrasting cases with in-depth interviews. Student representatives prefer, whether or not in partnership with other actors (an advocacy coalition), to influence policy makers directly. Policy influence is usually achieved by means of arguing and informing, often by participation in meetings. But students also make use of more subtle means such as communication and networking. Means such as litigating, damaging or punishing are only used in extreme cases because they could harm the co-operative relationship with policy makers. Student representatives frequently influence the stage of problem formulation, but they also try to influence the stage of policy formulation. Student representatives only influence the stage of policy adoption in a limited way, even when student representatives have decision (voting) power because of their membership of the board.

**Keywords:** student governance; student participation; higher education; student interest groups; advocacy

## Introduction<sup>58</sup>

Student participation is a substantial element of higher education policy within the Flemish Community of Belgium (education is in Belgium a competence of the communities). However, only a limited amount of research concerning student participation has been carried out to date (Zuo and Ratsoy 1999; Luescher 2008; Trowler 2010; Pabian and Minsková 2011; Popović 2011). Pabian and Minsková (2011: 264) posit that “a special challenge lies in developing studies that use multi-method ... multi-site ... and multi-responent ... designs”.

This chapter reports on case study research carried out in four Flemish University Colleges (*hogescholen*) and endeavours to answer the following question: “How do student representatives attempt to influence the policy-making process at the central level of their University Colleges, or in other words, what is their policy influence strategy (that is a combination of choices of channel, means and points in time)?” One needs to adopt an integrated approach when studying policy making in Flemish University Colleges and student representation (Pabian and Minsková 2011), because of the particular institutionalised roles of student representatives in Flemish University Colleges (partly due to Flemish legislation) and the correspondences between the agendas of both the University Colleges and the student representatives (Bienefeld and Almqvist 2004; Vos 2005). In the next paragraphs I will commence by describing governance and policy making in University Colleges and student representation in Flanders. Consequently I will explain the research design and provide an analysis of the four cases I studied.

### **Flemish University Colleges: governance, policy making and student representation**

The Flemish higher education system is institutionally divided into universities (responsible for academic higher education and research) and University Colleges (responsible for professionally oriented bachelor's level education).<sup>59</sup> Policy making in University Colleges takes place at different levels, from the programme or departmental level through the intermediary level (e.g. faculty or educational group) to the central level (Santiago et al. 2008; De Boer and File 2009). The responsibility for financial and material policy issues lies primarily with the board and the general director. Hence, educational policy is strongly decentralised (Devos et. al. 2001). Furthermore, University Colleges are characterised by numerous interacting advisory bodies (Kezar and Eckel 2004; Santiago et al. 2008). Apart from the decision-making body of the board, the academic council is an important advisory body at the central level of the institutions.

Student representation is obligatory in each of the Flemish University Colleges. A student council (*studentenraad*) defends student interests (VVS 2008; Ministry of Education and Training 2011). Moreover, the Flemish Decree on Participation outlines two models for student representation (see Table 1). Either students are

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58. This chapter is an adaptation of the author's master's thesis (Horsten 2013).

59. At the time of the research University Colleges also ran some academic degree programmes. Since 2013, these have been organised by the universities.

full members – forming at least 10% of the membership of the board of governors (the co-determination model, *medebestuur*), or students only have observatory and advisory rights (the consultation model, *medezeggenschap*). In all state colleges students have full membership. Non-state colleges, on the other hand, can determine independently which model is preferable. A majority of the non-state colleges have chosen the consultation model, that is students do not have voting rights, but they do have the right to send an observer to the board, to advise and to deliberate with the board.<sup>60</sup>

Within both models, student representatives carry out fundamentally different roles. Within the co-determination model they function as directors (by their membership of the board), in the consultation model they have only advisory rights. Consequently, the co-determination model has not been uncontested. In the 1970s, several student groups pointed out how this model could potentially subdue students because of the corrupting workings of the power system, in such a way that it would diminish their abilities to oppose it (Van der Steen 1982; see also Van Weel 2007). The Flemish student union VVS was initially also sceptical of the model. Yet VVS changed its outlook in the 1990s and actually became a proponent of the model.

**Table 1: Models of co-determination and consultation: obligations via the Flemish Decree on Participation (VVS 2008; Van Weel 2007; Ministry 2011)**

	Co-determination model <i>(medebestuur)</i>	Consultation model <i>(medezeggenschap)</i>
<i>Board of governors</i>	Composed of at least 10% students	Observation and advisory rights for students
<i>Student council</i>	Defends students' interests	
	Student members of the board are <i>ex officio</i> members of the student council	The student council has the right to delegate a member to the board
<i>Forms of student participation</i>	Student representatives have voting rights on the board; Advisory rights for the student council	Student representatives as observers on the board; Advisory rights for the student council with an obligation for the board to react; Direct deliberation with the board or consultation (student council gives written advice)
<i>Institutions</i>	All Flemish Universities and all Universities of public law; some private law University Colleges	University Colleges of the provinces and a majority of the private law University Colleges

60. At the time of the research nine University Colleges organised student involvement via the co-determination model; five University Colleges organised student involvement via the consultation model (Regcom 2010; Ministry of Education and Training 2011).

Apart from the structural organisation of student representation, the governing style of the University Colleges themselves is also important. The “participation ladder” of Pröpper and Steenbeek (Pröpper 2009) constitutes a tool for the analysis of governing styles. Central to this tool is the question of whether there exists a power division between the “rulers” and the “ruled”.

When, in the setting of a University College, the governing style is non-interactive, students are either not informed, or they are informed or consulted but their actions remain without consequences. In an interactive style, students either have an advisory role and the government is open to their ideas and solutions, or they even have co-decision powers, so the government and the students are collaborators.

### **Student representation: influencing policy and accompanying strategies**

An important goal of student representation is to influence decisions by the University College (see Klemenčič 2012). Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) stress the importance of process and style and these elements potentially have a significant impact on the success of the participation. Surprisingly, research on the way students try to influence policy making in their institutions hardly exists.

To analyse the complexity of the policy influence strategy, I use the conceptual framework of Vander Elst (2010). The policy influence strategy is a “motivated combination of choices concerning channel, means and timing” (Vancoppenolle and De Corte 2011: 324).<sup>61</sup> This scheme is also applicable to student representation. In the following paragraphs I take a closer look at these three aspects and I apply them to student representation. However, it is important to recognise that a certain strategy does not imply an exclusive choice.

The “channel” of policy influence addresses the question “through whom do student representatives try to influence the policy making of the University College?” A list with potential influence channels inside and outside University Colleges may be found in Figure 1, based on Vander Elst (2010), who was inspired by Binderkrantz’s work on interest group strategies (2005). Binderkrantz distinguishes four categories of channels (he calls them “influence strategies”). He distinguishes “direct strategies where groups approach public decision makers, and indirect strategies where influence on policy is sought in more indirect ways”. A further distinction is made between strategies to “bureaucratic actors” (that is staff members and administrators in the case of University Colleges) and to “politicians and parties” (that is the University College executives and board). Indirect strategies focus on “media” or “citizens” (that is University College students), and interest groups with “a privileged position vis-à-vis decision makers show high levels of activities targeting these decision makers” (Binderkrantz 2005).

The theory of advocacy coalition of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993; see also Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009) is also relevant. They propose that in a political system there is a diversity of subsystems. When such systems share common ideas, an “advocacy coalition” to influence policy is sometimes formed. Within such a coalition actors with similar points of view and goals work together to influence policy.

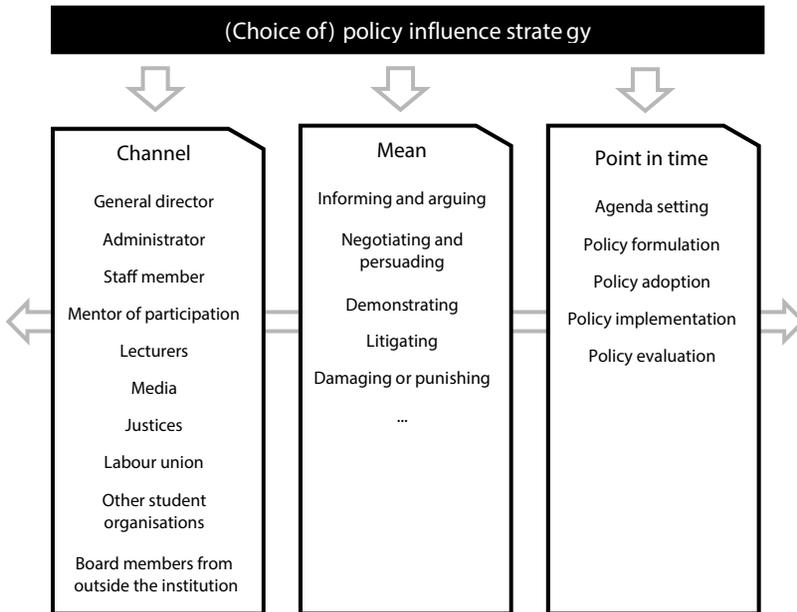
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61. “De gemotiveerde koppeling van keuzes omtrent kanaal, middelen en timing.”

How do student representatives try to influence policy making? Vander Elst (2010) derives five means from van Noort, Huberts and Rademakers (1987) (see Figure 1). In a higher education setting, the first means, “informing” or “arguing”, implies that student representatives try to convince influential actors. Student representatives can also try to reach their goal by “negotiating” or “persuading”, which means that they reward influential actors. A third possible means is “demonstration”, through which students try to achieve their demands by showing decision makers that a lot of people share the same demand. “Litigating” is a possible fourth way for students to influence their institution’s policy. Finally, “contesting” implies that student representatives try to reach their goals by damaging or punishing influential actors. Binderkrantz states that “disruptive tactics such as direct action and strikes are only used by a minority of groups. These activities are difficult to reconcile with close contacts with bureaucrats” (2005: 710).

The last aspect of the policy influence strategy, the point in time, answers the question “when do student representatives try to influence policy?” Here the policy cycle (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009) is an adequate model of analysis (see Figure 1). The policy cycle describes the development of policy in five phases: agenda setting (problem formulation); policy formulation; adoption (by the board of governors); implementation; and evaluation (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009). Each stage can be influenced. However, Howlett, Ramesh and Perl (2009) posit that “the number of relevant actors decreases substantially when the public policy process reaches the decision-making stage”. The authors argue that within the stages of agenda setting and policy evaluation, “virtually any actor in the policy universe could, theoretically at least, become active and involved” (ibid.: 140).

**Figure 1: (Choice of) policy influence strategy by student representatives**



*Based on Vander Elst (2010); Vancoppenolle and De Corte (2012: 324).*

The model of Vander Elst seems to suggest a certain rationality in choice with regard to influence strategy. Nevertheless, policy making is not always rational (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009) and the same is true for policy influencing. Furthermore, in order to influence policy in a rational way, it is necessary to first possess a thorough understanding of the process of policy making, that is which actors decide, how they decide and when they decide. Having a grip on policy making is not always easy for students as novices to the policy-making process in University Colleges. Students are not always familiar with the procedures and they may lack insight into the more cultural aspects of decision making, like the diversity of values, codes and rituals in meetings (Tavernier 2004). Moreover, Luescher (2008) and Le Bart and Merle (1997) draw attention to the hollowing of official advisory and policy adoption councils and boards by “subtle and informal decision making outside the official representative governing bodies” (Luescher 2008). Such lack of insight into policy processes makes it difficult for student representatives to influence policy in a rational way.

## Research methodology

To come to a better understanding of student representatives’ policy influence strategies I have opted for a research design with four contrasting cases. Pabian and Minsková conclude that previous research concerning student participation has mostly focused on single cases. Conducting multiple case studies is indeed “much more challenging and therefore not so numerous” (2011: 264). However, the explanatory value of this design is higher.

Furthermore, I have opted for a design with contrasting cases. This allows me to look into “patterns of similarities and differences within a given set of cases” (Ragin 1994: 113, in Lešyté 2007: 73). There are no commonly accepted guidelines with regard to the number of cases to be studied for research to be valid and reliable. However, the more cases used, the higher the validity and the reliability (van Thiel 2007; Yin 2009). For reasons of feasibility, only four cases were studied. Triangulation and an accurate attestation of research steps guarded the validity and reliability of the study (van Thiel 2007).

Case selection was a very important stage within this research. The theoretical framework referred to above, reports on student participation (Regcom 2010) and my own knowledge of the educational field were used to select the research cases (Yin 2009). With the participation model as the independent variables (because student representatives play fundamentally different roles), two University Colleges with systems of co-determination (coded UC1 and UC2) and two with systems of consultation (coded UC3 and UC4) were selected.

For each University College, data collection consisted of documents and semi-structured interviews. The main documental sources in the research project were student participation evaluations carried out by governmental commissioners (providing information for each University College; Regcom 2010); University College statutes, mission statements and visions; and annual reports. Where available, I also consulted the rules of participation of the University Colleges (as obligated by the Decree on Participation); strategic plans; the house rules of the student council; and other texts that illustrated ideas on student participation. All these documents were

to help sketch out the context of the cases selected: McKaig and Policello state that “an analysis of an institution’s philosophy toward the culture and value of student involvement is critical in order to give context to the role of student government” (1999, in Laosebikan-Buggs 2006: 2).

The majority of previous research concerning student participation has used interviews with student leaders and student representatives. However, Pabian and Minsková stress the importance of involving other groups “in order to gain a complex understanding of governance processes” (2011: 264). For reasons of feasibility it was not possible to interview a large number of actors. Thus, for this research a leading student representative and a closely involved member of staff were interviewed in each institution. Each respondent is coded as UCX-S or UCX-M, where the “S” corresponds to “student representative” and “M” to “member of staff”. The “X” stands for the case study in question.

Interviews were conducted based on a list of topics with general questions about the strengths and weaknesses of student participation in the institution, the perception of student representatives and their roles. Subsequently respondents were asked to describe a case where student representatives had tried to influence policy in a “good way” and to describe a case where student representatives did this in a “wrong way”. In the fourth part of the interview respondents were asked to score the frequency of use of the different policy influence channels, the different means and the different points of time (see Figure 1) on a five-point scale. In each interview, an explanation of the given score was asked for. The last part focused on the election process of the policy influence style.

The method of open questions brings in an inductive component and makes it possible to start from the respondents’ point of view. The questions on the frequency of use of the aspects of the policy influence strategy help focus the interviews and allow for direct answers to the research questions and hypotheses.

The results vis-à-vis the research questions and hypotheses of each case were analysed individually. On the basis of these case studies, a cross-case synthesis (Yin 2009) and conclusions were formulated.

## **Research questions and hypotheses**

The central goal of the research was to gain insight into the complexity of the policy influence strategies of student representatives at the central level of University Colleges. The policy influence strategy is defined by a combination of the choice in channel, means and point of time. Generally I expected that the policy influence strategy would be different in a system of co-determination than in a consultation system. The following hypotheses – which bring in a testing element – guided the research:

- ▶ hypothesis (a): student representatives in the co-determination model use more direct channels of influence such as policy makers while student representatives in the consultation model use more indirect channels;
- ▶ hypothesis (b): student representatives in the consultation model use more oppositional means such as demonstrating, litigating and contesting than student representatives in the co-determination model, who use more co-operative means;

- hypothesis (c): student representatives influence the stage of policy adoption in the system of co-determination rather than in the consultation model.

Furthermore, I wanted to find out if the choice of the policy influence strategy is always made in a rational way.

## **Situating the different cases**

UC1 is a non-state, Catholic University College with approximately 8 000 students. It is governed by the “principles of properly and collaborative government” (internal rules) and has the ambition of policy making with “a clear choice for involvement of students and staff” (mission) with students as “full partners” (vision on education). Students are full members of the board of governors. A full-time mentor supports the student council and the student representatives. The interviews indicated a positive view of student participation and an interactive government style.

UC2 is one of the biggest University Colleges in Flanders. Students are part of the board. The strategic plan formulates the strategic goal that “students take responsibility for their training” and the operational goal is to intensify “student participation in policy making, especially in programme boards”. Student representatives are supported by two full-time mentors. The interviews suggest that governance is interactive and starting from 2012, student representatives have been involved earlier in certain policy matters and the college has taken more initiative to solicit the points of view of students.

UC3 is a non-state University College with slightly more than 2 300 students and only two departments. The mission, vision and strategy of the University College draws on concepts such as “self-realisation” and education as a “process of experience”. Students have a consultative voice on the board of governors. The style of governance appears to be consultative, according to the student respondent, and participatory, according to the staff respondent. It is mostly management that has decision-making power and there are hardly any policy-formulating working groups at the central level of the institution.

The last case, UC4, is a non-governmental, Catholic University College with approximately 7 000 students. In its vision of education the development of students is central and students and teachers are “partners in learning”. The college wants to give “voice and regard” to everyone. Recently, students gained actual co-determination (however, not according to the statutes). The respondents report a more positive attitude of the institution towards the student representatives, though they say there is still a long way to go. The member of staff recommends a governing style restricted to consultation, while the student representative prefers a governing style which is more interactive.

## **Results of the case studies (cross-case synthesis)**

The four cases provide interesting insights into the policy influence strategy of student representatives. Structured by the three aspects of such strategies, as explained in the theoretical framework (see Figure 1), each case was analysed and compared with the others (cross-case synthesis).

## Policy influence channels

The diversity in policy influence channels is rather limited in all the University Colleges studied. Usually executives of the central administration are approached to influence policy – except in the case of UC3. In this regard, executives are also influenced by student representatives through participation in work groups, councils and boards. Hence, the channels used are mostly direct. Government commissioners, public opinion, other students, board members from outside the institution, student organisations other than the student council, labour unions, justices, the media, lecturers, the mentor for participation (the member of staff tasked with supporting the student representatives) and staff members are in UC1, UC2 and UC4 not used or only used in a limited way.

In UC3, central administration executives are approached less in order to influence policy. The governing style is non-interactive; however, the distinctly informal context shapes opportunities for contact. Therefore, in contrast to the other University Colleges, student representatives here influence policy makers more indirectly (via students or by using an “advocacy coalition”, which I will elaborate on further).

Student representatives often use a cascade-like approach; if they do not succeed in influencing people at a lower level (e.g. an administrator), they attempt to do so higher up in the institutional hierarchy (e.g. the general director). In UC4, this happens less frequently due to student representatives’ limited knowledge of the way (the policy making of) the University College works, as the staff respondent indicated.

In UC2 and UC3, student representatives form a coalition with other actors to influence policy successfully (an advocacy coalition). In UC2, this happens through partnering with executives of the faculties who have a voice in policy at the central level and via student representatives at the level of the faculties. In UC3, executives, teachers and students at the level of the departments feel that the central level is not really open to participation (according to the respondents). An advocacy coalition is thus used often to influence policy due to the shared concerns of these parties.

In UC1, there is no need to form coalitions because of the harmonious policy making at meetings, in which the voice of student representatives is taken into account sufficiently. At UC4, too, advocacy coalition building is almost absent. According to the respondents, not everyone in the institution (e.g. among the staff) is convinced of the advantages of student involvement, which makes forming a coalition difficult. Furthermore, the student representatives have not developed substantial networks with other actors. With regard to advocacy coalitions, I can thus conclude that they are formed in both systems of student representation. Knowledge of the field of actors in the University College, acceptance of the student representatives by these actors, and shared concerns seem to be important conditions to form an advocacy coalition.

Personal factors, such as the attitudes of the people involved, have an important impact on the process of choosing a channel of influence. The relationship between student representatives and those who are to be influenced is an important feature, but so is the degree to which the latter are open to student representatives, therefore their background is determinative as well. The chairperson of the board of UC3, for instance, was once the president of a student union and is thus open to student

involvement. Although he occupies a senior position within the field of business, he is easily approachable to student representatives.

In all the cases, student representatives themselves try to influence policy making. The student participation mentors do not act as mediators between the student representatives and the policy makers in order to influence policy, though the mentor at UC4 appears to be more active in this regard. But in all the examined University Colleges, the mentors had a clear vision of their role.

## Means

In three cases (UC1, UC2, UC4) the means that is most frequently used is informing and arguing. At UC1 and UC2, this is articulated mostly by student representatives' participation in work groups, councils and boards, and in the form of written advice by the student councils.

The student representatives in all cases use informal communication. Asking questions, small talk and networking are means to creating a bond between students and executives rather than for direct use in policy influencing. In UC4, there are informal contacts with executives too, but the contacts seem to be limited to executives and the chairperson of the student council. The whole student council meets one time a year with an executive at the yearly dinner. The student participation mentor stimulates the cultivation of such contacts.

The respondents reported a reluctance in using the means of litigating, damaging and punishing. According to the respondents, such means are morally problematic and harmful to students as well as their representatives because of the negative repercussions involved.

Demonstrating seems potentially functional, but only in extreme cases. Although student representatives at UC3 also use the means of informing and arguing, they resort more frequently to demonstrating because informing and arguing do not always have an effect. Demonstrating has to be restricted to *intra muros* activities, because the management might otherwise perceive the actions as contesting (that is bringing harm to the reputation of the institution). Generally speaking, oppositional means are regarded by the student representatives as ineffective for policy influence.

Because student representatives use contacts with executives as the main channel for influencing policy (see policy influence channels) they avoid oppositional means because it could harm their relationship with the executives. The student representatives of UC1 and UC2 in particular have a strong conviction as to the necessity of collaboration and constructiveness to achieve their goals. At UC3, demonstrating is more common because the relationship with the executives is not very strong. At UC4, too, mild forms of contestation have appeared because of the frustration of students.

## Points of time

In each case student representatives set the policy agenda of the University College. At UC3, however, it is very difficult to influence the institutional agenda. Matters raised by students, for instance classrooms that are too crowded, are recognised

insufficiently by the management. Furthermore, the absence of a formal body which formulates policy at the central level (it has been a few years since the academic council last gathered) makes access to the policy agenda difficult.

At UC1 and UC2, student representatives have succeeded in influencing the institutional agenda, partly due to a strong linkage between the stage of agenda setting and the stage of policy formulation in work groups and other meetings. Student representatives are often involved at the latter stage, *inter alia* through participation in meetings. The involvement of student representatives in this stage is increasing in UC4, but the initiative often comes from the students (this can be explained by the less interactive governance style in UC4) – whereas in UC1 and UC2 policy makers mostly take the initiative. In UC2, this is a recent trend.

It is noteworthy that student representatives do not often use the stage of policy adoption, either in the system of consultation or the system of co-determination. This might not come as a surprise for UC3, a University College in which the management is firmly in favour of the consultation model. However, this is also the reality at the other University Colleges. In UC1 and UC2 student representatives are members of the board and have – at least in theory – the possibility of influencing the stage of policy adoption. Yet students consider this stage as less relevant in influencing policy. Either policy has been adjusted at the stage of policy formulating (UC1) or the main centre of power is not the board, but the management (UC2 and UC3).

Though the stage of policy adoption is not conceived as very important in influencing policy making, all student respondents prefer the system of co-determination. Student representatives use ideological arguments (e.g. co-determination as an acquired right and expression of respect and trust) and other arguments which favour the usefulness of co-determination (e.g. the system can be convenient when it is necessary to have voting rights in the board).

For all the cases within this research project, influencing policy implementation and evaluation happens mostly in an informal and ad hoc way. At UC3, much of the time in meetings of the student council is taken up by (an informal) evaluation of the policy of the University College. Of course, students are in general involved in systems of internal quality assurance such as programme evaluations, which gives (all) students the chance to evaluate their education.

## **The process of choosing the policy influence strategy**

The choice of policy influence strategy proved to be more rationalised than expected, with UC4 constituting the exception. At UC1 and UC2, respondents indicated that student representatives are gradually going through a learning process which will enable them to choose the most adequate policy influence strategy.

In general, the student participation mentors play an important role in the choice of the strategy. They almost always take the role of information provider and adviser, and sometimes play the devil's advocate. They vitalise the process of searching for solutions (and thereby enable student representatives to act in a constructive way). Furthermore, the mentors stimulate diversity in the channels employed and the concrete content of policy influence means.

## Conclusion

The central goal of this chapter was to gain insights into the policy influence strategy of student representatives in Flemish University Colleges. The case studies indicate that a constructive and pragmatic influence strategy seems to dominate. Generally speaking, most of the student representatives reflect upon the strategy they want to employ, often supported by the student participation mentor.

When possible, whether or not in partnership with other actors (an advocacy coalition), student representatives prefer to influence policy makers directly (channel). The direct influence strategy is not restricted to the co-determination model. Moreover, in one University College characterised by the consultation system the student council tries to influence (almost exclusively) the executives because the student council only has a limited view of and understanding with other actors. More than the representation model, the insights of the student council in policy influencing and the governing style of the University College seem to influence the choice of channels. When there is a partnership between student representatives and those who hold power, the need to influence other actors diminishes. Policy influence is usually achieved by means of arguing and informing, often by participation in meetings. But students also make use of more subtle means such as communication and networking. Means such as litigating, damaging or punishing are only used in extreme cases because they could harm the co-operative relationship with policy makers.

It is not surprising that student representatives frequently influence the stage of problem formulating (point in time), but they also try to influence the policy formulation stage. However, it is noteworthy that the stage of policy adoption is only influenced in a limited way, which is certainly remarkable for the co-determination model because student representatives have decision (voting) power because of their membership of the board. However, student representatives' behaviour is characterised by pragmatic ways of working. It is easier to adjust policy matters in the stages of agenda setting and policy formulation than in the stage of policy adoption. Policy implementation and evaluation are influenced in an ad hoc and informal way.

Student councils have developed into institutionalised actors integrated within the University College system, which is in correspondence with the aims of the Flemish Decree on Participation. This explains the constructive approach generally adopted by student representatives. Their style could be called "pragmatic", with influencing policy as their main goal. At University Colleges where the student council is less institutionalised or integrated (and the governance style is less interactive), the means are often more oppositional.

At least in the cases studied here, student representatives in the co-determination model are more included in the policy cycle than in the consultation model. Although it was expected that the organisational model of student participation would be an important explanatory factor for the policy influence strategy, the importance of this element was challenged: that is a (strong) causality between the model and the influence strategy seems absent. Perhaps more cultural factors such as the governance style used (interactive or non-interactive) and personal factors (both of the student representative and the policy maker) influence the strategy employed. More in-depth research into the importance of these factors is needed.

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## Chapter 21

# Belonging, social capital and representation: first-generation students' voices in Portuguese higher education

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### **Abstract**

The ability to belong and feel integrated in education institutions has been recognised as one of the factors that prevent dropout and student disengagement in higher education. Belonging can be defined via a psychological and sociological matrix and it can flourish through relational ties nurtured by universities. Considering investments in social capital as a moral economy exchange where one gains access to resources through network affiliation, this contribution uses the narratives of 25 first-generation students from one Portuguese campus, and analyses their experiences with three distinct types of peer interaction: hazings (traditional integration rituals), student union participation and creative clubs. It argues that the enhancement of belonging on campus needs to distinguish forms of socialisation that encourage representation and voice from others that are oppressive and diminishing to students, and that extracurricular activities should be clearly supported, as they provide not only network ties but also add to individual development.

**Keywords:** social capital; belonging; extracurricular activities; capability for voice

## Introduction

Student engagement in higher education has long been an area of research (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Mann 2001; Kuh et al. 2007; Kuh 2009). As a multidimensional construct, student engagement can be defined as “a psycho-social process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context” (Kahu 2013: 768), a definition that integrates the socio-cultural, psychological and behavioural views on the topic. The interest in student engagement is raised by its understanding as a proxy for student success and achievement (Reschly et al. 2012; Trowler 2010). As much as the economic crisis in Europe highlighted the role that material scarcity plays in student dropout rates, other factors have to be considered when unveiling the reasons behind students abandoning their studies. Cultural attrition, unfamiliarity with institutional procedures and lack of tutoring support can also lead some students astray, particularly those from “vulnerable” groups, such as first-generation students. Recent research suggests that a sense of belonging can be the key to the engagement of such students (Strayhorn 2012; Thomas 2012) and that universities can play a decisive role inside and outside the classroom to foster this.

Framing belonging within a social capital perspective, justified by the relational nature of the concept, this chapter critically examines integration activities in one Portuguese campus, based on the biographical narratives of 25 first-generation students collected between 2011 and 2012. It confirms that engagement in extracurricular activities is decisive for establishing academic resilience in this group. However, it alerts us to the need for such activities to promote representation and voice, as traditional integration practices are viewed as oppressive and threatening to human rights and personal integrity. The chapter is structured as follows: I first present a conceptual overview of belonging and its relations with social capital, then I move to a characterisation of integration activities in the Portuguese higher education context. Subsequently I present my theoretical framework, based on Portes’ social capital theory (Portes 2010) and the capability for voice (Appadurai 2004; Crocker and Robeyns 2009). Finally I proceed with data analysis and conclusions, highlighting the need for better institutional monitoring and planning of integration actions.

## Belonging: towards a definition

The ability to belong to and feel integrated in educational institutions has long been recognised as one of the factors that prevent dropout and student disengagement in higher education. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) as well as Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) have addressed the need to fit in and to belong of students from underrepresented segments (such as working-class and mature students) as crucial to avoid disconnection with institutions. Tinto’s (1993) pioneering model for student retention highlights the need for the student to feel integrated. Despite critiques that suggest excessive weight is allotted to student adaptation to institutional culture and not to the need for environmental change, integration is still a key concern on the agenda of student engagement strategies, more recently due to the renewed interest in the concept of belonging.

Belonging can be defined from a psychological (individual and affective) point of view and from a sociological (historically and culturally situated) stand. Considering

the individual, belonging relates to the emotional geographies that connect one to an education institution where one feels accepted, respected and heard. Thomas (2012: 13), citing Goodnow (1993), offers the following definition of belonging:

Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.

A more comprehensive model for belonging can be found in Strayhorn's (2012) work. The author defines belonging as the student's perception of affiliation and identification with the university community, and locates belonging within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of basic human needs (physiological necessities, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation). Strayhorn's model for a sense of belonging in higher education highlights the fluctuating nature of the concept, which assumes particular relevance on certain occasions such as life transitions or uncontrolled futures; and delves into the relatedness of "mattering" to belonging, that is the reciprocal feeling that one is needed and appreciated by others, which can be a motivation driver, as well as the way belongingness is influenced by intersected social identities (such as being gay, Latino, first-generation or coloured, as the author illustrates in his research). Strayhorn also stresses that belonging predicts other positive outcomes, such as well-being, happiness and optimal performance (in a given context), since people will want to maintain and nurture social bonds created on campus, and for this they will closely engage and invest in academic activities. However, the author also maintains that the feeling of belonging is subject to change due to circumstances and conditions and therefore needs constant nurturing through activities and interactions, or can otherwise fade and lead to disengagement from college through attrition (Strayhorn 2012: 23). Therefore, student involvement can have a positive or negative effect over an individual sense of belonging, and institutional engagement in such actions can be determinative in encouraging belonging.

Both definitions highlight the role that environment and institutions play in fostering belonging, and both understand belonging as a relational construct, where a dialogical dynamic is constructed among peers, faculty members and the university's extended network. Belonging is thus related to what is commonly defined as social capital, that according to Portes (2010) can assume a more communitarian view (Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000) and another more critical view, associated with Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), which sheds light on the mismatch between the cultural and social capital of students from lower socio-economic status and that of the university, as a result of class differences and values that are inherited from one's family background. Such a mismatch can result in a persistent feeling of alienation from one's original place that leads the student to drop out or change institution/degree. Research shows that this cultural disengagement can be overcome through network ties fostered by universities organising extracurricular activities and other events (Thomas 2012). Moreover, student involvement in such activities not only contributes to the development of deep learning experiences, but can also represent a competitive advantage when entering the job market. As Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) note, such activities are crucial to developing soft skills (e.g. leadership and ability to work in groups) that are

increasingly valued by employers, who need to distinguish between candidates with the same qualifications. This insight is also confirmed by a recent project, the findings of which reflect the value of extracurricular activities for the building of personal capital that is crucial in overcoming class barriers (Bathmaker 2012). Nevertheless, and while investigating the weight of such activities in job prospects, Lehmann (2012) observes that first-generation students and their working-class peers have difficulties in participating in extracurricular events due to lack of time and money. This situation ends up restricting these students' opportunities when seeking employment.

Regarding institutional culture, its ability to create and feed organisational mythologies can be more or less favourable to the creation of ties of belonging. Clark (1986) stresses the importance of belief in the construction of an organisational saga, that is a collective understanding and presentation of an organisation's history, stories and developments (including shared feelings) as a set of beliefs and symbols. This narrative's strength and efficiency depends on organisational scale, age, competitiveness and consistency, and is mediated through different student subcultures (the academic, the collegiate or the non-conformist, to name a few). Despite acknowledging the importance of investigating institutional cultures in order to develop adequate belonging strategies, this paper focuses on interactions between students themselves, since interviews were collected on a single campus. However, a brief introduction to integration traditions in Portuguese higher education will follow this section, as it is necessary to contextualise the data analysed.

## Integration activities in Portuguese higher education institutions

Most higher education institutions in Portugal allow for practices of integration promoted by students, which are commonly designated as "praxe" (from the Latin *praxis*). The praxe can be defined as a "set of practices, traditions and rituals taking place repeatedly over the years in a given community, be it academic or not" (Nascimento 2010). The praxe had its origins in the 13th century at the University of Coimbra, which until the 18th century had special jurisdiction in order to enforce mandatory sleep and study schedules. Later, the praxe was extended to other universities, gaining particular popularity with the massification of the educational system in the late 1980s (Frias 2003). The praxe has a written code (with no legal value) which comprises certain rules that extend from dress code to behaviour when going out that newcomers should observe if they wish to wear the academic suit and participate in the many student gatherings over the academic year (parades, parties, trips, dinners, among others).<sup>62</sup> As historically observed, the praxe had its genesis in the need to discipline members of the academy, and it can be seen as a reminder of a time where the university had its own jurisdiction, with its own court, police and prison (Cardina 2008), confirming the thesis that education institutions are spaces of control and sanction (Foucault 1995). Though its general intent is allegedly to welcome and introduce new students to the institution, the praxe has assumed progressively the guise of hazings, that is

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62. Despite older students telling newcomers that if they refuse to participate in praxe activities they will not be able to wear the academic suit, any student can wear the traditional suit, if she or he wishes to.

mocking of younger students by older peers, by forcing them to publicly humiliate themselves through heavy drinking, the simulation of sexual acts and the singing of obscene chants, to name a few.<sup>63</sup> This has led to a degeneration of its rationale of integration and its evolution into a power game aimed at oppressing new students, in some cases with tragic results. Cases involving the hospitalisation of a female student and the rape of a first-year female student attest to the violence of such practices.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, these are not isolated cases, and complaints of symbolic violence and physical abuse caused by praxe activities have long been reported (Frias 2003). More recently, the death of six students on a beach during a weekend promoted by a praxe commission<sup>65</sup> reignited the debate over the legitimacy of such rituals within the academic community, as the parents of the victims pressed criminal charges against one of the praxe leaders (the Lusófona University *dux*, which means “chief”) who refused to make any declarations about the event. In general, when incidents such as these occur, institutions suspend the praxe for some period, but the students bring it back, as most of the praxe regulations are traditionally set up by the students themselves. Despite several appeals from human rights observers and heated public debates, institutions have refused to take a legal collective position on the matter.

On the other hand, this is in many institutions the only welcoming integration activity that exists (Comissão para Educação e Ciência, Assembleia da República 2008 [Education and Research Committee of the National Assembly]). Some higher education institutions offer extracurricular activities through societies, fraternities, sororities and clubs, often for culture or sports. This is the case of theatre groups, radio clubs, choirs and sports’ teams. Such groups constitute social networks outside the classroom, but they also demand that additional time be devoted to extracurricular activities. Membership acceptance in these societies can be subject to selection if the number of applicants is too high; however, according to members of such groups, the number of students seeking such activities has decreased in recent years. Student unions, too, constitute alternative spaces of socialisation, chosen by those with political affinities or just curious to learn the institutional trades. Each faculty, class or institution has its own student representatives, who assume in most cases a consultative role. As reported for the cultural clubs, participation in student unions and associations is also undergoing a crisis, as many students are now more dependent on their parents’ income and usually go home every weekend (and in many cases continue to live at their parents’ house while studying, to avoid the costs of renting accommodation). They therefore spend less time at the university campus (Estanque 2008), which in turn leads to greater pressure to complete their studies. However, the importance of such extracurricular activities for the education and job

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63. For a clarification of such practices, see the documentary “Praxis” (2011) by Bruno Cabral, trailer available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xawGvGsl4yU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xawGvGsl4yU), accessed 8 October 2014.

64. “Caloira acaba no hospital de Beja depois de praxe”, *Jornal Público*, 29 September 2012, available at [www.publico.pt/educacao/noticia/caloira-acaba-no-hospital-de-beja-depois-de-praxe-1564956](http://www.publico.pt/educacao/noticia/caloira-acaba-no-hospital-de-beja-depois-de-praxe-1564956); “Cinco anos de prisão para veterano que violou caloira”, *Jornal Público*, 13 February 2010, available at [www.publico.pt/portugal/jornal/cinco-anos-de-prisao-para-veterano-que-violou-calaira-18790641](http://www.publico.pt/portugal/jornal/cinco-anos-de-prisao-para-veterano-que-violou-calaira-18790641), accessed 13 October 2014.

65. “Student deaths spark debate over hazing at Portugal’s universities”, *New York Times*, 18 March 2014, available at [www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/student-deaths-spark-debate-over-hazing-at-portugals-universities.html?emc=eta1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/student-deaths-spark-debate-over-hazing-at-portugals-universities.html?emc=eta1&_r=1), accessed 8 October 2014.

prospects of higher education students was recently recognised by the National Council of Education.<sup>66</sup> In a recent recommendation, the National Council urged universities to acknowledge these activities through the Diploma Supplement, since they contribute not only to the formation of new skills but also to graduate differentiation (Conselho Nacional de Educação 2013).

## **Social capital and the capability for voice**

Due to the relational nature of belonging, the concept of social capital is an adequate exploratory tool to frame the analytical findings of this research. Social capital has been researched differently across educational and sociological fields, ranging from small units of analysis (Bourdieu 1984; Coleman 1988) to organisational and international comparative studies (Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000). According to Portes (2010), social capital can be defined as the ability to gain access to resources through network affiliation. Such affiliation can be family mediated (also understood as cultural capital), non-family mediated (networks of friends, for example) or a case of social control or cohesion (Coleman 1988; Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 2000), emphasising communitarian and economic benefits. The latter approach tends to be used in macro-level quantitative studies and often disregards the contradictions collective social capital entails at an individual level, more visible when biographical methods are employed. For that reason, Portes' (2010) approach is the one adopted in this research.

Social capital can be found in the relationship ties people establish with each other. For Portes (2010), motivations for social connections can be categorised as consummatory or instrumental. Consummatory motivations can be found in bounded solidarity patterns, where sharing ethical values creates groups, or in internalised norms (people feel morally compelled to be civic, for instance). Instrumental motivations can be found in reciprocity patterns (people do something in exchange for something else, provided that the return is not always scheduled or previously accorded), or in ties of enforced trust that rely on fear of community sanction mechanisms of public shame or ostracism (that is trust is secured by the established community culture). These diverse sources of social capital can have positive effects (such as norm observance, family support and traded benefits) as well as negative ones (restricted access to opportunities, restricted individual freedom, excessive demands on members or accordance to group standards that are diminishing).

The adoption of Portes' view on social capital allows a critical view of the construct, as different sources have consequences that clash with each other. In the case of a student population, social capital derived from secure ties may lead to social control and may benefit those who want to maintain their status and organisational culture as they come from a privileged social context, but does little for those who come from a disadvantaged background and need to reach outside their social sphere to gain social mobility. For the latter, the looseness of their original network can be the driver to look elsewhere for support. In this respect, it is interesting to note how class mobility is often manifested in actual mobility, visible in changes of job or

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66. A collegiate body that advises the government on matters of education policy.

changes of residence, with the possibility of escaping your natural social circle and establishing relations that go beyond geographical circumstances.

As student voice is also a strong component of belonging, the social capital framework proposed is complemented by the concept of capability for voice (Bonvin and Thelen 2003; Appadurai 2004). The capabilities approach evaluates quality of life in terms of opportunities and freedom (procedural and factual), freedom depending on the extent and quality of the opportunities one is provided with (Sen 1999). In that sense, this is an approach that privileges agency, both individual and collective, as the subject does not only act for private benefit but also looks to bring about change and have an impact on others (Crocker and Robeyns 2009). Capability for voice is conceptualised as “the ability to express one’s opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of public discussion” (Bonvin and Thelen 2003: 3). This presupposes the opportunity to fully participate and intervene in public life, be it in the university environment, in the personal context or in the broader public sphere. Ontologically, it is linked with Fraser’s (2007) concept of representation, which understands participatory justice as including the rights of individuals and groups to have their voices heard in debates about social justice and to actively participate in decision making (Tikly and Barrett 2011), thus avoiding underrepresentation in local and broader contexts. Another perspective on the capability for voice comes from Appadurai (2004), who links it with the ability to experiment and rehearse different roles, an activity that shapes aspirations, for the capability to aspire “thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation” (ibid.: 69). The capability for voice, then, has a double substance: it signals both participation (in a democratic and collective sphere) and self-expression (of an individual, projective identity). Such capability takes on particular relevance in contexts of social integration, where groups of people often exert peer pressure on new students, disseminating values that support conformity to prevailing norms and can repress dissonant opinions and voices.

In line with the described theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were fashioned:

- ▶ integration activities based on enforced trust strategies have a negative impact on first-generation students’ sense of belonging;
- ▶ socialisation based on bounded solidarity patterns favours voice and collective agency;
- ▶ first-generation students engage in social activities both for consummatory and instrumental concerns.

The data analysed was gathered from 25 biographical interviews with first-generation students from one Portuguese campus between 2011 and 2012. First-generation students are defined in this research as students whose parents have at most nine years of education and account for the majority of Portuguese higher education participants. The interviews followed a mixed methods approach, uniting problem-centred interviews, visual elicitation and features of the German tradition of biographical narratives (Schütze 2007; Witzel and Reiter 2012). The interviewees were given a pseudonym to be used for research purposes, in order to preserve their privacy.

## Academic praxe: enforced trust and silent compliance

The first-generation students interviewed recognised a sense of belonging related to social ties as a key factor behind academic resilience. When questioned about difficult times during which they might have thought of leaving the university, students consistently affirm that it was mostly their social network inside the university that kept them going. Marisa, a 19-year-old Psychology student, says:

In the beginning it was really hard, I cried a few times, but I had a lot of people to support me, and that was it, in the first year I was much more lonely. This year I am more close to people from my faculty and so it helps.

Academic traditions and rituals are commonly regarded as the main way to meet people and make connections, despite the heated debates around their violence and legitimacy. Being able to wear the students' traditional suit is a desire shared by many, either because they wish to please their family or because they see it as a way to validate their membership of the institution. Jorge, a 22-year-old Social Service student, declares that he always wanted to have the suit:

It's that pride of reaching the university. Not because of issues of exhibitionism, not just because "I have the suit, I did it." No, it's a different pride, something you have always had the ambition to have. When I was younger, I used to see students from musical groups performing and I thought, "Wow, amazing! I can hardly wait for my turn, when I can have mine." It's nice to reach the end of upper secondary and think, "Now I will go to university and have my suit."

However, getting to wear the suit requires the students to comply with rules and activities imposed by older colleagues, and these practices are often humiliating and carried out under the threat of exclusion. Paulo, a 20-year-old first-year Law student who was in Educational Sciences for a year since he did not have grades necessary to get into the degree of his choice, observes:

My brother had to ask permission to pass in front of everyone he saw with the suit. Does this make any sense, a person having to crawl to someone just because they have more registration years than you?

Another difficult episode is reported by 22-year-old Maria, student of Educational Sciences and a volunteer firewoman:

Once I had to leave the hazings earlier because there was going to be a dinner and I couldn't attend, I was going to spend the night at the fire unit and I couldn't reschedule. And an older student said: So you don't go! And I thought that was so low of her and I was so angry that I never participated in such praxe rituals again. And they overreacted a lot, it seemed that they went there just to release the stress from going to classes upon others. And that for me is not pedagogical, and means nothing.

Violence is also a constant, and some students suffer physical harm when participating in praxe rituals. Vânia is a 20-year-old who dropped out her Geography degree for lack of economic support. She remembers:

Yeah, I have integrated well, I was at the praxe. I had my back injured, we were playing a game, and I went up and down some stairs, running, on my knees, and

my back started to hurt. And when I have back pain I have to take something. Otherwise I just fall to the floor and cannot move. And I asked them if I could take my pill, and showed it to them, and they did not let me. I cried with pain, but they did not care. On the next day there was the praxe, and I did not go, I stayed in bed. You know, there are some things in the university that... (goes silent and nods with a negative expression)

Other students are more critical towards these rituals and refuse to participate in them, declaring themselves anti-praxe. However this assertive attitude can have hard consequences. Marta, a 26-year-old student of Management and a borderline dropout, recalls that she had huge problems with integration in her first year:

There were two things that were very complicated in my adaptation here. The first was the fact that I did not enter the praxe rituals. That in my faculty...I don't know if it was because the information did not reach me, or I didn't look for it, but I felt like an outsider because I didn't align with the praxe. Then, I had no friends in my first year here.

When asked what role the praxe played in their integration, students are ambiguous. Lucas, a 20-year-old student of French Language in his 3rd year of studies, states that the praxe:

helped me to meet other people from my degree. At least to see them, and get visual contact. But not more than that. That bonding feeling, from belonging to a group...that does not exist in reality, it's a myth created around integration. I think this is not the best way to integrate someone. It's a way, but not the best.

Susana, a 23-year-old student of Psychology, observes that the students in the praxe are not really supportive outside the rituals:

There can be a lot of fun in their group, but after that, when one needs to count on them for other situations, they are not available ... So I wasn't in the rituals, I just used the suit in my first year, and after that no more, because I didn't identify with it. But it was a conscious decision. I have other ways to mark my passage here.

### **Extracurricular activities: bounded solidarity, reciprocity and the space of voice**

Unlike traditional integration rituals, extracurricular activities such as theatre, choirs, poetry clubs or student politics seem to foster institutional engagement, as students spend a longer time at the university on their own initiative, even when they have to accommodate this extra time with a part-time job. In that sense, data confirm Portuguese working-class students' preference for socially centred projects (Machado et al. 2003). Tiago, a final-year Law student, explains what activism means to him:

when I was in upper secondary, I was on a list for the student union. But after that that political vein went numb. Until I came here. ... There are people I have been working with since the beginning in Law that motivate me. People that actually want to change things. I grew a lot here as a citizen. Some people may think this is a bit limiting, but I think this helped me to open my eyes and to care about society.

Here the identification with common values described as bounded solidarity is visible, as is its translation into collective agency. For some students, participating in such activities provides room for the exploration of alternate selves necessary to build what is commonly termed “aspirations”; that is the ability to plan the future and project oneself in a meaningful fashion. Cátia, a 26-year-old student of Nursing, has been repeating every school year since her upper secondary. She has considered dropping out, but theatre has given her a reason to continue her studies. She justifies her decision to join student theatre thus:

I still think...I had theatre in upper secondary and I liked it a lot, this is where I got my best grade. And at the time I said, “Hey, maybe this is cool”. But I left it there. And later I remembered: “I need to try something. To know if I like it or not”. In the meantime, I developed this mechanism. To know if I like blue, I need to see blue first. It’s a bit like that, to know if I like caramel sundae, I need to taste it. And so, to know if I like theatre, I have to do it. ... I am at this stage in my life doing this, this mechanism. Twenty-six years old is a bit late, but I don’t blame anyone, its not worth it.

In Cátia’s case, theatre is allowing her to voice her long-held aspirations.

On the other hand, some students see participating in social activities from a pragmatic point of view: they are valued by the labour market, and thus they can be a plus once you finish your degree. Luis is a 20-year-old student of Physical Engineering. In his first year at university as a Physics freshman, he got burned out for studying too much and not getting the results he was used to. He decided to change his degree and compensates for not being the best in class with lots of social activity. As he explains:

I’m in the student union of my faculty, I’m the head of this students’ hall, I belong to a fraternity, I also have other responsibilities related to fraternities. ... This will help me a lot in my future, because as an engineer employers are looking less for people with good grades and more for people with entrepreneurial spirit.

Paulo, the first-year Law student, also considers engaging in the students’ union for curriculum purposes:

I’d like to join the students’ union of the whole university or just in my faculty. But for that I need to know more people, since I only know a few. They...it’s not exactly discrimination, maybe they don’t mean it, but the people who are not from the faculty discussion group are not supported. Those who rule in the faculty are always the same ones. So I have to be friends with them. ... I think it is nice for those who make it. For example, a few years ago, a student that was the president of the student union is now working in one of the biggest law firms in Lisbon. He participated in several demonstrations, maybe that is why he organised them, I don’t know. But it seems to be working out for people, to take responsibilities.

This approach resembles what Portes (2010) referred as reciprocity exchange, as the student invests time and energy anticipating later profit, though the latter is not guaranteed or specified. Students like Tiago, the final-year Law student, who are perhaps oriented towards other values, condemn such an attitude:

Many people who are here in student unions only care about themselves. They only care about the positions they will get, of their curriculum ... and if they do

not get what they want in a given project, either they get out of the project or they are there, they have their role but they do not do what they are supposed to do. And that is a shame, for me.

## Conclusion

Relations with peers do play a substantial role in a population considered vulnerable for their poor socio-economic background, as the previous data analysis confirms. However, it is necessary to stress that not all relations with peers are beneficial for these students, and that the quality of such relations must be considered. Traditional integration rituals as a strategy for socialisation forge relations based on domination and oppression, and should therefore be questioned as a valid integration method, as hardly anyone wishes to belong to a setting in which hostility is encouraged. On the other hand, activities such as those promoted by cultural clubs and political unions seem not only to promote belonging but also to enhance soft skills and contribute to the students' overall well-being. It is therefore necessary to distinguish forms of social capital that encourage representation and voice from others that are oppressive and diminishing. Universities as sites of knowledge creation foster often contradictory dynamics: if on one hand they demand respect for the scholarship and authority of those who came before, on the other hand they also thrive on critical thinking and on challenging the status quo. If both dynamics are to cohabit respectfully and participants are to flourish, individual freedom should be respected.

While fostering belonging in Portuguese universities is very much left to the students themselves, universities in general seem to profit from the "branding" and strengthening of institutional identity that activities such as the praxe and artistic groups promote. However, this negligence can work both ways, as many students can be demotivated and even afraid of showing up for courses because of the violence and humiliation certain practices entail, and on the other hand, artistic clubs and student unions risk disappearing for lack of explicit support.<sup>67</sup> Power hierarchies among students cannot be left unchecked, as they can cause further inequalities inside and outside the institutional setting. In that sense, and in the absence of a clearly defined strategy for promoting institutional engagement, it is necessary for both activities to be closely monitored, namely by informing students about their rights in the case of hazings, and of the other options for institutional engagement at their disposal, such as those provided by student organisations, that can also enrich a student's curriculum. Extracurricular activities can build institutional attractiveness and community, as long as its procedure dignifies the students, and their participation is not coercive. Otherwise, institutions should be ready for the unintended consequences that occur when cultural traditions are imposed on students at any cost rather than being adopted and adapted by them.

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67. See the recent case of a university theatre group performing a play in the dark for lack of funds to pay the electricity bill, available at [www.sol.pt/noticia/87293](http://www.sol.pt/noticia/87293).

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## Chapter 22

# The quality of representation of international students in higher education governance: a case study of the German Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein and its higher education institutions

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*Laura Asarite and Sophie Wulk*

### **Abstract**

The chapter explores the quality of representation of international students in university governance and questions to what extent international students have the chance to influence and shape the institutional structures of their host universities. In the form of an exploratory case study, the chapter looks at the federal *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein in Germany and its universities in Flensburg, Kiel and Lübeck to shed light on possible changes in the participatory dimension of higher education institutions. Judging from six semi-structured interviews conducted with international student representatives from the three universities, it appears that international students are engaged in cultural and social associations at universities but are not really involved in university governance. The interviews have brought to the fore some possible explanations. They raised a number of questions which should be analysed further: what role do the linguistic, social and political differences between host and home societies play in the lack of democratic participation of international students? What part does the policy in place play? Considering the low electoral turnout and sparse participation of students in university governance in Germany, how far might the prevailing democratic structures and processes at universities generally be in need of an overhaul?

**Keywords:** university governance; internationalisation; international students; student representation; student unions; Germany (Schleswig-Holstein)

## Introduction

International students make up a growing share of the student body at higher education institutions worldwide. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the number of students enrolled in tertiary education in a foreign country rose from 2 million in 2000 to at least 3.6 million students in 2010: an increase of 78% (UNESCO 2012). Student mobility across countries and continents is not “just” occurring but is actively promoted by stakeholders of the economic, political and educational realm. This mobility is not without consequences for the student body. The students’ different nationalities bring with them societal, cultural and linguistic diversity. Moreover, foreign students are less familiar with the institutional set-up and functioning of their host universities, and are less acquainted with the political, social and cultural system the university is embedded in. Therefore, it appears that international students have particular needs and interests. As a result, driving this research is the question as to how far international students have the opportunity to make their concerns and interests heard at the university. Can and do they influence or shape university structures? Are they equitably represented in democratic university structures? To what extent are international students acknowledged members of the student body?

Detailed research is needed on the representation and participation of international students in university governance. Such a point of departure requires an exploration of the field. Accordingly, this chapter presents the findings of an exploratory case study of the higher education landscape of the federal *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein in Germany. It investigates the quality and nature of representation of international students at the universities of Flensburg, Kiel and Lübeck. The study attempts to find out if and how growing internationalisation has influenced the respective universities’ governance structures. An explorative case study brings with it methodological limitations. The purpose of this chapter is thus not to provide insights that are generally applicable but to identify patterns of representation as a basis for further investigation.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the call for the internationalisation of higher education institutions is put in a historical and political context. Second, the actual level of internationalisation of higher education institutions is considered, in order to then discuss the case of Germany in general and the federal *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein in particular. The third part focuses on the quality and nature of international student representation and participation at the universities in question. This will allow the drawing of conclusions for further research within the study area in question.

### **The political dimensions of the internationalisation of higher education institutions: the European and German perspective**

The internationalisation of higher education institutions has become a widely accepted and highly encouraged objective in nearly all parts of the world. It is considered essential for the overall objective of enhancing global competitiveness and attractiveness and is perceived to contribute to the solution of global challenges.

Such internationalisation has not only been fostered by governments or businesses but also universities themselves, which have long co-operated with each other. Even in the Middle Ages, universities formed stable systems of their own across political, often conflict-ridden, borders: “in spite of the hatreds between peoples, there was above all the frontiers a European alliance of all the superior schools, a something like the United States of universities” (Campayre 2009: 78). The search for reason does not halt before political borders.

In more recent times, universities have been forerunners in institutionalising international co-operation. In 1988, at the festivities marking the 900th anniversary of the founding of the University of Bologna, 430 university leaders signed the Magna Charta Universitatum Europaeum in which they expressed the desire to enhance co-operation among European universities. Eleven years later, another political agreement was signed by the Ministers of Education: the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Process 1999).

According to a membership consultation of the EUA of 2013, internationalisation has been identified as a crucial strategy by most institutions of higher education. About half (56%) of all respondents indicate that their institution has an internationalisation strategy already in place, whereas almost one third (30%) argues that they consider internationalisation within other strategies (EUA, 2013b: 7). When looking more closely at the strategies, it seems that the most common goal is to attract more international students as 30% of institutions identify this approach as their principle strategy (EUA, 2013b: 10).

Universities have been crucial drivers of their own internationalisation. Political stakeholders have been pushing for a focus on higher education and its internationalisation for economic purposes since the late 1980s. At the European level the ambition for internationalisation of higher education was expressed clearly in Delors’ “White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment” (European Commission 1993). Accordingly, education and training were to play an important role in “the emergence of a new development model in the Community” (idem: 133). Such perspective was stressed in the preamble of the Amsterdam Treaty, aiming “[...] to promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for their peoples” (EU 1997). The Lisbon European Council then confirmed this ambition and defined the strategic objective for the European Union “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (European Council 2000: point 5). Knowledge and with it education and training was regarded as the principal asset with which to successfully tackle global competitive and domestic social problems. The follow-up strategy, “Europe 2020” reaffirmed that co-operation in this field across borders was pivotal for driving forward the economic revitalisation and growth of the internal market (Council of the European Union, 2009).

Matching the ambitions expressed by the representatives of the EU, the Bologna Process, outside this supranational framework, was initiated in 1999 by 29 states as a voluntary and intergovernmental agreement. By now 47 states have committed to the objective of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The mutual recognition of study programmes, degrees and periods of study abroad lie at the core of the

agreement. The aim has been to achieve a coherent area of higher education for the purposes of mobility, employability and the global attractiveness/competitiveness as well as quality of European higher education (EHEA, 2010).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, education had thus become recognised as an essential economic factor at the political level, which served the purpose of economic growth and allowing for job creation, with the overall goal of securing global economic competitiveness. Moreover, education had to have both a European and an international focus in order to tackle global competitive pressures.

## Higher education in Germany and internationalisation

Germany has long committed to internationalisation in higher education. In the EU, only the United Kingdom attracts more international students than Germany (Eurostat 2013). In winter term 2012/13 around 2.5 million students studied at German universities, whereas the share of international students was 11.2% (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013: 6). The foreign students are rather unevenly distributed amongst the federal *Länder*. For example, North Rhine-Westphalia, the largest federal state of Germany with a population of 17.8 million, hosts the largest share of students overall (25% of all students of Germany) and also quite a share of Germany's international students (22%). In North Rhine-Westphalia, 7.9% of the students are thus international students. In contrast, a *Land* such as Mecklenburg-Vorpommern with a rather small population of 1.6 million, hosts only a small proportion of students overall (1.8% of all students in Germany) and even fewer international students (1.1% of all international students in Germany). Hence, 6.2% of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern's students are foreign. In contrast, although the Saarland, also a small *Land* with a population below 1 million, hosts only 1.1% of Germany's students, it hosts 1.8% of all international students. Thus 14.5% of the students studying in the Saarland are foreign (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013). Hence, total student numbers and the composition of the student body vary significantly among the federal *Länder*. Many factors such as the geographical location, the degree of urbanisation, territorial size, economic structures, demographic composition and historical background influence these outcomes.

When analysing Germany's higher education landscape it is important to bear in mind that it is not only student numbers and their composition that vary among the federal *Länder* but also the governments that are responsible for higher education policy. Also crucial is the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz), the representative organisation of German institutions of higher education, which commonly defined the objective of internationalisation in 2008 (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz 2008). It was, however, only in April 2013 that a nationwide resolution for the internationalisation of higher education was agreed on by the 16 ministers responsible as a means to develop their profile, ensure quality development and assurance, and drive higher education reform. A major aim of internationalisation is to ensure that Germany maintains its key position as a centre for science and research in the world (Joint Science Conference 2013).

The key advantages of the internationalisation of higher education, as identified by the ministers, are enhanced attractiveness, competitiveness and the mastering of global

challenges. Promoting the international mobility of students and staff is considered a priority. The aim is also to enhance the international mobility of German students and for that purpose, to ensure the recognition of course and examination credits gained abroad. A specific aim is to raise the number of international students in Germany by one third. In order to accommodate international students, the ministers consider it important to train staff in foreign languages and intercultural skills and to encourage them to participate in mobility schemes. Another aim is to encourage and support institutions of higher education to establish internationally oriented, transnational and intercultural study programmes. Acknowledging the potential brought in by international students and staff, the institutions are encouraged to further attract international researchers as well as international research co-operation. All in all, mobility and international co-operation is considered to be of vital importance for the global competitiveness of universities as well as for Germany as a whole, and a variety of methods may be employed to this end.

In order to realise this strategy, the *Länder* will receive support from the national level and the respective national agencies and organisations. One important national agency here is the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service). It offers scholarships for students and researchers to study in Germany and for Germans to go abroad. It also supports international co-operation of researchers, universities and others.

As can be seen, internationalisation in Germany is visibly driven both by representatives of higher education and the political realm. How then is the concrete situation of internationalisation in Schleswig-Holstein?

### **Embracing internationalisation? The university landscape in Schleswig-Holstein**

With a population of 2.8 million, the northernmost *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein is rather sparsely populated. It remains structurally weak with only two large cities, Kiel and Lübeck, and a comparatively large number of employees still working in the agricultural sector. It has 16 institutions of higher education with approximately 55 000 students as of winter term 2012/2013, comprising 2.2% of all students in Germany. Three are universities in the German understanding of the term: the University of Flensburg, the University of Kiel and the University of Lübeck. Together, they host a total of 32 209 students as of winter term 2012/2013 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013: 32). The institutions vary widely in size, both with regards to student numbers and academic disciplines covered. The University of Kiel had 24 222 students enrolled during winter term 2012/13, the University of Flensburg hosted a total of 4 642 students, and the University of Lübeck had 3 345 students (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013). The University of Kiel conducts research and teaching across the entire spectrum of academic disciplines. In contrast, the University of Flensburg concentrates mainly on teachers' education and management studies and the University of Lübeck focuses on medical and computer sciences.

The *Land* of Schleswig-Holstein has not developed its own internationalisation strategy for its higher education institutions. The universities themselves do not have separate internationalisation strategies either, but refer to internationalisation as an objective

in other existing documents. To support and enhance internationalisation, all three universities have an International Centre in place. Amongst others, the International Centres manage the university's international partnerships, offer language courses and intercultural training, put forward programmes to integrate international students and support local students in the realisation of their study-related stays abroad. They are therefore crucial supporters of internationalisation at the universities.

From 2008 to 2012, total student numbers enrolled at universities in Schleswig-Holstein have risen by 14%. On the other hand the number of international students has risen, over the same period, only by 8%. In winter term 2012/13, 7.7% of all students studying here were foreign students (Statistisches Bundesamt 2013). As becomes clear, Schleswig-Holstein's universities, hosting approximately 1.4% of all international students studying in Germany, have not only few students overall, but also a low share of international students in contrast to the rest of Germany. Schleswig-Holstein is second last in terms of absolute numbers of international students, followed by Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (*ibid.*). However, in order to understand the situation in detail it is necessary to look at each of the three universities separately.

The University of Flensburg, Germany's northernmost university, was established in 1946 as a teacher's college (*pädagogische Hochschule*) and attained university status only in 1994. With its profile in teacher education the university's international profile has remained rather low. An exception has been the co-operation with the neighbouring university in Sønderborg, Denmark, which is ongoing since 1993. The universities offer joint and dual degrees, and maintain an exchange of lecturers. Active attempts at internationalisation are rather a recent phenomenon but appear to have taken large steps fostered both by the university leaders and by the government coalition of the *Land*, which has expressed a desire to transform the University of Flensburg into a *Europa-Hochschule* (Landesregierung Schleswig-Holstein 2012: 19).

Of the 4 828 students enrolled at the University of Flensburg in winter term 2013/14, approximately 7.2% are international students. Within the past decade the number of international students has risen steadily; in autumn 2005, only 4.9% of the students enrolled here were international students. International students mostly come from Turkey, Azerbaijan, Denmark and Russia. By far the most international programme is the Master's in European Studies, making up for almost half of all international students at the university in winter term 2013/14.

The University of Kiel is Schleswig-Holstein's oldest university, founded in 1666, and with more than 24 000 students it also the biggest university in Schleswig-Holstein. It had 1 867 international students enrolled during the winter term 2013/14, a share of 7.8%. Most international students come from China, Turkey and Russia (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel 2014). With regards to internationalisation, a recent innovation has been the Fund for Internationalisation (Internationalisierungs-Fonds) introduced in 2013. It aims at furthering international visibility and reputation, the framework conditions for international partnerships and mobility, and the internationalisation of the course offer. The University of Kiel offers several study programmes in English (Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel 2014).

The University of Lübeck was originally established as a medical academy and as a branch of the University of Kiel in 1964. It gained full university status in 1985. It

currently has about 3 300 students. As of winter term 2013/14, 275 international students were enrolled here, a share of 8.3%. Most international students come from Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Nepal. The University of Lübeck offers two different programmes taught in English – Biomedical Engineering and Infection Biology (Universität zu Lübeck 2014).

All in all, although scoring low when comparing numbers of international students with other universities and *Länder* in Germany, Schleswig-Holstein and its three universities host a significant number of international students. Their rights to participation in university governance should be taken into consideration. The next part of this chapter will investigate the situation by paying attention to the governance bodies at the institutions of higher education in Schleswig-Holstein.

### **International students in university governance: the case of Schleswig-Holstein**

The structures allowing students a voice in university governance in Germany differ slightly across the *Länder*. In principle, however, student interests are represented by three bodies: the student parliament (*Studierendenparlament* or StuPa) as legislative organ, the student government (*Allgemeiner Studierenden-Ausschuss* or AStA) as executive and the representatives of the different faculties (*Fachschaften*). StuPAs and *Fachschaften* are directly elected by the student body. AStAs are then elected by StuPas. Taking into consideration the crucial role of this body in university governance, the growing internationalisation of education in Schleswig-Holstein is explored here through AStAs.

In Schleswig-Holstein, AStAs have reacted to internationalisation by setting up sub-committees dealing with international affairs. Their task is to integrate international students into the host university and the local environment. They are also meant to represent the interests of international students. According to an interviewee at the University of Flensburg, the international unit of the AStA there supports international students in promoting their cultures and traditions. It helps to organise (inter)cultural events, supporting such activities financially and logistically. Further, the unit translates university documents to make them more accessible to international students. According to the official information provided, the units for international affairs of the AStAs at the other two universities have similar goals (Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss Christian-Albrechts Universität zu Kiel 2014; Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss der Universität zu Lübeck 2014). In order to grasp the quality of representation of international students in university governance in Schleswig-Holstein, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of these committees, dealing in particular with international affairs.

The main finding of the six interviews conducted was that although the structures for engagement and participation are equally open to international students as they are for German students, meaning that international students have full rights to vote and to run for elections for all three bodies of student representation, their engagement in university governance remains very low. In the framework of this study, the interviews sought to shed light on the reasons underlying abstention from university governance and to identify other possible ways of representation used by international students.

One recurring answer from the interviewees at all universities to the question of why international students abstain from elections was that the working language of these bodies is German. It is further argued that the rather complicated election documents, which are only available in German, keep international students from partaking in the voting procedures. Thus, in the eyes of the interviewees, language proficiency plays an essential role and remains a barrier of entry and participation for international students.

Another factor identified by the interviewees is the difference in the political and university cultures of home and host societies. This was highlighted by the representatives from Kiel and Lübeck as a reason for non-participation. Further, as claimed by the interviewees, the issues dealt with by AStAs are not of high relevance for international students residing in Germany for a limited period of time. The interviewee at Kiel added that bureaucratic structures – the formalities and complex procedures involved in university governance and voting at German universities – keep international students from getting actively involved. The fact that international students can in principle participate in university democracy led the interviewees to argue that the system of student representation does not require any changes. However, the interviews show that the bodies representing student interests at universities in Schleswig-Holstein do not provide international students with extra information about their role and functioning or about ways to get engaged. Hence, as the interviewee at Kiel stressed, international students are mostly unaware of the ways they can influence university governance, and do not necessarily know their rights and options for engagement.

While the interviewees at all universities agree that more information could be provided to international students about university governance and the role of the student representation, they underline that the more pressing problem is the generally low participation in elections by all students. For example, only 18.5% of all students participated in StuPa elections at the University of Kiel in 2013 (Studierendenparlament Christian-Albrechts Universität Kiel 2013). In the same year, participation in the elections was below 10% at the University of Flensburg (Schleswig-Holsteinischer Zeitungsverlag 2013) and around 29.26% for the StuPa at the University of Lübeck (Studierendenparlament Universität zu Lübeck 2013).

In this regard, the low participation and engagement of international students in university governance is not perceived as particularly problematic. One argument made by the four interviewees at the University of Lübeck is that since the overall number of international students is low at around 270 (8.3% of around 3 300 students overall), having only one representative at StuPa is not necessarily a sign of under-representation. Furthermore, the single interviewee at the University of Flensburg argues that actually, international students are well represented at the university via alternative channels of representation. Direct involvement of international students in the StuPa or AStA is substituted by organisation within their programmes and support from the International Centre. The interviewee stresses that the latter substantially helps international students in solving their problems at the university level. The needs and interests of international students are thus channelled through the International Centre, which then addresses the issues at the relevant level at the university. Also, the interviewees in Lübeck argue that international students have found alternative ways to the existing governance structures to represent their

interests and take them up at the university. The most active in providing support for international students here is Lübecker Internationales Studierenden Tutorium (LIST, the association of international students). This association, according to the interviewees, not only defends the interests of international students at the university level, while organising events and providing a forum for networking, but is also a significant mediator between the university's AStA and the international students.

Besides these organs through which international students organise themselves or find a point of contact for their concerns, according to the interviewees at the University of Kiel and the University of Lübeck, international students are quite active in associations organised according to countries of origin or along cultural lines. One can identify a number of such associations at both Lübeck (e.g. the Association of African Students, the Association of Chinese Students and Scientists, the Association for Integration of International Students) (Universität zu Lübeck 2014) and Kiel (e.g. international student groups organised for specific nationalities such as Cameroonians, Indians, Koreans, Russians, Chinese, Pakistanis and Ukrainians) (Christian-Albrechts Universität zu Kiel 2014). At the University of Flensburg, international students have the opportunity to organise events to portray their cultures and traditions to a wider audience. These events are primarily organised by the International Centre or supported by the international unit of the AStA. All in all, these associations are without doubt valuable for the visibility of international students. It nevertheless has to be stressed that they do not represent means of direct influence on university structures and thus do not grant international students a voice in the democratic processes of the university. As it stands, the student representatives interviewed did not perceive this as problematic, as overall, "the priority is not to have them in different committees, but rather that they are integrated" (Interviewee, University of Lübeck). It is interesting to note that it seems social integration has priority over political participation, which also stands for integration.

Although international students, formally, have the same rights as German students, they are mostly not represented in university governance in Schleswig-Holstein. From the interviews it appears that the lack of information, different social and political socialisations, and language issues are crucial barriers to the full political integration of international students in university governance. Instead, international students are culturally represented at universities, with a clear focus of the existing bodies on their social integration. Comparing these findings with the political strategies, one can detect a certain parallel. Here the focus has been laid primarily on attracting more international students, researchers and staff and creating a welcoming culture. It appears that making students feel comfortable is the goal that is pursued. There is room for improvement, however, in making international students full members of the university student body. A key aspect here would be to introduce them to the standard dynamics, functions and means of engagement at German universities.

## Conclusion

Internationalisation of higher education is promoted in the EU as a whole as well as in individual member states. In Germany, commitment to internationalisation has been expressed both by the universities and by the Ministers of Research. The degree of internationalisation varies greatly among the federal *Länder*. Schleswig-Holstein

represents a rather rural and economically less developed *Land*. It has a small student population and scores very low on internationalisation. The analysis has shown that all three universities of Schleswig-Holstein have been embracing internationalisation in similar ways – through international co-operation, encouraging the international mobility of students, researchers and staff, and by hosting students and staff from different countries. International Centres have been established in particular to accommodate international students and to manage internationalisation in general. AStAs support these ambitions and it seems that a large proportion of international students are engaged in international clubs or country associations which focus on visibility of culture, language and tradition. However, international students seem not to be politically involved at their universities. Despite their diverging needs and interests, their engagement in university governance is limited. Possible reasons explaining this cultural assertiveness but political passiveness include low language proficiency, differences in political and educational systems between home and host countries, the complexity of the democratic procedures involved, a lack of information tailored to international students as well as the fact that international students are less interested in the issues their AStA is dealing with to accommodate the majority of the student body.

It appears that the measures introduced to enhance internationalisation suit primarily social and cultural integration and serve the visibility of international students with the aim of encouraging further international mobility and exchange. The politics of internationalisation focus more on creating a culture of welcome than on introducing international students to the system of university governance. However, this is essential in order to make international students full members of the student body with a distinct voice. Stimulating understanding of the system of university governance among international students appears crucial to fully embrace internationalisation at higher education institutions. Considering the overall lack of participation in elections and student representation bodies, university governance needs to be brought to even broader attention. All in all, in seeking to answer the question posed by this chapter – how has growing internationalisation influenced the respective universities' governance structures? – it is possible to observe a significant discrepancy. On the one hand, the universities are calling for more internationalisation. On the other, the universities' governance structures have not changed in order to fully integrate international students into the system.

The patterns of representation identified in the course of this explorative study shed light in particular on three issues that deserve further academic analysis. First, there is the question of cultural associations and International Centres as a means of informal influence. To what extent and how can these bodies exert influence and shape university structures? Second, considering that the case study at hand was concerned with a university landscape marked by small universities and low internationalisation, the question remains as to how far universities with a higher number or higher share of international students and a longer history of internationalisation have succeeded in improving the quality of representation of international students. Finally, further investigation is needed into the perspective of the international students themselves. By conducting interviews with international students, their actual level of knowledge and awareness of university governance, and motives for non-participation, could be identified. This would also help to develop possible solutions to enhance their participation.

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## Chapter 23

# Student unions and British popular music culture

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*Paul Long*

### **Abstract**

This chapter examines how students, as a definable group, have been integral to popular music cultures and the economy of the music industries in the United Kingdom. It considers the current scope of student engagement with popular music and aspects of the historical emergence of popular music programming in universities. This approach is used to identify the specific character of the relationship between students and the culture and business of popular music. A final section considers issues arising from this survey, of the value of student culture for universities and localities, concluding with some questions regarding this activity in the context of contemporary higher education in the United Kingdom. The chapter suggests that the business and culture of popular music on campus is pertinent to thinking about students in terms of their engagements and identities as well as their expectations, opportunities and experiences of higher education beyond the lecture hall.

**Keywords:** higher education; student experience; student unions; popular culture; student culture; music culture; music industry; student extracurricular activities; United Kingdom

## Introduction

As the geographer Paul Chatterton has argued, the economic impact of universities has received much analysis, yet there has been little attempt to account for the various ways in which such institutions play a part in the wider cultural life of society (Chatterton 2000: 169).<sup>68</sup> However, the university can be considered alongside such institutions as museums, orchestras or theatre companies for the part they have played in building national identity as well as cultural hierarchies and distinctions. While this role is certainly in need of consideration in terms of the nature of the formalised activities of the institution – in curricula, research or knowledge exchange, for instance – it is the cultural life of students that is in focus here. In particular, this chapter explores the role of higher education students in the popular music cultures of the United Kingdom, through the organisational auspices of their unions, and beyond the space of the university to local relations between “town and gown”.

Alongside those who have attended to the impact of students on locale (Allinson 2006; Munro and Livingston 2012) and their place in the “night-time economy” (Hollands 2002), Chatterton’s work is a valuable prompt for explorations of the relations of unions and popular music in commercial and cultural terms. For instance, Chatterton has explored how the University of Bristol’s investment in the Anson Rooms venue and nightclub represents a contemporary commercialisation of student union activities. This kind of organisation and engagement with the business of music – with business *per se* – invites investigation of its historical emergence and development. As I have argued elsewhere (Long 2011), in popular music studies or indeed in the literature of the music business – in press reviews of concerts, tour news or even on live recordings, for instance – the university or student union (the distinction is not always clear) usually appears as little more than a taken-for-granted site for performance. There has been little systematic reflection on the value and character of this sector of live music activity, of how such sites emerged as venues, of why popular music was performed in such places at all. After all, if the traditional role of the university aimed at nurturing the selective tradition of high culture and the cultural capital of both graduates and institution, this was predicated at a distance from the kinds of popular music that have been successfully serviced by many unions.

In the context of this volume, exploration of the business and culture of popular music on campus is pertinent too for thinking about students in terms of their engagements and identities, as well as their expectations, opportunities and experiences of higher education beyond the lecture hall, and indeed in relation to perceptions of the contemporary character of education. In proceeding, then, I will first consider the current scope of student engagement with popular music. Then I will consider the historical emergence of popular music programming in universities, outlining aspects of the specific character of the relationship between students and the culture and business of popular music. Finally, I will turn to issues arising from this survey, of the value of student culture for universities and localities, concluding with some questions regarding this activity in the context of contemporary higher education in the United Kingdom.

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68. As the editors of this volume have pointed out to me, in the US context, the work of the Anchor Institutions Task Force should be acknowledged for its consideration of this issue (see [www.margainc.com/initiatives/aitf](http://www.margainc.com/initiatives/aitf), accessed 9 October 2014).

## Student engagement with the business of popular music

Classical recitals, of the kind produced by schools of music for instance, attest to the kind of repertoire that informs the high cultural role of universities. In contrast, at least until relatively recently, popular music provision has taken place largely as a result of the entrepreneurial activities of individuals, often within the structure of the student union: “a self-governing community with a committee and officers elected by the student body to represent their views and concerns to the University authorities and the outside world” (Mathers 2007: 1). Here, “student union” describes both the organisational body as well as on-campus spaces where, amongst other things, leisure activities such as music concerts take place under the auspices of the “Entertainments Officer” or “Social Secretary”.

Historically, such positions have not been afforded the benefit of sabbatical leave although the increasing complexity of student union business and the formalities of events organisation demand expertise and attention to the role liable to compromise devotion to full-time study. By way of illustration, an outline of the duties of role from the Falmouth and Exeter Students’ Union (FXU) informs prospective candidates that they will:

represent and campaign on students’ interests with particular regard to FXU events, entertainments and social activities ... increase student involvement with FXU events and support groups of students in arranging their own activities and events... ensure that FXU events reflect the needs of the student body and to ensure a planned programme of events throughout the year ... assess applications for financial support and ensure that regular student-led social activities and events are planned and delivered within agreed budgets ... input into the planning and delivery of the Freshers’ programme 2015 ... undertake training as required to fulfil your role (Falmouth and Exeter Student Union 2014).

Individuals in such positions do gain support and training from the NUS. This is the body that currently offers advice, co-ordination and organisational weight to 600 affiliated unions, representing approximately 98% of all students in the UK. Around five million individuals are entitled to hold cards issued by the NUS that identify them as students (of this number, 2.5 million students were studying with UK higher education institutions in 2011/12).<sup>69</sup>

Such cards identify holders as part of a local union’s constituency and, while not all institutions programme live music or have the facilities to do so, the size of the student population underlines the economic potential of this group as an object of interest for music and other industries. This interest is registered by the fact that cards allow holders to take advantage of concessions that are often negotiated for the collective by the NUS or offered independently and locally by retailers, restaurants or nightclubs and music venues as a means of engaging with this sizeable market. In terms of music in the UK, this engagement is well organised: there is an established culture and infrastructure of venues and indeed a touring circuit for professional (and semi-professional) bands across the higher education sector. Consider the city

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69. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), available at [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk), and the NUS, available at [www.nus.org.uk/en/About-NUS](http://www.nus.org.uk/en/About-NUS), both accessed 9 October 2014.

of Manchester: it has three universities with a combined student population of over 70 000 – the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University and the Royal Northern College of Music – and facilities concentrated along a main road south of the city centre. The union of the University of Manchester runs three venues within the university complex under the “Manchester Academy” brand. As stated on the union website: “You’ll be hard pressed to think of any major music act which has not passed through our venues. From Foo Fighters to Kylie, we’ve had them all”. The three venues allow the provision “of gigs that range from the up-close-and-personal to 2,500 fans sharing the big gig experience. A few times a year we even combine all the venues and put on massive events for up to 5,000 students”<sup>70</sup>

The University of Manchester union venues are not to be confused with the many outlets of the same name owned by the Academy Music Group (AMG), “the UK’s leading owner and operator of nationwide live music and club venues” (Masson 2010: 8). Nonetheless, the name or brand “Academy” is full of connotations around the association of music venues with student audiences. The name signals that AMG sites are built to high standards and indicates the studious, serious approach to the music one is liable to find there – an issue related to the quality of student audiences, which is dealt with below. It is important then, that in 2007, AMG expanded its portfolio when it took over the promotion of union venues at the universities of Liverpool and Hertfordshire and later, in 2010, took on Bournemouth student union’s Old Fire Station. As AMG chief executive John Northcote said on this expansion, “Students are a core part of our market so this makes complete sense for us” (quoted in Masson 2010: 8). He revealed that such deals work on a profit-share basis with student unions retaining their existing staff and AMG bringing in commercial expertise to attract more live music. Liverpool’s Guild offers a prime city centre site with a pedigree as it has hosted concerts in its main Mountford Hall since 1965. Hertfordshire’s Forum was part of that university’s £38 million redevelopment and is operated in tandem with the student union and AMG.<sup>71</sup> Such operations are paralleled elsewhere in the higher education sector: the University of Lancaster’s student union has invested in the town centre nightclub Sugarhouse while the aforementioned Anson Rooms are run by Bristol University’s union.

## **The origins of student union music promotions: a cultural change**

The professional, corporate ambition evinced on the websites of these union ventures can be counterpoised with the emergent character and origins of student promotions of popular music in order to understand the continuities and changes to student culture that they represent. While there is historical evidence of dances, swing concerts, balls and classical recitals in the archives of student newspapers which provide the resources for this kind of research, the concerted development of student promotions is one that marks the progress of the post-war “bulge” in

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70. See <http://manchesterstudentsunion.com/top-navigation/shops-venues/academy-gig-venues>, accessed 9 October 2014.

71. See [http://britishdesign.ru/content/uh\\_eng](http://britishdesign.ru/content/uh_eng), accessed 1 December 2013.

the population (Marwick 1998: 59-60). This group reached maturity in the 1960s, its presence and activities defining ideas of youth culture and contributing to the post-war consumer boom. Indeed a significant proportion were serviced by the growth in the provision of higher education in the UK.

Reviews and the recollections and memories of those in higher education and the music industries in the 1960s and 1970s reveal how music programming in student unions was unevenly organised and experienced – by artists and audiences. It was largely down to social secretaries with either a passion for music, entrepreneurial zeal, or both, who explored and established the manner in which unions could become venues. Some of these figures went on to establish themselves as professionals in the field, responding to the changing nature of the music business and wider entertainment world in the 1960s and in part coming to define it. Terry Ellis, Newcastle University, who founded Chrysalis records with Chris Wright, began booking bands in the mid-1960s. In his biography, Wright records the scale of the enterprise he was involved in at Manchester University:

Largely due to the rapidly changing nature of the live music business that the sixties ushered in, being social secretary at a university the size of Manchester soon became a major undertaking. We had to come up with serious money to pay the emerging groups. So it was, as a student aged just 20, I was becoming one of the biggest music promoters in the country. Nobody else appeared to be doing what we were doing (Wright 2013: 19).

Of course, others were doing the same kind of thing. Harvey Goldsmith, most famous perhaps for aiding in the organisation of Live Aid, was a pharmacy student at the Brighton College of Technology from 1965, where he founded a music club and venue for students. As Simon Frith et al. relate:

Following his success as a student rep and Rag Chairman, Goldsmith became social secretary for the college as a whole, booking bands and developing contracts with London agencies ... He also started booking acts outside the college, creating his own Kangaroo Club and using existing Brighton venues like the Metropol (Frith et al. 2013: 193).

Such figures forged their own way into relationships with the music business, drawing the attention of agents and labels to the potential of the student market. At the same time, on a highly individualised basis, they were exploring the nature of such work and the possibilities of organising music concerts within, and sometimes testing and redefining, the remit of the student union.

During the 1970s, the developing nature of the role of entertainments officer or social secretary was recognised and supported by individual unions and the NUS in its co-ordinating role as a means of properly satisfying the demand for live music among students. For instance, prompted by the enterprise and success of Barry Lucas, whose endeavours paralleled those of Goldsmith and Wright, the union at Lancaster University began to employ full-time staff in order to deal with the demand for entertainments and the exigencies of live music programming (Steps 2009). The NUS developed aids such as manuals on contracts, budgeting, programming policy, event logistics and health and safety matters. This rationalisation was also a means of accommodating the attention from the music industry, which increasingly recognised

the particular value and function of union venues and the market opportunity they represented. In one briefing (circa 1974), developed for the benefit of social secretaries, Pete Ashby of the NUS Executive outlined the potential dangers of dealing with the music business. These included rapacious agencies and managers who approached unions with high-pressure sales tactics that, when things went wrong (as they were sometimes prone to do), could lead to overreaching available budgets or even being prosecuted for breach of contract. Ashby warned that the social secretary was likely to lack experience, with little time to monitor finances or even for consideration of audience taste and demand. More dangerous, the entertainments officer might be tempted to compete for acts with other unions, leading to price inflation and unions subsidising concert costs rather than attempting to at least break even or make a small profit to replenish coffers (Ashby, n.d.).

## **The business model and cultural space of the student union**

The mention of subsidies highlights the particular nature of student unions as distinct businesses when compared to other venues and promotions in the music sector. This is demonstrated by the case of Manchester's student union, which receives in-kind and direct financial support of £1 413 000 from the university (University of Manchester 2012: 33). Unions are durable businesses wherein the need to generate incomes and sustain business is offset by subsidies as well as the fact that they own their own venues, often equipped with in-house Public Address and lighting equipment – all representing a fixed cost, albeit one in need of upkeep and occasional renewal. The costs of hiring bands for events, as well as paying students (or other employees) staffing venues, are offset by income from ticket prices (concerts are rarely free), bar takings where licensed to sell alcohol and, indeed, all the other trading activities in any union. Thus unions, as well as the personal finances or reputations of entertainments officers themselves, are rarely exposed to risk in the same manner as entrepreneurs or bespoke venues in the private sector. The subsidised, low-risk nature of student business has meant that union spaces can support artists of various ranks who demand a negotiated flat fee or may be offered a percentage of what is taken in ticket prices on the door. Sometimes, acts may play under informal conditions and are paid out of a collection from the audience rather in the manner of street entertainers or “buskers” as they are known in the UK.

This low-risk environment is key to understanding the cultural qualities of union venues, as it has enabled entertainments officers to experiment with programming policy in innovative ways. Ostensibly obliged to serve the tastes and expectations of the wider student body (to whom they may have made promises in order to gain office where elected), officers have also been able to follow their muse and personal preferences, as their own capital is not at risk. While no individual with such responsibilities who is beholden to a wider organisational structure can be completely ignorant of audience demands, the social secretary operating as cultural entrepreneur has been aided by an assumption that the student body is likely to have enlightened tastes. This assumption allows for occasional experimentation in the music offered – a quality that reflects back to the audience members a sense of their own status as members of a wider learning community. An indication of how unions have offered a liberal environment for music programming can be

garnered for instance from the roster of performances at Manchester Academy, the website of which provides an extensive list of acts who have appeared there from 1963 to the present day.<sup>72</sup> These are dominated by the emergent forms of rock that appeared at the end of the 1960s, the “progressive” bands and punks of the 1970s, and “alternative” acts often associated with the independent label boom into the 1980s (Hesmondhalgh 1999). This variety might best be encapsulated by the label of “college rock”, that elastic genre that characterises the programming of venues and dedicated radio stations at US universities (Wall 2007).

Historically, the liberal environment created by the presence of students in their social space has served the music industry as a testing ground for new bands and has sustained whole genres with limited large-scale commercial prospects. As Sarah Thornton has noted, in the 1980s, unions hosted a large proportion of “middle-sized gigs” and “college students now make up the bulk of the audience for live popular music and the live circuit is heavily dominated by a few subgenres, like alternative rock and indie music” (Thornton 1995: 48). Union spaces can thus be considered to offer performers (and thus the music industries that support them) what in cultural studies is described as a “quality” audience whose receptiveness and discernment is open to new experience (McCabe 2005). Constituted as private members’ clubs, unions have also been able to police the “quality” of the audience by limiting entry to those already holding NUS cards or using a system by which visitors are required to register or “sign in” supported by a card-holding sponsor. Of course, the character of interlopers in union audiences has been nurtured by the kinds of bands programmed, which are likely to appeal to the informed or culturally adventurous. This situation has the potential to introduce local scene-makers and students to each other, so aiding interaction.

## **Beyond the union: students and the wider cultural landscape**

One should not overstate the restricted aspect of the union environment, as it is certainly the policy of commercially ambitious unions such as those collaborating with AMG, for instance, to expand audiences by removing traditional restrictions. As Northcote suggested on the occasion of the company’s liaison with Liverpool and Hertfordshire: “Many students’ unions are ideally located but currently under-utilised resources. Our proposal involves taking over the diary to bring in bands and club nights to provide high-quality entertainment for both the student and non-student market” (quoted in Masson 2010: 8). Of course, students with all of their cultural appurtenances constitute an important part of the audience for live music in any locale beyond the union. As soon as new cohorts arrive at university in the autumn, guides to local venues, promotional flyers and discount offers are thrust upon them. Music business entrepreneurs, venues and agents organising national tours must optimise their potential returns by taking account of the academic cycle and the availability of student audiences. Importantly, local venues have traditionally been able to attract audiences drawn from the student body for concerts and other themed

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72. See [www.manchesteracademy.net/History%20Pages/rollofhonourinde.html](http://www.manchesteracademy.net/History%20Pages/rollofhonourinde.html), accessed 9 October 2014.

nights during the working week, which offers fewer returns when compared with the priority business of each weekend break for drawing in non-students.

Between the site of the union and the engagement of students with the wider locality beyond the university, there is a tangible value that individual students and the group have for popular music culture, which is manifest in their contribution to the notion of subcultural “scenes” (Kruse 1993; Thornton 1995) and indeed to the ambience of place. Appositely in the context of the examples cited in this chapter, Will Straw’s reflections on the nature of scenes make a point of the relationship between the city of Manchester’s reputation and its universities. Reflecting on the city’s cultural status Straw writes that in the 1980s and 1990s it “was one of the most important western cities in the field of popular music, the birthplace of highly influential cross-fertilisations of post-punk rock and forms of dance music” (Straw 2004: 414). As he suggests, this character had much to do with the sizeable student population and its place in that development, a result of the fact that all universities “generate forms of learning and expressive practices that are in excess of their intended function as places for the imparting of formal, disciplinary knowledge” (ibid.). It is not enough to think of students simply in economic terms, their spending and consumption aiding in the flourishing of venues, bars, clubs or music retail. Instead, one can ponder their agency, of the manner in which interactions between students and locals aid in the nourishment, shape and meaning formation of the cultures of popular music, and indeed wider forms of activity.

While the organic quality and authenticity of subcultural music scenes is important to their internal dynamic, such characteristics have become visible to university marketing departments that have recognised the value of vibrant music activity in their recruitment strategies. Likewise, the value of a well-established and effective union reputation for music programming has proven valuable to university recruitment. Furthermore, theorists of urban regeneration and the creative city have recognised the ways in which university cultural life is lived beyond the formal structures of the institution, for its importance to place making. As Stefan Krätke writes, the very presence of students is itself an indication of “an attractive cultural scene” (Krätke 2011: 81). Most famous perhaps is the work of Richard Florida, who argues that students influence both social and cultural spheres, inculcating a climate of tolerance and vibrancy. This characteristic is one that aids in the retention of students in their place of study as well as attracting new talent – Florida’s “creative class” – to the locale (Florida 2002: 292; Krätke 2011: 81-2).

The manner in which the relationship of students with popular music culture has become important in the business plans of unions, to university marketing and indeed, recognised as an asset to the ambience of the wider locale raises a number of questions. In fact, the apparent vibrancy of some of the sites and ventures described above can be counterpoised with fears about the university circuit as a whole. For instance, a 2007 report from the Live Music Forum (LMF) warned that “the student union network, which helped launch the careers of bands like Pink Floyd and The Smiths and also many industry executives who worked as NUS ents officers, has deteriorated over the past two decades, leaving a massive gap in the live scene”. (Music Week 2007: 4). So concerned was the LMF with this situation that it suggested that government assistance and financial support was required to “recreate the university circuit of old”.

Whatever the result of such calls and possible interventions, the sense that something has changed in student engagement with popular music needs to be qualified first of all by a consideration of what constitutes “live music” and what evidence is marshalled in support of such claims. For instance, the rise of DJ culture since the late 1980s has greatly affected the nature of music events. For unions, for instance, the economic advantage of booking artists whose equipment consists of little more than a box of vinyl records, or lately a laptop programmed with digital files, as compared to touring bands, is obvious. Furthermore, students themselves are imbricated in the practices of DJ culture – as audiences and creators. Similarly, as with all young people, the claims on their cultural attention vie with computer games and other activities and indeed, unions as sites of organised leisure provision have become ever more varied in the kinds of entertainments available – from regular comedy nights to branded club nights. Simply put, students are perhaps less interested in live music than they once were because it is less central to the lives of young people.

### **Conclusion: students and cultural engagement in the culture of higher education**

Clearly, the character of student engagement in popular music outlined above has long involved the independent nurturing of cultural entrepreneurship not always dictated by economic goals, if at all. It would be limiting therefore simply to locate the designs of some of the current union businesses described above as a result of a wider set of trends in which marketising and corporatising dynamics have come to determine the character of institutions, cultural or otherwise (Beck 2003: 2). Nonetheless, student activity, whatever the space of the union has meant in this field of cultural participation, is subject to a number of pressures on its established character and independence. Here, we can identify above all the changing nature of student finances and question the very liberty of individuals to take up extra-curricular leisure pursuits at all when the economic position is for many a precarious and stressful one where “spare” time is often devoted to paid employment – if available. In addition, there is the notion of the “quality” audience of the union for popular music, which has some parallels with the traditional high cultural elitism of the university proper. Thus, the very expansion in student numbers in the UK at least stretches the character of what was once a minority: for some this might be termed a form of qualitative dilution that parallels a devaluation of the idea of the University.

In tandem with the expansion of the higher education sector and student numbers (and attendant negative perceptions, perhaps) is the fact that the cultural boundaries of union activities in music programming and that of the institution – in some universities at least – have become blurred. Courses dedicated to event management or popular music production have been established across the sector in universities such as the University of Salford, Leeds Metropolitan University, Birmingham City University, to name but three. Certainly, the introduction of the enterprise agenda into university curricula – particularly in the arts and humanities (Naudin 2013) – means perhaps that what was once a chance for independence and experimentation is now a formalised rather than optional quality of the learning experience. With UK university courses geared towards the “employability” of graduates, one wonders at

the likelihood of students of pharmacy (Harvey Goldsmith) or history and politics (Chris Wright) finding their way into careers in the music industries.

Ultimately, this discussion is a means of asking rather than answering some of the questions that arise when considering student cultural activity. The fortunes of students in relation to the music business and culture have been, and continue to be, important and worthy of further research and exploration. All of this activity, individual and collective, with students constituting a definable market, and operating as tastemakers and entrepreneurs, suggests that those in higher education have played an important role in popular music culture. That this activity has something important to add to how we think about the student experience of higher education in the United Kingdom – and, perhaps, further afield – is a question in need of our attention.

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## Conclusion

# Democratic culture, education and student engagement

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*Sjur Bergan*

### **Abstract**

The prevailing view of democracy has changed over the past generation or so from one emphasising institutions and laws to one recognising that these cannot function unless they build on a culture of democracy. We need to be able to solve the problems of our societies through deliberation and discussion rather than by violence and we need, as societies and as individuals, to be able to weigh long-term and short-term benefits and disadvantages. Our schools and universities play key roles in developing the kind of competences we need to be active citizens in democratic societies with the will and ability to engage in the public sphere. Student engagement in higher education governance and, more broadly, in institutional life is vital to building democratic culture and developing democratic competences. This again requires that students be seen as members of the academic community with a strong interest in contributing to the development of that community rather than as clients shopping around for “the best education money can buy”.

**Keywords:** democracy; democratic culture; student engagement; democratic institutions; education for democracy; academic community; democratic competences

## Democracy and participation

Most of the authors in this volume came of age in a Europe very different from that in which I grew up, when the division between democracy and dictatorship seemed clear-cut and where, in a European context, a neat East-West divide was disturbed only by Franco's Spain, Salazar's Portugal and, for a more limited period of time, the Colonels' Greece. At that time, democracy seemed fairly simple: if a country had democratic institutions and elections in which a variety of parties could run and for which they could campaign openly, the country was a democracy. This corresponds to the images that are most likely to come to mind if we are asked to think about democracy: it corresponds to the image of democracy given in school textbooks.

A generation or so ago, democracy was perceived largely in terms of its institutions, symbolised by the parliament building and the election booth. Laws were also seen as important and many countries, for good reasons, celebrate their constitutions. My home country Norway celebrates its Constitution Day (17 May) as its national day, whereas Independence Day (7 June) is hardly noted, perhaps because the constitution was adopted and then salvaged at a time when independence seemed within reach and nevertheless slipped for almost another century.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, however, there was a certain awareness that countries like the Soviet Union had constitutions whose seemingly democratic provisions were compromised by the fact that they were not being implemented.

The emphasis on institutions and legislation was prevalent also when the division of Europe into democracies and dictatorships broke down in the late 1980s and early 1990s, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was a certain naive belief that once former dictatorships had adopted democratic laws and held free elections, democracy would follow or would already have been achieved. This belief may have been helped by the successful democratic transitions of Greece, Portugal and Spain from the mid-1970s, which were completed with all three countries becoming members of both the Council of Europe and the EU by the mid-1980s. It is nevertheless worth noting that Europe – and that includes both institutions just mentioned – was not very good at drawing on the Iberian and Greek experiences in helping the democratic transition in central and eastern Europe.

In the course of the 1990s, the image of democracy evolved. United Germany was democratic and put very considerable resources into trying to even out differences between the eastern and the western part of the country, yet many divides persisted. People who had grown up in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) seemed to find it difficult to fit into the new German society. Many felt unwanted and undervalued and some sought refuge in anti-democratic movements, whether in nostalgia for the GDR or in extreme rightist movements and some ended up violently attacking foreigners. In other countries, people in or close to the former political

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73. Norway was under Danish suzerainty from 1319 until 1814, when Norway came under Swedish suzerainty as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars, in which Denmark had sided with Napoleon. The constitution was adopted on 17 May 1814, when for a few months, independence seemed like a realistic option. Independence was finally won – or rather regained, since Norway had been independent prior to 1319 – on 7 June 1905.

elite recycled into a new – or not-so-new – political and economic elite that proved more adept at making use of the market economy than in promoting democracy. A generation earlier, a market economy and democracy might more easily have been seen as going hand in hand.

Gradually, and “helped” by political crises, an understanding of democracy developed that emphasised not only institutions and legislation but also democratic culture, that is the set of attitudes and behaviours that make democratic institutions and laws function in practice. In the Council of Europe context, the first explicit acknowledgement of the importance of democratic culture is, to my knowledge, the Action Plan adopted by the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in Warsaw in 2005, which declared:

We are convinced that social cohesion, as well as education and culture, are essential enabling factors for effective implementation of Council of Europe core values in our societies and for the long-term security of Europeans. The Council of Europe will therefore promote a model of democratic culture, underpinning law and institutions and actively involving civil society and citizens (Council of Europe 2005).

That the initiative to include a reference to democratic culture in the Action Plan came from the education sector is perhaps not surprising since education must play a strong role in building and maintaining democratic culture. Both verbs – to build and to maintain – are essential: democracy is not like skiing or riding a bicycle, in that once you have learned it, you retain the ability barring any physical impediment. Democracy is more like speaking a language: a language learned can be lost unless it is practised with some regularity, and that is true even for one’s native language.

The point, of course, is not that democratic institutions and laws are unimportant. They are essential but they are not sufficient. They will work in practice only if citizens have the will and ability to make them work, something that has been underscored by the fact that democracy is hardly challenged as a European norm today. The challenge is that actual practice in many countries falls short of the ideals of democracy, in the same way that even if all Council of Europe member states have ratified the European Convention on Human Rights, few if any have never been found guilty of violating the Convention by the European Court of Human Rights. In other words, unless society is imbued with what is variously referred to as democratic culture and a culture of democracy, democratic laws and institutions will not work. Whether “democratic culture” and a “culture of democracy” are distinct may, incidentally, be an interesting discussion but not one that will be pursued in this chapter, which will use the two interchangeably.

The will and ability to make democracy work in practice translates into attitudes and behaviour, which were the focus of discussions about democratic culture around a decade ago. Since then, another important dimension has been added: competences (Bergan and Damian 2010).

In part, the focus on competences has been added through an exploration of the public responsibility for higher education and research. Twice in the early 2000s, the European Ministers responsible for Higher Education declared that higher

education is a public good and a public responsibility (Bologna Process 2001, 2003). The operational part of the statement was the part on public responsibility and if the ministers underlined this twice, in two successive ministerial meetings of the Bologna Process, the statement should most likely not be interpreted as stating the obvious but rather as expressing a concern that what has traditionally been a key feature of European higher education may not be so in the future, as societies change, the number of actors increase and their agendas seem to diverge. The Council of Europe therefore took the statement in this sense and concluded that if higher education is to continue to be considered a public responsibility, we need to develop a more nuanced view of how that public responsibility should be articulated. In 2007, the Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation which, among other things, stated (Council of Europe 2007):

The responsibility of public authorities for higher education and research should be nuanced and defined relative to specific areas. It is broadly recommended that public authorities have:

- exclusive responsibility for the framework within which higher education and research is conducted;
- leading responsibility for ensuring effective equal opportunities to higher education for all citizens, as well as ensuring that basic research remains a public good;
- substantial responsibility for financing higher education and research, the provision of higher education and research, as well as for stimulating and facilitating financing and provision by other sources within the framework developed by public authorities.

Public responsibility, however, is not only a question of the role and legal competence of public authorities in relation to these specific areas. Public authorities have a responsibility for the education system, which must fulfil all major purposes of higher education:

In keeping with the values of democratic and equitable societies, public authorities should ensure that higher education institutions, while exercising their autonomy, can meet society's multiple expectations and fulfil their various and equally important objectives, which include:

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base (see also Bergan 2005).

Over the past couple of years, another aspect of the democratic mission of education has received increased attention: that of developing democratic and intercultural competence. The will and ability to make democracy work in practice requires attitudes and behaviour conducive to this goal but also competences. If we are to develop the current education debate from the dominant focus on employability to a more balanced view of the purposes of education, we need to be able to indicate what competences our education institutions and systems should provide students with at different levels of education in order to enable them to be active citizens in

democratic societies. This was the focus of a conference organised by Andorra as the main event of its Chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, in February 2013,<sup>74</sup> and the Council of Europe has decided to launch work on non-binding guidelines for competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue.

There has, then, been an important development over the past couple of decades in how we view democracy. From a longstanding focus on institutions and legislation, our understanding has developed to include the culture of democracy that makes democratic institutions and legislation work in practice and hence that makes democratic societies real. Education must play a key role in developing democratic culture, the understanding of which has evolved from an emphasis on attitudes and behaviour to include also an emphasis on competences. Even if competences can be obtained outside of the formal education system, they are the key outcomes of formal education and an essential purpose of formal education.

This somewhat lengthy introduction leads us to a consideration of the role of those who are in the process of developing their competences within the education system and who are members of the academic community: students. More specifically, it leads us to a consideration of the importance of student participation in democratic culture.

## **Education and democracy**

The focus of this volume is student participation in the sense of student engagement with civic and political issues as well as the more restricted issue of student representation. Before considering representation, however, it may be useful to consider student participation in a somewhat broader perspective and link this to considerations of democracy.

The more traditional, institution-focused view of democracy emphasises elections and representation. It is indeed difficult to conceive of a democracy that would not provide for the fair representation of its citizens. However, as views on democracy evolve, two other aspects are also emphasised: participation and deliberation. One aspect of participation is voter turnout in elections but even if the level of turnout is of concern in some countries, the concept of participation goes well beyond that. Are citizens willing to run for office; do they participate in political work, for instance through membership of political parties; do they participate in voluntary associations and community work; in brief: do they commit to and engage in the public sphere?

Deliberation is also essential to democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Klemenčič 2010). In democracies, decisions are made and problems solved through processes that involve reasoning and debate rather than deployment of physical force and violence. Deliberation involves listening to the arguments of others as well as presenting one's own; it involves weighing different options and reaching decisions on the basis of a variety of opinions and information, even if information is often both contradictory and incomplete. Democratic debate should also be a debate about values and priorities, as we may find it necessary to accept considerable disadvantages in the short term to ensure benefits in the long run.

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74. See [http://hub.coe.int/en/20130206\\_culture](http://hub.coe.int/en/20130206_culture), accessed 10 October 2014.

One obvious example is climate change, where our survival may ultimately hinge on our ability to weigh long-term and short-term benefits and sacrifices and even to set priorities that ensure benefits for future generations at some cost to our own. Another is, alas, the situation of undocumented or stateless children in some European countries. All countries rightly emphasise the need for identifying documents and reserve the right to assess the status of those whose documents are not in order. However, in some countries, undocumented or stateless children or children whose residency documents are not in order are denied access to education. In this case, a short-term concern with reducing immigration and with administrative formalities trumps a longer-term and principled concern with providing all individuals with fair opportunities for education.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, voices arguing that education opportunities for children of illegal immigrants should be reduced or withdrawn can now be heard also in countries that have so far not made access to education dependent on the legal status of parents.

Extensive arguments should not be needed to make the case that education, at all levels, is essential for democracy to become and remain a reality. It would be difficult to argue in any context that ignorance is a recipe for success but the argument is particularly difficult to make in modern, complex societies. A full discussion of the role of education in developing and maintaining democracy is beyond the scope of this chapter but it does influence how we view student engagement. From a democratic perspective, student participation is important to students in at least three respects:

- ▶ participation in the learning process;
- ▶ participation in the life of their higher education institution and, more broadly, in the life of their community and society;
- ▶ participation in higher education governance.

## **Student participation in the learning process**

Student participation in the learning process might be taken as a truism. After all, no learning can take place without a measure of participation. Taking notes in an auditorium or reading a book – two traditional activities for students – will result in learning only if the students actively engage with the material.

True participation, however, cannot mean that students are only at the receiving end of wisdom, whether as readers or as listeners-cum-note takers. True student participation means that students discuss with their teachers and fellow students, that they challenge received assumptions and not only master the received canon or basic theory of their chosen fields but also develop the ability to question those assumptions, analyse different approaches to their discipline, apply their theoretical knowledge to solve problems, assess information from various sources, identify potential information sources and develop views of their own, and present issues related to their discipline in such a way that they are understandable to non-specialists,

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<sup>75</sup> I am grateful to Gabriela Bergan for drawing my attention to this phenomenon through her voluntary work with street children in Tbilisi; see also <http://letkidsclick.wordpress.com> and [www.facebook.com/LetKidsClick](http://www.facebook.com/LetKidsClick), both accessed 10 October 2014.

among other things. In brief, from a more traditional view of learning which tends to emphasise passive absorption of facts, learning for democracy requires active engagement on the part of learners.

From a democratic perspective, it is important that students combine a solid understanding of their academic discipline – what is referred to as subject-specific competence – with generic competences like analytical ability and communication skills (González and Wagenaar 2005; Bergan 2007). Complex societies need highly qualified subject specialists but they also cannot survive without people who can put this specialised knowledge into a broader context. It is important that subject specialists be able to present complex issues in ways that non-specialists understand, and that means both responding clearly to questions about the possible consequences of different alternatives and on their own initiative, identifying issues that broader society and political decision makers need to address. Democracy is possible only if civil society, public authorities and the various expert communities interact meaningfully.

One particular aspect of student participation in learning concerns new technologies. Few Europeans of “classical student age” today will have recollections of a world without the Internet, much less without computers. Where their grandparents would head for the encyclopaedia for information, today’s students will google the Web. The easy availability of information and easy access – at least in technological, if not always in financial, terms – of courses and individual lectures from well-reputed institutions and teachers undoubtedly opens up countless interesting perspectives. While at first sight, students watching lectures on a computer would seem to be at the receiving end in a large if fractured auditorium, information technologies also offer countless opportunities for interaction among students and between teachers and students even if lecturers with a big Internet audience will find it no easier to be in direct contact with students than traditional lecturers with a full auditorium.

Online provision does, however, raise questions about the value of face-to-face contact as well as of all the interactions among students outside of the classroom (Kvan 2013). Does face-to-face contact provide higher quality learning than online provision and, if yes, is face-to-face contact a luxury only a few will be able to afford or a must to which priority must be given so that all – or at least most – higher education programmes include at least some face-to-face sessions? What impact will online provision have on quality, on the one hand, and access to education on the other, and will these factors pull in the same or in opposite directions?

Online provision also raises questions about student representation. If, as the European Ministers for Higher Education have stated, students are members of the academic community (Bologna Process 2001), and if we recognise that students should participate in the governance of higher education, how can students in online provision be brought into the process? Online education has come to stay and has many exciting possibilities even if it also presents a good number of challenges. The issue is not whether online provision is good or not and even less whether it should exist – it does – but how key concerns about student participation can be brought into the process and how online delivery could and should be combined with other forms of teaching and learning.

## Student participation in institutional and community life

“Campus” may well designate the land on which a university is located and the buildings on it. It is normally conceived of as a continuous stretch of land used for the sole purpose of housing one or more higher education institutions and the term seems to have been used in this sense for the first time in the 18th century for the College of New Jersey, which is now a world-famous institution, albeit under a different name: Princeton University. An institution whose buildings are spread across a city with many other buildings in between is not thought of as having a campus in the sense of the origin of the term: “campus” stems from the Latin word for “field” and the original meaning of the term lives on in Romance languages, for instance Spanish *campo* and French *champ*. Many European universities do not have a campus but are spread out across different locations in a city, often with an older, prestigious building as its historic location close to the downtown area and one or several more modern buildings on sites further away from downtown. The Universities of Oslo and Strasbourg are two examples.

When we think of a campus, however, we do not necessarily only think of real estate. Rather, the term evokes life: teaching and learning, of course, in auditoriums and libraries, but also student life in a broader sense: student associations, social life and often student dorms. A campus, then, is not only the space in which institutional life takes place but also a metaphor for institutional life itself.

To some extent, this image may represent an idealised version of higher education, in which students are of classic student age, do not yet have family obligations, study full-time, attend lectures and seminars, read books, use computers in communal spaces and spend their spare time in the company of other students. This idealised picture may never have been completely true but reality is perhaps further removed from it today than ever before. The economic pressure on most students is probably higher, both to finish their studies on time and to work. Students are more diverse in terms of age and family status, at least to some extent also in family background (even if massification of higher education has not provided as much diversity in access to higher education as had been hoped for), and even if living on campus may be an option at many universities, it is not necessarily an option open to students with families and/or studying part-time.

These caveats also mean that the time available for students to participate in extracurricular activities and live what may be called a “student life” is limited. The issue is not only one of time, however, but also of motivation. To what extent do students actually see themselves as members of the academic community and to what extent do they see themselves primarily as individuals investing some time and money in obtaining a qualification that they hope will be useful in their further professional career but that does not necessarily determine how they live their lives while obtaining the qualification? Do they consider education as a process that leads to a qualification or rather as a product or service that requires some investment of time and money? Do they, in brief, consider themselves as students or customers?

Considering qualifications – the end product – as the embodiment of education may well seem to be consistent with the increasing emphasis in our societies on end results rather than on processes, including the insistence that processes need to be

cost-effective and results-oriented. In education policy, this is exemplified by the increasing focus on learning outcomes rather than on the processes and procedures that lead to the learning outcomes. On the positive side, this entails a recognition that given learning outcomes may be obtained in different ways, along different learning paths, including through a combination of formal and non-formal learning. In the recognition of foreign qualifications, what should count is the learning outcomes achieved rather than the length of study or the precise curriculum followed, even if actual practice is at some distance from this goal.

The traditional definition of learning outcomes is that they designate what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on the basis of a given qualification (Bergan 2007). All three elements are important, and even a brief exploration of them reveals that while the emphasis may be on the end results, the process counts. Foreign-language learning provides a good illustration. In learning a Slavic language like Russian or Serbian, students need to memorise – that is know – a good number of grammatical forms, like case endings, in addition to a vocabulary that will seem foreign to those whose repertoire of languages does not already include a Slavic language. While challenging enough, a knowledge of case endings and forms denoting verbal aspect must be complemented with an understanding of how these grammatical forms function, for example that certain verb forms are used to describe actions that are limited in time and that an accusative case ending is the normal form used for direct objects. However, we master a foreign language only if we can actually understand it when it is spoken and written and when we can speak it and write it ourselves.

Knowledge, understanding and an ability to act on this all require a learning process and the importance of the process is further underlined by what I have increasingly become convinced should be added as a fourth element of the definition of learning outcomes: attitudes. Knowing grammatical forms, understanding how they work and being able to use them in practice needs to be complemented by curiosity about the culture that the language expresses and respect for those who live the culture and use the language in their everyday life, those for whom the language is the vehicle through which reality is seen and – at least for monolingual speakers – for whom that language may constitute the limits of their experience. An attitude of respect does of course not mean uncritical acceptance. If the speakers of a given language practise discrimination of women and consider foreigners as less than equal human beings, we may try to understand why this is so but we would not approve of these attitudes.

The education process, therefore, should be one of interaction in which students take an important part of the responsibility for their own learning.<sup>76</sup> It should include lectures and discussions, reading and writing, using information technologies and independent research. It should also include living together with others and engaging in the public sphere. Student associations and activities, whether directly study-related or not, have an intrinsic value through the goals they further. They also have a generic value through the competences and attitudes they develop. Democracies can only function if it can rely on citizens who are able to organise and argue; raise

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76. See the ESU's work on student-centred learning [www.esu-online.org/resources/6068/Student-Centred-Learning-Toolkit](http://www.esu-online.org/resources/6068/Student-Centred-Learning-Toolkit), accessed 10 October 2014.

funds and bring out the vote; define goals for an activity or an association and then find ways of achieving them; analyse issues, suggest solutions and engage in public debate (Klemenčič 2010; Bergan 2013). Democracy can only function if it can rely on citizens committed to participating in the public sphere. That is why democracies value citizen participation and dictatorships abhor it. That is also why, even if undemocratic societies may value specialised training, democracies need to further not just training but education.

The campus will be a campus only if students help build and maintain it. It will be a live space rather than just a collection of more or less monumental buildings only if students make it a centre of life and if they see education as a process requiring that they commit, interact and engage. Student associations, therefore, are important both because of the specific goals they try to further and because their activities constitute an important part of the education process. Education must combine the development of advanced and specialised competences in specific fields of knowledge with the development of students' personalities. Democracy can of course be studied within and across academic disciplines but democratic competences and attitudes cannot be developed in classrooms alone. It is true that "reforms intended to promote democratic values or greater civic engagement can conflict with the traditional role of universities as providers of 'useful' education" (Plantan 2004: 87) but that is a very limited view both of education and of what may be "useful". Higher education institutions have no less a responsibility than primary and secondary schools for educating the whole person.

Should higher education institutions, then, encourage all kinds of student activities on campus, regardless of their content? In this, institutions differ in their policies, especially when it comes to more controversial areas like politics. In many countries in western Europe, political parties have student organisations which have associations on campus and may also run in student elections. In other countries, political organisations are unwelcome and even outlawed within higher education institutions as higher education is seen as an area that should be "free of politics". This is particularly true for countries that have lived through political conflict and turmoil within recent memory (Plantan 2004). On the other hand, while not political in the sense of "party political", both higher education institutions and their student associations may play a very important political and civic role in promoting reconciliation, in providing a civic space for it and in developing policies that may later be "exported" to society at large. The role Queen's University Belfast has played in the peace process in Northern Ireland, wherein it has made great efforts to make both Catholic and Protestant students of different political persuasions feel part of the same academic community and at home on the same campus, is a good example.

Even those who, like the present author, value the role of student associations and take the view that higher education institutions should be liberal in allowing student organisations to operate on campus will recognise that liberal practice should not be a *carte blanche*. There are undoubtedly organisations whose goals and practice are at such fundamental variance with the goals of democracy and academic freedom that they have no place on campus. It is difficult to see how, for example, overtly racist organisations or associations arguing for the use of violence in overthrowing democracy would have a role in campus. Lines may of course be very difficult to draw in practice, as shown by a recent decision by the University of Oslo not to grant an

Islamic association status as a student organisation on the grounds that it advocates and practices gender segregation<sup>77</sup> and the debate this decision gave rise to.

Higher education institutions should therefore encourage students to participate in campus life and to develop student activities and associations. They may even consider giving some kind of credit for such activities provided sustained participation can be documented and generic learning outcomes described. Institutions should also encourage students and faculty to engage with the community of which the institution is a part. This will help prevent an artificial divide between “town and gown” but more importantly, higher education institutions are important to democracy. As societies, we need advanced competences and we need the institutions that are foremost in developing and transmitting advanced competences to interact and engage with the societies of which they are a part.

Even if many European universities work actively with their local communities, community engagement is very likely an area that US higher education institutions have developed further than their European counterparts. Students often have the opportunity to carry out projects with the local community as part of their coursework and universities may highlight community work as part of their public relations and image. One example is the University of Pennsylvania, a major research institution, whose President chose to include the university’s work in its local community of West Philadelphia as the main featured chapter of an annual financial report (University of Pennsylvania 2010: 3- 9). Another example is the Anchor Institutions Task Force, which facilitates co-operation among institutions as well as between institutions and their communities. Anchor institutions take their name from the fact that they are unlikely to move away even if their local communities are troubled since they are tied to their present location and cannot easily be outsourced or relocated. Therefore, they have the potential to become cornerstones in their local and regional communities. This potential can be realised through commitment to co-operation and partnership; equity and social justice; democracy and democratic practice; and commitment to place and community (Maurrasse 2013). A third example is the work by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) on Liberal Education and America’s Promise (Musil 2013).<sup>78</sup>

## **Student participation in higher education governance**

That students have a legitimate stake in the governance of higher education institutions is now broadly accepted in Europe and a survey conducted by the Council of Europe in 2002 (Persson 2004; see also Bergan 2004) shows that student representation is well established at institutional and faculty level, where students generally elect between 10% and 30% of the members of the university and faculty governing bodies. In most cases, student representatives have the right to vote on all issues brought before the governing board, though in a few cases student representatives were reported to have no voting rights on issues such as staff matters, administrative and financial issues, curricula or the recognition of academic degrees. Interestingly, in view of how the European higher education debate has developed since the survey was conducted,

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77. See [www.studenttorget.no/index.php?show=3798&expand=3797,3798&artikkelid=11962](http://www.studenttorget.no/index.php?show=3798&expand=3797,3798&artikkelid=11962), accessed 10 October 2014.

78. See [www.aacu.org/leap/index.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/leap/index.cfm), accessed on 10 October 2014.

these issues student representatives are allowed to vote on were also reported to include “the issue of employability” and “educational processes” (Persson 2004: 44). Provision for student representation at the highest and lowest levels of governance covered by the survey, that is at the national or system level on the one hand and at the department level on the other, was less well developed than at institutional and faculty level.

The Council of Europe survey on student participation in higher education governance was conducted more than a decade ago and needs updating. This is less because there seems reason to believe that the formal aspects of student representation have evolved significantly, even if some countries did not respond to the 2002 survey, than because attitudes and practice are likely to have evolved.

The European level was not covered by the survey. While the students were not present at the Sorbonne meeting in 1998 and were present at the Bologna meeting only because they invited themselves, ESU (then ESIB) has been a consultative member of the Bologna Process since 2001. Even if ESU representatives may feel they should have greater influence on European higher education policy, there can be little doubt that the ESU voice is both heard and listened to in the Bologna Follow-Up Group and more broadly on the European higher education scene. ESU is an observer with the Council of Europe’s Steering Committee for Educational Policy and Practice (CDPPE), as it was with the previously separate Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research.<sup>79</sup> It is regularly consulted by the European Commission and it is one of four NGOs that developed the ESG for quality assurance in higher education and later the EQAR. ESU is also, with the Council of Europe, the only consultative member of the Bologna Process to co-chair one of its working groups.<sup>80</sup> At European level, *de facto* student representation has therefore increased very considerably over the past decade and the general opinion seems to be that ESU has contributed very significantly to the development of the EHEA.

Student representation is in many ways a success story also at other levels. Most European countries have representative NUSs and student representatives play important roles in governance bodies at institutional, faculty and department level. Institutionally, student representation in Europe seems sound and whereas European higher education has much to learn from the US when it comes to community engagement, for student participation in higher education governance it is the other way around.<sup>81</sup> The reasons are partly to be found in the US governance model, which

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79. Until January 2012, the Council of Europe had separate steering committees for Education (CDED) and Higher Education and Research. They were then replaced by the current CDPPE.

80. In the case of ESU, the Working Group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning. The Council of Europe co-chairs the Working Group on Structural Reforms and from 2007 to 2012 chaired the then separate Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks.

81. A fruitful co-operation between European and US higher education on the democratic mission of higher education has been established by the Council of Europe and the US Steering Committee of the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, see [www.internationalconsortium.org](http://www.internationalconsortium.org), accessed 10 October 2014. Among other things, this co-operation has resulted in four large conferences and three books in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series, available at [www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Resources/HEseries\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Resources/HEseries_en.asp), accessed 10 October 2014.

puts less emphasis on representation in higher education governance – a model which is increasingly found also in Europe (Klemenčič 2011).

If our concept of democracy has evolved over the past generation or so, the same should apply to student participation in higher education governance. Student representation can be seen as a trade-off or balance between representation and competence. Had higher education institutions been run on the general democratic principle of “one person, one vote”, they would have been run by students. Had they been run purely on the basis of competence in research, they would have been run by professors alone. If this looks like a somewhat familiar model, it is because until a few decades ago, the governing bodies of many European universities were in fact composed overwhelmingly of tenured academic staff. A more recent and yet traditional governance model, reflected in the 2002 survey referred to above, is that tenured academic staff have a majority of representatives on institutional governance bodies though non-tenured academic staff, students, and technical and administrative staff are also represented.

The reasoning behind this governance model is relatively easy to discern. On the one hand, it assumes that high competence in the key missions of higher education – research and teaching – is required to govern the institution. The third important mission of higher education, community service, is less overtly reflected in the model but since the service higher education can provide to broader society is based on research and teaching, what is often referred to as “the third mission” is nevertheless a part of the equation. By giving tenured academic staff a majority on the governance bodies, this model stipulates competence in the key missions of higher education as the key requisite for successful institutional governance. This concern is, however, tempered by a concern for presentation, as is seen also in the fact that students tend to elect more members of the governing bodies than technical and administrative staff.<sup>82</sup> Hence, this model balances competence and representation, even if it gives greater emphasis to the former.

There are, however, two developments that shift the reasoning behind this model: external representation and professionalisation of management. Neither development is universal but both have been accentuated greatly since the 2002 survey was conducted. Significantly, in neither case has the balance between competence and representation been a prominent part of the argument.

In many European countries, the traditional model where institutional governance bodies were made up exclusively of members from inside the institution has been replaced by a model with mixed external and internal representation. Whereas members from inside the institution continue to be elected by the groups they represent, external members may be appointed by the governing bodies themselves or by public authorities. Laws or regulations of lesser legal status stipulate the distribution among the different categories of members. The reasons for this shift have to

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82. Even if the reasoning can also be that students have greater competence in the key missions of higher education than at least those technical and administrative staff members whose positions do not require a higher education degree, one argument does not exclude the other. It should, however, be noted that the representation of technical and administrative staff is not graded within this group according to their perceived level of competence in the key missions.

do with the role higher education institutions could and should play in developing society and, unsurprisingly, the emphasis has been on the role of higher education in economic development. External representation is recognition of the key role of higher education in modern societies and will also help institutions develop and maintain close links with broader society. As such, external representation can be a very positive factor, provided that external members of institutional governing bodies represent a broader segment of society than just actors in the economy and the labour market and that they accept that one important role of higher education is to take a more detached and longer-term view of societal development than that imposed by electoral cycles and budget deadlines. Universities must continue to be places of critical reflection even in the age of headlines and deadlines.

At the same time, there has been a call for a professionalisation of university management. Most institutions of some size have long had full-time administrators but the demands on managers have evolved, as they have evolved elsewhere in public administration as well as in the private sector. Lawyers were replaced by economists and economists are being replaced by management specialists as the dominant professional group in public administration. At higher education institutions, however, many administrators had an academic background from other areas, such as social sciences, humanities and natural science. As an anecdotal illustration, for some unknown reason physicists were grossly overrepresented in the central administration of the University of Oslo when I started my working life there in the 1980s, whereas administrators at faculty level often had their academic degree from the faculty at which they were working. They were not always updated on the latest management theories but they were committed to their institution and to the academic mission. Many of my colleagues were idealists who would have found it unsatisfactory to work for an institution or a company unless they could be passionate about its mission.

The call for professionalisation is consistent with an increased emphasis on results and cost-effectiveness. It is of course impossible to argue the opposite – that higher education administration should be unprofessional – and it is equally pointless to argue that efficiency and the good use of resources should not be as important to higher education as to other areas of activity. What could and should be questioned, however, is what “professional” actually means. The Council of Europe has developed a recommendation in which it argues that the quality of education can only be assessed in relation to what one is trying to achieve (Council of Europe 2012). The same must hold true in assessing whether managers are professional. One aspect of professionalism is technical competence but an equally important criterion is in my view whether they understand and are committed to the purposes and objectives of the institution or company they manage. Professionalisation of higher education management must therefore mean that modern management methods are applied with a solid dose of common sense to enable the institution to achieve its goals as these are defined in its mission statement and as they relate to teaching, research and serving society. Both timelines and performance indicators must be adapted accordingly, though it must also be underlined that a longer-term perspective does not mean an absence of deadlines.

Both developments have implications in terms of competence and representation but these consequences have not been prominent in the public debate. The call for

professionalisation, as shown above, entails a redefinition of the kind of competences required in higher education management and this is in itself not dramatic. The more important issue is what the impact might be on the relationship between the political and administrative leadership of institutions. In many cases, this is a question of the relationship between elected rectors and governance bodies and managers who have been hired on the basis of their technical management competence. In some cases, institutions or public authorities have taken one step further and have hired rectors on the basis of their management record, sometimes in spite of the fact that those appointed may not have a strong background in higher education policy and management. In these cases, elected governance bodies, including student representatives, will have a particularly important and possibly difficult task in ensuring that a leadership selected on the basis of management expertise identifies with the mission of the institutions, follows the policy priorities adopted by the governance bodies and prepares issues put before the governance bodies in such a way that the elected representatives are presented with real alternatives in terms of possible decisions and are not simply asked to rubber stamp suggestions that are presented as the only possible solution for technical and management reasons.

External representation on governance bodies also implies shifts in our understanding of competence and representation and the relationship between them. If governance bodies are not to be too big – an important point in view of the general concern with efficiency – and non-tenured staff, students and technical and administrative staff are to retain a meaningful level of representation, meaning at least that a single person cannot represent a whole group alone, it will follow that tenured staff will no longer elect a majority of the representatives on the governance bodies. Either a majority of representatives will be external or no single group will have a majority. In either case, the implications are clear but undebated. On the one hand, to the extent that competence is still seen as outweighing representation, competence in teaching and research will no longer be seen as a *conditio sine qua non* for governing higher education institutions. Rather, members of governance bodies should have high political and policy competence in defining the role of higher education in developing and serving society and in building university-society relations. In terms of representation, the implicit argument of the new model is that the higher education governance bodies need to be representative not only with regard to the academic community but also in relation to broader society and its stakeholders. The latter term, which I must confess reminds me of those who lit the fire under Ste Jeanne d’Arc, is now ubiquitously used as a rather diffuse designation of whoever may have some kind of legitimate interest in an issue. I must, however, also confess that the term is often useful when precision is either impossible or overly cumbersome. In this interpretation, since our society as a whole has a legitimate interest in higher education institutions, and since most institutions operate with significant but far from exclusive public funding, broader society should be represented on the governance bodies. That is, however, a valid argument only if the external representatives in fact reflect societal concerns and not only the concerns of a specific sector of society, most likely the commercial sector.

Whether the arguments for external representation are seen in terms of representation or competence, the new governance model is a tacit argument for student

participation. If representation is emphasised, students constitute a clear majority within the institutions and even if broader societal representation is emphasised, the new model does not aim to do away with representatives elected from within the institution. If competences in the political role of higher education and in university-society relations are emphasised, students are exceptionally well placed since student representatives often have a higher level of policy competence than many academics and have often thought more about university-society relations than many external representatives, to say nothing of the fact that they tend to take a more holistic view of societal development than representatives of the labour market.

In reality, governance models evolve for reasons that are less clear-cut than the ones just presented and it is unlikely that they are designed on the basis of principles of competence and representation alone. Nevertheless, it is of considerable concern that the considerations of principle outlined here have been virtually absent from the public debate on higher education governance – and it is also of concern that neither academic staff nor student representatives seem to have put them on the table.

## Conclusion

Education is a crucial factor in determining how our societies should develop. The term “two cultures” was originally coined by C.P. Snow<sup>83</sup> to describe what he saw as two distinct academic cultures, one exemplified by natural sciences and the other by the humanities and social sciences. Today, we may speak of “two cultures” also in designating two different approaches to education. One sees education as a process of cultural, intellectual and personal development, while the other sees education as a commercial good with an immediately utilitarian purpose. Neither vision denies the utility of education but how they see utility is so different as to be almost irreconcilable.

Interpreted in this sense, the two cultures have a clear impact on the role of students. In the first interpretation, students are members of the academic community, while in the second they are clients. That again has impacts on student representation as well as on the role of education in building and maintaining democracy. If students are clients, their interest in education is limited to obtaining what they see as value-for-money, which will most likely be a marketable diploma obtained with as little investment in terms of money and effort as possible. This is not to say that their qualifications are not valuable, simply that they have little interest in what lies behind the qualification as long as it enables to exercise the economic activity they are interested in. If students are clients, they have little interest in the higher education institution, which will most likely be referred to in more commercially correct terms as a “provider”. If the provider offers what the students want, they will pay their tuition fee and stay with the provider to obtain their degree. If the provider does not meet expectations, the students-cum-clients will move elsewhere to another provider who offers what they want.

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83. In the 1959 Rede Lecture at University of Cambridge and subsequently published as *The two cultures and the scientific revolution* (1959).

If students are members of the academic community, however, they have an intrinsic interest in the community of which they are a part. They will have as clear an expectation of the institution or study programme as those who think of themselves as clients but if they are not happy with the institution, programme or even education system, their first reflex is not to leave. They will stay and try to improve the situation and only if reasonable efforts at reform fail will they leave.

Whether students see themselves as clients or members of the academic community is therefore much more than an issue of semantics. It will decide whether students will engage in developing the kind of education our societies need, which will in its turn be decisive for whether we will develop the kind of societies we want (Tironi 2005). If we want our children and grandchildren to live in societies that not only have democratic institutions and laws but which are also imbued with the democratic culture needed to make them work, we need education, from pre-primary to higher education, that develops democratic competences and attitudes as well as a commitment in students to participate in the public sphere. If we want our societies to be both able and willing to make difficult decisions today that will make our societies politically, environmentally, culturally, socially and economically sustainable for the generations to come, we need education, from pre-primary to higher education, that develops the will and ability to assess long-term and short-term advantages and disadvantages, often on the basis of incomplete information, as well as the will and ability to resolve conflicts and set priorities through public debate and dialogue. To develop the kind of education we need, students must engage and participate – in the learning process; in the life of their higher education institution, community and society; and in higher education governance.

The kind of society we should want for our children and grandchildren cannot be developed by clients and providers. It must be developed by citizens and civil society as well as by elected officials; students and teachers; researchers and those able to understand and make use of research results even if the results do not come from their own area of specialisation; and higher education institutions and public authorities.

Student participation is also essential for education to develop the ability to think coherently about our societies and their goals. One of the major challenges we face in reforming and innovating within our democratic institutions as well as our democratic practice is in reconciling the ample opportunities new and not-so-new media provide to engage on single issues with the need to develop and implement a coherent vision of society. Citizen engagement on single issues is valuable but the sum of single-issue politics does not add up to a roadmap of where our societies should go or how we should get there. As the Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul puts it:

Of course, separating out elements in a complicated world is a valid intellectual activity. It must be done. But the capacity to see how the elements fit together is a completely different form of intelligence and is of equal if not greater importance (Saul 2009: 37).

To stick with Saul, student participation is essential to educating citizens and not just employees:

I find our education is increasingly one aimed at training loyal employees, even though the state and the corporations are increasingly disloyal. What we should

be doing is quite different. It turns on our ability to rethink our education and our public expectations so that we create a non-employee, non-loyal space for citizenship. After all, a citizen is by definition loyal to the state because it belongs to her or him. That is what frees the citizen to be boisterous, outspoken, cantankerous and, all in all, by corporatist standards, disloyal. This is the key to the success of our democracy (Saul 2009: 318).

Student participation in higher education life and governance as well as engagement with broader society should help develop and maintain the kind of higher education we need also to ensure a balance between specialised knowledge and a sense of broader purpose. As Brad S. Gregory says:

Since the nineteenth century, when the modern research university was constituted, the trend has been unmistakable: the growth of knowledge entails the proliferation of ever more specialised research in an ever greater number of discrete, increasingly divergent academic disciplines. They comprise “the really modern university – the multiversity”, which Clark Kerr characterised as “a city of infinite variety”... In this respect, research specialisation is necessary, inevitable and innocuous. What is less satisfactory – although it is not unsurprising, given the intensive, specialised nature of advanced training – is the dearth of efforts by intellectuals in whatever field even to try to understand where and how the sorts of inquiry by, say, astrophysics, comparative political scientists, and ethnomusicologists fit within the pursuit of knowledge as a whole (Gregory 2012, Kindle version, location 4406-15).

As I have said elsewhere (Bergan 2011), our societies need subject specialists with the ability to engage with broader issues. Higher education today is very good at training highly qualified specialists in a broad range of disciplines, very possibly better and more efficient at it than ever before. We are, however, much less good at educating intellectuals, by which I mean people who can put their advanced knowledge and understanding of a specific field into its proper context and ask fundamental questions about the purposes of our existence.

We do need people who are highly specialised in a specific field, but we also need people who can ask critical questions about where we should go as societies and about which values should guide us on our way. Not least, we need people who are subject specialists and intellectuals at the same time. Student participation is crucial to our success.

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