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## Student power in a global perspective and contemporary trends in student organising

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Students, if organised into representative student governments or movements, can be a highly influential agency shaping higher education policy. This article introduces the Special Issue on student power in a global perspective, which addresses the question of how students are organised in different world regions and what role they play in higher education policymaking within universities or at the national level. The article discusses conceptual considerations in the study of student governments and movements and reviews the contemporary trends in student organising globally.

**Keywords:** student governments; student movements; student protests; tuition fees; higher education politics; student activism; higher education reforms

### Introduction

Walking on the campus of higher education institutions almost anywhere, one can note spaces and artefacts of student political organising. The most recognisable and widespread form of student organising are student governments whose primary aim is ‘to represent and defend the interests of the collective student body’ (Klemenčič 2012a, 2). Although they exist in different forms and designations – for example, student unions, councils, parliaments, board, guilds, associations – they effectively operate as ‘governments’; they present a system of rules, norms and institutions by which the student body within an institution or nation is organised and indeed governed. They are also political institutions through which collective student interests are aggregated and intermediated to other actors within the higher education or wider political context. Student governments provide a framework for student social and political activities within the academic community. They also have a professional function: they provide academic and welfare support services to students, and manage student facilities and sometimes business operations (for example, travel agencies, publishing houses, clubs and restaurants). The organisational resources of institutional student unions vary significantly. For example, the Student Union of the University of Helsinki in Finland is perhaps one of the world’s wealthiest student unions: it owns HYY Group, a service group operating in accommodation and restaurants, real estate business, investment and publishing with net sales of EUR33.5 million and a profit of EUR2.9 million (in 2012).<sup>1</sup> It also owns a block of valuable real estate in Helsinki. Another example, the Warwick Student Union, ‘owns and runs five food and drink outlets’.<sup>2</sup>

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What students spend in Warwick Student Union ‘goes directly to fund student activities, such as democracy, the Student Advice Centre, Clubs and Societies and more’.<sup>3</sup> Not all student governments are so well resourced and entrepreneurial, but most receive some financial support from the university to which they belong.

While the existence of student governments at universities is almost universally accepted, the existence of national (or regional) platforms of student representation is much less widespread. Governments are aware of the political potency of organised student interest groups on the national level. History offers ample lessons of organised students forming an influential oppositional force. Therefore, in countries under authoritarian rule, national student associations have been either prohibited or – in a corporatist fashion – fully controlled by the regime. In transitional countries, governments tend to opt for a pluralist approach: addressing several student groups, prompting them to compete against each other for influence, thus deterring possible mass collective action through *‘divide et impera’*. And then there are the many countries with powerful national student associations, such as those of the European Nordic countries, who hold a long tradition of student unionism, automatic or mandatory student union membership, and ample financial and other organisational resources. These national student associations are powerful political institutions that cannot easily be ignored by authorities. Through various social networks, they are often also closely connected to different actors within the government and political parties. National student unions have a tradition of being the training ground for future political leaders (Day 2012; Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume 2014).

Frequently, national student associations or institutional student governments initiate and organise student protests, but student movements can also emerge without the intervention of representative student structures or due to the inaction of representative student structures. As depicted in the classic works on student activism by Philip Altbach (1966, 1979, 1981, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1991, 1992, 2006)<sup>4</sup>, student movements have often disrupted work of higher education institutions, obstructed national higher education reforms, and exerted pressure for social change. Student protests, petitions, boycotts are still recognisable features of campus life, even if unpredictable in their occurrence and of highly varying extent of participation, duration and effects. As recently as December 2013, at least four student protests of a scale large enough to attract the attention of the international media took place around the world. In the United Kingdom, students supported workers in protests against worsening employment conditions seen as consequence of neoliberal reform policies. In Bulgaria, students went to the streets to protest against government corruption and to demand new elections. In Ukraine, students left universities to join other citizens in protests against the government decision to end trade negotiations with the European Union. In al-Azhar University in Egypt, there were clashes between students from different party affiliations concerning the uncertain future of the political system.

The student protests in the 1960s and early 1970s are marked in history books as the most dramatic and widespread student upheaval directed specifically at the reform of universities in the wake of massification and university bureaucratisation (Lipset and Altbach 1969). One of the notable outcomes of these protests was the consolidation of student representation within university decision-making. In continental Europe, for example, governments inserted into higher education legislation provisions securing the existence of student governments and the representation of students in governing bodies often with co-decision rights (Klemenčič 2012b). After the 1970s, student governments became an inherent part of democratic university governance. Even in the

more marketised systems, such as the United States (and later the United Kingdom and Australia), and several Asian countries (such as Korea and Japan), which gave rise to corporate universities, student governments are also part of university structures. However, within this governance model, student governments are consulted in decision-making and solicited to provide student services, but typically do not hold co-decision rights.

Since early 2000, we have witnessed another global wave of student protests directed at higher education. The dynamics of student protests vary significantly across space, but most share grievances associated with the international trend toward the marketisation of higher education. Marketisation of higher education has been characterised by one or more of the following measures: introducing greater competition into the provision of student education; supplementing the public sources of funding of universities with private sources, especially tuition fees; and granting institutions more autonomy from government steering. The global financial crisis that began in 2007 only reinforced such reforms. Due to austerity measures, governments have been reducing public funding for universities in many countries, most notably in Brazil, Italy, Pakistan, Ukraine, but also the United Kingdom and the United States (Marcucci and Usher 2012). Even in those countries where public spending remained the same or was increased, the trend has been – virtually in every region of the world – towards forcing higher education institutions to increase their income from private sources, including tuition fees, and to compete for public resources (Marcucci and Usher 2012, 3). Student protests in Austria (2009), Croatia (2009), California (2009), Ireland (2010), the United Kingdom (2011), Nigeria (2011), Columbia (2011), Chile (2012), Canada (2012), South Korea (2012), Spain (2013), and Italy (2013) are only few among many examples of mass national student movements against tuition fees, and also against the marketisation of higher education and cuts in public spending. In a highly marketised system, the United States, students have been protesting on campuses against rising student debt. These protests have been linked to the broader social movement – the Occupy movement – against social and economic inequalities.

The Special Issue on student power in a global perspective addresses the question of how students are organised in different world regions and what role they play in higher education policy-making within universities or at the national level. The issue builds on the pioneering comparative accounts on student activism by Lipset and Altbach (1966, 1969), Altbach (1979, 1989c); emphasising, however, the contemporary trends in student organising and how students respond collectively to the contemporary higher education reforms and developments. By investigating student organising and collective action, this Special Issue seeks to make a contribution to the still underresearched area of higher education politics and how human agency – individual and collective – shapes higher education policies (Marginson and Rhoades 2002, 286).

Higher education policymaking around the world is becoming more ‘policy network’ like: less hierarchical, with policy decisions being negotiated and mediated among several stakeholders rather than simply imposed by the authorities (Klemenčič 2012a). Within such policy networks, organised student groups present an important and increasingly vocal stakeholder. The core assumption of policy network governance is resource dependency: political resources are dispersed over several public and private actors, thus forcing a government or university leaders to include these actors in decision-making in the interest of effective

policy formulation, legitimisation of adopted policy, and accountability (de Boer, Enders, and Schimank 2007; Olsen 2005). As the collective representations of student interests, student governments are certainly one of the actors that can supply relevant information, expertise and legitimisation of policy outcomes. To be able to investigate political developments in higher education in specific national and institutional contexts, we have to scrutinise all the key actors which comprise higher education systems. We need to understand how they operate, the social mechanisms underlying their political action, and their relationships and interactions with other actors. We need to investigate what processes of social action and interaction take place between these actors. We also need to unbundle what are the key aspects of the context that shape political processes, including the institutional rules, historical trajectories, and critical events. And we have to unravel the cultural meanings underlying social processes.

In this article, I focus on uncovering student political agency – in the form of student governments and student movements – at a rather high level of abstraction. My starting point is the assumption that ‘studentship’, i.e., the state of being a student, can be highly conducive to ‘acting collectively in a public sphere’ to express interests, ideas, make demands on some authority, or hold that authority accountable (cf. Diamond 1994, 5). The propensity to collective student political engagement lies in the characteristics of studentship as a life stage, which is that of ‘being free and becoming’ (Barnett 2007, 3). Developmentally, studentship (as emerging adulthood) has been associated with higher levels of cognitive, emotional and practical maturity and also with nurturing idealist (and abstract) ideas (Jensen 2008). Furthermore, academic institutions as distinct intellectual and social environments provide space for students to freely and critically exchange and develop their ideas and articulate political aspirations (Pinhero and Antonowicz, forthcoming). The multiple and overlapping social networks that constitute university environments are fertile grounds for the cultivation and organisation of student interests. Unburdened by care for family or full-time work, the ‘typical’ student has the leisure of time and peace of mind to engage in political action if so inclined.

Yet, the majority of students rarely get politically engaged in student protests or in student governments, even if this involves only casting a vote in student elections. Furthermore, the student body is becoming increasingly heterogeneous in all aspects: social background (with more students from lower social backgrounds), age (more mature students), country of origin (more international students), paying and non-paying students (with privatisation of higher education), and full and part-time students (more students work while studying). Contemporary students are less likely to live in student residences and more likely to work while studying. This diversity of the student body makes it more difficult to cultivate a collective student identity which helps student governments flourish and to uncover shared grievances and shared emotions which fuel student movements. However, despite the passivity of the student body, the legitimate power conferred on student governments as a key university constituency or stakeholder through legislation and institutional rules can be significant (cf. Hüther and Krücken 2013; Bótas and Huisman 2012). Also significant can be the coercive power of student movements. And both forms of power are exercised by students. On the other hand, the relations between institutional leaders and student representatives of government officials and student representatives often contain certain forms of domination by authorities over students manifested through subtle and implicit actions. The concept of domination is closely related to autonomy

and freedom, which is indeed ‘an important component of power’ (Bótas and Huisman 2012, 373).

This article is confined only to the question of how student governments and movements operate and what their generic characteristics are. These generic characteristics, which are further developed in the next section, are relevant for understanding student agency in the context of higher education policy-making. The section after that introduces the articles in the Special Issue, each of which depicts a case of student organising in a different country or region, carefully developing the particular contextual specifics in which student governments or student movements operate. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of contemporary trends in student organising in a global perspective.

## **Conceptual approaches to the study of student governments and student movements**

### ***Student governments: autonomy and representational structures***

Student governments, by the very nature of their role, have to balance between what Schmitter and Streeck (1999) call the ‘logic of influence’ and ‘logic of membership’ (cf. Klemenčič 2012a). They exist to intermediate the interests of the student body to an authority, a higher education institution or government. Therefore, student governments inevitably have to relate to that authority, engage with its structures and agenda, and engage in its policy networks. Consequently, as the theory of political socialisation informs us, student governments’ organisational characteristics are affected by the ‘logic of influence’. At the same time, student governments exist to serve their constituency, the collective student body. The student body elects student representatives into student governments and mandates them to act on their behalf and in their interest. The organisational characteristics of a student government are thus inevitably defined by and determined through the ‘logic of membership’. Like other political institutions, student governments too are

relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of the turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing circumstances. (March and Olsen 2008, 3)

However, given the rapid turnaround of elected officials and the transient nature of studentship, student governments tend to be more susceptible to change under the influence of individual ‘agents’ or external circumstances.

Three sets of questions typically guide the investigation of student governments: how they operate, how they change, and how they matter in the context of higher education politics (cf. Klemenčič 2012a; Stensaker and Michelsen 2012; Jungblut and Weber 2012). We can endeavour to answer them by drawing from a combination of conceptual tools. Student governments stand in implicit or explicit exchange relationships with authorities whom they seek to influence. In this relationship, student governments possess and can supply important resources: professional expertise, legitimisation of policy outcomes, social control of their members, and services valued by the authority (Klemenčič 2012a). Authorities in turn provide funding and other material or symbolic resources. They also define the relational structures through which student governments can formally and informally intermediate their

interests. Resource dependency theory posits that we can predict student governments' characteristics and behaviour on the basis of resource dependencies in a given relationship and situation. The interactions between authorities and student governments take place within a particular 'structure' either the university setting or the political system, with a set of formal and informal rules, norms and values. The neo-institutionalist theories remind us that these structures can both constrain and enable agents' choices and shape actors' preferences (Thelen and Mahoney 2010). Neither student governments nor authorities are perfectly unitary actors and their preferences for political outcomes and their behaviour are not fixed, but rather shaped in the interaction with other actors and the context in which they are embedded. Finally, drawing from cultural sociology, the investigation of social relations between student governments and authorities has to take into account the cultural meanings of authority in the context of a particular higher education institution or system and the interpretations of what constitutes legitimacy. Consequently, I advocate context-dependent investigations of student collective agency and action, which is what the articles in this Special Issue do superbly.

Nevertheless, to allow for comparative analyses of student governments across time and space two generic conditions of student organising are crucial for our understanding of their operations: one is the autonomy of student governments and the other is student governments' representational structures. The autonomy of student governments can be defined in similar terms as Enders, de Boer, and Weyer (2013) defined autonomy for universities: as institutions having decision-making competences and as being exempt from constraints on the actual use of such competences (Enders, de Boer, and Weyer 2013, 7). Adapted to student governments, the former refers to policy autonomy (ability to decide on its own political and professional agenda); governance autonomy (ability to decide on internal structures and processes) and managerial autonomy (discretion over financial matters, human and other resources). The latter includes financial autonomy (conditions imposed through funding), legal autonomy (legal status) and 'symbolic' autonomy (relations to, in particular, political parties). These terms can aid us in comparing the positional power of student governments and predicting their influence.

The state can (and often does) regulate through legislation the terms of the relationship between student governments and their home institutions. The sticking points in such formulations are several: whether membership in student governments is automatic (or mandatory) or voluntary; how student governments are funded (through mandatory student fees or through voluntary contributions of students); and what the legal status of student governments is (are they legally independent or integrated into governing structure of the university they belong to). The expectation here is that the less dependent student governments are on their home institutions, the freer they will be from possible intervention and control from the institutional leadership. Consequently, student governments will be more likely to hold authorities accountable to student interests.

The state can also define the structures and processes through which student governments represent student interests in institutional decision-making. The key questions here are whether there are formal structures and procedures in place that ensure that student representatives share decision rights with other constituencies in all decision-making issues or only on issues directly relevant to students (such as quality of teaching and student services), or whether such provisions are absent or indicate that students should not have major influence in decision-making (cf. Stensaker and Vabø 2013).

In other words, state intervention can define the extent to which student involvement is ‘formally secured through legislation, or whether their involvement is more dependent on traditions, culture and informal arrangements’ (Stensaker and Vabø 2013, 259). The more formalised the rules, the stronger is the legitimate power of student governments and the higher is the propensity for students to influence policy process. However, as mentioned earlier, the formal rules alone do not define the relations between student governments and institutional leaders. Traditions and cultural attitudes to authority and legitimacy are equally influential. Even if the formal rules change, it is not necessary that actual relations will change if the new rules go against deeply established traditions and cultural meanings.

Both autonomy and relational structures impact student governments’ internal legitimacy that is related to their perceived ability to foster and represent effectively and truthfully student interests. External legitimacy of student governments relates to how they are perceived by the social actors in the environment, including and especially the authority they seek to influence. External legitimacy is often assessed by representativity, structural and procedural democracy, but also expertise, constructiveness, reliability and trustworthiness. What constitutes legitimacy for the student government and when its involvement in policymaking is conceived as legitimate varies across institutional and national contexts and may be changing with the profound ideological shifts in university governance and higher education governance on the national level. Relationships to external actors, in particular political parties, are also relevant to legitimacy. While student governments may form alliances with political parties or other actors, or sympathise with some informally, the question at hand is whether their structures and processes are strong enough to prevent their primary locus of interest and activity to be moved from students to the outside actor. This would, of course, undermine their unique ability to perform representational functions.

In sum, the investigation of student governments needs to account for the context in which they are embedded and the cultural meanings that underpin their role. What the ‘context’ consists of can vary but would typically include the formal and informal rules, norms, and historical traditions of the higher education institution or political system in which they are embedded. At the higher level of abstraction we can, however, compare student unions within national systems and internationally. A typology for the study of national student associations and national systems of student representation and interest intermediation has already been developed (Klemenčič 2012a). This article highlights generic characteristics of student governance and posits that autonomy, legitimacy and relational structures are the key determinants of student governments’ political engagement within higher education decision-making.

### ***Student movements: demand and supply side of student mobilisation***

Scholars of social movements propose that the availability of resources and the presence of opportunities play a key role in emergence of social movements (Klandermans 2013). I have argued earlier that studentship and academic environment present favourable conditions to ‘movement mobilisation potential’ (cf. Klandermans 2013). Well-established communication networks among students within higher education establishments make it more possible to politicise student grievances. The study of student protest movements will necessarily be concerned with the study of contention, i.e. the claims students have which conflict with the interests of the authorities. The



other area of interest is the dynamic of student movement: the actors, the mobilising structures and processes, political opportunities they seize, and their strategic action and outcomes. Both dimensions are highly contingent on the context in which the movement is embedded, which makes international comparisons somewhat more difficult. In this article I wish to discuss two dimensions of the study of student movements which are particularly suitable to comparative analysis without necessarily losing too much of explanatory power through a high level of abstraction: the demand and supply side of student movements.

The demand side concerns the student movement mobilisation potential (Klander-mans 2013). Student movement mobilisation potential has been profoundly affected by the increasing diversity of student body, which makes it more difficult to establish a collective student identity, shared grievances and shared emotions. Students' expectations of higher education and their experience of it can vary significantly even within the same institutions. Furthermore, the extent of social networks in which students are embedded and the possibilities for their action in physical and virtual environments has also increased dramatically. Consequently, students increasingly have multiple and overlapping memberships in different networks and multiple identities (cf. Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). These networks pose multiple demands on students' time and attention. However, information and communication technologies also make it more possible to quickly respond to several initiatives and be simultaneously engaged in several activities. The key question then becomes whether and when students decide to engage politically.

To massively mobilise students within an institution, regionally, nationally or internationally, the initiators of the movement need to help students to become aware of their common shared grievances and identify who the opponents – those held responsible for the grievances – are. In other words, the collective student identity needs to be politicised. The study of student movements includes the study of the contention, i.e. the claims students have and which conflict with the interests of authorities. The contention changes over time (as seen if comparing student protests from the 1960s with those taking place since 2000) and differ across space, i.e. contention is inevitably determined by the specific institutional or national political developments, which may be similar across countries or not. The contention is contingent on the overall student culture, i.e. the overall values and beliefs students hold in particular time and space. Studies such as the World Values Survey (Inglehart and Welzel 2005) that depict the value make-up of different categories of population across time and space can be helpful in this regard. In European contexts, studies such as Eurostudent (Orr, Gwosc, and Netz 2011; Orr, Wartenbergh-Cras, and Scholz, forthcoming) offer a helpful insight into the socioeconomic conditions of students and how these may be conducive, or deterrent, to different forms of student engagement.

The supply side of protest is concerned with the characteristics of the broad social movement sector in a country, its strength, its diversity, and its contentiousness (Roggeband and Duyvendak 2013, 16). Given the existence of formal representative structures, student movements may be linked to student governments. The proliferation of representative student structures has had an impact on the supply side of protests: in some places deterring protests and elsewhere fuelling them due to perceived inaction, ineffectiveness or illegitimacy (cf. March and Olsen 2008, 10). The overall protest culture, especially popular attitudes to protest as a mode of political action, should also be considered.

The myth of rising political apathy of young people has been largely demolished in recent scholarly work. There is compelling evidence that although less engaged in traditional modes of politics, such as voting and joining political parties, young people – and particularly those in education or holding a higher education degree – are concerned about political issues and their political engagement is increasing (Sloam 2014). The political action of young people has, however, become more individualised, ad-hoc, issue-specific and less linked to traditional societal cleavages (Sloam 2014). More research, and especially comparative research, is needed to uncover the variations and changes in student mobilisation potential and the characteristics of the student movement sector, their impact on student collective action and on political developments in higher education.

### **Introducing the Special Issue**

This Special Issue offers a contemporary comparative account of political behaviour of organised student interest in higher education politics across different world regions. The seven articles in the issue paint a picture of changing student political agency and variations in the power that organised student interests have on higher education reforms.

The issue opens with examples of two of the most prominent student protests in recent history. Bégin-Caouette and Jones (2014) analyse the role of student organisations in what turned out to be the largest student protest in Canadian history. Quebec's 'Maple Spring' in 2012 emerged from students' opposition to the government's announcement of increased tuition fees. It eventually spread into a broader social movement against neoliberal reforms. The outcome of the protest was the destabilisation of the entire Quebec political system, culminating in the fall of the Quebec government and the decision of the new government to roll back and then index tuition fees. Furthermore, the protest disrupted the traditional power relationships associated with the Quebec higher education policy community. The authors systematically analyse the movement in terms of systemic, circumstantial and strategic factors, suggesting that the combination of all these factors contributed to the distinctive nature of the protest. They also describe the considerable organisational capacity of representative student organisations in Canada, which act as influential 'pressure groups' and whose ample organisational resources aided support to the protest.

The Canadian protest in many aspects resembles and was inspired by the Chilean student protest in 2011 – perhaps the most striking example of social mobilisation in Chile since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Bellei, Cabalin, and Orellana argue that this student protest was 'a process of expressing accumulated grievances against some neoliberal features of Chilean education' and 'ultimately changed the public agenda in education' (Bellei, Cabalin, and Orellana 2014). For seven months, university students organised massive marches, occupied university premises, held assemblies, and conducted media campaigns. The authors analyse the student movement, paying close attention to the context in which it was embedded: the extreme market-oriented higher education reforms over the last three decades and a long tradition of student activism after the end of dictatorship in Chile.

Protests against tuition fees also feature in the article by Shin, Kim and Choi on contemporary student organising in Korea. The authors pay particular attention to the historical context of student organising and to the contemporary higher education developments. After democratisation, the existence of student unions at universities

was stipulated in higher education legislation; however mildly regulated. Each university can determine the terms of student union operations, which results in highly differentiated unions across institutions. The authors suggest that after democratic rule had been installed, student unions 'became less interested in national politics and more interested in student welfare related issues' (Shin, Kim, and Choi 2014), especially tuition fees. This comes as no surprise in a country with the second highest tuition level in the world, a low public expenditure for higher education, and where over 78% of students are enrolled in private institutions. Shin, Kim and Choi carefully describe the emergence of a national student movement against tuition fees and analyse the effects of the subsequent government policy to make it mandatory for university presidents to include students in institutional 'tuition review committees'. They find that universities are able to increase tuition fees despite the involvement of students, and even in cases where student unions have a strong political orientation.

The next three articles are concerned explicitly with changes in representative student organisations and their role in higher education politics. In the article on Russia, Chirikov and Gruzdev (2014) note that the expanding and more diverse student body appears less interested in student politics. This poses a challenge to representative student associations which have been granted more involvement in institutional governance with the recent reforms. The Russian Federation's new education legislation adopted in 2013, requires all institutions of higher education to include students in the decision-making process by establishing either student councils or professional student unions. The authors question the effectiveness of the implementation of this policy due to the 'path dependence': the past institutional arrangements of student involvement in decision-making and the service-oriented (rather than political) nature of professional student unions.

In Poland, the development of a national student representation had a turbulent history with periods of political fragmentation into different student bodies each of whose legitimacy was weakened by close association with political parties. Antonowicz, Pinheiro and Smużewska suggest that it was Poland's participation in the Bologna Process that paved the way for the strengthening of the national representative student association, the Student Parliament. As the Student Parliament turned more into 'an expert organisation on student affairs' (Antonowicz, Pinheiro, and Smużewska 2014) it managed to legally consolidate its status as the only representative body of students at national level and gain access to several key governmental bodies. These changes happened during Poland's growing marketisation of higher education and the introduction of New Public Management principles to higher education. Within this context, the Student Parliament has found its *modus operandi*, trying to combine political and professional roles.

In the case of Australia, Rochfort carefully examines the development of state legislation regulating student organisations. In particular, she emphasises the legislative change from mandatory student membership to voluntary student unionism which had significant repercussions on the funding (and hence also the action capacity) of student organisations. Rochfort argues that the reorientation of the higher education sector to fulfil a more market-oriented role has been facilitated by a reconfiguration of the relationship between universities and students and between universities and student organisations. She finds that universities have established a contractual relationship with students whereby students as customers pay fees for higher education services provided by universities as commercial enterprises. In this environment, the student organisations occupy difficult terrain: 'simultaneously acting as a service

provider, student advocate and political lobbyist' which tends to 'a conflation of their interests with that of universities' (Rochfort 2014). Rochfort further notes that student organisations have been depoliticised as part of the universities' marketisation.

The final article on Africa testifies to the importance of context for our understanding of student organising. Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume describe the implications of the political transition from authoritarianism to multiparty democracy on student representative organisations in Africa. The authors propose that the shift from oppositional politics, in which students were strongly invested during the political transition, to multiparty politics has resulted in a strengthening of the influence of party-politics in African student politics. In post-independence Africa, the student estate has inherited the political culture of involvement in the political system and continues to engage in wider political issues rather than predominantly focusing on their representative role within higher education governance. Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume observe that institutionalised student representation in Africa tends to retain much of the activist orientation, in contrast to developed countries where the distinction between interest-group orientations and student movements tends to be more pronounced. Competition among students who represent different national parties in student leadership elections has become commonplace on many African university campuses.

### **Global contemporary trends in student organising**

The cases presented in this Special Issue are a vivid reminder that student organisations and student movements are deeply embedded in national and institutional contexts. What comprises the 'context' and which social mechanisms are most pronounced in student organising and student political action varies. For the purposes of international comparison, cultural explanation is a critical component in the study of student organising and its role in higher education policymaking, similarly as we witness advantages in cultural studies of higher education (Välilmaa and Ylijoki 2008). Culture, in the sense of shared meanings, beliefs, and values within higher education communities, emerges as a powerful explanatory variable in several instances.

First, the cultural attitudes of the key actors in the higher education community to power, authority and legitimacy within higher education governance help us unravel the informal relations that underlie the policy processes and outcomes. The anecdotal evidence speaks of students having formal powers in decision-making, but lacking effective influence on key policy outcomes. I have mentioned in the introduction that policy processes within higher education are becoming more network-like, inviting participation by different stakeholders, including representative student organisations. Inspired by New Public Management doctrine, universities and governments are revising their governance structures and procedures to involve the stakeholders with the expectation that these will contribute to the efficiency as well as legitimacy of the policy outcomes. In the European context, several governments have strengthened legislation providing for student involvement in institutional and government decision-making. In this issue, the articles about Poland and Russia depict this trend, which can also be observed elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe (Klemenčič 2012b). The effectiveness of the implementation of these legislative changes depends, however, on the cultural attitudes of the key actors to power and authority in higher education politics as well as these actors' attitudes to whether student participation is needed to legitimise the policy outcomes. In their article on professional

student unions in Russia, Chirikov and Gruzdev expose this question when referring to the ‘path dependencies’ of past arrangements of student participation and the traditional role of student unions as service organisations rather than political actors. Paternalistic relations between university leadership and student unions in Korea might also be one possible explanation for why the Korean government’s decision to include student representatives in institutional decisions on tuition fees did not prevent rises in tuition fees. In the case of Australia, Rochfort notes that student representatives might be less willing to openly criticise institutional practices so as not to undermine the reputation of the university from which they derive their eventual degree and which competes in the market.

The articles in this Special Issue refer to the three forms of relations between university and representative student structures. One is an authoritarian-paternalistic approach in which a student government is integrated into the institutional structure and given limited discretion for involvement on issues strictly concerning students (such as student services, teaching quality) and only in an advisory rather than co-decision capacity. In other words, student representatives are seen as junior members of the academic community not able to contribute to decisions on an equal level as academics (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). Another form is based on democratic collegiate institutional governance which assumes the existence of fairly autonomous student governments at higher education institutions (and so stipulated in national legislation). Student representatives, as an internal constituency, are granted participation in institutions and often co-decision rights on all decision-making issues. The third form is based on a managerial (or corporate) governance model, which is promulgated in the New Public Management doctrine, and in which institutional leadership involves student unions together with other stakeholders, where external stakeholders hold a considerable leverage and student representatives (as well as academics) are engaged as consultants rather than co-decision-makers (Klemenčič 2012b). Strategic emphasis on quality assurance and student satisfaction opens up new opportunity structures for the engagement of student governments: in professional roles offering advice, performing student services, and managing student facilities. Student governments tend to adapt to these opportunities and expectations, resulting in changes in their organisational structures, practices, priorities and orientations. They become more professionalised while more political student groups within student government become increasingly marginalised. The less financial and legal autonomy the student governments have, the quicker is the transformation towards professionalisation and entrepreneurialism (Klemenčič 2012b).

Second, the cultural attitudes of students towards social welfare provisions, such as free access to education and education as a public good, are important determinants of their responses to neoliberal higher education reforms. Neoliberal reforms in higher education put emphasis on efficiency, competition and choice and are pursued through a number of means: the corporatisation, marketisation and privatisation of the higher education sector; the insertion of market-oriented competitive elements into the higher education market; and the effective retrenchment of the state from funding higher education. Austerity measures following the global financial crisis have accelerated the implementation of such reforms in countries where they previously did not exist. Although the differences between countries continue to be pronounced, there nevertheless exists a sense that the national higher education systems are becoming more alike in the sense of being more market-oriented, even in countries with a strong social welfare tradition.

However, the application of neoliberal reforms worldwide, even though reflecting certain ideological commonalities, is far from unified. There is a sense that the national

higher education systems are becoming more alike in being more market-oriented, however, the differences in the specific policy measures individual governments choose remain pronounced. Governments inevitably need to be attuning not only to what they think is a desirable policy, but also what they believe will be an acceptable policy. Cultural values concerning the role of state in funding of higher education and the role of universities in society certainly factor in such decisions. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom (Day 2012), and Korea (Shin, Kim, and Choi 2014), opposition from students to tuition fee increases emerged, but government policy persisted. The obstruction of government policy was relatively more successful in Chile and Canada where popular rejection of the marketisation of higher education prevailed. In sum, the neoliberal reforms have deepened and widened the ‘pool of grievances’ in many societies and demand for protest has been on the rise (cf. Klandermans 2013, 15); however neither mobilisation nor the outcomes of the protests have been equally successful everywhere. Understanding the cultural attitudes towards questions such as whom higher education serves, who should pay for higher education and what role universities have in society can offer important insights into understanding the political developments and outcomes in higher education.

Over 20 years since the last international comparative account on student activism (Altbach 1989c) much has changed and much has remained the same. Higher education systems are becoming liberalised, there is more competition between higher education institutions and the trend is towards introducing or raising tuition fees. Student governments have consolidated a strong place within higher education institutions and play a combination of representative, consultative and professional service functions. Giving students a voice appears to be universally advocated, even if justifications differ. In marketised systems, student engagement is valued in the context of quality assurance and student satisfaction. In systems where government steering remains strong and universities remain collegiate, students – as a key internal constituency – exercise accountability checks through participation in institutional decision-making. Student protest culture is still vibrant: students are at the forefront of anti-government protests, as witnessed by the Arab Spring and other ‘colour revolutions’, the Occupy movement and other protests against austerity measures, for autonomy and democracy. Mass student protests in twenty-first century are almost exclusively oriented against the rise in tuition fees and other measures associated with the marketisation of higher education.

This Special Issue brings insights into contemporary student organising and activism, but more work remains to be done. The changes in governance regimes in higher education at the national and institutional level open a whole array of questions as to the changes in the constellations of actors, their relationships, roles, power and culture. The question of how much influence students have over their education has also not yet been sufficiently explored. A whole new research field is opening in the area of student engagement (Klemenčič, Bergan, and Primožič, forthcoming). What this research also ought to address is whether the contemporary higher education reforms are liberating or domesticating student voices?<sup>5</sup> And, does conceiving students as consumers change their behaviour and indeed their influence?<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

1. More information on HYY Group is available at <http://yhtyma.hyy.fi/en/financial-information/> [accessed 2 January 2014].
2. <https://www.warwick.ac.uk/yourunion/> [accessed 2 January 2014].

3. See note 2.
4. For an excellent review of Altbach's contribution on student activism see Luescher-Mama-shela (Forthcoming).
5. I thank Bruce Macfarlane for raising this question during my keynote on student engagement in times of transformations at Annual Research Conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education in Wales, December 2013.
6. I thank Simon Marginson for raising this question during my keynote on student engagement in times of transformations at Annual Research Conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education in Wales, December 2013.

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