



## Student representation in Western Europe: introduction to the special issue

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## INTRODUCTION

### Student representation in Western Europe: introduction to the special issue

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This article introduces the special issue of *European Journal of Higher Education* dedicated to the cross-national comparison of student representation in Western Europe. Student representative organisations, whose primary aim is to represent and defend the interests of the collective student body, are core participants in European higher education (HE) governance. Yet, these organisations are strikingly absent in scholarly literature. This special issue is guided by the question of how students as a collective body are organised, and how their interests are aggregated, articulated and intermediated into the national policy processes. The article develops the conceptual framework guiding the investigation of national student associations and systems of student representation and interest intermediation; and it introduces the five empirically-driven articles on student representation in Norway, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy compared, and Spain.

**Keywords:** representative student organisations student unions; student governments; student parliaments; student councils; systems of student interest intermediation; HE policymaking; Western Europe

#### Introduction

Student representative organisations – student unions, councils, parliaments, governments – are those whose primary aim is to represent and defend the interests of the collective student body. They operate on different levels of higher education (HE) governance: from the sub-institutional (faculty and departmental) through institutional, regional, national to the European level where national representative organisations congregate in the European Students' Union (ESU). All of these student organisations are similar in that they organise, aggregate and intermediate student interests, provide services for students and organize student activities. The norms of legitimate student representation stipulate that these organisations be governed by democratically elected student representatives and be democratic and autonomous in terms of their governance.

In national HE legislation, European countries almost universally adhere to the principles of democratic representation in institutional governance (Bergan 2004; Persson 2004). For example, the Norwegian HE Act includes a whole chapter on

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‘student bodies’ whose purpose it is ‘to safeguard the interests of students and present their views to the board of the institution’ (Norwegian HE Act 2005, Chapter 4, Section 4–1[1]). It further stipulates the election procedures to student bodies (Section 4–1[2]) and dictates that institutions ‘shall provide conditions in which student bodies are able to perform their functions in a satisfactory manner’ and that ‘the extent of such arrangements shall be specified in an agreement between the institution and the highest student body’ (Section 4–1[3]). Within this context, institutions are bound to enable and provide for representative student organisations, and this situation results in a fairly – albeit not a fully – converged picture of student representation on an institutional level.

On the national level, a much more variegated picture of student representation can be seen. Only in few countries do national HE legislations explicitly stipulate the existence and function of national student associations. In Austria, for example, national-level student representation is regulated through Student Association Act (HSG 1998). In the majority of countries, there is no regulation of student organising on the national level. National associations are formed by the collective action of a group of university<sup>1</sup> student organisations who chose to cooperate and coordinate their activities in relation to public authorities and in international cooperation. These associations are typically registered as non-profit organisations and on the European level come together in membership of ESU: these are 45 national student associations from 38 countries.<sup>2</sup> These associations vary across countries significantly in terms of their organisational characteristics. Hence, the first set of questions guiding this article is how we can compare them across the key organisational parameters. What are their organisational structures like? What is their political agenda: the salient issues defended and types of goals pursued? What is their mode of action: ways and means to pursue their goals? And what are their exchange resources and outputs of their action? These parameters underlie the basic distinction, proposed by this article, between national student associations as interest groups and as student movement organisations or civil society organisations.

Equally diverse are the specific relationships between state and national representative student associations, i.e. the systems of student interest intermediation. The comparison of systems of student interest intermediation can be based on its two defining conditions: the *agency*, i.e. the system of student representation and the *structure* and characteristics of public policy processes. The first is concerned with the characteristics of the representational system in terms of the number of associations and whether the state has granted any representational monopolies. The distinction here is made between neo-corporatist and pluralist systems of student representation. The structural aspect is concerned with the characteristics of public policy processes in the areas of HE and student social welfare, and whether there exist formal mechanisms of student interest intermediation, e.g. a governmental council for student affairs. The distinction here is made between more formalised and informal systems of student interest intermediation.

Given that in Europe students are considered a major constituency and nearly as a rule participate in HE governance (Bergan 2004; Persson 2004) it is rather surprising how little scholarly research exists on student representative organisations. The reasons for this may be that the domestic and European HE politics as a research area are seriously understudied, rather than any assumption that student associations are marginal players in these domains. No in-depth comparative study

of these organisations has been conducted to date. The bulk of the scholarly literature on students as a collective body is dedicated to studies of the student rebellions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These studies mostly focus on non-institutionalised forms of student political behaviour, i.e. student protests as social movements (Lipset and Altbach 1969; Altbach 1989). Much less frequent are accounts of student organisations as an institutionalized form of student politics; with exception of Altbach (1992, 2006) who in his reviews of student politics and culture also addresses characteristics and role of student associations. The few empirical studies that exist focus on individual national cases or compare a handful (e.g. Fields [1970, 1989] for France; Levitt [1989] and Keller [2000] for Germany; Statera [1979] for Italy; Pinner [1964] comparing Dutch, Belgian and French student unionism). While these offer a valuable historical overview of development of student unionism in the selected countries, their analysis frequently targets the explanation of student revolts and does not account for the more contemporary institutional and systemic developments. Student organisations are also typically absent from comparative interest-group research which usually focuses on business interest associations, trade unions, and – among the public interest groups – the environmental and human rights groups. What is missing from the literature, and what this special issue aims towards, is a theoretically-engaged and timely empirical account of the state of student representation in Europe.

This introductory article offers a conceptual outline for a cross-national comparison of organisational properties of national student associations and of national systems of student representation and interest intermediation. It is structured into four sections. The first section discusses the history of organised student representation from medieval universities until today, and its relevance. The second section addresses the organizational characteristics of national-level associations, proposes a model for categorizing these and raises questions for investigation of organisational change. The third section depicts the characteristics of national systems of student interest representation and intermediation and extracts key conditions to model these across European countries. The concluding section briefly introduces the articles in this special issue, and relates their contribution to the conceptual outline.

### **History and relevance**

Representative student organisations are not a modern phenomenon. In the earliest, but also most dramatic display of student organisation – in medieval Bologna University – students were organised into ‘nations’ which initially offered them mutual welfare, protection and collective security against the local authorities, following the example of the guilds already common in Italian cities (Haskins 1923; Cobban 1971). These nations eventually developed their participation in – indeed control of – the academic affairs of the overall university (Kibre 1948; Schwinges 1992, 211). The Bologna students created a type of university in which sovereign power resided in the student body, the student body associated in nations, and these effectively controlled the university.

However, this governance arrangement lasted only a relatively short period and – with some exceptions – was not replicated elsewhere. Much more influential was the Parisian type of university where the guild of professors – the masters – shared

control over the university with a student rector – a young master – elected by the students (Haskins 1923). These student associations were less powerful than in Bologna; there was an opposition from secular and ecclesiastical authorities to granting them an official status (Cobban 1971). The arguments used were that such power would prove a disturbance to academic and urban peace, and that students had a bad to indifferent record in university administration (Cobban 1971, 56). The situation apparently did not progress beyond this stage in later centuries. On the contrary, by the sixteenth century, student involvement in university governance virtually collapsed (Cobban 1971, 56).<sup>3</sup> Where student nations survived, they remained ‘as units of administrative convenience, not as organs of student power’ (Cobban 1971, 55).

With the formation of nation states, student politics at universities began to experience nationalist tensions and nationalist students’ clubs and associations began to emerge (Gevers and Vos 2004). This was the beginning of the student movements of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which students became increasingly engaged with broader social and political issues and tied in with political and emancipation movements (Gevers and Vos 2004, 269). The emergence of student movements coincided with the proliferation of student associations: especially political and religious, but also those representing general student interests. In Scotland for example, ‘Student Representative Councils’ emerged. These aimed – as they do today – to represent the interests of all students and foster contacts between students and academic authorities (Gevers and Vos 2004, 315; Day, in this special issue).

In the early twentieth century, some of the oldest still-existing national representative student associations were created by congregations of university student organisations (e.g. UNEF France 1907; UNEL Luxembourg 1920; NUS-UK 1922; SYL Finland 1921; DSF Denmark 1938). Their aim was to aggregate the student voice nationally, organize student participation in both the domestic public sphere and in international cooperation. At the same time university-based organisations continued to play an important part in student life, offered various student services, but had limited rights in the professoriate-dominated governance structures.

Elsewhere, the state had intervened in the formation of national student association through legislation. Such laws on Student Associations or other similar legal acts *de jure* determine the status, organisation and operations of national-level student associations. Such associations were typically integrated into the state governance system in a similar way as the student council-type organisations are integrated into university governance. In countries run by authoritarian regimes such intervention meant that one compulsory, non-competitive national student organisation with a deliberate representational monopoly was imposed and controlled by the regime (cf. O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The transition to democracy resulted in a change from a state corporatist arrangement to societal corporatism, which allowed for autonomous student organisations, but at the same time often resulted in a fragmented system of student representation lacking the capacity to organise into a united national representation (e.g. Greece).<sup>4</sup>

Given their particular social status and intellectual *habitus*, students are known to be vibrant political and social force, with a history of political involvement and engagement with ideas of ‘nationalism, radicalism, and modern ideological trends’

(Altbach 1970, 74; Lipset and Altbach 1969). Student organisations have served as platforms for student political behaviour as they provide the location and resources for the aggregation and articulation of political ideas, which are then diffused into public policy processes or other political or social processes. But they are also in themselves forms of institutionalised political behaviour.

Today, the national student associations congregate in their European platform, ESU. Most of these associations – and ESU on the European level – have been successful in establishing themselves as indispensable partners in HE policymaking. This role has been prominently affirmed by the European ministers responsible for HE in the context of the Bologna Process. In fact, student participation in HE decision-making at all levels, which is the key political domain of representative student associations, has been continuously reaffirmed as one of the principles of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Klemenčič 2012, 637–40). The notions of legitimate HE policymaking in Europe traditionally involves participation of governments, academics and institutions, and students (Klemenčič 2011).

Apart from their political role, national student associations have established themselves also as providers of expertise and information services to public authorities as well as to their own members. This role has been emphasised in view of the contemporary social and economic developments affecting European HE, the ambitious HE modernisation agenda, and the policymaking accompanying these reforms in the context of the EHEA and the European Union (Klemenčič 2012). Governments (and EU) are increasingly subscribing to the new public management approach in public policy governance (de Boer and File 2009). This approach advocates increasing efficiency of policymaking by involving participation of external stakeholders. The national HE policymaking is becoming more policy-network like: less hierarchical, with policy decisions being negotiated and mediated among several stakeholders rather than simply imposed by public authorities (cf. Börzel 1998). The core assumption of the policy network governance is resource dependency: political resources are dispersed over several public and private actors, thus forcing these actors to cooperate if they wish to achieve policymaking effectiveness and solve coordination problems (Börzel 1998). Student associations are in this context seen as being able to supply relevant information, expertise and legitimisation of policy outcomes. Policy networks ultimately not only pursue new HE policies, but might also generate new political environments as to different constellations of organised interest, their power relationships and organizational adaptations. The changes in political context may thus also provoke changes in organisations and systems of student representation.

This article suggests that national student associations are interesting units of analysis in their own right. As relevant and potent actors within HE governance, they are also essential for understanding of HE politics and policymaking. Yet, student associations are also not unproblematic. Their political and service functions tend to be supported through highly developed organisational structures, often automatic membership and secure funding streams, but balancing between political and service functions, and between – what Schmitter and Streeck (1999 [1981]) call – the ‘logic of influence’ and ‘logic of membership’ is not easy. Indications of associations’ strengthened professionalisation raises concerns about a weakening of the ties between grass-roots student body and their elected representatives; thus of these organisations’ mobilisation capacity and ultimately representativeness. Another

problem typical for contemporary student associations is upholding organisational autonomy (defined here as having free capacity to act and independence from external interference) while partnering the public authorities and universities in the aforementioned broader transformation of HE governance. The rise in the number of student movements in recent years may be an indicator of the tensions and dissatisfaction that such balancing acts tend to generate.

### **Organisational characteristics of national student associations**

This article is taking Schmitter and Streeck's (1999 [1981]) account of the logic of membership and the logic of influence as a starting point in the discussion of the organisational characteristics of student association. According to Schmitter and Streeck (1999 [1981], 45), the emergence and structure of systems of interest representation vary according to the underlying membership interest and the conditions of the processes of political influence. National student associations present an organised aggregation of interests, values and identities. Their member organisations have made a collective choice to cooperate together and coordinate their collective action through joint institutions. They have supplied funding and delegated political authority to joint institutions to represent them towards public authorities and others, and to act on their behalf in domestic and international political processes. They have agreed upon governing structures, political agenda and modes of action. As such, national student associations' organisational characteristics – structure, resources, political agenda, mode of action, and outputs – are inevitably defined by and determined through the 'logic of membership.' At the same time, the core *raison d'être* of national student associations is to intermediate student interests to public authorities responsible for steering HE and student social welfare public policymaking. Therefore, these associations inevitably have to relate to public authorities, engage with their structures and cooperate in policy networks. Consequently – as theory of political socialisation informs us – their organisational characteristics are also affected by the 'logic of influence.' Associations tend to adapt their organisational characteristics rationally as to enable them to better perform their representative function, or these are changed through particular change in external circumstances, such as funding or membership.<sup>5</sup> Frequent and regular interactions between representatives of national associations and public authorities can initiate further socialisation effects: generate common understanding of social meaning and purpose and promote more cooperative behaviour.

Representatives of national student associations thus act simultaneously in a 'two-level' game. On the one hand, they serve their members and on the other hand they seek to represent them in relation to public authorities. The intra-organisational dynamic of the logic of membership is further complicated in more professionalised organisations which comprise not only elected officials, but also professional staff. The former is usually seen as closer to the members, whereas the latter might be more concerned about developing the organisations' long-term relational structures towards public authorities, and also securing sustainable funding. This dimension adds further tensions to the already difficult intra-organisational politics, which can be hampered by heterogeneous membership – according to type (representative and functionally or territorially differentiated types of organisations), economic and political power, and ideology.

The logic of membership and the logic of influence, as two clusters of independent variables that are assumed to affect organisational characteristics of national student associations, are crucial for drawing a distinction between two key types of national student associations: as *interest groups* and as *student movement/civil society organisations* (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup>

The conception of student associations as interest groups implies that there is – implicit or explicit – exchange relationship between the state and intermediary student associations. In this relationship, student associations possess and can supply important resources: functional expertise, legitimisation of policy outcomes, social control of their members, and may also be able to support certain service in policy implementation. The political activity of student organisations targets public policy processes and is typically conducted in corporatist fashion – with lobbying and general political and social advocacy, rather than conflict politics which is associated with student movements. In fact, their political agenda will often mirror the institutional and government salient issues directly affecting students. It takes place within established channels of interest intermediation and is based on a combination of exchange and strategic interaction-based and trust-based relationships. Particularly within policy networks – by some considered a superior form of policy governance – the interactions are typically based on a higher degree of communication and trust (and hence a partnership relationship between participating interest groups and state actors) and aim at achieving joint outcomes which have a proper value for all the actors (Börzel 1998). To develop exchange goods, student associations as interest groups need professionalised organisational structures with

Table 1. A typology of national student associations.

National student associations		
Qualifying factors	Student associations as social movement organisations	Student associations as interest groups
Organisational structure	Network-like; loosely integrated; limited functional differentiation	Hierarchically ordered with strong centralised coordination; highly functionally differentiated
Internal resources	Fluctuating administrative funding; volunteers	Secure administrative funding; professionalised administration
Political agenda	Transversal: next to sectorial also broader political issues (solidarity, human rights, social justice, egalitarian values, democratisation, anti-globalisation)	Sectorial: focusing on organisation, substance and processes of education and student welfare issues
Mode of action	Non-institutionalised forms of claim-making: protests, boycotts, campaigns	Lobbying and political advocacy, services
Outputs	Mobilisation capacity, expertise and information	Representativeness (legitimation capacity), expertise and information, implementation capacity
Examples of national student associations	UDU Italy; UNEF France; Fage France; CREUP Spain;	NSO Norway; NUS-UK; fzs Germany



functionally differentiated subunits and a high degree of coordination of the overall organisational purpose. To sustain such structures and purpose, ample funding is needed for support staff (permanent employees) and activities.

On the other hand, the conception of student associations as social movements and civil society organisations attributes to student associations' a tendency toward conflictual politics and non-institutionalised forms of claim-making, such as protests, boycotts, and campaigns (cf. della Porta and Diani 2006). The associations on this account display predominantly activist orientations; tend to be 'oppositional in nature,' 'opposing established authority,' 'on the left in terms of ideology and politics' (Altbach 2006, 335). The student-movement organisation conception emphasises that the defence of student interests cannot be separated from the movement against a neoliberal restructuring of HE and global capitalism itself (Callinicos 2006). The underlying argument is that the state serves the capitalist interest and seeks to 'co-opt' student associations into state policymaking organs to make them act 'as states surrogates' and exercise social control over their members (cf. Higgins 1985, 352). Consequently, representatives of such associations tend to be suspicious of corporatist relationships between state and student associations. The last decade has witnessed a rise in student movements across the world, many of them united in their struggle against all aspects of 'commercialisation,' 'commodification' and 'privatisation' of HE. The most salient issues include increases in tuition fees, decreasing public funding for education, the increasing influence of business interests on HE, the 'proletarianisation' of academics, etc.<sup>7</sup> Those national student associations that come closer to the social-movement organisation type tend to participate in and/or support such movements. The organisational structures of these associations tend to be less developed in terms of a web of working structures and full-time employed professional staff. They tend to be loosely organised (network-like) with volunteers rather than permanent staff. The focus in terms of organisational resources is on mobilisation capacity – targeting student body and resources – and identity formation.

National student associations may display more strongly the characteristics of one or the other ideological orientation, but these orientations can and have been changing within the same organisations reflecting especially the orientations of the elected officials and/or members. For example, according to political agenda, mode of action and outputs, UNEF clearly fits into the category of the social movement organisations. It deviates somewhat from this category, however, if one looks at its organisational structure and resources. fzs is among the case organisations perhaps most closely situated, and indeed fluctuates, between both categories.<sup>8</sup> In addition, conflictual politics remains an optional mode of action even for the most 'professionalised' interest-group-type of student organisations. Given that these tensions between radical and professional are inherent to student organisations on all levels, it is not surprising that representative student organisations are viewed by the state especially as problematic as well as potent.

In sum, interest group and student movement organisations present two ideal types on a spectrum of organisational characteristics of interest groups. These categories help us to clarify the complex, heterogeneous and often fluid social reality of national student representation in Europe. Each individual case only comes closer to one or the other ideal based on meeting the specified qualifying factors. Most of the representative student organisations fall somewhere in the range between these

extreme categories while displaying more characteristics of one or the other type. Their orientations may be changing with the changes in HE regulations on student representation, the nature of HE policy processes, and other changes in the HE system and general political and social circumstances.

Thus, there are several possible avenues for investigation in terms of student associations' organisational change. One such area is professionalisation of national student associations, which is a hot topic in contemporary interest group research (Beyers, Eising, and Maloney 2008). What does professionalisation mean in the context of national student associations and who or what drives it? Another avenue for possible study is concerned with the Europeanisation of national student associations. Does the increase in European-level policymaking result in further Europeanisation of national student associations? Have student associations' policies and structures changed so as to better address policy issues emerging on and from the European level? How does Europeanisation resonate within the multilevel system of student representation? Finally, how do the various changes in HE environment, especially perhaps the most contested issue of HE financing, reflect on the student associations' intra-organisational politics in terms of balancing the logic of influence and logic of membership?

### **National systems of student interest representation and intermediation**

Across Europe one finds quite diverse models of public-private interactions in the making of public policies (Falkner 2000). These differences have been studied in the context of the two classic political science paradigms in the study of interest intermediation: neo-corporatist and pluralist. In early corporatist accounts, there was a distinction in emphasis between the particular organisational characteristics of the interest representation system and the particularity of the policy process (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979). The qualification of corporatism rests on the system of interest representation as consisting of a limited number of interest organisations which are recognised or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective policy domains (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979). These organisations are effectively in an exchange relationship with the state: they seek to influence policy processes based on their preferences and they may also seek financial support from the government, and in return they can offer expertise and information (Bouwen 2002), the ability to legitimise or de-legitimise policy decisions (Princen and Kerremans 2008) and a certain measure of control over their members in terms of demands and support. The particularities of policy process focus on the institutionalized pattern of policy formation and policy implementation in which large interest organizations cooperate with each other and with public authorities in all stages of the policy process and in the authoritative allocation of values (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979). The arrangements of public-private interactions in policy processes vary across policy subsystems within the same political system, and there are differences even within sectorial policies as to the specific issue areas or specific decision process (Falkner 2000).

Adopting these explanation to the specific policy domains of HE and student welfare policymaking, and exposing the state-student interactions, a similar dichotomy of neo-corporatist and pluralist models emerges, but with further

qualifications as to the formalised or informal structures of student interest intermediation (see Tables 2 and 3).

In terms of *agency*, i.e. the systems of student representation, we can draw a clear dichotomy between neo-corporatist and pluralist arrangements based on whether some organisations have been granted formal or informal representational monopoly. In neo-corporatist systems of state-student interactions, one or few privileged intermediary student associations are involved in public decision-making concerning student issues. This can be based on informal agreement or simply unquestioned tradition or formalised in national legislation. Such formal stipulation of these organisations' representational monopoly is typically backed by compulsory or automatic membership of the entire student body, and with specified financial instruments ensuring financial sustainability. These associations typically also have the exclusive right to nominate their representatives to the permanent governmental consultative structures and are invited to participate in ad hoc working parties. Hence, such organisations not only possess significant legitimacy resources and formal channels of influence, but typically also sustained financing and well-established institutional structures. There are two extensions of this model. One is functionally complementary differentiated monopoly of student representation in binary HE systems (e.g. in Finland, SYL represents university student organisations and SAMOK student organisations from polytechnics). Another is a territorially differentiated neo-corporatist model in federal systems where competences over HE have been transferred to the regional level and representational monopolies are granted to regional representative associations (e.g. in Belgium, VVS represents Flemish student organisations and FEF those from French-speaking institutions).

In pluralist systems of state-student interactions, the state does not grant official recognition of national student representation to one organisation, but there may be several organisations that claim such representation and compete for access to policymaking and financial resources provided by the state. The Schmitter and

Table 2. A typology of national systems of student representation.

National systems of student representation		
	Neo-corporatist	Pluralist
Number of student intermediary organisations	Limited number of student intermediate associations (possibly functionally complementary or territorially differentiated)	Unspecified number of student intermediate associations; identical functions are performed by several in competition; domains of action are decided without regard to other associations; no association can exercise hierarchical control over others
State – formally or informally – grants monopoly of student interest intermediation	Yes. Often accompanied with secure administrative funding arrangement. Membership in student organisations (at institutional level) is typically automatic or compulsory.	No. Administrative and funding arrangement can exist, but on a competitive basis. Membership in student organisations is typically voluntary.

Table 3. A typology of national systems of student interest intermediation.

National systems of student intermediation		
	Formalised	Informal
Relational structures between national student associations and public authorities	<p>HE legislation stipulates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Institutionalised mechanisms of representation of students within a national HE Council or other decision-making, permanent advisory or evaluating bodies relevant to HE and student affairs;</li> <li>● rules governing consultation procedures or meetings with the Ministry responsible for HE.</li> </ul>	<p>Informal, ad hoc or needs-based participation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● informal consultations and seminars;</li> <li>● representation on non-permanent working groups or projects of the Ministry;</li> <li>● informal contacts with Ministry officials;</li> <li>● written or oral contact with members of Parliament and representation in National Councils;</li> <li>● written or oral contact with agencies or committees in charge of student affairs, quality assurance etc.</li> </ul>
Role of student representatives in policy processes	Decisive co-actors	External pressure group, experts

Streeck (1999 [1981], 48) description of pluralist associational systems is valid also for systems of student representation: ‘the number of constituent units is unspecified; identical functions are performed simultaneously by several associations in competition with each other; associations determine their tasks independently without taking into account the tasks performed by other associations; and no association is in a position to exercise hierarchical control over others.’

While intermediary student associations are largely focused on influencing policy outcomes or bringing issues of student concern onto the political agenda, there are notable differences in the *structures* underlying the political process and formal channels of student influence. Both neo-corporatist and pluralist systems of student representation can display more *formalised* or more *informal* arrangements depending on whether and on which legal and constitutional mechanisms of student participation in policymaking are employed. In general, the most common legal or constitutional mechanism of student participation in national policymaking are: laws on the representation of students within a national HE council or other decision-making, advisory or evaluating bodies relevant to HE; and rules governing consultation procedures or meetings with the Ministry responsible for HE (Persson 2004). A very common mechanism of student interest intermediation in the policy process is through a government council which serves as a consultative body to the government, typically presided over by government representatives and comprising along with government officials also representatives from institutions, industry and students. In contrast, the informal state-student interactions are conducted

predominantly through informal consultations and seminars, representation on non-permanent working groups or projects of the Ministry, informal contacts with Ministry officials, written or oral contact with members of parliament and representation in national councils, agencies or committees in charge of student affairs, and quality assurance (Persson 2004).

The level of formalisation cannot, however, be understood as indication of actual student influence. A governmental advisory council for student affairs with a high share of student representatives may not have any real influence in policy process. In contrast, student representatives working primarily through a dense web of regular and frequent informal interactions might indeed be very influential. In order to assess the actual influence of national student representatives in policy process, one ought to also consider the relevance of 'soft factors,' such as the political culture of corporatism, the reputation of student organisations among public authorities and stakeholders, and even the public perception of student organisations. The model of national systems of student representation may therefore prove helpful in a comparison of case countries, but it is based exclusively on formal, structural characteristics and as such will not directly address the question of effective influence which would require a substantial independent study.

Other possible research questions that fall outside of the present set of studies stem from the changing HE public policy governance. As the new public management ideologies increasingly permeate policy interactions within national HE governance, this raises several questions as to the systems of student representation and intermediation. The introduction of a plurality of stakeholders at all levels of HE governance – in the interest of effective policy formulation, legitimisation of adopted policy and accountability – implies more government coordination among the diverse interests of multiple actors in the interconnected policy levels (de Boer, Enders, and Schimank 2007; Olsen 2005). Students and academics no longer have the privileged access to the governments' HE policy process but have to share the privileges with other stakeholders, specifically from business associations. At the same time, governments in Europe are reinstating procedures for student participation in independent quality assurance and accreditation agencies to which governments have passed the task of accountability checks (Klemenčič 2012; Palomares 2012). How do these changes reflect in the inter-organisational HE politics between national student associations, public authorities and other stakeholders? What are the underlying political cleavages and the inter-organisational dynamics of cooperation and competition in HE policymaking? What are the effects on interrelationships and balance of power between the various stakeholders? Finally, do the changes in public policy governance lead to further institutionalisation of channels of intermediation or their de-institutionalisation?

### **National student representation in six Western European countries: introducing the special issue**

This special issue aims to make a first step towards uncovering the complex, heterogeneous and changing social reality of national student representation in Europe. The above outline suggests a model for conceptual ordering of national student associations and of systems of student representation and interest intermediation. The countries presented in this special issue – Norway, the United

Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy compared, and Spain – reflect diverse histories and traditions of interactions between public authorities and student associations (see Table 4).

Norway and the United Kingdom clearly belong to the neo-corporatist model of national student representation. In both cases, the national student associations have been formed by the collective action of university student parliaments and student unions; and not through state intervention. The majority of mechanisms of interest intermediation in HE policy are informal yet regular (e.g. meeting with Ministry officials, parliamentary hearings, etc.). In both countries, student representatives are also involved in the Quality Assurance Agencies and Bologna Expert groups. Perhaps Norway is closer to the category of formalised neo-corporatism than the UK since the representatives of the Norwegian national student association (NSO) are formally represented in the Council of Student Welfare Foundation.<sup>9</sup> Relative informality of interest intermediation arrangement does not imply little involvement or little influence. Norwegian political culture has a strong corporatist component of interest group participation in public policy processes; and students are fully involved in the formal governing of higher education institutions. In the UK, NUS-UK is recognised as the only representative voice of students. Student unions in the UK are more perhaps relatively involved in consultative than governing forms of participation while also being entrusted with the provision of student services including commercial services.

In pluralist countries, several associations compete – and sometimes cooperate – for student representation towards the public authorities. In the more formalised type of pluralism special governmental councils have been formed in which these student associations participate. This practice is well-established in France where the access to policymaking is organised through two national HE councils (National Council of HE and Research and National Council of HE and School Welfare). Student associations compete in national elections for seats in these two councils and are also allocated financing through a grant based on the seats gained (Genicot in this special issue). Similar council of university students exist also in Spain and Italy. In all of these countries, however, the interest intermediation could be described as weak due to fragmented, often politicized student associations being in a competitive relationship towards each other. Germany lies somewhere in-between the informal neo-corporatist and informal pluralist models. There exists only one representative student association on the federal level – fzs – which delegates representatives to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (Jungblut and Weber in this special issue). However, in federal negotiations on higher education policy student organisations of the major political parties also tend to be invited (Jungblut and Weber in this special issue).

Table 4. Categorising national systems of student representation and interest intermediation.

National student representation (six case countries)				
Country/region	Neo-corporatist		Pluralist	
	Formalised	Informal	Formalised	Informal
		Norway, the UK, Germany	France, Italy, Spain	

The above categorisation may serve as a basic groundwork for further comparative investigation of student participation and its changes. The following articles in the special issue address the most recent and contemporary empirical account of national student representation; they are about uncovering facts and causal mechanisms, while focusing on particular aspects of student representation most pertinent to their country cases. The contributors of this special issue draw from their experience as researchers and practitioners.

The article on Norway focuses on the relationship between the changes in the Norwegian HE landscape in terms of its structure and governance and the organisation of student interest representation at the institutional and national level. It first sets the context of interest representation in public policy processes in Norway through drawing a distinction between the 'Public Interest' and the 'Rechtsstaat' models, and suggests Norway may be moving away from the practices of the public service model towards incorporating new public management approaches into its governance system. Next it provides a historical account of development of student representation and links it to the overall developments in Norwegian HE. Finally, it argues that there is strengthened institutionalisation of student interest organisation evidenced through prominent mergers of student representative organisations on institutional and national level. According to Stensaker and Michelsen, state reforms moving towards a more integrated and market-oriented HE have provided important conditions for a more encompassing student union and a stronger re-institutionalisation of student interest.

The article on the United Kingdom examines the historical development of student representation on the institutional and national levels. It exposes the fluid relations of the public authorities towards the student unions and their national representation – NUS-UK as depicted in the changing legislation concerning the legal status of student unions and their financing. Finally, the article describes in detail the governing structures, political agenda and mode of action of NUS-UK; with a discussion of the most recent NUS-UK political campaign against tuition fees following the 2004 HE Act. Day depicts a picture of a well-established, highly professionalised and financially strong confederation of British student unions. However, NUS-UK intra-organisational politics has also displayed the difficulties in striking a balance between the logic of membership and logic of influence, especially in terms of defining the scope of the political agenda of the organisation and the mode of political action.

These tensions between logic of membership and logic of influence are even more prominent in the case of Germany. The national union of students in Germany, *fzs*, has evolved from a rather small, ideologically driven and a more network-oriented association (i.e. a social movement-type of association) into a national level umbrella with a more professionalised structure. Jungblut and Weber provide a comprehensive account of the multilevel system of student representation in Germany. They explain the changes in national student representation as reflecting two major developments: the increasing territorial differentiation of the HE governance (i.e. growing diversity in legal regulations concerning HE between *Länder*), and stronger formal student involvement in the context of the Bologna Process.

Genicot's article compares the French and Italian national unions of students. Her analytical lens is that of the increased internationalisation of HE policymaking, especially in the context of the Bologna Process. The article questions the effects of internationalisations on organisational characteristics of national unions in both

countries. The article first presents the systems of national student representation in France and Italy, exposing the similarities in terms of a conflictual culture of student mobilisation and weak national systems of student interest intermediation. The second part of the article is dedicated to the question of internationalisation of student unions. Genicot suggests that in context of internationalisation national associations in both countries (but perhaps stronger in France than Italy) struggle between two pressures. One is towards professionalisation coming from the European Students' Union and the opportunities arising from the domestic politics surrounding HE reforms. The other is towards radicalisations stemming from their participation in the Transnational Social Movement Organisation and the enhanced global struggle against the commodification of HE.

The final article addresses the historical development of student representation in Spain from *Sindicato Español Universitario* working under Franco's regime through the emergence of autonomous student associations, the establishment of the Coordinator of public university student representatives (CREUP) and finally to the formation of the governmental platform for student interest intermediation: *Consejo de Estudiantes Universitario del Estado*. Parejo and Lorente offer a conceptual model of Spanish student associations at institutional and at national level. They argue that the pluralist model of state-student interactions that has proliferated in democratic Spain may be evolving towards a more neo-corporatist model.

In conclusion, the collection of articles depicted in this special issue is not a comprehensive account of the state-of-the art of national student representation in Western Europe. More national case-studies would need to be included to meet such aim. However, in striking absence of scholarship on this topic, it is a much-needed empirically-driven account of a selection of European national student associations. More importantly, it is – hopefully – a beginning of scholarly conversation and a trigger for further research on this topic.

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### Notes

1. Note that for purposes of simpler wording I use the term 'university' in this article for all types of higher education institutions.



2. For list of ESU members see <http://www.esu-online.org/about/members/> [Last visited 1 May 2012]. Greece does not have a member organisation in ESU. Student Parliament of Montenegro has applied for membership.
3. Notable exceptions include universities where students retained power in elections of the dean (Louvain) or the rector (Aberdeen, St Andrews, Leipzig), and the appointment of teachers (Leipzig, Louvain) (de Ridder-Symoens 1996, 162–63).
4. Greece is a special case where a National Students Council is stipulated in HE law, but does not function in practice. The Council has not been convened for the last several years because the various students groups have not been able to agree on the results of the elections. The absence of a central creditable mechanism for the calculation of the results creates divisions among the various student union groups.
5. For example, the Swedish government in 2010 abolished compulsory membership of student unions. The Dutch government has increased funding for the representative student associations (LSVb and ISO) with explanation that it wanted them to be more professionalized.
6. This division is not unique to student associations. It can be equally found in trade unions where the corporatist approach of some is contrasted with political (class-oriented) unionism of others (Higgins 1985).
7. Goals stated by the 'International Student Movement': [http://ism-global.net/international\\_joint\\_statement](http://ism-global.net/international_joint_statement) [Last accessed 04/04/2012].
8. The author would like to thank Jens Jungblut for his helpful comments regarding categorization of UNEF and fzs.
9. These Foundations are licensed and funded by the government to provide student services, such as housing and health services, kindergartens and cafeterias) on campuses.

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