

# STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

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## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

As a part of the preparation for its Bologna seminar on student participation in higher education (Oslo 12-14 June 2003), the Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs commissioned a report from the Council of Europe to survey the state of affairs with regard to formal provision for student participation as well as actual practice. This survey was conducted by Annika Persson, mainly during her period as a trainee at the Council's Higher Education and Research Division in autumn 2002, with some support from Per Nyborg as Chair of the Council's Higher Education and Research Committee (CD-ESR) and myself. This survey, which Annika Persson completed after she returned to her permanent position in the Swedish Ministry of Education, is included as a separate article in the present volume.

The purpose of the present article is to put the findings of this survey in a broader context and draw on other kinds of experience, in particular a pilot project on *The University as a Site of Citizenship* carried out by the CD-ESR in cooperation with a consortium of US higher education institutions and NGOs in 2000 – 2001<sup>1</sup>.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Higher education institutions are an important part of - and play an important role in - society. The institutions are societies unto themselves, but they are also part of the larger society. If they remained only societies unto themselves, higher education institutions would be locked up in the proverbial ivory tower and their future would most likely be considerably shorter than their past. On the other hand, higher education institutions without some distance from society at large would run a serious risk of losing their capacity to reason in terms of principle, to take a long term view somewhat detached from the immediate issues of the day and to identify sustainable solutions to the most serious and long term challenges facing our society.

The CD-ESR pilot project on the University as a Site of Citizenship identified four sets of issues in which higher education institutions have a role to play, as institution and/or through their individual members, i.e. the academic community of scholars and students:

- (i) institutional decision making;
- (ii) institutional life in a wider sense, including the study process;
- (iii) higher education institutions as multicultural societies;

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<sup>1</sup> The final report, written by Dr Frank Plantan of the University of Pennsylvania is also include in this volume.

- (iv) higher education institutions in their relationship and interaction with the wider society.

While this conference focuses on higher education governance, I will to some extent also draw on the other dimensions identified by the project on the University as a Site of Citizenship where this seems relevant.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE**

Student participation as defined by this conference is an aspect of the broader area of higher education governance, so it may be useful to recall that higher education governance is at the heart of the Bologna Process and will be a key feature of the European Higher Education Area to be set up by 2010. To an extent, this is taken for granted, and many institutional representatives and higher education policy makers refer to academic freedom and institutional autonomy – or sometimes a mixture of the two – as if these were obvious features of higher education in Europe, freedoms earned at the dawn of time and destined to be with us until some distant academic sunset.

Yet reality, as so often, is slightly more complicated, even if there is general agreement on the need for autonomous institutions. Once we start asking what this actually means, however, consensus breaks down as the level of precision increases. Autonomy is often referred to as “institutional”, sometimes as “university”, but the question of whether there are differences between the two or whether we need to develop a more nuanced view is rarely asked. Similarly, autonomy is often thought of in legal terms, but even where autonomy from Ministries is guaranteed by law and honoured by practice, no institution can be an island unto itself. Institutions are influenced by the expectations and financial contributions by other actors, whether these be Ministries and other public authorities, private companies or the somewhat imprecise animal normally referred to as public opinion. Institutions not only *are* influenced by their surroundings, but they *should be*, at least to an extent. The problem, then, is not one of principle, but of finding the right balance.

Similarly, we tend to take it for granted that universities or higher education institutions – again, there tends to be lack of precision – are headed by an elected official who goes by many different names according to the context but who internationally tends to be referred to as the Rector and governed by a representative body elected by the academic community, typically by various combinations of the words University, Academic, Senate and Council.

Recently, however, a good number of universities have welcomed representatives who are not members of the academic community on their governing bodies - or they have been forced to accept such representatives, as the case may be. These representatives underline that universities are a part of the larger society, that they have a duty to this society and that they both contribute to and are influenced by it. Nor is this really a new development. It is not the phenomenon of interdependence between higher education and society at large that is new, but rather the form this

interdependence may take<sup>2</sup>. Some higher education institutions now even have institutional leaders hired on fixed term contracts and often recruited from the outside rather than Rectors elected by the academic community. So far, there has been little debate on the implications of these developments on our concept of higher education governance. The same, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, holds true for the relationship between the higher education institution and its faculties, which is a particularly pertinent issue in several countries emanating from former Yugoslavia.

## **STUDENT PARTICIPATION: BANGING IN OPEN DOORS?**

The topic for the Oslo conference was the specific part of higher education governance that has to do with the participation and contribution of students. This, also, we perhaps tend to take for granted, so it may be useful to remember that times have indeed been changing. This is true for the Bologna Process as well as for higher education governance proper.

Students, represented by ESIB<sup>3</sup>, are now observers on the Follow Up and Preparatory Groups and active contributors to the Process, so it is easy to forget that student representation was neither foreseen nor much talked about at the Bologna Conference. Students, in fact, did not move to center stage until the Praha Conference in 2001, when the President of ESIB spoke to the Ministers and the latter stated that “the involvement of universities and other higher education institutions and of students as competent, active and constructive partners in the establishment and shaping of a European Higher Education Area is needed and welcomed”. In the Praha Communiqué, Ministers also “affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions” and that “students are full members of the higher education community”. In moving from observers to key actors in the Bologna Process in two years, the students did of course have the support of many Ministers of Education, some of whom actively pushed for a stronger student participation in the Process. In this way, the Bologna Process would be in better conformity with the situation in most of its constituent parties. Nevertheless, it may be worth noting that at least one respondent to the survey carried out by the Council of Europe for the Oslo conference underlined the need for stronger student participation in the follow up structures of the Bologna Process.

Also in the governance of higher education institutions, we are used to taking student representation and student participation so much for granted that it is easy to forget that in most European countries, this representation in its current form is little more than a generation old. If the Bologna Process is the most important reform of higher education in Europe since the immediate aftermath of 1968, we should keep in mind that this previous wave of reform was very different. Both reform movements are about adapting higher education to a changing society, but whereas the Bologna

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<sup>2</sup> For an early example, see J. K. Hyde: “Universities and Cities in Medieval Italy” in Thomas Bender (ed.): *The University and the City. From Medieval Origins to the Present* (New York, N.Y 1988: Oxford University Press). For a broad view of the university heritage, see Nuria Sanz and Sjur Bergan (eds.): *The Heritage of European Universities* (Strasbourg 2002: Council of Europe Publishing)

<sup>3</sup> National Union of Students in Europe ([http : www.esib.org](http://www.esib.org))

Process was started at the initiative of Ministers, 1968 was started by students in the street, and one of their main issues was stronger student influence not just on higher education governance, but on university life in general, with issues ranging from student representation on university senates and improved access for disadvantaged groups to less restrictive rules on gender relations in university dorms<sup>4</sup>.

Today, there is a feeling that the formal aspect of student representation has largely been settled, but I am not aware of any previous large-scale survey of the facts. Secondly, there is also a feeling that even if the formal right to representation has been secured, students' actual use of that right is far from satisfactory. To put it crudely, while previous generations of students fought for representation, there is an impression that the current student generation does not make much use of the rights gained. However, it would be helpful to know whether this impression is in fact substantiated by facts and, if so, why present day students are to a large extent disconnected at least from institutional governance and perhaps even from institutional life. Thirdly, it would be useful to know something about student perceptions of their influence on higher education governance, and this might even offer a clue as to why actual participation is as it is. These, then, are the three topics addressed by the survey.

## **FORMAL STUDENT REPRESENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE**

What is normally thought of as student participation in higher education governance, namely formal provision for student representation on the governing bodies of higher education institutions, seems to be a general feature of higher education in Europe. Representatives of only two countries indicate that there is no legal provision for student representation on the governing bodies of the institutions. However, legal regulation of such representation at faculty and, even more, department level is less common and at national level, provision for student representation is found only in a narrow majority of cases. On closer reflection, however, this may not be surprising. At institutional, faculty and department level, higher education governance takes place within a clearly defined framework of institutional self-governance with clearly defined partners<sup>5</sup>. At national level, the framework is less clear, as both Ministries and national assemblies have a general political mandate. It would be interesting to see whether a consultative framework has been developed, to what extent this is formalized and to what extent students have a voice in bodies like national rectors' conferences.

If we start scratching below the surface to find out what student representation means in somewhat greater detail, we see that in the great majority of cases, regulations stipulate that between one in ten and one in five of all members of higher education governing bodies be students. In no case do students elect a majority of the representatives on the governing body, and in a number of cases student representation seems to be below 10 per cent.

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<sup>4</sup> Didier Fischer: *L'histoire des étudiants en France de 1945 à nos jours* (Paris 2000: Flammarion), pp. 288 - 290. This book provides an interesting and readable overview of the development of the student movement in France since 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Although the newer development with increased external representation has been referred to above.

However, it is not enough to be present, it is also of interest to know what competence – in this case in the legal sense of the term - student representatives actually have. In the vast majority of cases, student representatives are full members of the governing body in the sense that they have the right to speak and vote on all issues that come before the board. However, in 8 countries whose representatives replied to the survey, student voting rights were limited to issues that seem to be considered of most immediate concerns of students, while they are not allowed to vote on issues that concern staff appointments, administrative and finance issues, curricula or issues relating to the granting of doctoral degrees. While this concerns only 8 countries covered by the survey, it seems worthwhile to dwell on the issue as it raises an important question of principle.

There are two ways of interpreting such differentiated voting rights: they are either differentiated according to the stake students are perceived to have in the issues, or the differentiation is made according to competence – here in the sense of knowledge of the issues. In both cases, it is difficult to see why students should not vote on financial issues. If real competence is the line of argument, the formal argument for limiting voting rights on the granting of doctoral degrees to staff members who have earned this qualification themselves may seem evident, but it overlooks two factors: firstly, that the governing bodies would tend to act on and in the great majority of cases follow the advice of a committee of experts appointed for the occasion, and, secondly, that holding a doctoral qualification in one academic area does not necessarily mean that one is similarly qualified in other areas. A professor of business administration does not necessarily have a comparative advantage in assessing a doctoral thesis in astrophysics<sup>6</sup>.

It therefore seems safe to say that, with the exception of voting rights on some issues that come before the governing bodies, student representation is assured from a formal point of view. This is particularly true at institutional level, but it also largely holds true at faculty and, to a somewhat lesser extent, at department level. At national level, however, the representation is less well established in formal terms. These findings coincide with the findings of the pilot project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship<sup>7</sup>.

## **STUDENT POLITICS?**

One issue at the crossroads of formal provision and actual practice concerns how student representatives are identified and elected. In fact, elections are almost universal: the survey revealed five countries in which student representatives are appointed rather than elected, and in all but one of these the appointment is made by the student union. In the one case where the university or faculty appoints student representatives, a legal change seems to be on its way. One can of course ask to what extent the student unions making the appointments are representative of the student body at large, but that is a question of practice rather than formal provision.

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<sup>6</sup> I actually defended this point of view as a student representative on the Academic Senate of the University of Oslo in 1981 – 82, in a newspaper debate with a former Rector of the Veterinary College.

<sup>7</sup> Except that, since this project focused on institutional practice, representation at national level was not addressed by the project.

The most serious question arising in this borderland is what kind of student organizations are allowed, and in particular whether these may be linked to political parties. These are generally referred to as “political” student organizations, but it may be worth underlining that politics is about organizing and governing societies, and that no society can do without politics or a measure of political actors and organizations, even if these are not parties in the conventional sense of the terms. No society can be governed “apolitically”, notwithstanding the claims of certain dictators to this effect.

Representatives from 15 of the countries that replied to the questionnaire stated that “political student organizations” are illegal at higher education institutions. While the term “political” was not defined in the questionnaire, it was intended as “affiliated with a political party”, and this is also how the question was understood by the respondents. Of the 15 countries that reported prohibitions of student organizations affiliated with political parties, all but two are to be found in Central and Eastern Europe. This is consistent with the findings of the pilot project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship, which states:

*Another structural characteristic of universities is the legal and administrative prescriptions regarding organized political activity within the university. Many institutions in this study, particularly those in transitional societies or who have recently experienced violent conflict are attempting to respond to new statutory and constitutional arrangements. They are struggling with redefining roles and responsibilities while simultaneously dealing with basic issues of meeting their educational mission within tight fiscal and budgetary constraints<sup>8</sup>.*

This prohibition may perhaps be understandable on the background of the recent past of most of the countries where the ban is enforced, where political organizations served the needs of the regime, both in controlling academic activity and in recruiting “reliable” future party workers. From a thoroughly “politicized” but tightly controlled system, the temptation to turn to one without both politics and control is great, but the question is still whether this is feasible and desirable.

An additional reason for such a ban is the view that students should “concentrate on their education”. This view was expressed to researchers in the pilot project, where “[m]ost sites reported that university administrators and many faculty considered many aspects of citizenship and democracy to be entirely a personal matter such as decisions to vote, to volunteer in the community, to participate in campus organizations, or to engage in political debate and, therefore, not within their ken nor responsibilities as teachers and scholars.<sup>9</sup>” This represents a narrow view of the purpose of higher education that is limited to the role of academic disciplines and that leaves little room for the social function of education, such as developing the ability to live as active citizens in a democratic society.

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<sup>8</sup> The final report by Dr. Frank Plantan, CD-ESR (2002) 2, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

In a somewhat narrower sense, there is also a desire to keep contentious issue off campus, so as not to make higher education institutions battle fields for groups with sharply divergent views on conflictual issues, often linked to conflicts that divide the societies concerned, such as ethnic or religious conflicts. In a different context, this view was expressed by the principal of a school in Strasbourg with a high number of foreign students, who publicly made it clear that she would never tolerate students bringing any conflict between their home countries into the school yard or classroom. An example in the opposite sense is, however, provided by Queen's University, Belfast, which has for a long time made consistent efforts to accommodate members of both major communities in Northern Ireland and which has pioneered many of the measures that made the current Peace Process possible.

While a limitation of the activities of political parties, or organizations linked to these, in higher education institutions may be understandable on the basis of past experience, the limitation may nevertheless be questions on grounds of principle as well as of efficiency.

## **THE ACTUAL PRACTICE OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION**

If the survey as well as the pilot project confirm that formal rights to student participation are now almost universal, what use do students make of these rights? Do the formalities work as intended? These questions can be asked in at least two directions: firstly, is the general student body sufficiently active and interested to give its representatives legitimacy and, secondly, are student representatives effective once elected, or are they rather helping institutions fulfil the formal requirements of representation without having any real influence on institutional policies? The latter question also concerns how students perceive their influence, to which we will return shortly.

The survey carried out for the Oslo conference shows that in general it is possible to find motivated candidates to run for office, even if this seems more difficult at department level than at higher levels. It also shows that candidates run either as individuals or on tickets not affiliated with political parties and that the degree of organized politicking increases with the level of representation. In other words, candidates are more likely to run as individuals at department level than at faculty level, and so on. The replies indicate that a plurality of candidates run as individuals at department level, whereas at faculty level a plurality and at and institutional level a majority of candidates run on a ticket representing an organization.

This far, the results look good, but this changes when we examine voter turnout in student elections. Although turnout varies considerably, it tends to be low. The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that voter turnout is in one of the three lowest percentage brackets indicated (0 – 15, 16 – 30 or 31 – 45). Therefore, most of the time, less than half the student population elects those representing the whole student body, and in most cases voter turnout is actually one in three or less.

These figures indicate that something is wrong, and they are borne out by the pilot project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship. This project not only confirms the low

voter turnout, indicated as 8 – 10 per cent at two of the institutions participating in that study, but also indicates some interesting elements of explanation. It is hardly surprising that one important part of the explanation is that students feel under pressure to complete their studies as soon as possible and with as good results as possible, and that they therefore find little time for institutional life. In fact, not finding the time to do something normally indicates giving it a low priority, so participating in and contributing to institutional life in general and institutional governance in particular does not seem to be a priority for many, perhaps most, students.

An interesting observation concerns institutions in countries in which a period of great political conflict and tension has been followed by a period of normalization. In these cases – exemplified by institutions in Albania and Lithuania where the most intense period was in the early 1990s and in Greece, where it was around 1974 – student mobilization was strong in the period of crisis and the immediate aftermath, both in general terms and as concerns involvement with institutional governance. Once the crisis blew over and democratic governance was established, however, student interest declined considerably. This “democratic fatigue” corresponds to the experience of many institutions in Western Europe, where student interest declined once student representation had been secured in the aftermath of 1968. Thus, while it seems possible to mobilize students for a “great cause”, it seems much more difficult to maintain a sustained interest in and commitment to institutional life and governance.

A second major point that arises from the survey is that even where formal provision is absent, there may be informal consultations at national level, where in many cases there is no formalized representation. In most countries there seem to be regular contacts between the Ministry responsible for higher education and student representatives, typically the national student union. This may be unsatisfactory from a formal point of view, but such contacts can nevertheless help students wield considerable influence.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF INFLUENCE**

If the formal representation of students in higher education governance is generally provided for but student interest in electing representatives is low, is there a connection with students’ perceptions of their influence on university life in general and higher education governance in particular?

The survey did in fact not ask directly whether students feel they can influence university governance, and the selection of respondents was not such that this question would have made much sense. Since the respondents were mostly engaged in university governance, directly or indirectly, as members of student unions, academics or Ministry officials, the answers would presumably have been skewed. The survey did, however, ask more nuanced about perceived influence, in that it asked respondents to identify the areas and levels where the felt student influence was the strongest and weakest.

All groups of respondents felt students have the most influence on what may be seen as “immediate issues”, such as social issues, the learning environment and educational



content, in addition to the somewhat less decipherable category “institutional level generally”. At the other end of the scale we find “hard” issues like budget issues and criteria for recruiting teaching staff as well as on student admission. Budget policies are clearly a key instrument for implementing institutional policy, and as such they are also of immediate concern to students. In terms of level, most respondents felt that the student voice is more easily heard at institutional and faculty level than at the levels immediately above or below, i.e. national and department level.

Another indirect indication of student influence is that a large majority of respondents in all categories felt student influence should be increased. That 90 per cent of student respondents think so is perhaps no great surprise, but it is interesting to note that 72 per cent of academic and 70 per cent of Ministry respondents share this view.

Again, the findings of the survey are borne out by those of the pilot project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship, where researchers asked more direct questions about whether or not students felt they had influence on institutional life. The answers are, in fact, not very encouraging, even at institutions which in their own view make substantial efforts at consulting with and involving their students. The summary of the study states this very directly:

*Formal and statutory provisions for shared governance, transparency of decision-making and protection of faculty and student rights are often at odds with reality and actual practices<sup>10</sup>.*

In the body of the study, this is made more explicit. At one university, respondents felt that a few individuals continue to dominate the decision making process, while at several universities from different parts of Europe the feeling was that students are rarely if ever consulted and that there are no public hearings on university decisions.

These views are clearly linked to the issue of information to students, which is felt to be insufficient, something that is reflected in the study carried out by Annika Persson for the Oslo conference as well as in the project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship. A dictum has it that “information is power”, and information is an important condition for participation as active citizens in a democratic society. At the same time, we know that information is a difficult issue in many areas of modern society. In many contexts, the problem is not lack of information *per se*, but lack of reliable and targeted information<sup>11</sup>.

In several countries, there is still a strong tradition that senior faculty “decides everything”. Where there is student involvement, there is at the same time a feeling that this does not lead to many concrete results, and that student representatives, while a part of the process, have little influence on it. There is also a perception that student politics is run by a small elite without much contact to “normal” students. This,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> The lack of clear and targeted information was one of the main issues raised at the Bologna seminar on Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process, organized by the Council of Europe and the Portuguese authorities in Lisboa on April 11 – 12, 2002. See in particular the articles by Stephen Adam and Chantal Kaufmann in Sjur Bergan (ed) *Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process* (Strasbourg 2003: Council of Europe Publishing).

perhaps, echoes a frequent complaint about politics in general, but it is a serious challenge to student representatives, politicians in society at large and indeed to all members of society. While it is certainly not difficult to find examples of politicians who deserve our scorn, society at whatever level is in serious trouble if it becomes fashionable to despise politics, because it would then be fashionable not to care about how our own societies are run. History has only too many examples of what such attitudes of complacency can lead to, from all sides of the political spectrum<sup>12</sup>.

In this project, there even seemed to be a consistent difference in the way respondents addressed the issue of perceptions of influence: student respondents tended to emphasize what they perceived as real influence – or lack of it – whereas administrators tended to focus on formal student participation. Therefore, it is possible that the different groups did in fact not answer the same question, even if the same questions were asked of all. It is also interesting to note that students at three universities tended to have a more positive view of their influence. The foremost of these was Queen's University, which has not only played a significant role in the Peace Process – something that could hardly be done without consultations – but where the university leadership at the time the study was carried out was particularly known for collegiate leadership. As the study puts it, “[t]his not only sets a ‘tone’ for proper democratic demand and problem solving, such leadership typically directs the university mission towards meeting the objectives of civic education and democracy in its education programs”.

## **WHY SHOULD STUDENTS INFLUENCE INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE?**

One may perhaps have expected this question to be asked at the outset of this article, but I have preferred to survey facts and perceptions before entering into normative arguments. The survey does, incidentally, provide guidance also on this point, as respondents were asked why they felt – as the majority of them did – that student influence should be strengthened. The replies focused on the role of students as stakeholders in higher education; from many respondents' points of view they are even the main stakeholders.

I will take these arguments one step further and consider the role of students in somewhat more detail. My point of departure is that there is an increasing tendency to think of students as clients. This paradigm does, however, have profound implications for the relationship between students and the institutions at which they study. Clients essentially expect a number of defined services from a provider, and they would normally take little interest in the provider as long as these services are delivered as expected at an affordable price and acceptable quality – according to the contract, in commercial terms. There may be some exceptions, such as boycotts of companies refusing to hire ethnic or religious minorities, but these remain exceptions. If client expectations are not met, most clients respond by looking for the desired services elsewhere rather than by attempting to take control of the provider to make it deliver the services as stipulated or desired.

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<sup>12</sup> For an interesting, if depressing, example of the political thought of a right wing military regime, see Augusto Pinochet Ugarte: *Política, politiquería, demagogia* (Santiago de Chile 1983: Editorial Renacimiento).

Taken to the extreme, the idea of students as clients contradict the more traditional idea of students as members of the academic community<sup>13</sup>. The idea of community does not exclude the possibility of conflicting opinions about the purpose and standard of education, but it sees the students as participants rather than as receivers or buyers of a final product. As members of the academic community, students share a responsibility for their education and for the institution which provides the framework for this education. If the education is unsatisfactory, the response would be to try to improve the institution and the education it provides rather than to go elsewhere.

In real life, none of these extremes will be readily found. Students do legitimately have specific expectations for their education (in terms of quality, profile, price, conditions of study, etc.) and few students can afford to spend years of their life trying to improve an institution if what it gives them does not come reasonably close to their expectations, especially if other institutions - or alternative experiences outside of higher education – can better meet their expectations and needs. Most students take higher education because the qualifications they earn will help them reach their goals later in life. Academic mobility - getting students to move between higher education institutions - is of course also an important policy goal for higher education institutions as well as governments and international organizations.

However, students also see themselves as members of a community, as participants. While most students have utilitarian reasons for taking higher education, few would think that higher education does not also have an intrinsic value. I think it is worth emphasizing that while much of the current discussion on higher education, inside as well as outside of the Bologna Process, focuses on its role in relation to the labour market, we should take into account the full range of purposes of higher education. In my view, these are at least four:

- (i) preparation for the labour market;
- (ii) preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society;
- (iii) personal development;
- (iv) development and maintenance of an advanced knowledge base.

Students should have clear expectations of higher education institutions – expectations that are not always met – but they should also see themselves as a part of the institution. That may not always mean they identify very strongly with the institution as such<sup>14</sup> but they do at least identify with groups within the institution, such as the student body as a whole, a specific department, students at a specific department, etc. This identification is not and should not be uncritical, and students should have demands on their institutions and teachers, but if they no longer consider themselves as a part of the institution and the academic community, I believe higher education in Europe will have a very serious problem. In a sense, students must be

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<sup>13</sup> This notion was underlined by the “Bologna” Ministers in their Praha Communiqué.

<sup>14</sup> It may even be that some models of higher education tend to encourage a stronger institutional identification than others. It is at least a superficial impression that US students identify more closely with their institutions than many continental European students do.

members of an “imagined community”<sup>15</sup> that crosses national and institutional borders,

If we believe that higher education has a role in developing the democratic culture without which democratic institutions cannot function and democratic societies cannot exist, it is, as the pilot project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship points out, important to realize that these attitudes cannot be developed simply by seeing and learning. Doing is of the essence. Therefore, students must be encouraged to participate, and they must feel that their participation has an impact.

At least two *caveats* may be in order, and they both have to do with the democratic character of higher education institutions. The first is whether higher education institutions and their staff and students are necessarily democratic, and it is, unfortunately, not difficult for any of us to think of examples to the contrary. Here, I will therefore only point to a few selective examples. Many of the Council of Europe’s member states – and current or future participants in the Bologna Process – in their recent higher education history have no shortage of examples of how Communist regimes used higher education institutions for their purposes and how many staff members and students played along. The judges at show trials<sup>16</sup> were graduates of law faculties, and party membership was no disadvantage in securing staff appointments or places of study, provided the membership was in the “right” party. In the Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, most university teachers were nostalgic for pre-World War One elitist society and lukewarm to the Weimar Republic and even if the majority of them were not Nazi supporters, it was only a minority that fought actively against the Nazi regime<sup>17</sup>. Even as anti-intellectual a movement as the Nazis had their student organizations and student supporters. In Portugal, the main leaders of the Salazar regime had their roots at the University of Coimbra<sup>18</sup>. Nor is this a “privilege” of the undemocratic right. On the undemocratic left, we find students and staff in Maoist movements in Europe, and a little further afield, the leader and ideologue of the Peruvian terrorist movement *Sendero luminoso*, Abimael Guzmán, was a philosophy lecturer at the University of Ayacucho<sup>19</sup>.

The point is of course not that universities, scholars or students are inherently undemocratic. For each of the examples mentioned, counter examples can be found. In Central and Eastern Europe, the movements that ultimately brought down the Communist regimes were also often led by academics, and immediately after the political changes in the early 1990s, some university departments were decimated because many of their members had been democratically elected to Parliament. Germany not only had Nazi students, but also student and staff resisters who paid

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<sup>15</sup> The term “imagined community” is normally used in discussions of nationalism and was coined by the political scientist Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983: Verso), but, if used with care, the term may be fitting also for other kinds of communities.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Ulrich Mählert: *Kleine Geschichte der DDR* (München 1999: Verlag C. H. Beck), esp. Pp. 62 - 65.

<sup>17</sup> See Notker Hammerstein : Universities and democratisation: an historical perspective. The case of Germany (Paper written for a Council of Europe conference on Universities and Democratisation, Warszawa, January 29 – 31, 1992 , bearing the reference DECS-HE 91/97).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Luis Reis Torgal: *A Universidade e o Estado Novo* (Coimbra 1999: Livreria Minerva Editora)

<sup>19</sup> An enjoyable fictional account probably modeled on the *Sendero luminoso* is Mario Vargas Llosa: *Historia de Maya*

with their lives, like the Scholl siblings and other members of the Weisse Rose. Academics played an important role in the opposition to the Salazar regime, especially from the 1960s onwards, voices like José Afonso gave artistic expression to this through the *fado de Coimbra*<sup>20</sup>, and Maoist student movements were not unopposed even in the immediate aftermath of 1968. Under the Milošević regime, which in 1998 passed a particularly repressive higher education law that was implemented by government appointed Rectors and Deans, academic and democratic values were upheld by members of the academic community who often lost their jobs and who were in many cases members of the Alternative Academic Education Network.

The point is, rather, that politically, higher education institutions and their members are not much better or worse than society at large, and while they may tend to phrase their arguments in more theoretical terms, democracy must be maintained through both reflection and practice, on campus as elsewhere in society.

The second *caveat* is whether universities should be democratic and, if they should, in what way.

## **UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE – HOW DEMOCRATIC?**

A universal feature of the legal regulations is that students hold a substantial yet minority number of seats on the governing bodies. In other words, seats on the governing bodies are not distributed according to numerical strength. The democratic principle of one person, one vote is, then, not the norm in higher education institutions, where the votes (or number of representatives) of three groups are weighted according to their perceived roles in institutional life. Academic staff, perceived as having the main responsibility for the key missions of the university – teaching and research – in general elect a majority of the members of the decision making bodies, whereas students often elect a larger number of representatives than the administrative and technical staff (although students are not better represented if rather than the total number of representatives, one measures the number of voters per representative).

Votes, then, are weighted according to competence or function in relation to the missions of the university. Is this in contradiction to democratic principles, or is it simply that it is possible to define competence or function in the context of the university but not in that of civil society, in which all members have an equal stake? It may be noted that such weighting of votes is not unique to universities. It is found in a variety of contexts ranging from commercial companies (voting in relation to the number of shares owned) to diocesan councils (with separate representation of clergy and laity)<sup>21</sup> and international organizations<sup>22</sup>. It may also be noted that attempts at

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<sup>20</sup> See Maria da Fátima Silva: “The University of Coimbra and its traditions at the beginning of a new millennium” in Nuria Sanz and Sjur Bergan (eds.): *The Heritage of European Universities* (Strasbourg 2002: Council of Europe Publishing).

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that neither commercial companies nor diocesan councils, while concerned with a measure of representativity, necessarily aim to be democratic.

<sup>22</sup> In the United Nations, five countries are permanent members of the Security Council and may veto decisions of this body. In most other contexts, including the General Assembly of the United Nations,

introducing competence tests, such as literacy tests, into general elections are generally seen as undemocratic and even as attempts to keep less favoured groups from voting<sup>23</sup>. Weighted representation of specific groups is generally regarded as undemocratic but is nonetheless seen as acceptable in certain circumstances, generally in terms of geography<sup>24</sup> or to increase the representation of an underrepresented group (such as specific quotas for women), to ensure representation of a group whose voice may otherwise not be heard<sup>25</sup> or to ensure a *modus vivendi* in a highly conflictual society<sup>26</sup>.

It should also be noted that academic staff, students and administrative and technical staff are not necessarily homogenous groups given to bloc voting. Members of each of these groups may influence members of other groups by their arguments, and a majority may consist of some academic staff, students and administrative and technical staff. It is even conceivable that a majority of academic staff may be voted down by a coalition of students and administrative and technical staff with a minority of academic staff representatives. Incidentally, the survey indirectly underlined this point in that respondents from the same country did not always agree on their interpretation of the facts, or even on what the facts are.

## **THE WAY AHEAD**

At least as a preliminary conclusion to our consideration of the formal provision for student representation, it seems reasonable to say that the issue is largely settled, perhaps with the exception of representation at national level in a good number of countries and in more limited cases of the right of student representatives to vote on all issues that come before the governing body. While students have fewer representatives than academic staff, this is justifiable on theoretical grounds, and from a practical point of view, a student representation of 10 – 30 per cent does not seem to be widely contested.

It is also comforting to see that those who provided input to the Council of Europe study seem to agree on a wide range of issues, including the need for improved information and the desirability of improving student representation in higher education governance. The starting point for our discussion of further action – or for the road map for our way ahead, to use the most recent policyspeak – is therefore a reasonably high level of consensus, at least on the main principles.

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international organizations are generally run on the principle that each country has one vote, regardless of the size of its population, so that the basic unit of representation is the country or government rather than the individual.

<sup>23</sup> One example among many are the literacy tests used in the US Deep South in parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>24</sup> In many countries, there are fewer votes behind each representatives elected from rural than from urban districts. In Switzerland, the provision that a proposal put to a national referendum must win a majority not only in the referendum at large, but also in a specified number of cantons, tends to weight voting in favor of the less populous cantons.

<sup>25</sup> The institutionalized representation of the Maori population in the New Zealand Parliament, the quota of representatives of the Serb population and other minorities in the Kosovo legislative assembly or the existence of the Sámi parliament, an advisory body, in Norway are three examples.

<sup>26</sup> Examples include the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with one representative of each major ethnic community, and the increasingly contested provisions made in the Lebanese constitution, with a Maronite President, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shiite Speaker of Parliament.

If the formalities are settled, what are the issues on which the Bologna Process should focus if student representation is still to be on its agenda?

Firstly, there seems to be an issue concerning the level of representation, it in particular concerns student participation at national level and it seems to be an issue of both formal provisions and practice. How can the further development of national higher education systems - and the Bologna Process itself - best benefit from the contribution of students, and how can these important stakeholders gain the same influence they now have at institutional level?

Secondly, even if student representation is almost universal, we have seen that in some countries, student representatives cannot vote on all issues. Is this really reasonable? Even if we accept that academic staff may have a stronger representation than students for reasons of competence in the core areas of higher education - teaching, learning and research - is it reasonable that once the student representation on governing bodies has been determined, students should not speak or vote on all issues brought before these bodies?

A greater challenge is linked to real influence rather than formal representation. These issues may be linked in a vicious circle: if students believe they have little or no interest, why should they participate in governance or even vote? However, if students do not vote, why should they have stronger influence? Here we touch on the one hand on institutional culture, on the way in which institutions are governed and decisions made, and this is an issue that goes beyond student representation. To what extent should decisions be consensual, and to what extent do institutions need strong leadership?

The answer to this question is not as straightforward as it would seem, and I believe the issue should be considered within the Bologna Process. On the one hand, institutions where staff and students are committed to common goals and common reforms have a considerable advantage over those where no such consensus emerges, and institutional leadership should not be too aloof from the average staff member. The same could of course be said of the relationship between student representatives and the average student. In the project on Universities as Sites of Citizenship, Queen's University Belfast was identified as an institution with an inspirational leadership that achieved considerable results through persuasion. On the other hand, a consensus oriented governance model can also be a recipe for stalemate under which small groups or certain parts of the university can block any attempt at reform. The situation in many countries of former Yugoslavia, where faculties are independent legal persons and the institutional leadership (Rectorate) correspondingly weak is perhaps an extreme example, but the dilemma is real at many institutions in all parts of Europe.

The question of the relative weight of institutional self governance and external question is linked to this. It indirectly concerns student participation but is really an essential aspect of overall institutional governance. The issue is that of defining the stakeholders in higher education and their relative role as well as the relationship between stakeholder interest and their actual higher education competence. To what extent should society at large, which contributes substantially to financing higher

education, have a direct say in institutional governance, and who should represent this society at large which strongly resembles the proverbial duck: we recognize it when we see it but it is difficult to define and - I would add - to operationalize. The social partners - employers and trade unions - are important partners also for higher education institutions, but can they alone represent society at large? In most democracies, society is represented by politicians, but is the participation of political parties in higher education governance the right way to go? The material presented here at the very least indicates that views on the role - if any - of party politics at higher education institutions are highly diverse.

This leads me to what is perhaps the greatest challenge of all, namely the low interest students show in the governance of their higher education institutions and systems. Again, as important as this is for the issue of student representation, I would tend to see this in the context of disenchantment with the political process in society at large as well as the problem of providing clear and targeted information in a society where most people receive far more information than they can possibly absorb, and I have already underlined the seriousness of the issue. Therefore, an important part of the discussion should focus on how we can stimulate students as well as staff to take an active interest not only in their own teaching, learning and research, but in the life and governance of their institution and the society of which it is a part. In the classical French tragedies, the ideal was to be loved, but it was better to be hated than to be ignored, and I sometimes wonder if this is not true for higher education governance as well.

I would therefore point to two overall conclusions that, in addition to the questions just raised, should guide the further work within the Bologna Process. Firstly, we need to stimulate interest in and commitment to higher education among those most directly involved: students and staff. Secondly, however important student participation, it is a part of the overall issue of higher education governance and should, in my view, be considered within this framework.

Last, but not least: governance issues are not a luxury or a concern of the few while the majority of staff and students get on with their work. Rather, they are part and parcel of the contribution of higher education to developing and maintaining the democratic culture without which democratic institutions cannot function, and they are crucial to ensuring that the academic community of scholars and students be not only an imagined community but a real and healthy one.