

Student and staff participation in higher education governance

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Student and staff participation in higher education governance is one of the fundamental values of European higher education, ingrained in the European model of shared governance which is collegial in nature, recognizing the contributions and requirements of all members of the higher education community, including students, academic and professional staff, to part-take in decision processes resulting in decisions that affect them all.

Shared governance structures and collegial processes of decision-making foster partnership, sense of belonging, collective ownership of the higher education institution and knowledge production, and a shared interest in effective institutional policies, strategies and their implementation. These principles in many ways reflect the practices present in the medieval European universities. The European model of shared governance is distinctly different from the American, corporatist, model of shared governance in which authority lies in the hands of external boards of overseers which appoint academic administrators and these may consult academic staff and possibly students.

For example here: Embedded in the long history of the distinct European universities' governance models, student and staff participation in higher education governance has intrinsic value for the whole academic community: students practice democratic citizenship (reinforcing social responsibility of higher education); staff can voice grievances and exert influence for change. Participation contributes to a sense of mattering, identification with university, psychological ownership and sense belonging, all of which are essential for student and staff wellbeing. These principles further strengthen the role of academic community in the development of higher education policies, providing legitimacy and democratic accountability to the respective public authorities, supranational organizations and higher education institutions. The European Higher

Education Area has been built on the founding principle of democratic governance, and continuous inclusion of students and staff is the key guarantee for safeguarding European democratic character of higher education.

Governance of higher education refers to the structures and processes of decision-making on the direction of the institutions or systems and overseeing their operations. Governance arrangements vary significantly across institutions and countries. Some institutions have only one governing body that is either senate type (responsible mostly for academic matters) or board type (responsible for strategic institutional decisions) or dual-body governance. On the national level, the coordinating boards act in an advisory capacity to the government. They oversee the development of policies and regulatory instruments and, in some countries, also perform accountability checks as national quality assurance and accreditation bodies. However, actual structures and processes of students and staff participating in decision-processes and governing structures of higher education institutions and within public policy processes vary across higher education institutions and countries.

There are two necessary basic conditions for successful implementation of student and staff participation in higher education governance.

1. **Formal structures and processes should** involve representatives of students and staff, democratically elected through freedom of association, to contribute to decision-making processes at **all stages** (from agenda setting to implementation), on **the entire spectrum of higher education issues** (not only those directly addressing student or staff issues) and **at all levels of multilevel governance of higher education** (from sub-institutional and institutional level to national and EHEA levels, including transnational European endeavors like national BFUG committees and EU Education Council, or the European Universities Initiatives). The **different degrees of intensity of student and staff participation** in governing bodies and decision processes, depending on the model of participation, must be acknowledged in the implementation processes and evaluation exercises regarding staff and student participation in governance. The lowest degree of participation is when students and staff are engaged only as source of data, i.e., surveyed

or invited to participate in consultations. Structured dialogue model of participation implies regularity, some formalization of interaction and two-directional exchanges between institutional leadership and staff and students. However, it is only through the partnership model that equal rights and shared responsibilities in decision making are achieved.

2. **The legitimate democratic representative associations of students and staff** which elect their representatives through democratic processes, are autonomous and follow principles of democratic governance, should be considered as the only relevant representatives. Student representatives should be drawn from the representative student associations that are autonomous, democratic, student-run organizations. **The qualitative difference between participation of students or staff as individual experts or as elected representatives has to be noted.** Whereas the students and staff as experts contribute their personal expertise or experiences and are accountable to no one, the student and staff representatives are necessarily accountable to the constituents that elected them. They also draw their insights from the positions developed as part of their organizations' policy processes. Furthermore, student and staff representative organizations need to have financial independence which is vital for their autonomy and capabilities to perform representative function effectively. The stronger are their organizational capabilities, the better positioned they are to generate expertise, gather information, conduct policy implementation and thus the better their contributions to the policy and decision processes in higher education governance.

Indicators of student and staff participation in higher education require de jure and de facto assessments. Data collection within developed monitoring mechanisms has to take place in close cooperation with the democratically elected student and staff representatives, including the opinions from full student and staff communities at the higher education institutions.

De jure assessments address formalized provisions for student and staff participation in higher education governance stipulated in national legislative and regulatory documents as well as within statutory documents of higher education institutions. Besides nominal declarations, student and staff participation in governance should be placed within democratic governance structures and

provided functional mechanisms in order to be truly implemented in practice. For example, a nominal declaration of participation without its access to democratically elected representatives, would remain an empty promise. Further on, regulatory frameworks should follow the multi-level principle and reflect student and staff participation as described above.

De facto assessments focus on the actual practices within higher education institutions and public policy processes as experienced by student and staff representatives, including full access to information to relevant documents and the culture which could be either welcoming, neutral or hostile to student and staff voice in decision processes. The cleavages between the proclaimed regulatory frameworks and democratic realities have to be taken into account in order for monitoring mechanisms to provide a full picture on the state of affairs. Fictitious associations, hidden obstacles, direct or indirect threats and pressures are often a reality and as such have no place in the European democratic universities.