Setting the scene

• **Defined** as students’ formal and actual ability to influence decisions made in the context of a higher education institution or public authority.
Justifying student participation

• Enriches deliberation and **improves decision-making** at every level.
  – Students as transient members, as junior members, not able to challenge default positions, hold adversary positions...

• **Is intrinsic to democratic governance model and students as key constituency/stakeholders.**

• **Complies with public ethos of education and students as custodians of the public interest.**

• **Is part of democratic citizenship education.**
  – Problems with acceptance in principle.

Qualifying student participation in terms of

• The degrees of intensity.
• The extent/domains.
• Multilevel nature and the differentiated higher education systems.
The degrees of intensity of student participation

1. Access to information

2. Consultation

3. (Structured) Dialogue

4. Partnership implies shared responsibilities in each step of the institutional decision-making process: agenda setting, drafting, decision-taking, implementation and monitoring of institutional decisions.

The domains of student participation

- Whether students are represented in consultative and decision-making bodies;
- Whether student representatives have full voting rights on all issues, or some issues.
The multilevel nature and the different types of institutions

- Multilevel HE governance -> multilevel student participation: European, intergovernmental regional cooperation, national, regional, institutional, sub-institutional.

- Diversified HE system: university vs. non-university, public vs. private, for profit.

The EHEA developments

- The Bologna Process
- The modernisation agenda for universities
Student participation as an EHEA principle

- a ‘procedural principle’. ‘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’ (BP 2001).
- a ‘substantial value’. ‘fully support staff and student participation in decision-making structures at European, national and institutional levels’ (BP 2010) and students are ‘full partners in higher education governance’ (BP 2003).
- a ‘policy objective’. ‘to identify ways of increasing actual student involvement in higher education governance’ (BP 2003). Explicit on participation in QA and student-centred learning.

Impact?

- Historical achievement for European Students’ Union and its involvement and influence in European higher education policy-making.
- Especially strong involvement in the domains of QA and student-centred-learning.

BUT

- Ambiguity of the Bologna documents as to the extent and degree of student participation.
- The ‘Bologna effect’ on student participation varies across countries and institutions.
Modernisation agenda and the higher education reforms across EHEA

- New Public Management and the reform of:
  - Internal organisation and governance
  - Funding of HE
  - QA and accountability measures.

- Underlying tensions:
  - Which HE purposes to prioritise?
  - Is HE a public good or a service?

Impact?

- Plurality of stakeholders:
  – weakening students’ relative influence.
- Right to free tertiary education challenged.
- Emergence of corporate university model.
- Conceiving students as consumers:
  – less interest in the representativeness, more in professionalisation;
  – focus on students’ consultative rather than decision making function.
  – transparency tools to give student a choice.
The trends

• Weakening formal student participation.
• Strengthening informal student participation: in QA, student-centred learning, student experience.
• HE governance: negotiations between different actors on the key priorities: differences in interests, power, coalitional patterns.
• Emerging conception of students as costumers... added to OR overriding the conception of students as partners?

How these processes affect the enabling environment for student participation?

• institution’s adherence to fundamental democratic principles,
• clear and extensive formal provisions defining the terms of student participation for all levels and domains of institutional governance,
• full and continuous recognition of student representation as free and independent with respect to aims, decisions and activities,
• long-term institutional support and resources for a sustainable student representation,
• political will for actual (not only formalistic) continuous student involvement.
How do these trends affect student unions?

• More professionalisation? More detachment from the student body?
• Whose servants? Those of the institutional leadership or the student body?
• Adherence to principles of good governance of student representation: How to retain autonomy of student unions from interferences from institutional leadership, public authorities?

Thank you

Background articles to this presentation: