

## Preface

What you are about to read is a collection of essays on higher education written over the past decade and published in various contexts. Many have been published in books in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series and, where they have not, permission to include them in this collection has been obtained from the publishers.

While most of the essays are fairly recent some are 8 or 10 years old, which inevitably leaves one with the dilemma of whether to update them for recent developments or not. In most cases, I have chosen not to undertake a full update and wherever modifications have been made, they have been relatively modest. In at least one case, a particular reference to what was a quite intense discussion at the time has been more substantially modified since the issue has long since been resolved. In most articles, key references which appeared after the article was originally published have been added. References to websites were valid at the time of publication but may no longer be so.

More important than the technicalities, however, are the reasons that might justify a collection of essays on higher education. The justification is to be found in a desire to contribute to a public debate that is evolving but which is nevertheless often too narrow. Higher education does have an important economic function but it has equally important functions in terms of democratic citizenship, personal development and the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base (Bergan 2005, Council of Europe 2007). For someone responsible for the higher education programme of a values-based organisation like the Council of Europe, contributing a collection of essays that seek to sketch the multiple missions and purposes of higher education seems an important undertaking. The desire to contribute to developing a holistic vision of higher education has also given this book its title. Just as man does not live by bread alone, so too societies do not find their *raison d'être* in the economy alone, however important the economy is.

It is a truism to say that modern societies are complex, that they are characterised by rapid change, and that education is a key factor in the success of modern societies – no society can succeed without well-educated citizens – as well as in success in modern societies – no individual citizen can fully succeed in modern society without education. These truisms are nevertheless a useful starting point for the reflections developed in these essays.

Modern societies are characterised by technological sophistication, by high levels of achievement, by great opportunities for many of their citizens in terms of self-fulfilment, material wealth, mobility and influence over their own lives. One or two generations ago – not to mention a century ago – these opportunities may well have been the aspects that would have been most readily referred to if citizens were asked to describe their societies and not least their expectations of the future.

Today, however, there is an awareness not only of great opportunities, but also of great threats: to the environment, to material well-being, to personal and societal security, to social cohesion, to values, convictions and beliefs and not least to the *status quo*. Few will today think of the development of their societies in terms of uninterrupted, linear improvement, and some will undoubtedly emphasise what they perceive as negative tendencies. Many, however, will have outlooks that may be characterised as “cautiously optimistic” or “cautiously pessimistic”. In other words, most people will be aware of opportunities as well as of threats, and even though they may emphasise the former or the latter, they will seek to strike some kind of balance between the two.

The sustainability of our societies is in question. In environmental terms, this has been brought home forcefully by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>1</sup> as well as, to a larger public, by Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Over the past decade or so, something resembling a consensus has been emerging that climate change is a real threat, that it is at least partially the work of human beings and that there is still time to redress the balance if our societies take decisive action. Taking action requires an ability not only to face painful choices and to consider long-term benefits against short-term sacrifice, but also to analyse highly complex data, to act on complex issues on the basis of expert advice and often also on the basis of incomplete information, and to weigh benefits in one area against disadvantages in another. As regards concrete measures, the consensus has so far been less evident.

Sustainability does not only have an environmental aspect, however. Societies must also be sustainable economically, socially, politically and culturally, and they must be all of these at the same time. A society sustainable environmentally and in terms of overall economic indicators, but not in terms of social cohesion because of gross inequalities in the distribution of opportunities and wealth would probably not be sustainable in the long term. Similarly, a society may be environmentally sustainable without being economically or socially sustainable, or vice versa, or it may be all of these without being politically or culturally sustainable. In each case, the end result is unlikely to be overall sustainability. These diverse aspects of sustainability further underscore the need for societies and their members to be able to deal with highly complex situations and choices. Only exceptionally will the issues that face us be ones of a straightforward relationship between cause and effect.

Whereas previous generations were often faced with technological limitations, present-day limitations are frequently of a different order. Technological developments provide us with possibilities to undertake actions that may be technologically feasible but that raise serious ethical concerns or that would be too costly in economic, environmental or social terms. In this context, it may be worth recalling that deciding whether a given possibility is too costly involves not only

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1. [www.ipcc.ch](http://www.ipcc.ch), accessed on 23 July 2010.

a purely economic consideration – “do we have the funds needed?” – but also issues of priorities and relative merit – “is it more important to invest our funds in this than in other undertakings?” – and of the impact of actions in non-economic terms – “it may be economically profitable to invest in a new factory in city A, but is it defensible in terms of the impact on the environment?”. These kinds of considerations require an ability among decision makers, economic actors and voters to assess complex arguments and to make a decision on the basis of an overall assessment of advantages and disadvantages. This again requires decision makers, economic actors and voters who are not only well trained in a specific discipline, but who are also well educated in the true, holistic sense of the term.

As regards social cohesion, there are many more opportunities generally available than at any other time in history. European societies today are incomparably more just and cohesive than those that gave rise to such admired monuments as Versailles, Schönbrunn, Westminster Abbey or the Hermitage. At the same time, however, the gap between those who avail themselves of the opportunities modern democratic societies offer and those who for whatever reason do not or cannot seems destined to grow and threaten the cohesion of our societies unless education on values is given the prominence it requires in our education policy and practice.

Education must play an essential role in developing the ability of our societies to address questions such as these, which concern the very future of our societies. Partly, it may be a question of long-term survival, but it is also a question of setting priorities and deciding on the values by which we wish to be guided. Hughes de Saint-Cher, a 13th-century Dominican, said “First the bow is bent in study and then the arrow is released in preaching” (Radcliffe 2005: 5). While preaching may come easily to academics, the call is for teaching, learning and action, within and outside of universities.

In other words, in seeking to rise to the challenges our societies face, we must include considerations of values and priorities. This will require weighing complex and often difficult priorities in which not all options that would be desirable will necessarily be feasible and in which not all options that may be possible will necessarily be desirable. This also underlines the point that defining the kind of higher education we will need in the future is not simply a matter of identifying the trends and developments to which higher education must respond, but also of identifying how higher education may influence our societies in order to help them develop towards the kind of societies we would want for our children.

The kind of education we will need is not a question of identifying the single most important factor for the development of our societies and then gearing our education system to meet it. It is not a question only of economic performance, only of social cohesion, only of environmentally sound practice or only of democratic participation. The education we need must include and balance all of these as well as many other factors. In short, it must encompass the four major purposes

of higher education identified through the Council of Europe's work on the public responsibility for higher education and research, all of which are fundamental:

- preparation for the labour market;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development;
- the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Bergan 2005, Council of Europe 2007).

This also implies that the answer to the question “what education do we need?” is not to be found solely in the identification of a set of specialities (such as more information technology specialists, more petroleum engineers, more accountants, more general education teachers or more nurses). It is also not to suggest the opposite: that our societies will not need specialised competence in a wide range of areas. Rather, higher education must provide both specialised and general knowledge, or in more technical terms: subject-specific as well as generic competence. We need subject specialists with the ability to engage with broader issues. In a word, we need intellectuals, even if modern societies often seem to be sceptical of them.

The essays in this collection are organised around three broad themes. The first set of essays address the theme that has just been evoked: the purposes and mission of higher education, and the essays will make it clear that the use of the plural is a conscious choice.

The second broad topic is the public responsibility for higher education. The role of public authorities in financing higher education is strong in Europe, as is the role of public authorities in setting overall priorities for the sector as well as in ensuring its diversity. As society is changing, however, the role of public authorities will also change and public responsibility cannot be exercised in the same way today and tomorrow as it was a generation ago. If we wish to ensure that higher education should remain, as ministers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) stated twice, a public good and a public responsibility (Bologna Process 2001 and 2003), we need to take a hard look at how public responsibility may be exercised in modern, complex societies. The second set of essays represent an attempt to stimulate discussion on this crucial issue, the importance of which far exceeds the attention devoted to it in public debate.

The third major topic in this book is competences and qualifications. This is the topic on which I started my career in European higher education policy when I joined the Council of Europe in 1991 and is the subject of a previous monograph in the Council of Europe Higher Education Series (Bergan 2007). It is an area with its share of technical issues, but qualifications and competences are also key to the development of our societies as well as of our own development as an individual. Qualifications may even serve as a small-scale illustration of a proper discussion about education as such: one should master the technical issues but limiting one's attention to these means that one would miss the point. Structures are important

but they are important because they serve a set of purposes. If we get the purposes wrong, it is of marginal importance whether we get the technicalities right. The reverse is not true: reaching well-justified goals and fulfilling well-reflected purposes may be made impossible by imperfect implementation. Even if the topic of the third part of the book is narrower than those of the first two parts, the essays in this part, like the others, serve to explore and hopefully help develop our vision of the education our societies need.

The fourth part fits in with the overall concerns of the book but the form is different. This part assembles six speeches I have had the privilege of delivering on significant occasions. Five of them were delivered to ministerial conferences of the European Higher Education Area, while the sixth was held on the seventieth anniversary of International Students' Day. The speeches are shorter than the essays, references are for the most part missing and the form is oral but the concern remains the same: to help develop the kind of society in which we would want to live and in which we want our children and grandchildren to live and to help develop the kind of education that makes this society possible.

The book is a collection of articles written on the same broad topic – the roles and purposes of higher education – over a period of several years. They will hopefully show a certain development in the author's thinking but such a collection also sets an inherent challenge: that of a certain amount of repetition. Readers will find some ideas, turns of phrase and references popping up in several of the essays. It could hardly be otherwise and hopefully a certain degree of consistency of thought will also be seen as a virtue.

My previous monograph includes a long list of heartfelt thanks and dedications. All of them remain valid and they will not be repeated here. However, I am happy to be able to add some new ones. Bastian Baumann, Bruno Carapinha, Vanja Ivošević, Janja Komljenović, Milica Popović and Colin Tück all started contributing to European higher education policies in their days in the European Students' Union (ESU) and continue to contribute from other positions without losing either the enthusiasm or the sense of values that I have come to appreciate so much with the ESU. Andrea Blättler, Olav Øye, Robert Santa, Bert Vandenkendelaere and others continue to remind us all of the importance of student participation.

I have benefited from and greatly enjoyed many stimulating discussions on qualifications and their broader importance with Wilfried Boomgaert, Jeff Bridgford, Mike Coles, Samuel Isaacs, Bryan Maguire, Thomas Mayr, Jim Murray, Eduard Staudecker and Anja Trier-Wang as well as with Gordon Clark, Anita Krémo and Carlo Scatoli of the European Commission, Jens Bjørnåvold and Loukas Zahilas of CEDEFOP and Arjen Deij, Vincent McBride and Madlen Șerban of the European Training Foundation. Agnetha Bladh, Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, Eva Egron-Polak and Juan Ramón de la Fuente of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and Monique Fouilhoux of Education International are all living proof of the crucial importance of higher education institutions and their staff.

The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) and its working groups have benefited from the continued contributions of many of those thanked in the previous monograph as well as of new perspectives conveyed by Peter Baldwinson, Rafael Bonete, Peter Greisler, Toril Johansson, Luka Juroš, Cornelia Racké and many others. All the friends in and around South-East Europe mentioned in the previous monograph continue to provide me with stimulating insights and Edit Dibra and Aleksander Xuvani are added to the list with pleasure and gratitude. Sara Eco Conti, Alessandra Gallerano and Aline Sierp were unusually competent trainees with the Council of Europe's Higher Education and Research Division. So was Kathia Serrano-Velarde, who has also delivered valuable contributions to the European higher education debate through her research and now holds an academic position at the University of Heidelberg.

Two colleagues and friends deserve a particular thank you. Throughout her two terms as President of the European Students' Union, and now as co-ordinator of the Bologna Secretariat, Ligia Deca has demonstrated how an understanding of technical issues can and should go hand in hand with an understanding of the broader issues involved. Hilligje van't Land, Director of Membership and Programme Development of the IAU, has been an exceptional co-editor of a volume on the role of higher education in promoting intercultural dialogue (Bergan and van't Land 2010) with an uncanny ability to spot logical inconsistencies and to open new perspectives. Both are inspiring partners in countless discussions on the past, present and future of education and the purposes of it all.

My hope is that the essays in this volume will illustrate why higher education deserves to be at the top of our agendas as societies and as individuals. Even if some European ministries of education still carry the epithet "national", higher education is international by nature, in practice and by the conviction of most of those who make up the higher education community. The friends and colleagues listed in this preface as well as in the preface to my previous monograph also illustrate that sharing hard work to make one's convictions a reality of policy and practice can also be a true shared joy and the inevitable frustrations along the road are better overcome through international friendships.

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# **I. The missions of higher education**



# Higher education governance and democratic participation: the university and democratic culture<sup>2</sup>

## *Background and purpose*

As part of the preparation for its follow-up Bologna Seminar on Student Participation in Higher Education Governance (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. The 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 Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR) and myself (Persson 2004). 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 CDESR in co-operation with a consortium of US higher education institutions and NGOs in 2000-01 (Plantan 2004).

## *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 broader 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 keeping 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 pilot project on the University as a Site of Citizenship carried out by the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research identified four sets of issues in which higher education institutions have a role to play, as institutions and/or through their individual members, that is, the academic community of scholars and students:

- institutional decision making;
- institutional life in a wider sense, including the study process;

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2. This essay was originally published in Sjur Bergan (ed.) (2004): *The University as Res Publica: Higher Education Governance, Student Participation and the University as a Site of Citizenship*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 1.

- higher education institutions as multicultural societies;
- higher education institutions in their relationship and interaction with the wider society.

While this seminar focused 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 the Oslo seminar 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 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. However, once we start asking what this actually means, 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 in practice, no institution can be an island unto itself. Institutions are influenced by the expectations and financial contributions of 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 the fact that universities are part of broader 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 (see, for example, Hyde 1988, Sanz and Bergan 2007). 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 the former Yugoslavia.

### ***Student participation: banging on open doors?***

The topic for the Oslo seminar 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 the ESU,<sup>3</sup> are now observers on the Bologna Follow-up Group and Board and active contributors to the Bologna Process, so it is easy to forget that student representation was neither foreseen nor much talked about at the 1999 Bologna Conference. Students, in fact, did not move to centre stage until the Prague Conference in 2001, when the President of the ESIB<sup>4</sup> 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 Prague 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” (Bologna Process 2001). 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 Bologna Process. In this way, the process would be in better conformity with the situation in most of its member countries. Nevertheless, it may be worth noting that at least one respondent to the survey carried out by Annika Persson for the Oslo seminar 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

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3. European Students' Union, see [www.esib.org](http://www.esib.org).

4. European Students' Information Bureau, the ESU's name at the time.

reform movements are about adapting higher education to a changing society, but whereas the Bologna Process was started at the initiative of ministers, “1968” was started by students in the street. One of their main demands was the need for 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 (Fischer 2000: 288-290).

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. Second, 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. Third, 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 so, at 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 formalised and to what extent students have a voice in bodies such as 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

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5. Although the newer development with increased external representation has been referred to above.

the representatives on the governing body, and in a number of cases student representation seems to be below 10%.

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 eight countries whose representatives replied to the survey, student voting rights were limited to issues that seem to be considered of most immediate concern to the 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 relates to only eight 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 and understanding 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: first, that the governing bodies tend to act on, and in the great majority of cases follow, the advice of a committee of experts appointed for the occasion, and second, 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 ensured 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 the national level, however, the representation is less well established in formal terms. These findings coincide with the findings of the pilot project on the University as a Site of Citizenship, with the caveat that, since this project focused on institutional practice, representation at national level was not addressed by the project.

### ***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

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6. The present author 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.

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.

The most serious question arising in this area is what kind of student organisations are allowed, and in particular whether these may be linked to political parties. These are generally referred to as “political” student organisations, but it may be worth underlining that politics is about organising and governing societies, and that no society can do without politics or a measure of political actors and organisations, even if these are not political parties in the conventional sense of the term. 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 state that “political student organisations” are illegal in higher education institutions. While the term “political” was not defined in the questionnaire, it was intended to mean “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 organisations 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 the University as a Site of Citizenship, which states:

Another structural characteristic of universities is the legal and administrative prescriptions regarding organised 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 (Plantan 2004: 95).

This prohibition may perhaps be understandable in the light of the recent past of most of the countries where the ban is enforced, where political organisations served the needs of the regime, both in controlling academic activity and in recruiting “reliable” future party workers. From a thoroughly “politicised” 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 organisations, or to engage in political debate and, therefore, not within their ken nor responsibilities as teachers and scholars (Plantan 2004: 89).

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.

In a somewhat narrower sense, there is also a desire to keep contentious issues off campus, so as not to make higher education institutions battlefields for groups with sharply divergent views on issues often linked to conflicts that divide the societies concerned, such as ethnic or religious conflicts. In a different context, this view was expressed<sup>7</sup> 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 religious communities in Northern Ireland and which has pioneered many of the measures that made the Peace Process possible.

While a limitation of the activities of political parties, or organisations linked to these, in higher education institutions may be understandable on the basis of past experience, the limitation may nevertheless be questioned 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 from at least two angles: first, is the general student body sufficiently active and interested to give its representatives legitimacy and, second, 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 seminar 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 organised 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 of, and at an institutional level a majority of, candidates run as a representative of an organisation.

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 indicate that voter turnout is in one of the

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7. At a meeting attended by the author.

three lowest percentage ranges 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 the University as a Site of Citizenship. This project not only confirms the low voter turnout, indicated as 8-10% 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 normalisation. 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 occurred around 1974 – student mobilisation was strong in the period of crisis and the immediate aftermath, both in general terms and relating to involvement with institutional governance. However, once the crisis blew over and democratic governance was established, 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 mobilise 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 formalised representation. In most countries there seems to be regular contact 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 questions about perceived influence, in that it asked respondents to identify the areas and levels where they feel that student influence was the strongest and weakest.

All groups of respondents feel that 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 such as 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 feel that the student voice is more easily heard at institutional and faculty level than at the levels immediately above or below, that is, national and department level.

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

Again, the findings of the survey are borne out by those of the pilot project on the University as a Site 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 that 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” (Plantan 2004: 88).

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 given to students, which is felt to be insufficient, something that is reflected in the study carried out by Annika Persson for the Oslo seminar as well as in the project on the University as a Site 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>8</sup>

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8. The lack of clear and targeted information was one of the main issues raised at the follow-up Bologna Seminar on Recognition Issues in the Bologna Process, organised by the Council of Europe and the Portuguese authorities in Lisbon on 11 and 12 April 2002. See in particular the articles by Stephen Adam and Chantal Kaufmann in Bergan (2003).

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 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 with “normal” students. This, 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 unfortunately 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 too many examples of what such attitudes of complacency can lead to, from all sides of the political spectrum.<sup>9</sup>

In this project, there even seems to be a consistent difference in the way respondents addressed the issue of perceptions of influence: student respondents tended to emphasise 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, Belfast, which has not only played a significant role in the Northern Ireland Peace Process – something that could hardly be done without consultation – 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 programmes” (Plantan 2004: 98).

### ***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

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

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.

Taken to the extreme, the idea of students as clients contradicts the idea of students as members of the academic community (Bologna Process 2001). The idea of community does not exclude the possibility of there being 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 that 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 higher education – can better meet their expectations and needs. Most students embark on higher education because the qualifications they earn will help them reach their goals later in life. Academic mobility, that is, 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 organisations.

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 emphasising that while much of the current discussion on higher education, inside as well as outside 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:

- preparation for the labour market;
- preparation for life as active citizens in a democratic society;
- personal development;
- development and maintenance of an advanced knowledge base (Bergan 2005, Council of Europe 2007).

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>10</sup> but they do at least identify with groups within the institution, such as the student body as a whole, a specific department or students in a specific department. This identification is not and should not be uncritical, and students should make 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 members of an “imagined community”<sup>11</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 the University as a Site of Citizenship points out, important to realise 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 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 own purposes and how many staff members and students played along. The judges at show trials (Mählert 1999: especially, 62-65) 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-First World War 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 (Hammerstein 1991). Even as anti-intellectual a movement as the Nazi Party had its student organisations and student supporters. In Portugal, the main leaders of the Salazar regime had their roots at the University of Coimbra (Torgal 1999). In Chile, the Pinochet regime received strong support from a group of economists at the Universidad Católica who had some of their formative experience at the University of Chicago and who were therefore known as the Chicago boys. They were the moving force behind the economic liberalism of the Pinochet regime and they were largely unconcerned by its human rights abuses (Huneus 2001). Nor is this a prerogative of the undemocratic

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10. 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.

11. The term “imagined community” is normally used in discussions of nationalism and was coined by the political scientist Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1983) but, if used with care, the term may be fitting also for other kinds of communities.

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 (Shining Path), Abimael Guzmán, was a philosophy lecturer at the University of Ayacucho.<sup>12</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 members of the resistance who paid with their lives, such as 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 such as José Afonso gave artistic expression to this through the *fado de Coimbra* (Silva 2007).<sup>13</sup> Chilean academics played an important part in the opposition to the Pinochet regime 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 is it?***

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

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12. An enjoyable fictional account probably modelled on the Sendero Luminoso is Mario Vargas Llosa: *Historia de Mayta* (1984).

13. Afonso's "Grândola, Vila Morena" became the emblematic song of the revolution that overthrew the military regime in 1974.



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>14</sup> and international organisations.<sup>15</sup> It may also be noted that attempts at 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>16</sup> Weighted representation of specific groups is generally regarded as undemocratic but is none the less seen as acceptable in certain circumstances, generally in terms of geography<sup>17</sup> or to increase the representation of an under-represented group (such as specific quotas for women), to ensure representation of a group whose voice may otherwise not be heard<sup>18</sup> or to ensure a *modus vivendi* in a highly conflictual society.<sup>19</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

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14. It should be noted that neither commercial companies nor diocesan councils, while concerned with a measure of representativity, necessarily aim or claim to be democratic.

15. 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, international organisations 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.

16. One example among many is the literacy tests used in the US Deep South in parts of the 20th century.

17. In many countries, there are fewer votes behind each representative 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 favour of the less populous cantons.

18. The institutionalised representation of the Māori 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. (Reference to Kosovo shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.)

19. 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.



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% 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 policy-speak – is therefore a reasonably high level of consensus, at least on the main principles.

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?

First, there seems to be an issue concerning the level of representation, which particularly concerns student participation at national level and seems to be an issue of both formal provisions and practice. How can the further development of national higher education systems – and the European Higher Education Area itself – best benefit from the contribution of students, and how can these important stakeholders gain the same influence they now have at institutional level?

Second, 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 a greater influence? Here we touch 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 the University as a Site 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 the former Yugoslavia, where faculties have an independent legal personality and a correspondingly weak institutional leadership (rectorate), 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 influence 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 recognise it when we see it but it is difficult to define and, I would add, to operationalise. 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 that 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 European Higher Education Area. First, we need to stimulate interest in and commitment to higher education among those most directly involved: students and staff. Second, 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 also a real and healthy one.

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