PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ABOUT DEMOCRATIC STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION AT UNIVERSITY

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This article analyzes similarities and differences between the perception of students and teachers concerning different fields of university participation and representation, with the aim of contributing with suggestions for improvement that promote students' involvement, which at present we consider to be scarce. A five-dimension questionnaire was created and applied to 374 students and 65 teachers from Ramon Llull University in Barcelona; a focus group was carried out with student representatives; and the degree course directors were interviewed. Results show significant differences concerning: information and communication; consideration of participation as a dimension of university quality; role of the university as a promoter of participatory processes; motivation and satisfaction for participating; training of representatives and external image of the university. We conclude with proposals for improvement concerning effective communication, internal representation, and external representation.

Keywords: Student participation, Comparative study, Higher education, Quality of education.

Introduction

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was a good opportunity to revise the university structures and cultures that, as stated by Michavila and Parejo (2008), should question their pedagogical efficacy in front of the new social challenges.

Although the philosophy of the so-called Bologna process gives students a protagonist role in education and some research studies as that by Persson (2004) point to a positive attitude towards increasing student participation, some reports show a low student participation, perhaps due to disinterest or to their being uninformed (Giménez, 2001; Urraca, 2005; González, 2007; Martín, 2007; Francés, 2008; Merhi, 2011; Soler *et al*., 2011, 2012). This deficit could be partially explained by its similarity to the context of citizen participation where, according to García Pérez (2009, 6), "the conformed usual exercise of citizenship in our democratic societies does not seem to contribute much to constructing this kind of really participative and Universalist citizen." The same author considered that individuals do not have a clear idea of their role when they have to participate, as they think that they have been given rights but, in reality, these rights are the result of a long democratic conquest. It is not strange, then, that students feel more as a client or a user of the goods that universities offer them, rather than an actor and active member of the institution. The report by the Council of Europe (Bergan, 2004) highlighted the impression that, although the formal right of representation is guaranteed, its effective use is far from

satisfactory. It seems logical that, among the initiatives of University Strategy 2015 (EU 2015) for the development of a Modern University System in Spain, participation is promoted through the University Student Statute (2010).

Sense of Participation

We understand the participatory model as a quality model, because it implies the condition of subject for the people who commit to the building of citizenship and the consolidation of citizen rights, thus generating social and political innovation and moving forward in the democratic development.

From an ethical-political and regulatory perspective, we consider that participation results in benefits both for the subject or group that participates and for the context where these participatory processes take place. Thus, the fact of participating is associated with social transformation –by redistributing the power- and the exercise of what Habermas (1999) called "political autonomy", that is, the capacity and possibility of citizens to intervene in the formulation of subjective rights by participating in public discussions. Oraisón (2009, 40) believed that "citizens then take on the protagonist role, as a valid interlocutor who cannot be disregarded when discussing and making decisions." This implies the possibility of becoming involved and committed in the group –"being part"–, the option of deciding about issues that affect –"taking part"– and the awareness about one's own rights and duties, and what is achieved and lost –"having a part"– (Hernández, 1994 as cited in Oraisón, 2009, 40).

At university, participation is the action that students develop to achieve some learning, a competence or some personal interest that has an impact on the environment (Michavila & Parejo, 2008). Students, as main protagonists of the university educational project, are also responsible for the conformation of the university community and service to society, as reported by Bergan (2004) when he observed that higher education has to contribute to maintaining the democratic culture.

In this respect, participation understood as a way of intervention that allows people to recognize themselves and be recognized as actors in a certain society is a tool to construct university life and, therefore, it is the students' responsibility to develop it by strengthening their representation and promoting initiatives that correspond to their own interests and those of the community.

Therefore, participation not only refers to management, but it is also a learning process and a means for education (Montalbán, 2006), promoter and regulator of democratic values, attitudes, strategies, procedures, and behaviors (Martínez & Payà, 2007), which includes the capacity to present proposals, negotiate, collaborate, understand the difference, generate operational agreements, and find adequate mechanisms and channels to solve conflicts. Participation also improves student satisfaction and, according to Salaburu (2007), it increases their feeling of belonging to the university.

However, for there to be active participation, three elements are essential: motivation, that is, willingness to participate; education, that is, knowing how to participate; and participatory organization, that is, being able to participate.

Motivation is an absolutely necessary condition for participation to happen. De la Riva (1994) defined it as the set of impulses, needs, desires, reasons, interests, and motives, capable of calling to action, in this case, participation. In order to motivate students, their participation should be promoted in the different settings at their disposal, by encouraging them to get informed and to be aware of the value and importance of the participatory fact, so that they can permanently and systematically give their vision of the university, express their concerns and projects, and to help optimize the services that they get in a collaborative and constructive manner.

A previous step to education is obviously information. This means that both the student with a representative position and the student that actively participates in the university community have to have access to the information that allows them to connect their interests with those of other people or groups. Moreover, students have to have some training to know how to develop the specific tasks of the organization or groups that they are representing; they have to have the ability to communicate and

socialize. This training should not be reduced to its technical, strategic or managerial dimension, but should also focus on the construction of a real participatory culture as the social capital of the university.

Role of University as Promoter of Student Participation

The university is interested in student representation in managing boards in order to ensure student involvement in university life and to have permanent interlocution with continuity guarantees. Besides, participation improves university quality, with the process to implement participatory systems being a process of educational innovation in itself. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, in 2005, analyzed the relevance of student participation to ensure quality. This report tackled the need to count on students concerning teaching methods, competences, mobility, assessment criteria, and participation in managing boards, among others. For this reason, the university has to promote the creation of spaces for participation in order to revive their own socio-cultural institutions by incorporating students to their management and by promoting volunteer, social promotion, and cooperation programs as an effective means for the integral cultural development of the university community.

With regard to organization, the point is to create or revitalize channels and mechanisms that facilitate participation in tasks, dissemination of information, effective communication, and participation in the internal functioning, so that people that are willing and know how to take part in common affairs can have more spaces and tools that enhance mutual knowledge and communication among members.

Every piece of quality policy should include, then, student participation and representation as a fundamental pillar (Miller & Nadler, 2006) and, therefore, from the different educational spaces, a real participatory culture should be facilitated and promoted through an education for democratic citizenship (Martínez & Payà, 2007), which includes the capacity to make proposals, negotiate, teamwork, understand the difference, generate operational agreements, and find adequate mechanisms and channels to solve conflicts.

In this respect, the university becomes an essential component for citizens to acquire the competences needed to face the challenges of the new millennium (Domingo *et al.*, 2013), and functions of university are linked to the education of professionals who are thoughtful, responsible, and active protagonists in social and educational processes (Monarca, 2013) and capable.

Research Design

On the basis of the previous assumptions, our intention was to analyze the participation of university students from the perception of the different agents involved and to propose guidelines to stimulate and make this participation more significant.

The complexity of factors that have an influence on student participation at university makes it necessary to use different sources of information. These sources may provide us with contradictory information as well as coincidences, which have to be assessed before making any decision. In this respect, we set up this research project that presents the complementary vision of both students and teachers, who are the agents more directly involved in the educational process, with the conviction that the conceptions of both groups may point at some ideas that can help us reassess student involvement, encourage it, and exert an influence on university and its environment.

This study is empirical, descriptive, and comparative, with a multi-method approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative strategies in order to achieve a holistic vision of reality (Cohen *et al.*, 2000), developed in four phases:

- ✓ Exploratory phase: interviews with three people responsible for student education or guidance.
- ✓ Extensive phase: administration of a questionnaire to students and teachers about their perception of university student participation.

✓ Intensive phase: focus group with student representatives and in-depth interviews with degree course directors.

✓ Proposal phase: gathering information collected and developing proposals to improve student participation.

We set up two main objectives:

To identify differences and points of contact between the perceptions of students and teachers about the dimensions of student participation in university life and in representation boards. Table 1 presents this objective in detail.

To propose strategies and guidelines to promote and improve student representation and participation at the university.

Participants

Population A: Students in the last year of the Teacher Training, Psychology, Physical Activity and Sports Sciences, and Speech Therapy degree courses, from Ramon Llull University (URL in Spanish).

Of this population, there was a sample A_1 selected via convenience nonprobability sampling, consisting of 374 students from the aforementioned courses, mainly from the Teacher Training degree course (66.8%). 14.2% were students from the Physical Activity and Sports Sciences degree course, 10.2% from Psychology, and 8.8% from Speech Therapy. By gender, the percentages were as follows: males, 20.9%, and females, 79.1%. Concerning representation, 9.3% have taken on this responsibility, and 90.7% have not. There was also a sample A_2, of a purposive kind, accepting sample, consisting of student representatives of the last year.

Population B: Teachers of the Teacher Training, Psychology, Physical Activity and Sports Sciences, and Speech Therapy degree courses, from Ramon Llull University.

Of this population B, an accepting sample B_1 was selected, consisting of 65 teachers: 56.9% women and 43.1% men; 10.8% with a teaching experience at the university lower than 3 years, 7.7% between 3 and 6 years, 20% between 6 and 10 years, 16.9% between 10 and 15 years, and 44.6% with more than 15 years of experience; full-time teachers 53.8%, part-time (with more than 6 hours) 29.2% and (with less than 6 hours) 16.9%. There was also a sample B_2 consisting of the directors of the different degree courses that teachers in population B worked in.

Instruments

1. Questionnaire for students and teachers

As we were not able to find instruments that meet the necessary psychometrical requirements for our research, a five-dimension questionnaire was developed ad hoc (Boqué *et al.,* 2013). To establish the dimensions, and as a first step, we started from a literature review on participation in different universities at a national and international level, and recent articles on this topic were consulted.

Content validity is known via the evaluation of experts who guarantee relevance and representativeness. From their assessments, the questionnaire was reduced to 45 items: 42 items with a 4-point Likert-type answer scale depending on the degree of agreement with the sentence, and 3 items with a multiple choice answer. The questionnaire was structured with the dimensions and subdimensions presented in Table 3, and in its introduction, the purpose of the research was briefly explained.

The validity and reliability of this questionnaire were assessed through Cronbach's reliability test, the KMO test, and Bartlett's test for factor analysis, developed with the statistics software IBM SPSS Statistics 20.

Finally, we also considered a factor analysis to be interesting to check the consistency of the test's internal structure. To do so, we used principal component analysis and Varimax rotation.

In view of the values presented in Table 1 and, considering that Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.865, we can state that a high level of reliability was achieved.

Table 1. Test for sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test for sampling adequacy		0.848
Bartlett's sphericity test	Chi-squared approximation	4153.225
	gl	861
	Sig.	<0.0001

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 20

The factor analysis shows that the questionnaire is coherent and that its items are well designed and grouped. In Table 2, we can see that eleven components account for 60% of variance, approximately, with the first one being higher than 21%.

Table 2. Factor analysis by principal component analysis

Total Variance Explained								
Compo-nent	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	8.852	21.076	21.076	8.852	21.076	21.076	2.945	7.012	7.012
2	2.782	6.625	27.701	2.782	6.625	27.701	2.915	6.941	13.953
3	2.563	6.102	33.803	2.563	6.102	33.803	2.855	6.798	20.752
4	2.000	4.762	38.565	2.000	4.762	38.565	2.489	5.927	26.679
5	1.570	3.739	42.303	1.570	3.739	42.303	2.254	5.368	32.046
6	1.454	3.463	45.766	1.454	3.463	45.766	2.251	5.360	37.406
7	1.373	3.270	49.035	1.373	3.270	49.035	2.194	5.224	42.630
8	1.245	2.964	51.999	1.245	2.964	51.999	2.177	5.183	47.813
9	1.168	2.781	54.780	1.168	2.781	54.780	1.751	4.169	51.982
10	1.092	2.600	57.381	1.092	2.600	57.381	1.709	4.068	56.050
11	1.067	2.541	59.922	1.067	2.541	59.922	1.626	3.872	59.922
12	.977	2.325	62.247						
13	.917	2.184	64.432						
14	.905	2.154	66.586						
15	.858	2.044	68.630						
16	.828	1.972	70.602						
17	.796	1.896	72.498						
18	.752	1.791	74.289						
19	.700	1.667	75.956						
20	.699	1.664	77.620						
21	.671	1.598	79.218						
22	.630	1.501	80.719						

23	.623	1.484	82.203							
24	.584	1.390	83.593							
25	.538	1.281	84.874							
26	.523	1.245	86.119							
27	.509	1.212	87.331							
28	.490	1.166	88.497							
29	.455	1.084	89.581							
30	.439	1.045	90.626							
31	.426	1.014	91.640							
32	.408	.971	92.611							
33	.405	.963	93.574							
34	.379	.902	94.476							
35	.374	.891	95.366							
36	.359	.854	96.220							
37	.322	.767	96.987							
38	.303	.722	97.710							
39	.270	.643	98.352							
40	.252	.599	98.952							
41	.240	.572	99.524							
42	.200	.476	100.000							

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 20

Moreover, consistency is reinforced by the way how items are grouped, as the components are very similarly adjusted to the subdimensions explained in Table 3.

Thus, items in dimension 1, subdimension 1, are included in two components: those referring to information about activities in component 7, and those referring to information about management of representatives in component 10. Items in dimension 2 are distributed into three components: those of subdimension 1 in component 3, those of subdimension 2 in component 5, and those of subdimension 3 in component 6. Items in dimension 3 appear in two components: those of subdimension 1 in component 2, and those of subdimension 2 in component 8. Items in dimension 4, subdimension 1, are distributed between components 4 and 9. Items in dimension 5 are included in two components: those of subdimension 1 in component 1, and those of subdimension 2 in component 11.

We should also add that items in dimension 4, subdimension 2, are included not only in one component but are distributed in three components: 3, 5, and 9.

Subdimensions 2 in dimension 1 and in dimension 5 have not been considered for the factor analysis as their answer is not a Likert-type scale but multiple choice.

This questionnaire was applied to samples A_1 and B_1. Students answered regarding their participation at university, and teachers regarding their perception about student participation.

Table 3. Dimensions of the questionnaire for data collection

Dimension	Objective	Subdimension	No. of Items
1. Information and communication strategies	To get to know the perception of students and teachers about the information that students get, how they get it, and what communication channels are appropriate for a real participatory culture in the university setting	1. Information provided to students about participation spaces at university	5
		2. Communication channels between students and institution	2
2. Meaning and importance of participation and internal representation	To identify the perception of both groups about the value given to the students' responsible participation at university	1. Student participation as a quality factor of university life	7
		2. Strategies of the university as promoter of student participation and representation processes	4
		3. Elements to improve internal participation	3
3. Social commitment and external representation	To show the perception about the students' commitment to society, as active subjects able to construct alternatives via innovation and social creativity processes	1. Interaction between university and society	3
		2. Mechanisms for university socio-cultural development	3
4. Motivation, involvement, and personal satisfaction	To assess the perception about aspects concerning involvement and personal satisfaction in participatory processes and about demotivating aspects or difficulties	1. Expressions of personal satisfaction in participation or representation processes	8
		2. Difficulties for participation and representation	3
5. Profile and education	To get to know the perception about knowledge, skills, and capacities needed to intervene at university	1. Education of student representatives	4
		2. Types of qualities for a good student representative	3

Source: Own elaboration

2.   *Focus group with student representatives*

The aim of this focus group was to collect the vision of last-year student representatives from the different studies concerning university student participation, on the basis of the most significant results from the questionnaire.

3.   *Interviews with degree course directors*

In-depth interviews were carried out with the directors as a counterpoint to the contributions by students and teachers, due to their global vision of every degree course.

Procedure for information collection and data analysis

The questionnaire was administered to the students by the research team. Questionnaires were filled in anonymously and in paper format. The questionnaire for teachers was administered online.

As our objective was to study differences and analogies between the perceptions of students and teachers, we carried out mean comparisons for every Likert-scale question. For the three items with multiple choice answer, we ranked answers from more to less preferential and then compared them.

Given the need for synthesis of this article, results from the focus group and the interviews are considered when presenting contributions for improvement.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the results from applying the questionnaire to students and teachers, according to the five dimensions of the questionnaire.

Results of significant differences were taken correspondingly: when the distribution was normal, results from the t-test for mean comparison in independent samples were used; and when the distribution was not normal, those from the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test were used, depending on whether variances were equal according to Levene's F-test.

Information and communication strategies

The differences in the assessments of students and teachers are statistically significant if we take the total score for the first subdimension in dimension 1 as a reference (M students = 1.76, M teachers = 2, t = -3.765, p<0.001). We can state, then, that the perceptions of teachers show a higher level of knowledge of the information about student participation than that expressed by the students themselves, and that the perceptions of both groups are located in the area of ignorance about this information in all items.

The differences observed (Table 4) are significant in all items, except for item 2. Particularly, the greatest contrast appears in relation to their ignorance of: information about projects that the university offers (69.2% for teachers, and 90.3% for students); credit recognition for representation responsibilities (67.2% for teachers, and 88% for students); and student associations and movements (89.1% for teachers, and 97.9% for students).

In those items about whether the tasks of representatives and the Board of representatives were known to students, only 35.4% of teachers think that students know what tasks their representatives carry out, and an even lower percentage (7.7%) report that they know the tasks of the Board of representatives. These perceptions are lower to those of students, which reach 50.5% and 26.8% for the tasks of representatives and the Board of representatives, respectively.

Table 4. Differences in items related to information provided to students about participation spaces

Dimension 1, subdimension 1 "Information provided to students about participation spaces at university"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
1. Students know the tasks that their class representative carries out on behalf of the group.	2.54	2.31	2.51	0.039
2. Students know the proposals to improve academic dynamics that are presented via the URL Board of representatives.	1.69	1.69	1.69	0.437
3. Students are informed about Solidarity Action projects, free sport, physical and leisure activities offered by the university, and about spaces for reflection and cultural promotion.	1.63	2.17	1.71	<0.001

4. Students are informed about the recognition of academic credits for representation tasks.	1.71	2.16	1.77	<0.001
5. Students are informed about student associations, networks, and social movements, such as ACE (Catalan Student Association), ESU (European Students' Union) or EUA (European University Association).	1.26	1.70	1.32	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the second subdimension in dimension 1, consisting of two multiple-choice items (6 and 7) and referring to communication channels between students and university, teachers mainly think that students get informed via their teachers and tutors and, secondly, on the Faculty's website. This perception differs from the answers of students, who observe that they first get informed on the website and then by their teachers. We can also point at 20.30%, according to the teachers' perception, and 19%, according to the students, of students that neither look for nor are interested in information about spaces for participation.

The channels that teachers consider to be the best to get information would be a promotion group and social networks (24.60% and 20%, respectively), whereas students clearly prefer the virtual space (42.20%) and consider neither a group that promotes participation (6.90%) nor social networks (7.20%) to be very efficient.

Once analyzed the results from dimension 1, coinciding with Soler et al. (2012), we can see that the information is there but does not reach the students properly, or when it does, it does not settle. There is also some similarity with Giménez's (2001) work about the ignorance concerning the role of representatives.

Meaning and importance of participation and internal representation

As in the previous case, in the first subdimension of dimension 2, we can find divergences between the perceptions of teachers and students, with significant differences (M students = 3.168, M teachers = 3.557 t = -6.516, p<0.001) considering total means.

By items, all differences are significant except for those in item 11 (Table 5).

If we compare results, we can see a clear tendency in teachers to have higher scores, giving a score of 4 for items in this subdimension in percentages that range from 60% to 70%, whereas students give this score in percentages ranging from 15% and 40%.

The differences are even bigger in items 13 and 14, with students strongly agreeing only in 19.4% and 15.8%, and teachers in 45.3% and 54.7%, respectively.

Table 5. Differences in items related to student participation as a quality factor in university life

Dimension 2, subdimension 1 "Student participation as a quality factor in university life"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
8. Participation is a learning and educational process, rather than just managerial.	3.21	3.68	3.28	<0.001
9. Participation involves sharing a common project.	3.27	3.52	3.31	0.001
10. Participation allows individuals to recognize themselves and be recognized as actors within a certain society.	3.28	3.60	3.33	<0.001
11. Participation implies the power to make decisions and, therefore, responsibility, commitment, and involvement.	3.32	3.48	3.34	0.070

12. Participation is a right and responsibility for all students.	3.27	3.61	3.32	<0.001
13. It is the students' responsibility to develop student life, by strengthening the representation of their representatives and initiatives linked to their interests.	3.03	3.36	3.08	<0.001
14. The Bologna process focuses education on students. Therefore, students have to become involved actively and efficiently in university organization, quality processes, etc.	2.78	3.39	2.87	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

In the second subdimension of dimension 2, we can also find more divergences than agreements, with significant differences between the means of the two groups (M students = 3.294, M teachers = 3.580, t = -4.456, p < 0.001). This shows a more positive perception of teachers about the relationship between participation and university quality.

There are significant differences in all items (Table 6).

Both teachers and students recognize that it is important that the university prepares and motivates them to live in a democratic society. However, the percentages of agreement among teachers are higher than those among students, who seem to be more doubtful (only 50% reported to agree with the statements in this section).

The higher assessment of teachers corresponds to the fact that the educational community has to generate institutional spaces for dialogue and critical thinking (73.4% gave this item a score of 4), whereas students essentially value that participation processes are promoted from the university itself (40.8% gave this item a score of 4). We should highlight that scores lower than 3 have very low percentages in both groups.

According to the previous results, democratic participation at university should be considered to be fundamental in university strategic plans, thus assuming their educational duty towards their students. This involves the incorporation of the debate on participation as a priority and ordinary element in university functioning (mean scores between 3.28 and 3.64 in items of subdimension 2, both for students and teachers), coinciding with Becerra (2006) in the fact that the university is not always aware that it is a privileged space of transformation, sticking to academic approaches instead.

Table 6. Differences in items related to strategies of the university to promote student participation and representation processes

Dimension 2, subdimension 2 "Strategies of the university to promote student participation and representation processes"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
15. Every university has to include participation in its quality strategic plans.	3.29	3.62	3.34	<0.001
16. The university itself has to promote participation and representation processes to improve educational quality.	3.33	3.57	3.36	0.005
17. The university has to develop mechanisms to recognize and certify student representation.	3.28	3.40	3.30	0.020
18. The educational community has to generate institutional spaces for dialogue and critical thinking where students can actively participate.	3.28	3.64	3.33	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

In the third subdimension, there are the greatest coincidences of dimension 2 between students and teachers, with no significant differences between the means for both groups (M students = 3.256, M teachers = 3.166, t = 1.183, p = 0.237).

When considering items in isolation, we still find no significant differences in any of them (Table 7).

Table 7. Differences in items related to elements to improve internal participation

Dimension 2, subdimension 3 "Elements to improve internal participation"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
19. Participation would improve if there were clear regulations to facilitate it.	3.08	2.89	3.06	0.116
20. Participation would improve if there was a promotion group in the faculty.	3.30	3.35	3.31	0.584
21. Participation would improve if communication channels were real communication spaces between students, teachers, managers, administrations, etc.	3.39	3.28	3.37	0.561

Source: Own elaboration

To promote student participation, respondents prudently rely on a promotion group (scores of 4 in 41.9% of students and 49.2% of teachers) and on the improvement of communication channels (scores of 4 in 44% of students and 46.9% of teachers).

With lower scores, respondents value the existence of regulations that control participation to improve it (scores of 4 in 30.4% of students and 27.7% of teachers).

The element with more agreement between teachers and students points at the recognition of the capacity of those who participate to act rather than only interact with the environment. This issue should be further and carefully analyzed, as to motivate and recognize participation this has to be authentic and effective, and this can only be possible if you can intervene in decision-making processes, as observed in the studies by Kuruuzum et al. (2005).

Social commitment and external representation

In the first subdimension of dimension 3, we can see disagreements between the perceptions of students and teachers, with significant differences between means for both groups (M students = 3.161, M teachers = 3.474, t = -4.798, p<0.001). Teachers are slightly more optimistic in their assessment of participation as an element that contributes to the interaction between university and society, with mean differences being significant in all items (Table 8).

From these results, we can deduce that both teachers and students agree on the fact that the university should increase their social outreach, with the sum of scores 3 and 4 reaching more than 85% in all items.

However, in the case of teachers, this percentage shows more agreement, with scores of 4 ranging from 56% to 60%. For students, this range is 21%-28%.

Table 8. Differences in items related to the interaction between university and society

Dimension 3, subdimension 1 "Interaction between university and society"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
22. Participation and representation contribute to university socio-cultural development, allowing for greater interaction between university and society.	3.18	3.45	3.22	<0.001

23. Student participation contributes to their education and identification with the process of institutional management, in general.	3.11	3.51	3.17	<0.001
24. Social projects can be an effective means to link institutions and students more closely.	3.19	3.45	3.23	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

In the second subdimension of dimension 3, we observe agreements between the perceptions of students and teachers, with no significant differences between means for both groups (M students = 3.342, M teachers = 3.338, t = 0.056, p = 0.955). There were significant differences only in item 27 (Table 9).

Table 9. Differences in items related to mechanisms for university socio-cultural development

Dimension 3, subdimension 2 "Mechanisms for university socio-cultural development"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
25. To make student voice heard, it is necessary that their representatives together with the teachers and non-teaching staff give contributions to the public discourse about issues that affect the university or the community.	3.32	3.25	3.31	0.436
26. The university has to foster student participation in associations and social movements.	3.29	3.14	3.27	0.087
27. The university has to be another cog in the machine of their environment.	3.41	3.59	3.44	0.019

Source: Own elaboration

In contrast to the first subdimension, the highest score reaches very similar percentages in both groups, except for the fact that the university should be another cog in the socio-cultural machine, which students strongly agree with in 45.2% and teachers in 62.5%.

Almost 20% of teachers disagree with the contributions of the educational community to the public discourse and with the fact that the university fosters student participation in associations and social movements. This percentage is reduced to 10% in the sample of students.

In items 24 and 27, teachers gave scores of 3.45 and 3.59, respectively, thus showing that social projects can be a link between institutions and students; therefore, the university should become a cog in the socio-cultural machine of their environment. These assessments go down in the answers of students (3.19 and 3.41, respectively).

There is agreement on the need of promoting the external participation of university students because, as Puig (2012) observed, a responsible university has to work together with society to analyze what is not working and then find possible solutions. Therefore, according to Medina (2005), we should identify clear scenarios of social involvement in the university environment as an expression of the education in values of life together and citizenship, by establishing the corresponding mechanisms for active and committed participation.

Motivation, satisfaction, and personal involvement

In the first subdimension of dimension 4, the means of the perceptions of students and teachers (Table 10) show significant differences (M students = 3.312, M teachers = 3.542, U = 4870.5, p<0.001), with teachers being the ones better assessing the satisfaction of participating.

With regard to the items, there are significant differences in all of them, except for items 30 and 34.

The percentages obtained show that, for all items, the opinions of teachers are in the agreement range, with motivation standing out as a condition for participation and a greater sense of belonging to the university thanks to their involvement in participatory projects, where scores of 4 are higher than 75% in teachers, whereas they only reach 33.9% in students.

We should also consider that the lowest percentages of score 4 appear in the item concerning the increase of students' social outreach through participation in both groups (18.1% for students and 35.9% for teachers).

Table 10. Differences in items related to expressions of personal satisfaction in participation or representation processes

Dimension 4, subdimension 1 "Expressions of personal satisfaction in participation or representation processes"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
28. Participation in university life strengthens links between students.	3.34	3.63	3.38	0.001
29. Involvement in participatory activities improves communication between students.	3.41	3.60	3.44	0.023
30. Motivation is a necessary condition to participate.	3.67	3.66	3.67	0.915
31. Representation increases the social awareness of students.	3.06	3.33	3.10	<0.001
32. Participation in university projects increases the feeling of belonging to the university.	3.17	3.76	3.26	<0.001
33. Satisfaction of participating is linked to the recognition by the group.	3.22	3.39	3.24	0.023
34. Satisfaction of participating is linked to the capacity to influence decision-making processes.	3.25	3.32	3.26	0.231
35. Participating is satisfactory because it implies getting involved in a common project.	3.22	3.56	3.28	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

In the second subdimension of dimension 4, the differences between means for the two groups are not significant, when considering the total score of this subdimension (M students = 2.857, M teachers = 2.784, t = 1.135, p = 0.257).

But if we analyze results for every particular item, we can see significant differences in items 36 and 38 (Table 11).

Table 11. Differences in items related to difficulties for participation and representation

Dimension 4, subdimension 2 "Difficulties for participation and representation"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
36. Students are not motivated to participate because their opinions have little influence on decision-making processes.	3.45	2.92	3.37	<0.001
37. Low student participation is related to disinterest and being uninformed.	3.24	3.08	3.21	0.153
38. The university is aware of the needs of their students.	1.89	2.37	1.96	<0.001

Source: Own elaboration

Some teachers are doubtful that the low participation of students is due to disinterest, ignorance or the low transcendence of their opinions, with the sum of low scores (1 and 2) reaching percentages of 30%. Students, on the other hand, assume these reasons as the cause for their low participation, particularly the little influence of their opinions, with a percentage of agreement (sum of scores 3 and 4) of 90.9% in concordance with different reports (Giménez, 2001; González, 2007; Martín, 2007; Francés, 2008; Merhi, 2011; Soler et al., 2012).

On the point of whether the university is aware of the needs of their students, teachers express their disagreement, with scores lower than 3 reaching a percentage of 62.9%, which in students reach 77.1%.

Profile and education

In the first subdimension of dimension 5, the differences between means for both groups were significant when considering the total score (M students = 3.112, M teachers = 3.261, t = -1.971, p = 0.049). Again, teachers give higher scores here for the value of educational actions to improve student representation.

The significance of differences is maintained when studying items in isolation, except for item 39, which shows unanimity of criteria for both students and teachers concerning the importance of education (Table 12).

Table 12. Differences in items related to education of student representatives

Dimension 5, subdimension 1 "Education of student representatives"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
39. Education is important to be a good representative (congresses, courses on rights and duties, meetings with student representatives, etc.)	3.06	2.91	3.04	0.109
40. A student representative has to know the structure of the new degrees.	3.28	3.50	3.31	0.016
41. A student representative has to know the legal framework of the EHEA and URL.	3.06	3.38	3.11	0.002
42. A student representative has to know the forms of association inside and outside the university.	3.06	3.34	3.10	0.004

Source: Own elaboration

In the items of this subdimension about the education of student representatives, the highest score goes to the fact that student representatives should know the new degrees in terms of content, structure, objectives, method, etc. Teachers' scores (93.8%) are in the area of agreement (3 and 4), with those strongly agreeing with this statement reaching more than 50% (40.6% in the case of students). Knowing the EHEA and university legal framework and the forms of association get recognition with a percentage of agreement with values near 90% (teachers) and 80% (students). This 90% is equally distributed between scores of 3 and 4, which shows that some teachers do not completely share these proposed statements. The 80% obtained in students is divided into 50% for score 3 and 30% for score 4. Almost 28% of teachers do not find the offer of specific training appropriate. Students express their disagreement in 16.7%.

In the second subdimension of dimension 5, the differences between means for both groups are not significant when considering the total score (M students = 2.298, M teachers = 2.286, t = 0.104, p = 0.917). There were no significant differences in either of the two items (Table 13).

Table 13. Differences in items related to types of qualities of a good student representative

Dimension 5, subdimension 2 "Types of qualities of a good student representative"	Mean for students	Mean for teachers	Total Mean	Significance (bilateral)
43. Student representatives have to be in the last years and/or be older because the degree of maturity is important.	2.58	2.68	2.59	0.387
44. It is interesting that student representatives are involved in associations and/or political parties, thus showing involvement and civil liability.	2.02	1.90	2	0.362

Source: Own elaboration

The fact that student representatives should be students in the last years does not get agreement. Half the teachers gave this item a score of 1 or 2, and the rest, 3 or 4. Students answered in a very similar way.

The item with lower scores in dimension 5 is item 44, with 82% of teachers and 70% of students disagreeing with the importance of the representatives' involvement in associations or political parties.

Dimension 5 has a multiple-choice item (45) about the qualities of a good representative. More than half the teachers (52.30%) and students (56.20%) chose, principally, interpersonal qualities such as teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, empathy, etc. A quarter of teachers and 16.8% of students preferred personal qualities such as being trustful, reliable, and credible. The rest, at quite a distance from the first two, is distributed among intellectual, communication, educational, and managerial qualities. These results are quite coincidental in both groups.

Conclusions and Contributions for Improvement

From the results of this research, we present some suggestions to improve student participation and representation, organized in three areas: effective communication, internal representation, and external representation.

Effective communication

The different perceptions of the two groups point at the virtual environment and teachers as the communication means to be promoted. Virtual information should be improved and spaces for debate between students and teachers should be fostered, with the attitudes and actions of teachers being understood as essential for student participation. These university forums imply that students are members with full rights in their educational process, which requires fluent communication, transparency in determination and approach processes between the institution and the current student.

Some specific actions to improve communication are presented in Table 14.

Table 14. Contributions to improve effective communication

Type of actions	Specific actions
Information	Student Portal to offer news of the university, scholarships, discount guides for students, offers, accommodation, etc.
	Bureau of students that collaborate in different tasks of the faculty. The objective of this Bureau of collaborating students is to have data of students willing to become collaborators in the different services of the university available.

	Creation of an interactive platform for student representatives to help them call for meetings and communicate in general with their peers.
	Placement of an information board for biweekly activities: events at the faculty and university, cultural events, deadlines and calls, and other information of interest.
	Creation of an Information Service of the Student Vice Rector's Office (SIVE in Spanish), which also works as an office for the promotion of university life, linked to the SEPAE.
Communication	Fostering spaces for debate and discussion for students and teachers, understanding that teachers should have an important role in student participation. Forums of dialogue to grasp the interests and needs of students.
	Making determination process transparent and improving communication so that it is fluent, and thinking about how the university can be adjusted to be closer to the student in our current society.
	Setting up a group to promote participation consisting of both students and teachers. The members of this group should give advice on methods and resources to stimulate student participation, be informed about current legislation on this topic, stimulate external outreach, and promote the education of student representatives in techniques of communication and management of groups and meetings, provide and revise the information to be published online.
Dissemination	Dissemination of participation actions that take place outside the faculty and spaces for external participation, where students can participate.
	Dissemination of the documents that regulate student participation and representation at the university.

Source: Own elaboration

Internal representation

Both students and teachers recognize the educational value of participation and the responsibility and commitment involved in being active agents at university and in society. Despite this, the students' involvement is very diluted.

It is then urgent to incorporate student participation to quality strategic plans of the university, by designing and developing strategies to motivate students, defining spaces for participation, providing students with tools and certain aspects where their voice will be heard and they will be able to decide as active part of the dynamics, content, and organization of the university.

Points of interest should be fostered, as well as communication processes. Groups should be set up to talk about issues concerning students, which in the academic field could refer to reforms in their teaching and learning, updating and assessment of didactic methods and practices according to new educational paradigms.

Student representation in the boards of university management should be extended to bodies at a lower level such as areas and departments, and interuniversity mobility, exchange, and cooperation should be fostered.

Such measures as the creation of funds for student initiatives, scholarships for the promotion of student participation, recognition and certification of education, experience and skills acquired as a student representative, motivate students to take on this representation.

A Student Participation Service would contribute to being present on social networks and assess current participation models to look for greater efficiency. Likewise, it should support groups that create spaces for participation, welcome ideas from the students themselves, assess and manage issues of interest for students, propose educational courses for representatives, develop a system of complaints, suggestions, and acknowledgments, etc.

So that students recognize the value of participation as an educational means and the responsibility and commitment involved in being an active agent at university and in society, we suggest the following actions presented in Table 15.

Table 15. Contributions to improve internal participation

Type of actions	Specific actions
Services	Creation of the figure of the teacher responsible for guiding students (vice dean or coordinator) and a body that is really representative of students (vice dean of students).
	Organization of a Student Participation Service (SEPAE in Spanish) with the following functions, among others: - Support to groups that create spaces and ways for participation, - Development of proposals intending to improve and enrich the students' social and cultural life, - Gathering ideas from the students themselves in order to organize lectures, contests, exhibitions, etc. - Development of cultural activities of interest (music or drama groups, associations, roundtables, exhibitions, contests, etc.) as a complement to university education, - Proposal of educational courses for representatives to intervene in managerial bodies, and educational programs, actions or lectures about participation that can be useful to promote reflection about participation as an educational process, - Offering guidance to students, - Establishing mechanisms and channels of participation, - Providing students with documents, - Promotion of initiatives that correspond to the students' interests, - Search for ways of working together through networked coordination with different groups of the same university or from others, - Management of issues of interest for students, - Dissemination of information of interest, - Responding properly and as quickly as possible to requests and proposals of students, - Development of a system of complaints, suggestions, and acknowledgments of the vice rector of students, - Being present on social networks, - Assessment of current participation models and search for more efficient ones.
	Office of Voluntary Work.
	Meeting room for students and associations.
Mechanisms and spaces for student decision	Tackling the role that the university wants their students to have in it, how to look at the outside world, and what means and educational courses should be offered. This implies the definition of spaces for participation, tools that students should be provided with, aspects where they will be listened to, and aspects where they will be able to decide so that students can feel as an active part of the dynamics, content, and

	organization of the university.
	Inclusion of student participation in the strategic plans of the faculty as a quality element.
	Legitimization of students as fellow partners of university life by including them in decision-making mechanisms in the different levels that have an impact on their educational process: academic and social. Not restricting student representation to the main bodies of university management, but extending it to other bodies at a lower level, such as committees for syllabus planning, committees for the assessment of teaching quality, committees for the implementation of new degree courses, departments, etc.
	Reinforcing the figure of the representative. The election process to choose the representative for every group, year and course should be described and disseminated: inform about the tasks of the representatives, call elections for a certain date, set up voting and counting. Every month, the representative should meet the management team and devote some time in the students' schedule to transmit information, establish regular meetings with other representatives and directors and coordinators.
	Design of clear regulations that foster and guide student participation and representation.
Offers to participate	Offer of interesting, innovating and motivating proposals by the faculty.
	Offer of educational courses for student representation that consider: the organization of student representation, the figure of the year representative, university bodies of representation, basic regulations that affect the student and participation, and other ways of participation. (They could be recognized with 2 or 3 ECTS credits.)
	Promotion of the foundation of a Cultural Center.
	Promotion of leisure activities.
	Creation of funds for student initiative contests.
	Calls for scholarships to develop tasks concerning the promotion of student participation, such as collaboration in the development of projects, publications concerning student participation, or the creation and management of the Student Participation Service (SEPAE).
	Creation of the Student Participation Conference so that topics of interest can be discussed. Annual Student Congress.
Groups for dialogue and work	Creation of institutional spaces for dialogue and critical thinking. Fostering responsibility of students for their own education, so that they understand the commitment involved in participation. The content of some of these conversations should be disseminated by the participants, and this dissemination could be oral or in writing and posted on public or restricted digital spaces for interested groups.
	Setting up a Seminar of Innovation and Promotion of Student Participation, which should be regularly held to share ideas and experiences, assess difficulties, and try new strategies and resources. We propose the creation of a committee with teachers and students, with shared objectives, for the analysis of teaching quality, without restricting this analysis to the answers of questionnaires to assess teachers.
	Ordinary meetings of representatives with coordinators and directors, the Council of

	the Faculty, the Group Assembly with the Degree Course Direction and different Coordination teams (practices, mentions, years, etc.).
	Working groups to prepare welcome and graduation events.
	Groups of student mentors that carry out activities of cooperation with the university to welcome and attract new students.
	Groups to guide and integrate foreign students: guidance and welcome activities, activities for social and cultural integration, and linguistic exchange activities.
Recognition of participation	Recognition of representation and promotion of student participation activities.
	Recognition and certification of education, experience, and skills acquired as a student representative, in order to motivate students to take on this representation.
Association movements	Promotion of student associations as a motor for participation and expression of the university to face the challenges of the present and future.
	Strengthening the Association of former students.

Source: Own elaboration

External representation

Student participation is an open and dynamic process, focusing on the group rather than on individual participation. In this respect, the capacity to impact on decision-making processes beyond the university should not be just symbolic.

A quality participation model should generate social and political innovation. In this respect, student participation, as an exercise of democratic citizenship, should be a usual issue rather than an exception, so that students can make their voice heard in different environments and institutions.

Nevertheless, this approach between non-university administrations and institutions and university requires mutual respect and the certainty that the participatory processes foster and strengthen representational democracy and are not an obstacle.

Likewise, the university has to promote student representation boards with an influence on educational policies. Any government that watches over a fair and democratic society has to aim at the participation of youth in any reform of the educational system. Educational administrations should encourage university student participation in the field of education, by giving contributions to the public discourse on topics that affect them, as a fact that impacts on quality.

Moreover, the university should respond to a society in transformation by being receptive to the social demands, having a relationship with other centers and the environment, and being open to interesting proposals from outside.

In Table 16, we define some actions to put external participation into effect.

Table 16. Contributions to improve external participation

Type of actions	Specific actions
Programs ad projects	Development of social projects as a means to achieve a closer relationship between students and institutions.
	Promotion of university exchange programs to get to know the European university systems and to find out and strengthen the relationship of common interests.

	Programs of International Cooperation for Development, which are ethical projects aimed at developing shared actions with different countries, cultures, and organizations.
	Program to Support Business Projects of the university. The main objective is to promote the business initiative in the university community, by supporting initiatives that spring from the same university.
	Creation of spaces for debate and reflection with the different people involved in a project and experts that can help in its development. For instance, opening a space of exchange for a few days, where different activities are carried out so that students from different faculties can present their work in order to strengthen the relationship with the rest of the university community. Another possibility could be the "Student Participation Week" with round-table debates with university students and authorities, stands of student initiatives resulting from cultural activities, proposals of community intervention, etc.
Socio-cultural and educational proposals	Promotion of mechanisms to foster the culture of external participation so that students are present when making decisions about issues that affect them, by giving contributions to the public discourse in order to have an impact on the society that they are living in, thus engaging in a transforming role.
	Dissemination of different socio-cultural proposals that students could participate in. They could be disseminated online and via the promotion group that could inform through the representatives and act as a coordinator.
	Promotion of participation in interuniversity meetings, such as Rural School Conferences, Special Education Conferences, etc.
	Proposals for activities linked to socio-cultural institutions that the university wants to get closer to (not only for students but also for different sectors in the university community).
	Preparation and education of students to manage social projects or have an influence on them.

Source: Own elaboration

These proposals to improve university student participation presented on the basis of the results of our study, organized in three areas: effective communication, internal representation, and external representation, are a sound foundation for universities to promote policies of active, responsible, and transforming participation.

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