

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR PARTICIPATIVE ROLE IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Students are at the core of the University's education mission. Therefore, in addition to their academic performance, they must also be responsible for building their university and social communities. This suggests that students' participation in university life is a key element in their education, but frequently it remains at a symbolic level. The purpose of this study is to ascertain the meaning and significance that students attach to their active involvement in university life, identifying their interests, needs and difficulties in taking on such a role. The results derive from the application of a 60-item questionnaire answered by students from diverse courses at the University Ramon Llull in Barcelona, and from a focus group conducted with these students' representatives. Following the analysis of these data, we suggest several factors that can enhance students' involvement in priority areas such as information and communication, internal participation and external representation, personal achievement and training.

Key words: *higher education, student representation, university participation*

1. INTRODUCTION

As part of the European Higher Education Area, students, as the main protagonists of universities' educational mission, are not only responsible for their academic performance but also for building their university community and serving society, as stated by Bergan (2004, 30). In this sense, participation, viewed as a kind of intervention that allows people to recognise themselves and be recognised as actors within a given society, is a tool for building university life, and as such it falls within students' competence to develop it by strengthening their representation and promoting initiatives that match both their own interests and those of the community. In short, participation is an open, dynamic process that entails a shared project and requires commitment and involvement.

In Bergen in 2005, the European governments accepted the document drafted by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) entitled "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area", in which it asked quality agencies to include students in their evaluation and accreditation processes.

Based on this recommendation, the ANECA Working Group for Student Participation Quality Policies (GATPEPC) was established to study the situation in Spain and the European referents with the goal of achieving student participation in the different spheres of university quality evaluation.

There are three necessary factors for active student participation in university life: motivation, or wanting to participate; training, or knowing how to participate; and participative organisation, or being able to participate.

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Motivation is a totally necessary condition for participation to occur. De la Riva (1994) defines motivation as the entire set of drives, needs, wishes, interests and motives that are capable of mobilisation action, in this case, participation. To motivate students, their participation must be encouraged in all the different areas around them; they must be encouraged to get information and become aware of the value and importance of participating so that they share their vision of the university in an ongoing, systematic fashion, express their concerns and plans and help to optimise the services offered to them collaboratively and constructively. Boqué, Alguacil and Pañellas (2011) stress the communicative dimension, one of the most fundamental aspects in that it affects students' motivation, their ability to participate and improvements in the understanding of both students and their university.

With regard to training for participation, we mean not only the more technical, strategic or managerial dimension but also building a true participative culture as part of the university's social capital. In this sense, all spaces of participation that the institution already has serve as an important foundation for the experience of democratic commitment, from classroom management, curricular learning processes, educational and evaluative methodologies, joint knowledge-building, the roles of teacher and student and positive conflict management to participation in social, cultural or political actions through the channels set up for this purpose.

As we can see, student participation can be channelled towards specific topics, such as improving university quality, or to other spheres related to the roles of the representatives which require the development of generic and specific competences related to the jobs they perform, including communication, participation in clubs and organisations, conflict management, charitable and development cooperation projects, the organisation of cultural events, promotion of the values of peaceful coexistence, approximation of university regulations, exchanges with other universities, management of the job placement service, defence of gender parity and equality, promotion of disabled students' rights, attention to students, collaboration with the university union, sustainability and healthful activities, scholarship programmes, national and international participation, project management, organisation of debate and reflection sessions and more.

The organisation of channels and venues for participation is partly determined by the Statute on University Students (BOE no. 318 dated 31/11/2010), approved by the Ministry of Education. It assumes a democratic structure of the institution, a clarification of the venues of participation, the positioning of the different stakeholders and the determination of the university-community ties. According to Oraisón (2009), participation is related to factors such as the interpretations of the management team, the leadership style it implements, the degree of social distance that teachers establish with students, the different stakeholders' representations of each other and the institution's acceptance or rejection of innovation. Participation can be managed asymmetrically via a social distance legitimised by knowledge or, to the contrary, symmetrically based on recognition of the students and the other members of the university community as valid, autonomous interlocutors.

As noted above, even though the issue of participation in the different spheres of community life has gained ground in recent years, the university community has barely joined the debate on participation in its operations (Michavila and Parejo, 2008; Pérez and Díaz, 2005). Student participation has been merely symbolic, and still is in the majority of cases (Giménez 2001; report Urraca (2005); Soler et al, 2011).

In order to improve participative action, in this study we set out primarily to identify the motivations of and difficulties in student participation in university life and representational bodies as a way of providing guidelines for the design of a student participation and representation programme.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study outlined below is empirical and both descriptive and interpretative within the field of the social sciences. It combines quantitative and qualitative data analysis. To describe the design, we have followed the in the footsteps of Bisquerra and Sabariego (2004) and Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado and Baptista (2003).

We shall describe the social phenomenon that is the focal point of this study based on the subjective experiences of the individuals involved, namely university students from the Blanquerna Faculty of Psychology, Education Studies and Sports (FPCEE Blanquerna) at the University Ramon Llull (URL) from the perspective of its professors and from the standpoint of the heads of the different programmes of study.

The quantitative analysis refers to the data obtained on the students' perceptions of their own participation in the university.

The qualitative analysis consists of an assessment of the results of the quantitative study performed by a representative of the course delegates.

2.1 *Participants*

Given the nature of this study, the means used to obtain the information on student participation and representation included a variety of different measurement instruments. We planned to use two samples: Sample A made up of 374 students in their third year of diploma courses and fourth year of Bachelor's programmes at FPCEE Blanquerna, that is, students in the last year of their initial university training; and Sample B, made up of two student delegates or representatives from each of the programmes, one from the first cycle and one from the second cycle.

2.2 *Instruments*

To carry out this study, two instruments were designed specifically to gather the data for this research:

- A questionnaire targeted at the students in Sample A, which refers to the standards of student participation and representation at the university.

Given that we found no instruments that met the psychometric requirements of our study, the questionnaire for students was designed specifically for our research.

This instrument asks questions about the following dimensions: information and communication strategies; meaning and importance of internal participation and representation; social commitment and external representation; motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement; profile and educational background.

The questionnaire consists of an introductory part which briefly explains the rationale for the study. It then continues with 60 different kinds of items: closed-ended questions on a Likert scale ranging from one to four; closed-ended multiple choice questions; and open-ended questions in which respondents had to complete a sentence.

The variables on the respondent profile were: v1, studying in their last year of a diploma or Bachelor's at Blanquerna's FPCEE; v2, gender; and v3, having served as a student representative at the university.

- A script for a group discussion with student representatives (Sample B).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we present the results of the student questionnaire broken down into the five dimensions studied.

3.1 Dimension A: Information and communication strategies

The first item refers to the channels of communication through which the students receive information. Figure 1 shows that half of the students claim that they receive this information via websites. Lower numbers mentioned that they receive it from professors and classmates. Worth noting is that almost 20% do not seek information on how to participate in the university.

If we compare the results of item 1, “Channels of communication through which students receive information” and item 11, “Channels which the students consider the best for receiving information” (Figure 1), we can see that students prefer first the websites of their department and the university, and secondly the faculty.

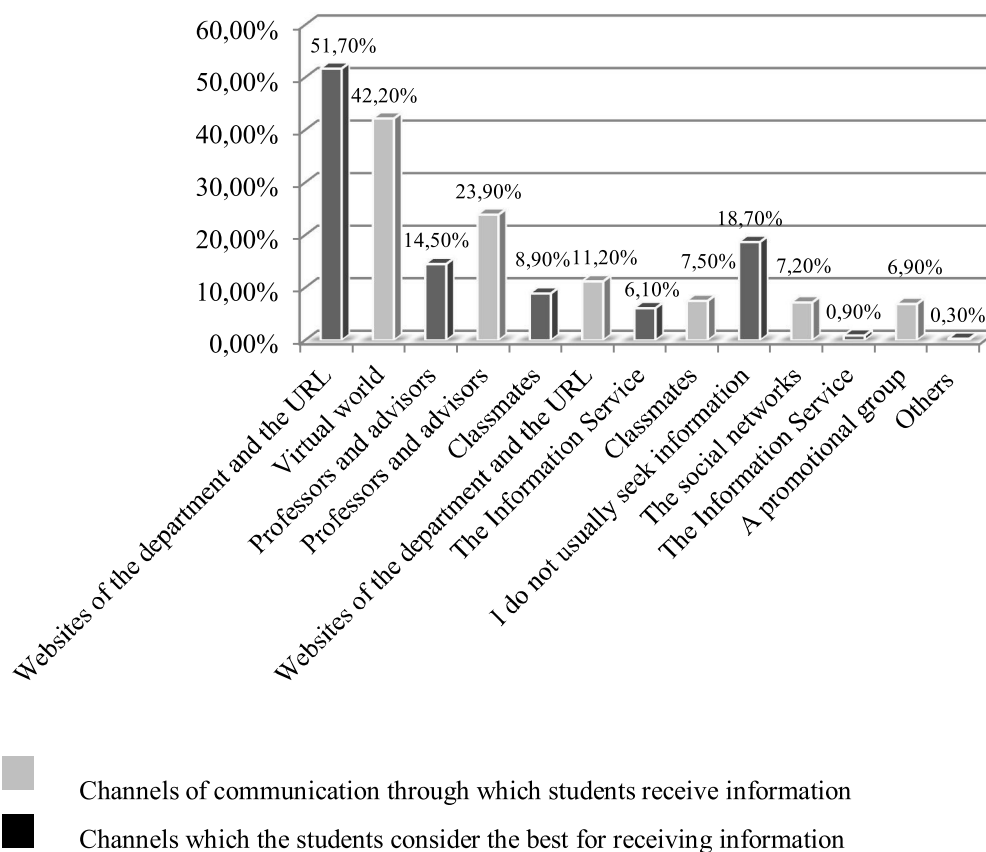


Figure 1. Comparison between the channels of communication through which students usually receive information on participation and those which they consider the best for receiving information

The data on the responses on the remaining items from this dimension are in Tables 1 and 2, below.

Dimension A: Information and communication strategies		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
2	I am aware of the job that the class delegate does on behalf of the group.	2.54	0.904	<0.001	<0.0001	<0.001
3	I am aware of the functions of the delegate of my programme and the activities of collective interest that the Student Council promotes.	2.05	0.888	<0.001	0.002	<0.001
4	I am aware of the proposals to improve the academic dynamic implemented through the URL's Student Council.	1.69	0.795	0.005	0.008	<0.001
5	I am aware of the charitable action project and how I can participate in it.	1.24	0.559	0.534	0.500	0.088
6	I am aware of the range of free-of-charge sports, physical and leisure activities offered by the university.	1.63	0.734	0.905	0.502	0.593
7	I am aware of the spaces of reflection, cultural entertainment and religion offered by the Pastoral Department of the faculty.	1.40	0.571	0.023	0.017	0.086
8	I have information on the recognition of academic credits for engaging in student representation.	1.71	0.753	0.032	0.762	0.011
9	I am aware of "The Statute of the University Student" and in particular chapter VIII, "On student participation and representation".	1.20	0.450	0.407	0.708	0.026

Table 1. Results of the items in Dimension A (Items 2 to 9)

Dimension A: Information and communication strategies		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
10	I have information on student associations, student networks and social movements currently operating, such as the ACE (Catalan Student Association), the ESU (European Students' Union) and the EUA (European University Association).	1.26	0.485	0.546	0.866	0.013
12	I am aware of what the class delegate does on behalf of the group.	2.04	0.816	0.062	0.020	0.007
13	I am aware of the functions of the delegate from my programme and the activities of collective interest that the Student Council promotes.	2.12	0.886	0.032	0.254	0.192

Table 2. Results of the items from Dimension A (Items 10 to 12)

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We would like to stress that the students feel fairly ill-informed about the participative activities available to them, including what their representatives do, given that even though Item 2 has the highest average, the highest percentage is not found in the “strongly agree” bracket; rather the values are distributed equally in the “somewhat disagree” and “somewhat agree” categories. There is even less knowledge about the activities of the Student Council, since the sum of the percentages given for “nothing” and “little” is 73.3%, and this total is even higher, 86.8%, regarding the activities stemming from the URL’s Student Council.

With regard to the different activities offered by the department (items 5, 6 and 7) which are outlined on the website, the students show a broad lack of awareness (96.2%, 88.4% and 95.7, respectively, adding the percentages of “nothing” and “little”). The fact that they can receive credits for being a student representative also earns very low percentages in terms of awareness. Thus, 88% say that they have no or little information, both answers with similar percentages.

A full 98.4% and 97.9% of students are unaware of other issues that affect students but are not an inherent part of the department’s internal life, such as the recent approval of “The Statute of the University Student” and student movements and networks.

Percentages near 30% indicate that some students know how to forward complaints or suggestions to their department. However, a few months after completing their degrees, 60% of the students are still unaware of how to do this.

We accept that there is no evidence of significant differences in the items referring to knowledge of the charitable actions or different sports and leisure activities. Nor did we find statistically significant differences in the items on knowledge of “The Statute of the University Student”, on student associations and on how to forward suggestions to the university.

In contrast, we do have indicators of significant differences in the items on the roles and jobs of the class, departmental and university delegates, recognition of credits to serve as a representative and knowing how to forward a complain to the university, as well as in the information received on the spaces of reflection, cultural entertainment and religion.

In these items, the average among the diploma students is higher than among the Bachelor’s students; that is, it seems that although the differences are slim, the future diploma graduates are better informed on these issues than the future Bachelor’s graduates.

For the “Gender” variable, females show a greater knowledge of the roles and jobs of the student class, departmental and university delegates, the spaces of reflection, cultural entertainment and religion and how to forward a suggestion to the university. For the other items, there were no significant differences in the information held by males and females.

We can observe that the student representatives have greater knowledge of all the topics questioned than their classmates, except for the sports and leisure activities and how to forward a suggestion to the university. This is shown by the results of Items 6 to 13 in which the representatives show more knowledge, although the difference is not significant.

3.2 Dimension B: Meaning and importance of internal participation and representation

The first five items in this dimension refer to the definition and characteristics of student participation, the next two to student competences in terms of strengthening involvement in the university and other contexts, and the seven remaining to the university’s actions to facilitate and encourage processes of

student participation and representation. The sentence to be completed asks for actions that could improve student participation.

Tables 3 and 4 show the results on the respondents' definition of the model of participation.

Dimension B: Meaning and importance of internal participation and representation		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
14	Participation is a learning process, a means of education and not only management.	3.21	0.596	0.069	0.035	0.329
15	Participation implies sharing a common goal.	3.27	0.599	0.224	0.001	0.166
16	Participation is a form of intervention that enables individuals to recognise themselves and be recognised as stakeholders within a given society.	3.28	0.626	0.009	0.001	0.513
17	Participation means having real decision-making power, and therefore it is linked to terms like responsibility, commitment and involvement.	3.32	0.643	0.611	0.060	0.232
18	Participation is a right but also a responsibility of all students.	3.27	0.689	0.036	0.007	0.438
19	It is students' responsibility to develop student life by strengthening the representation of the delegates and promoting initiatives that reflect their own interests.	3.03	0.611	0.018	0.045	0.316
20	The Bologna Process offers a new paradigm in which education is student-centred. Therefore, students have to get actively and effectively involved in university organisation, in quality processes, etc.	2.78	0.819	0.415	0.041	0.827

Table 3. Results of the items from Dimension B (Items 14 to 20)

Dimension B: Meaning and importance of internal participation and representation		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
21	A high-quality university has to include participation in its quality plans.	3.29	0.633	0.713	0.023	0.243
22	In order for participation and representation processes to take place as elements to improve the quality of education, they must be promoted by the university itself.	3.33	0.632	0.668	0.016	0.107
23	The university should develop mechanisms to recognise and certify student representation.	3.28	0.615	0.158	0.179	0.624
24	The educational community has to generate institutional venues of dialogue	3.28	0.562	0.003	0.019	0.388

	and critical thinking where students can actively participate.					
25	Participation would improve if there were clear norms that encourage it.	3.08	0.746	0.926	0.625	0.739
26	Participation would improve if there were a group that promoted it in the department.	3.30	0.687	0.933	0.019	0.421
27	Participation would improve if the channels of communication were truly communicative venues between students, professors, non-teaching staff, administration, etc.	3.39	0.593	0.479	0.003	0.083

Table 4. Results of the items from Dimension B (Items 21 to 27)

The students recognise the value of participation as a means of education, as a shared responsibility in a shared project and as a source of possibilities for being active agents in society. They also recognise their inherent right to participate with decision-making powers, and they know what commitment to and involvement in the university and society in general entails. We can make these statements after analysing the results of Items 14 to 18, since the agreement range is always between 87% and 93%, although there may be some nuances when we examine the more qualitative part of the study, as between 50% and 60% of the students claim to “agree somewhat”.

With regard to the students’ vision of their own involvement in the university, we can see that the highest values come in the “somewhat agree” category, and that almost 30% of the students think that they should not effectively get involved in university organisation, quality processes or other issues linked to their learning process. In turn, 15% believe that it is not within students’ sphere of competence to promote initiatives, even if they are related to their interests.

With regard to the university’s responsibility and actions to encourage and motivate student participation, the students think that it is important for the university to create participative processes, but that the educational community should primarily create spaces of dialogue and foster critical thinking (95.4% agreement). They also believe that the university should include student participation in its strategic plans as a quality factor and that it should recognise and certify student representation.

It should be noted that in all the items in this dimension, disagreement accounts for less than 10% of the responses except in items 25 (20.1%) and 26 (10.3%). The latter result indicates that a large group of students believe that regulations and a promotional group would be effective ways to encourage participation.

However, the students resoundingly state (94.8%) that participation would mainly improve if the channels of communication among the members of the educational community were real spaces of communication.

Of all the responses to the open-ended sentence “Participation would improve if...”, the four most common answers are illustrated in Figure 2.

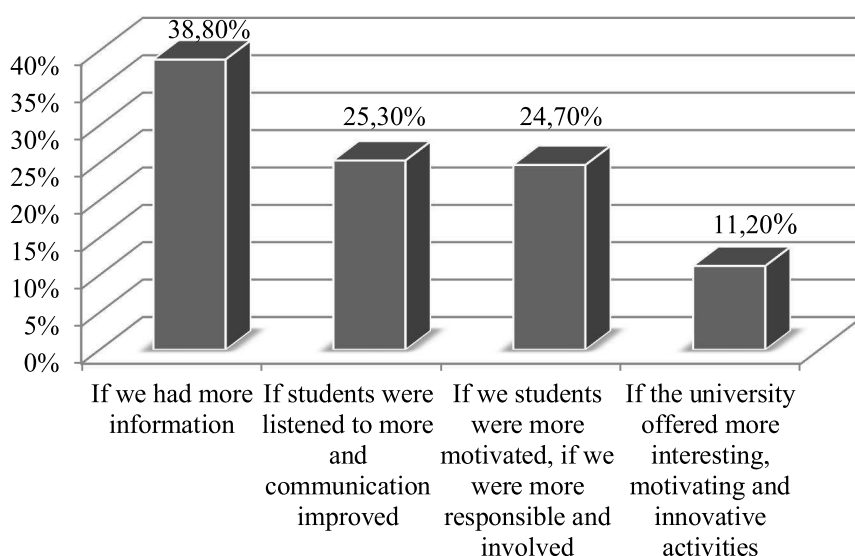


Figure 2. Most frequent answers regarding how to improve participation

With regard to the variable “Studying their last year in a diploma or Bachelor’s”, we found significant differences in the degree of agreement with items 16, 18, 19 and 24. That is, students in diploma programmes agree more than students in Bachelor’s degrees with two aspects that define participation: recognition as active agents in society and participation as both a right and a responsibility.

This also holds true with regard to students’ competence to promote initiatives and strengthen the representation of their delegates, as well as in the need for the educational community to create spaces of dialogue that foster students’ critical thinking. With regard to the other items, the differences are not significant.

By analysing the results by gender, females show a higher level of agreement with all the items, and almost all the differences are significant except Items 17, 23 and 25. That is, males and females express similar degrees of agreement that participation entails having a real decision-making power, that the university should recognise and certify student representation, and that participation would improve if there were regulations that facilitated it.

For the variable “having served as a student representative at the university”, even though there are slight differences in the degree of agreement in favour of the student representatives, none of these differences is statistically significant.

3.3 Dimension C: Social commitment and external representation

This dimension is divided into two parts of three items each. The first (items 28, 29 and 30) examines the benefits of student participation and representation in institutions of sociocultural development or in educational administrations, while the second (items 31, 32 and 33) examines the role of the university as a spearhead of its commitment with society as an educational institution.

Dimension C: Social commitment and external representation		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
28	Participation and representation contribute to the sociocultural development of the university, which allows for greater interaction between the university and society.	3.18	0.547	0.134	0.026	0.143
29	Student participation contributes to their education and to their identification with the process of institutional management in general.	3.11	0.570	0.339	0.229	0.991
30	Social projects can be an effective means of achieving a closer tie between institutions and students.	3.19	0.576	0.523	0.025	0.044
31	To enable students' voices to be heard, their representatives and the faculty and non-teaching staff must formulate contributions to the public discourse on issues that affect the university itself or the community.	3.32	0.621	0.218	<0.001	0.810
32	The university should promote student participation in clubs and social movements.	3.29	0.647	0.494	0.015	0.328
33	The university should be a part of the sociocultural milieu around it.	3.41	0.566	0.026	0.013	0.541

Table 5. Results of the items from Dimension C

The scores were divided almost identically in the first three items. The highest scores are for “somewhat agree”, with percentages between 63% and 69%. The “totally agree” option earned percentages between 21% and 28%, and the sum of the answers expressing disagreement is less than 10% in both cases.

Given these results, we can say that students value external representation as a contribution to sociocultural development, as a means for achieving closer ties with institutions and as a means of identifying with the process of managing these institutions.

In the last three items, the highest percentages also came in the “somewhat agree” response, but the percentages of respondents who “totally agree” rose compared to the items in the first part, achieving similar values in showing that students believe that the university should be a part of the sociocultural milieu around it.

The answers that show disagreement earned very low percentages, reaching only 10% in the item that stated that the university should promote student participation in clubs and social movements.

In all the items in dimension C, the differences are only significant in item 33, in the sense that the students in diploma courses value the university as a part of the sociocultural milieu around it more than Bachelor’s students do.

If we bear in mind the gender variable, we see that females agree more with the statements in this dimension than males, a result which also obtained in the previous categories. All of these differences

are significant except when discussing the fact that student participation contributes to their education and identification with the process of managing the institutions, where the differences are minimal.

The opinions of the student representatives and the students they represent barely differ, as the differences in averages are not significant in five of the six items. Only in item 30 can we consider the differences significant, and therefore we can claim that students who have represented their peers agree more than the other students that social projects can be an effective means to achieve closer ties with institutions.

3.4 Dimension D: Motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement

This dimension contains 17 items and three sentences to be completed. Of the 17 items, 13 ask for answers on a Likert scale with values from 1 to 4 which correspond to a gradation that ranges from total agreement to total disagreement. They refer to the benefits for students of involvement in university life, the reasons or causes behind a lack of motivation to participate, the factors linked to personal satisfaction at participating and whether the students feel well-represented by their delegates and whether they feel that they have a voice at the university.

The remaining items are multiple choice and indicate the kinds of activities in which the students participate and the reasons why they do or do not participate or serve as a representative.

The three sentences to be completed appeal directly to the students in the first person and ask them to explain the reasons why they participate in university activities or why they choose to represent their classmates.

Dimension D: Motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
34	Participation in university life strengthens the ties among students.	3.34	0.652	0.685	0.549	0.095
35	Involvement in participative activities improves communication among students.	3.41	0.610	0.694	0.827	0.182
36	Motivation is a necessary condition for participation to occur.	3.67	0.520	0.970	0.166	0.904
37	Students are not motivated to participate because their opinions have little effect on decision-making.	3.45	0.680	0.293	0.376	0.383
38	Students' low levels of participation are related to their lack of interest and information.	3.24	0.819	0.877	0.954	0.526
39	Representation boosts students' social projection.	3.06	0.559	0.066	0.086	0.066
40	Participation in university projects boosts the feeling of belonging to the university.	3.17	0.724	0.262	0.190	0.020

Table 6. Results of the items from Dimension D (Items 34 to 40)

Dimension D: Motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
41	The satisfaction of participating is linked to recognition for personal effort and the decisions taken.	3.22	0.593	0.769	0.385	0.076
42	The satisfaction of participating is linked to the ability to influence decision-making.	3.25	0.590	0.978	0.992	0.565
43	Participating is satisfactory because it means getting involved in a shared project.	3.22	0.560	0.758	0.319	0.374
44	I feel like my interests are well-represented by the student delegates.	2.43	0.903	0.016	0.048	-----
45	I always have information on what my representatives are doing.	2.33	0.923	<0.001	0.044	-----
46	The university responds to my needs as a student.	1.89	0.846	0.369	0.306	0.873

Table 7. Results of the items from Dimension D (Items 41 to 46)

Almost 70% of the students totally agree that motivation is a necessary condition for participation to occur, and the remaining 30% somewhat agree with this statement. Of the remaining items, we have reached the conclusion that almost 50% of the students are convinced that participation in university life improves communication and fosters ties among them, and another 50% somewhat agrees with this statement. However, a similar percentage “totally agrees” that a lack of interest and information, along with the scant attention paid to their opinions, are the causes of low levels of participation. Almost 40% are somewhat certain that the lack of participation stems from these causes.

With regard to personal satisfaction with getting involved in participative and representative activities, percentages between 60% and 66% show that the students agree considerably that the satisfaction of participating is linked to personal recognition, to the ability to influence decision-making and to getting involved in a shared project. Around 30% state that they totally agree with this, while the remaining 7% disagree.

The idea that participation increases the feeling of belonging to the university is supported by 85% of the students. The highest percentage of disagreement (20%) of all the items in this group came with the topic of social projection linked to representation.

The students are divided in their opinions on whether they feel well-represented by their delegates. With regard to knowing what these delegates are doing, the answers lean towards the negative, since 57% of the students surveyed stated that they are not well informed. And they disagree even more vehemently with the university responding to their needs as students.

If we analyse the differences between the students in their last year of a diploma course and those who are finishing their Bachelor’s degree, in the responses to the first 13 items in Dimension D, we can see unanimity in the opinions of students from both programmes, given that there are no significant differences in hardly any of the items.

We can only find differences in the representation of the delegates and in their knowledge of what these delegates are doing, aspects that future diploma graduates rate more highly than their counterparts earning Bachelor's degrees.

If we analyse the gender variable, the average results are somewhat even. We can only find significant differences in items 44 and 45, in which the females feel better represented.

If we study the differences with regard to the "having served as a student representative at the university" variable, we have eliminated items 44 and 45 because this group includes the delegates themselves.

We have noted that there are no significant differences in any of the items between the ratings of the students and their delegates except in item 40, where these differences show us that those who have served as representatives rate the fact that participation boosts their feeling of belonging to the university more highly than their classmates.

Another group of items in Dimension D is the multiple-choice items which try to capture the students' interests and difficulties in participating in activities that are not exclusively linked to the educational curriculum. These correspond to items 47 to 53, and the results are summarised in Figures 3, 4 and 5 and in the last paragraph of the section on this dimension.

The activities in which the students participate are illustrated in Figure 3.

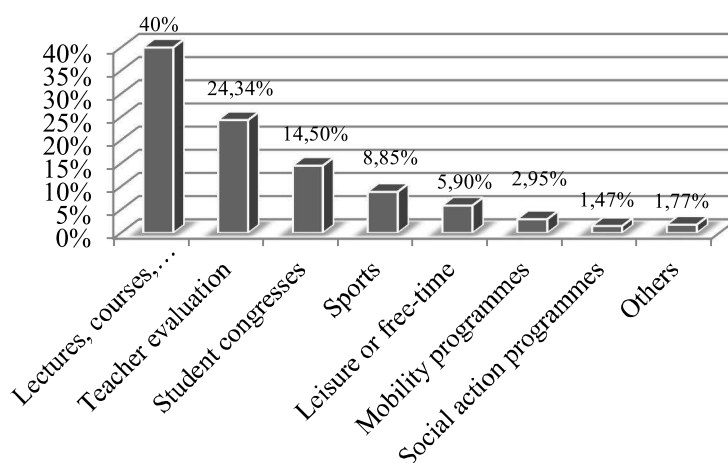


Figure 3. Activities in which the students participate

The activities in which the students participate are primarily academic, as they account for the three most popular ones which total 78.84% of the responses.

With regard to the motives for not participating in university activities (Figure 4), the students mainly state that they find it hard to combine them with their work timetable, which totals 33.03% if added to the third motive: participation in other activities outside the department.

The second and fourth causes revolve around the university setting itself: they find no activities in which they are interested in participating, and they are discouraged because they think that their opinions are not important. The fifth response refers to their dependence on transport given the distance to their homes, while the other responses yielded considerably lower percentages.

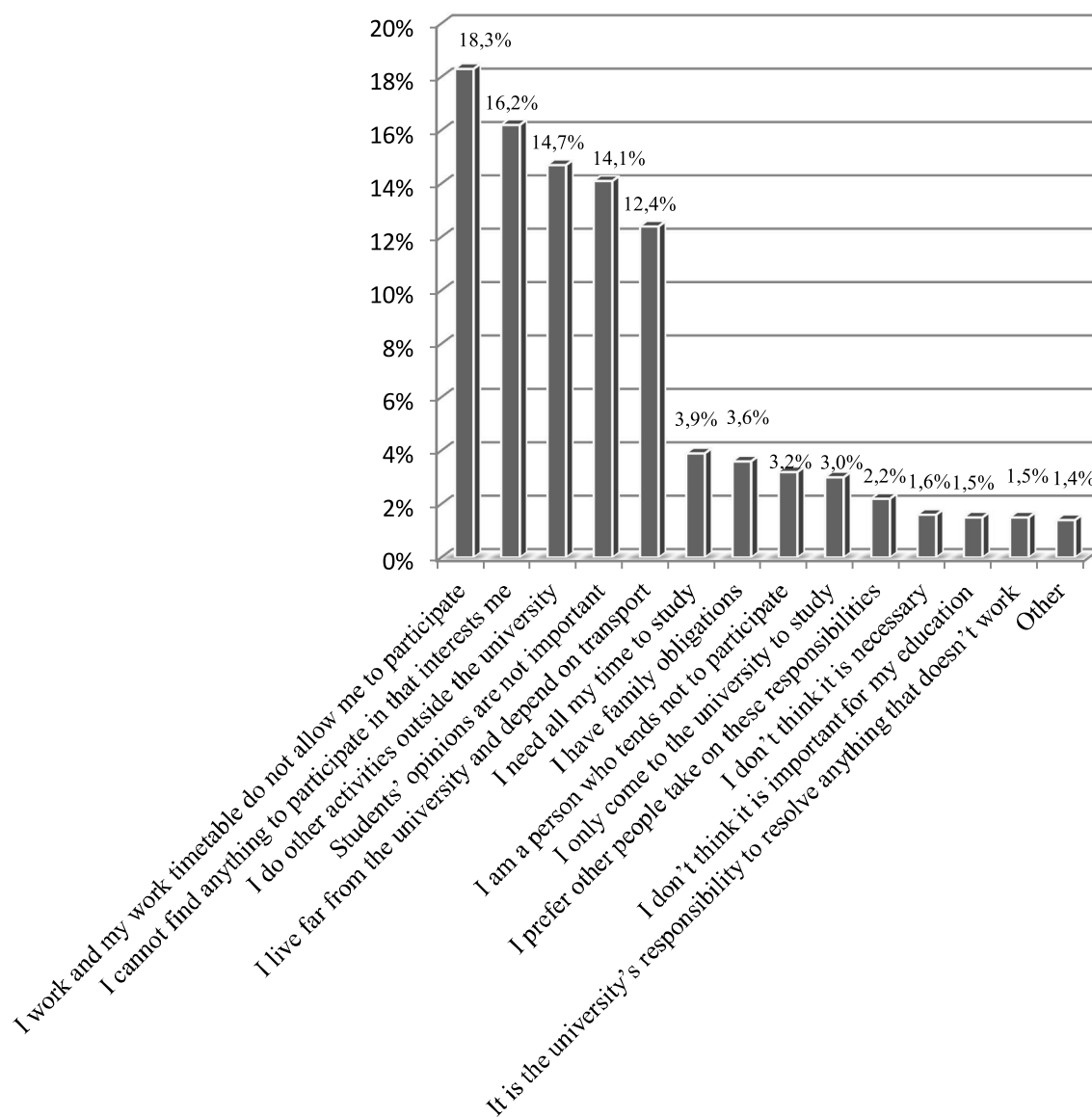


Figure 4. Reasons for not participating

When the students state their stances regarding the activities in which they would like to engage, Figure 5 shows that one-third chooses exchange and cooperation programmes, while 12.9% prefer social programmes, and almost 25% choose free-time activities. It is interesting to note that activities that directly affect them, linked to the structure of their academic programmes, improvements in academic-teaching quality or forums of student representation, attain much lower values, perhaps because these activities have not been sufficiently promoted.

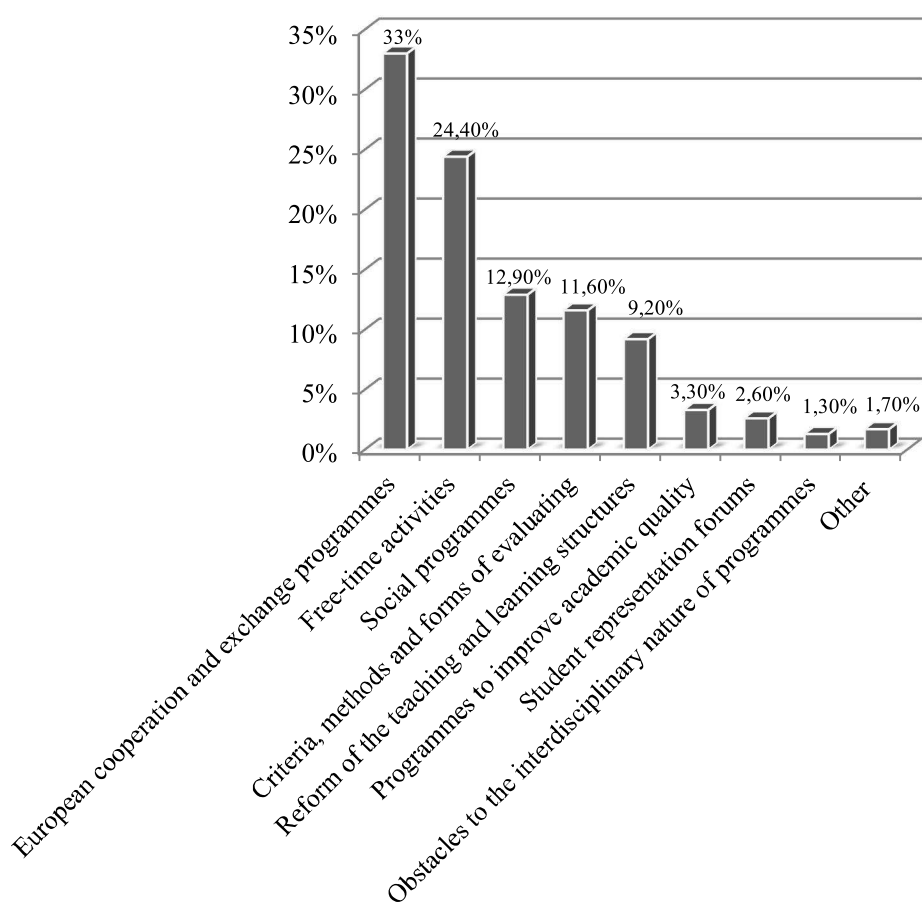


Figure 5. Activities in which the students would like to participate

The most popular answer to the question as to why the students are not representatives of their classes mentions the incompatibility of academic responsibilities and representation. The second and fifth answers show that perhaps the students would become representatives if they felt they were capable of doing it and if they truly knew what their role would be. The third answer, which is worth noting, is that the students believe that the delegates do not have enough support from their classmates.

3.5 Dimension E: Profile and educational background

Dimension E contains seven items. Six of them (from 54 to 59) are Likert scales with values from 1 to 4 which correspond to a gradation from total agreement to total disagreement, and one item (60) is a multiple-choice question.

The first four refer to the training of student representatives while the other three discuss qualities that these representatives should have.

Table 8 shows the results of the first six items in category E.

Dimension E: Profile and educational background		M	σ	Sig.v1	Sig.v2	Sig.v3
54	Training is important in order to be a good student representative (workshops, training courses on rights and responsibilities, encounters with student representatives, etc.).	3.06	0.710	0.273	0.078	0.242
55	A student representative has to be aware of the structure of the new degree programmes (Bachelor's/post-graduate, ECTS, European Diploma Supplement).	3.28	0.696	0.115	0.995	0.578
56	A student representative should be aware of the legal framework of the EHEA and the URL (bylaws, organisational and functional norms, quality policy, governing bodies, etc.).	3.06	0.749	0.159	0.590	0.347
57	A student representative should be aware of the forms of club membership both inside and outside the university.	3.06	0.711	0.254	0.479	0.135
58	A student representative should be someone in the last years of their degree and/or older students because their degree of maturity is important in fulfilling their responsibilities.	2.58	0.900	<0.001	0.006	0.875
59	It is worthwhile for student representatives to be involved in political associations and/or parties since in that way they demonstrate their involvement and civil responsibility.	2.02	0.935	0.008	0.011	0.665

Table 8. Results of the items from Dimension E

In the four items on training, the percentages of agreement range from 80% to 88%, and the highest level of agreement is for the statement that a student representative should be aware of the structure of the new degree programmes.

The statements referring to the characteristics of a student representative show lower percentages. Half of the respondents believe that student delegates should be in the last years of their degree because of their maturity and knowledge of the programmes, while the other half disagrees with this. Students disagree even more on whether their representatives should belong to political associations or parties, with only 30% in favour.

We can note that there are no significant differences between future diploma and Bachelor's graduates with regard to whether they consider the training of student representatives important and whether these representatives should be aware of the structure of the new degree programmes, the bylaws, the organisational and functional norms, the quality policy and the governing bodies of the university, as well as whether they should be aware of the forms of club membership both inside and outside the university.

In contrast, we can see differences that can be regarded as significant in the items that describe the characteristics of the representatives. The Bachelor's students agree more with the characteristics we listed than the diploma students.

Just as with the "A student representative should be someone in the last years of their degree" variable, there are no significant differences for the gender variable in the items referring to the training of representatives, although there are differences in the characteristics of these representatives.

For the "having served as a student representative at the university" variable, we found no significant differences between the opinions of the delegates and the students they represent in any of the items in category E.

In item 60, the qualities that students consider important in their representatives are interpersonal skills such as teamwork, empathy and leadership ability, which were chosen as the most important ones by more than half of the respondents. They are followed by personal traits, such as inspiring trust, credibility and reliability. The respondents attached little importance to management skills, communicative skills, training (even though they admitted the need for training in the previous items) or the professional ethics of their actions, although we should note that they were only allowed to choose one of these items.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

We found shortcomings in the information that students receive on the spaces of participation at the university and in the communication both between students and the university and among the students themselves in terms of knowing the roles and work performed by their representatives.

We also noted that students in the last year of their degree programmes do not know enough about either the laws that directly affect them or student associations.

The channels of communication are not clearly outlined in terms of encouraging participation in university life, although the virtual world and faculty are the channels the students prefer.

With regard to suggestions and complaints, we perceived student disorientation as to the way and place to forward them, even among the student representatives.

The first key factor in understanding the low levels of student participation is their degree of knowledge of the spaces and mechanisms of participation. As analysed above, the students themselves are often unaware of their opportunities for participating and making their voices heard both in their own university and outside the university system.

However, university institutions offer information that is accessible to anyone who is truly interested in finding it. The problem exists because the information is not presented in a format that is attractive to students or because not enough of students get beyond their own ennui.

The different languages that the institutions and young adults may speak is thus a major factor for the university to bear in mind, as we believe that it should make an effort to bridge this distance and motivate the students.

A good communicative strategy is crucial in encouraging participation, although it is not the only factor. In this sense, creating spaces of dialogue among the members of the educational community must be a primary avenue of action to be included in universities' strategic plans, if we view student participation and representation as a right and duty, and as part of students' educational process. Students ask to make

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their voices heard more and to be able to participate in decision-making in matters that affect them direct or indirectly. The efforts made to date to collect student initiatives in a variety of spheres may be positive, but they are not enough.

Likewise, clear rules on recognition of student representation and a group to promote participation would help students to play a fundamental role in rethinking their role with regard to the community, in choosing the strategies that the university may make available to them, in designing the annual action plan, and obviously in taking decisions. Designing motivating proposals that spark students' interest and are recognised for credits or grants is considered essential in promoting student involvement.

The results of capturing the students' opinions on the external projection of the university in terms of its intervention in the public discourse on topics that are relevant and contributing to forging ties with educational institutions, sociocultural actions and club movements express students' desire to make themselves heard and to establish a commitment with society. The same students also position themselves as transformative agents of university education, but they ask the university to exercise leadership to expand and systematise their participation in the university's own external activities and projects which have a direct impact on the student body. Encouraging and strengthening this involvement and fostering mechanisms to promote the culture of external participation could be one valuable component to prompt an overall improvement in the participation of students who believe it is important to be present in decision-making on topics that affect them and that affect the society in which they live.

However, the university is not the only agent that should make headway in this sphere; rather all the institutions involved in university education must make changes and undertake actions that enable them to move forward in this direction.

Both students and the university, as well as the institutions associated with the quality of the university system, concur on the need for students to be included in decision-making actions outside the university. However, this need must be made visible by creating promotional mechanisms that reach the students and encourage them to be present in a variety of spheres, both sociocultural and in processes that ensure university quality, as well as in national and international cooperation projects that promote the culture of peace, sustainable development and respect for the environment, along with any others that might be of interest to them.

Nevertheless, if we evaluate the results of this study, we can see that students state that they are not motivated because their opinions have little bearing on decision-making, and they also state that the lack of information prevents them from getting more involved in university life. Likewise, participation in university projects is recognised by 85% of the students as a factor that boosts the feeling of belonging to the university and personal satisfaction. Therefore, it is important for universities to become the spearheads of student participation and representation processes with motivating, innovative actions that connect with the students' interests and are held at times that are compatible with their jobs. This is corroborated by the students' answers to the question of what would make them participate in activities in their department. The three most frequent responses are related to the kind of activities offered and the lack of time to participate in activities that are not strictly academic. Likewise, when asked the reasons for the low degree of participation, they once again stress the lack of time and the fact that they hold down jobs or take part in activities outside the department, not to mention their lack of interest in the activities and the unimportance of their opinions.

Today, almost 80% of the student body participates only in academic activities, yet they ask that other activities be enhanced, specifically exchange programmes, in which 3% claim to participate but in which

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33% would like to participate, along with leisure activities, in which 6% currently participate but 24% would like to. Fifty-three percent of the students say that they would participate if the activities on offer were targeted at improving their professional training.

As a factor that needs improvement, after analysing the results we suggest speaking with the student representatives in order to ascertain their interests, and offer a range of programmes, primarily in a timetable that is compatible with other activities, that motivates participation, strengthens exchange programmes and encourages leisure or social activities that can attract a large number of students.

An interesting question, also, is how to effectively get students to take co-responsibility for the strategic policies of their department via their delegates. In this sense, encouraging student involvement in the decisions that affect them, both academic and organisational, creating specific discussion groups and giving them a greater presence on collegial bodies would be good way to listen to and respond to their requests. The best way to motivate students is by showing that their actions and contributions influence the educational model they receive.

Another issue worth consideration by the university is providing students with a permanent space for participation bearing in mind the different spheres of academic, professional and personal life, with a programme of activities and ideas targeted at improving and enriching students' cultural and social life, something like a Student Centre. From this venue, relationships can be forged with student groups, proposals on events from students themselves can be received and advised, and issues of interest for students can be managed. This would also be a good place to disseminate information of interest and to participate in social networks.

This physical space for the representatives could also be used to share information on their roles and actions. In this way, the perception held by 53% of the respondents that their interests are not being defended by their delegates and that they do not know what they do could be improved. However, despite this, very few students (only 4%) claim that they do not consider representation to be either important or necessary.

Perhaps particular attention should be paid to creating student clubs as an engine for participation and as the university's expression of its coping with present and future challenges.

Once again, a good communicative strategy is decisive in improving the motivation to participate.

Interacting skilfully is largely the ability to trigger feelings in others. This skill is the foundation of popularity and leadership. Therefore, this skill in interpersonal relationships should be borne in mind in the training of student delegates, since the second reason for participating noted by the students is the possibility of interacting and fostering socialisation.

Another action is the recognition of credits; this already exists for the delegates, but it could be extended to anyone who promotes and performs actions that encourage their classmates to participate and that benefit the community.

In order to be able to lead student representation and motivate students to commit themselves to activities at the university and the institutions involved in university education, it is important for the representatives to be informed and trained in the legal frameworks that govern representation and participation, in the structure and content of the degrees they are studying toward, in the rules and organisation of these degrees, in quality policies and in the role of the governing bodies. Likewise, they must know how to make the outcome of their actions reach the students they represent and they must ascertain their interests and needs in order to channel them to the proper authorities. This requires

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personal and interpersonal qualities involving leadership, empathy, conflict-resolution, credibility and reliability, which are the qualities that the respondents valued above all the others, including training.

However, fairly high percentages of students themselves recognise the need for training, and therefore the university should offer this training through informational documents, courses or workshops. It should also facilitate and establish avenues for the student representatives to project themselves in inter-university and social forums.

The proposals outlined and commented on above could lower the 77% of students who believe that the university does not respond to their needs.

In short, the goal is to promote positive participation experiences in which both critical thinking and the ability to reach consensus to the benefit of the university community and its ongoing transformation are valued. All of this must also affect students' commitment to their own education, their acceptance of responsibilities and their legitimisation as active co-participants in university life.

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