

**DIMENSIONS, ELEMENTS AND STANDARDS OF STUDENTS' REPRESENTATION
AND PARTICIPATION IN UNIVERSITIES**

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Abstract

Students' participation in the management of socio-cultural institutions through the promotion, organization and collaboration in the activities offered by these institutions is a contribution to the cultural development of the university community and society in general. In order to foster co-responsibility and civility, awareness towards participation should be encouraged at all levels and amidst different agents. In this article, we select and define the dimensions, aspects or elements and standards that must be taken into account in a university programme aiming at effective students' participation and representation. Such a programme should promote a closer relationship between institutions and students resulting into mutual social, political, economic and cultural benefits. Analyzed dimensions refer to information, communication, internal and external participation, motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement and training.

Key words: *higher education, student participation, student representation, dimensions and standards of student participation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Students are the heart of university and, for this reason, promoting student participation results in an improvement in university quality, as well as being a valuable educational experience. The fact of doing university studies should imply the students' being involved in different projects and spaces of their respective colleges, both formal and informal, thus creating a civic sense of belonging, solidarity and responsibility. Then, the availability of spaces for the permanent and continuing dialogue between university and students contributes to the cohesion and progress of the university community.

Nevertheless, student participation seems to be rather blurred at present. The deficit in student participation could be explained, partly, by similarity to the current context of citizen participation, where, according to García Pérez (2009, 6), the relaxed usual development of citizenship in our "democratic" societies does not seem to contribute very much to the construction of this kind of really participatory and universalist citizen, given the particular deficiencies of the traditional representative democracy that seems to have run out of resources. This same author considers that individuals have no clear idea of their role when participating, as they think that they have been given rights whereas in reality their rights are the result of a long democratic conquest. This would imply, in our case, that

students feel more like clients or users of goods offered by the university, rather than actors and active member of the institution.

The “political” training of human beings, in the Greek sense –being able to take on social responsibilities- has been a concern in the different educational systems, including the university system of course. But, with the praise of individualism, the social dimension has become less and less powerful. This could be one of the explanations for the difficulties to actively participate in college life.

In any context, though, the capacity to efficiently participate is directly influenced by the degree of support given by the academic institution, by mutual respect, trust and confidence in the people’s capacity to participate –in this case, the students’-, and the opportunities they are given to take on greater responsibilities. And some other capacities are also required, as the ones developed by Kouzes and Posner (2006) in their student leadership practices inventory.

2. THE SENSE OF PARTICIPATION AT UNIVERSITY

In the functioning of the educational system (compulsory and post-compulsory), participation refers to the necessary cooperation and coordination among the sectors in the educational communities, both within them and among the different sectors.

In this framework, participation can be understood as the capacity of the members of an organization, group or community to accede to decision-making processes affecting this organization; that is, it refers to the possibility of sharing the power to decide of educational institutions among all the members of the educational community. But, in education, participation is not only a performance mechanism to manage the organization; it is also a learning process, a means of training for students, teachers and other educational agents.

The implementation of the new degree studies in the framework of the European Higher Education Area involves a necessary process of transformation, which is at the basis of the current model of university teaching style, where the student’s leading role and the guidance nature of the teacher’s task merge in a constructivist vision of the teaching-learning process that has to enhance the development of cognitive competences and social and professional skills.

The key point is to identify significant and relevant competences to be developed and to take on the epistemological change that involves a new way of understanding knowledge, how and who constructs it in order to apprehend its authentic dimension.

In this sense, the methodological change in higher education implied by the emphasis on specific competences of a professional profile requires the creation of appropriate learning spaces that promote the students’ assimilation, growth, and integral development, by incorporating proposals of participation and intervention in the educational institutions.

Within this paradigm, student participation and involvement in university life is understood as a key element not only for the university itself but also for the student’s and the citizen’s education.

Therefore, we consider the participatory model as a high quality model, which implies the condition of subject of the participating people in an open process of citizenship construction. A process where social and political innovation is produced, by going further in the way of democracy and the consolidation of human rights. A model that is able to build new social alternatives.

Haerberli and Audigier (2009, 28) distinguished two ways for the individual to participate in the group whether it has an inclusive role or a decision-making role: in an inclusive role, participation is closely linked to the constitution and maintenance of the group's life. In the decision-making role, participation is linked to the construction and consideration of every individual's point of view and opinion.

Then, participation is seen as a voluntary practice built in the framework of a social relationship where subjects relate and interact in a situation of equality. This implies, thus, the possibility of getting involved in and committing to the group –what we understand as “being part”-, the option of being able to decide about issues of their concern, that is, “taking part”, and the awareness of their own rights and duties and of what can be achieved and lost, which means “having part” (Hernández, 1994 as cited in Oraisón, 2008, 40).

Participation is a learning process, a training means, not only for management (Montalbán, 2006) and, as such, besides being a right, it is also a responsibility. It is a process where values are promoted, attitudes are developed, strategies are learnt, and procedures and behaviours are regulated. At the same time, it is on the interest of the university that there is really enough student representation in their managing and governing boards with two clear aims: firstly, to ensure the presence of students in university life and, secondly, to have permanent student interlocution with some guarantee of continuity.

Developing student representation enhances learning and putting into practice skills connected with: organization, direction of working teams, planning of activities offered, or dissemination of this offer. Participation also improves student satisfaction, the quality of decisions and reduces resistance to change.

In conclusion, participation, from this perspective, could be defined as “feeling that you are part or being part” of an institution. That is, something that has to do with the fact that every person finds a feeling of belonging to the educational institution in many different ways.

3. THE NEED TO PROMOTE AND ASSESS PARTICIPATION

A policy of university quality has to consider student participation and representation as a fundamental pillar and, therefore, from the different educational spaces a real participatory culture has to be promoted and facilitated that includes the capacity to present proposals, for dialogue, for joint work, to understand the differences, to reach operational agreement, and to find appropriate mechanisms and channels to solve conflicts (Miller & Nadler, 2006).

In this concern, we will have to set up a democratic and favourable university context where students can develop a participatory role.

The new framework Strategy University 2015 is promoting the students' social participation and their participation in university policies, and the development of different channels of participation in different fields such as: the university's governing bodies, the university's strategic projects, the syllabuses of the different degrees, the processes to assess teaching quality, institutional representation. And it also considers participation to be important for the student's integral education.

This implies a set of actions to promote and increase the students' involvement in university life, with the aim of having the students involved as real partners in the decision-making structures in higher education and in the political debates about the issues that directly affect the university community.

Journal of International Scientific Publication: Educational Alternatives, Volume 11, Part 1

ISSN 1313-2571, Published at: <http://www.scientific-publications.net>

These mechanisms have to do, mainly, with defining policies to promote participation, with establishing participatory spheres, with recognising participation, with giving institutional support to these participatory spaces, and with training to participate. In order to regulate these policies, in December 2010 the Student Statute was passed, which also set up the State's University Student Board, the direct channel of representation in front of the Spanish Ministry of Education.

As a result, universities have to ascribe to all these strategies, always considering the singularity of every university, but moving forward to guarantee student participation in the university's management, their involvement in the community, and to promote that their voice is heard in the institutions and administrations where they can have representation, always from the perspective of university excellence.

With the aim of promoting excellence at university, assessment is one of the tools that can help us put into practice all the ideas about excellence. That is, there are some notions about excellence, and in order to specify them we have to put them into action and develop an assessment process to critically discuss them.

The will to excel in promoting university participation is also part of the promotion of university excellence. The latter, despite all these efforts, is still limited to a low percentage of students (Giménez, 2001; Urraca, 2005; González, 2007; Martín, 2007; Francés, 2008; Merhi, 2011; Soler et al., 2011, 2012). For this reason, we think that the university should be provided with a model to assess the mechanisms to tackle the progression and effectiveness of the implementation of such actions and in order to regulate them.

4. METHOD

Given that there were no references about a tool with the specific purpose of assessing the quality of student participation in the university field, we created our own instrument (instrument A), organized in hierarchical levels, based on that by Plewis and Preston (2001).

The instrument was validated by experts. But before its application, we considered it convenient to ask students from the last years in the studies offered at the Blanquerna Faculty of Psychology and Educational and Sports Sciences, Ramon Llull University, Barcelona.

In this sense, we developed a questionnaire (instrument B) arranged in the six dimensions to be assessed, which are described in section 5 of this article.

Instrument B was applied to a sample of 374 students in the degrees of Education, Psychology, Sciences of Physical Activity and Sport, and Speech Therapy.

From the contributions of experts and the results of questionnaire B, we adjusted instrument A. Results from instrument B are not presented in this article due to limitations of space and because they have been already incorporated in the final version of instrument A, which is our focus of attention as in it we define dimensions, elements, and standards of student participation and representation at university.

In the final instrument A, we proposed a quality model to assess student participation and representation, with a level-based structure.

At the first level, there are six dimensions identified, which are the big blocks on which to base assessment and which refer to:

- Information and communication
- Internal representation in the same university
- External representation in all the community, in national and international cooperation projects, activities and initiatives that contribute to the culture of peace, sustainable development and respect for the environment, and the contribution to the public discourse on issues that affect the university or its surrounding fabric
- Motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement of students to develop tasks of participation or representation
- Training and profile of student representatives
- Model of participation offered by the university.

At a second level, and within each dimension, some elements or objects are identified, up to a total of 17, which aim at providing an answer as to the way to develop a participation and representation programme for university students.

At the third level, there are 33 criteria or quality standards that allow us to compare what is real and what is desirable.

At the fourth level, there are indicators or norms that universities should write down for every standard, depending on their idiosyncrasy.

5. DIMENSIONS, ELEMENTS AND STANDARDS OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION AT UNIVERSITY

In this section, we select the dimensions, aspects or elements and standards that have to be considered in a student participation and representation programme at university.

The structure encompasses all the sections present in Figure 1, except for the section of evidence or indicators and norms. A further study, which should include interaction of different agents, would allow us to propose evidence or significant indicators for the elements and standards considered here.

5.1. Dimension A: Information and communication strategies

A first key factor to understand the low participation of students at university is to find out whether students know their possibilities of participation to express their own voice and contribute to create a model of university where all the agents involved can feel identified. In this sense, it is necessary to analyse the information that students get, how they get it and what communication channels are appropriate for a real participatory culture in the university field.

5.2. Dimension B: Meaning and significance of internal participation and representation

Participation in the university process is a responsibility and a right of all the members that make up the university, and implies sharing a common project. Nevertheless, proper participation has to imply being really able to make decisions, not only at a formal level. Therefore, it is necessary to move towards the transformation of current structures so that participation can become a norm and not an exception.

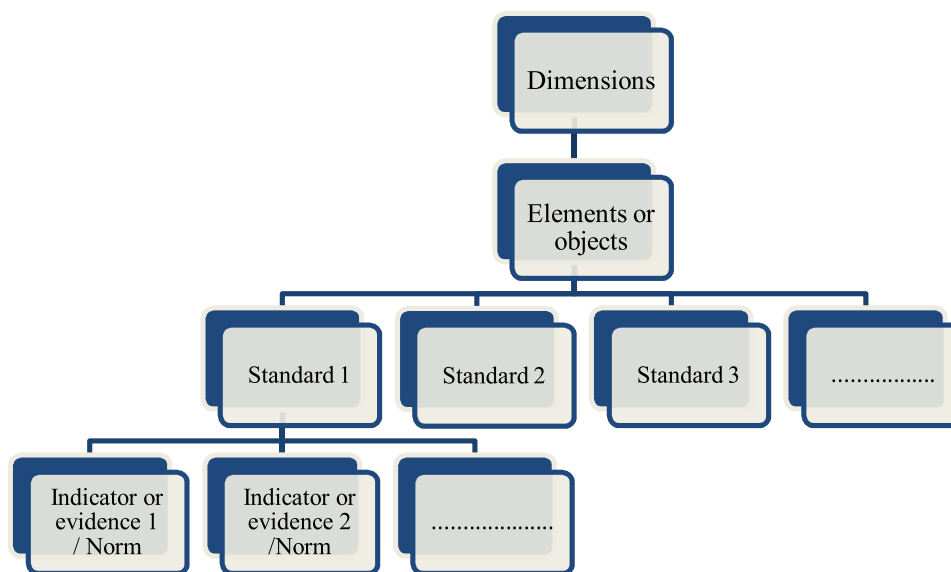


Figure 1. Global structure of dimensions

Dimension A: Information and communication strategies	
Elements or objects	Standards
Information provided to students about possible spaces of participation in university life.	<p>Students are provided with and know information about spaces of participation at university and proposals to improve academic (university) dynamics.</p> <p>The university institution has established actions to let students know the “Norms of organization and functioning of Ramon Llull University” and the “University Student Statute”, and these documents are known by students.</p> <p>Students are informed about the existence of student associations, student networks, and social movements.</p> <p>All the members of the student group know the role and tasks of their representatives to help their voice to be heard and to collaborate in the creation of a satisfactory university model for all the agents that interact in it.</p>
Channels of communication between the students and the institution.	The channels of communication, as a key element to improve the dissemination of information two-directionally between students and institutions involved in university education, are clearly defined and known by students.
Specific actions by the university to disseminate information among students.	The institution has a procedure to collect, assess and integrate students’ suggestions and claims.

Table 1. Elements and standards of dimension A

Dimension B: Meaning and significance of internal participation and representation	
Elements or objects	Standards
Theoretical dimension of the concept of participation.	Participation is understood as a right and responsibility of all the students in a common project of university and society. Participation is considered by students as a training process and not only as a managing mechanism.
Strategies of the university as a promoter of student participation and representation processes.	The university promotes participation and representation processes in its strategic plans in order to involve students actively in the organization, quality processes, etc., and collects initiatives derived from students' demands and interests. The educational community sets up spaces for dialogue and critical thinking where students actively intervene. The university has approved rules of organization and functioning where student participation in the university's and the centre's governing bodies and in service commissions is established.
Elements to improve internal participation.	Different elements to improve internal participation have been identified.

Table 2. Elements and standards of dimension B

5.3. Dimension C: Social commitment and external representation

Responsible participation at university is important but not sufficient. There is a need for a commitment with society, and society has to listen to students. Thus, it is necessary to offer possibilities of participation through dialogue and work with institutions in the management of public policies. In this sense, the university has to promote new spaces beyond academic activity that can give response to a society in transformation facing new situations and new challenges. In this framework, students are active agents-subjects, not only with the possibility of choosing but also with capacity to set up alternatives through processes of innovation and social creativity.

5.4. Dimension D: Motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement

Motivation is a necessary condition to have participation and, therefore, an unavoidable task of the university is to increase students' awareness to participate, by informing them about the existing channels and possibilities, and the values associated to participation. However, to motivate students to participate, they need to feel well represented and heard, and that their actions have a real repercussion in the university educational model.

An important factor to be analysed is the variety of aspects that lead to satisfaction and personal involvement in participatory processes, as well as demotivating aspects or difficulties that students face.

Dimension C: Social commitment and external representation	
Elements or objects	Standards
Mechanisms of interaction between university and society.	The university promotes the participation of the members of the university community in activities and projects of national, international cooperation and solidarity, and activities and initiatives that contribute to the culture of peace, sustainable development and respect for the environment.
	The university promotes means that facilitate and complement academic activity to contribute to the public discourse on issues that affect the university itself or its surrounding socio-cultural fabric.
Strategies for the university socio-cultural development.	The institutions involved in Catalan university education make it possible for students to be protagonists in different fields of action and decision-making spheres.

Table 3. Elements and standards of dimension C

Dimension D: Motivation, satisfaction and personal involvement	
Elements or objects	Standards
Actions of motivation to participate.	Students are motivated to get involved in participation and representation activities.
	Involvement in representation activities increases their feeling of belonging to the university.
Expressions of personal satisfaction in participation or representation processes.	Students are satisfied when their contributions have an influence on decision-making processes and on their educational model.
	Students feel well informed and represented by their representatives.
Types of participatory activities for university students.	Students often participate in activities of the university.
	The university recognizes the task of students to promote and carry out actions and activities that increase participation.
	The university listens to the voice of students in decision-making processes in the different fields of their concern and creates spaces and necessary resources.
Difficulties for participation and representation.	Students express difficulties to participate in activities of the university and in being part of the group of representatives.

Table 4. Elements and standards of dimension D

5.5. *Dimension E: Profile and training*

In order to have participation, it is not enough that students want to participate, but they have to have knowledge, skills and capacities necessary to take part and to intervene in the participatory proposal. Thus, preparation becomes a crucial element in the training of a real participatory culture, which implies presenting proposals, speaking, working in teams. From the university, there have to be proposals of training programmes or actions for students with the aim of contributing to the university socio-cultural development.

Dimension E: Profile and training	
Elements or objects	Standards
Training actions of the university for student representatives.	The university considers the training of students in participation and representation processes in its strategic plans. Students know the rules that support the representation processes in the university field and the different forms of association inside and outside the university.
Types of qualities of a good student representative.	Students that represent their peers show personal, interpersonal, intellectual, managing and ethical qualities needed to develop their task.

Table 5. Elements and standards of dimension E

5.6. *Dimension F: Model of participation and representation*

The last dimension to be considered is the model of representation and participation that we have at university. If people know and want to participate, they should find spaces and mechanisms that make this possible and this requires effective organization.

We talk about participation of students in academic bodies, in cultural, leisure or logistic activities, and in student organizations, as well as the relationship established with educational institutions and administrations and political parties.

Dimension F: Model of participation and representation	
Elements or objects	Standards
Principles and organization of the different ways of participating in the university field that imply mutual learning.	The university is a democratic institution and, therefore, the managing board understands the dynamics of participation democratically. The university clearly defines instances of participation. The university community is positively predisposed to innovation in the forms of social participation.
Programmes and campaigns to shape a real participatory culture that includes capacity to make proposals,	Participation is based on the representations that the different agents develop reciprocally between them, thus contributing to build a real participatory culture as the social capital of the university.

to dialogue, to work in teams, and to generate operational agreements.	The university establishes the position of the different actors, so that the social distance legitimated by knowledge does not inhibit the recognition of all the members of the community as valid interlocutors.
	The university promotes positive strategies of participation where both critical thinking and capacity to reach agreements to the advantage of the university community and its continuing transformation are valued.
Set of actions of influence and decision in university policies.	The university determines the links with the community, creating new spaces that promote dialogue or joint actions with administrations, companies, socio-cultural institutions, etc.

Table 6. Elements and standards of dimension F

6. FINAL REFLECTIONS AS A CONCLUSION

At present, we are at a moment with a strong international current to assess educational systems, because assessment is the instrument through which it is possible to appraise the degree of quality of a process, that is, to identify the degree of adjustment between objectives established and results. Assessment implies identifying and measuring indicators causing quality, which can be influenced to improve it (Sarramona, 2003).

For this reason, it is necessary that university centres have instruments and mechanisms that allow them to assess the levels of quality they are achieving, and this requires a model of quality management in the different fields of university life.

One of these fields is student participation at university, which can be considered as a factor that has a beneficial influence on the quality of higher education and as the result of a quality higher education that aims at the students' integral education.

In this sense, our design of dimensions, elements and standards to assess student participation at university aims at objectifying educational parameters that are illustrative of the situation of student participation and representation in order to make decisions to promote and extend this to a broad sector of the student population.

Nevertheless, we are aware that the use of standards and indicators to analyze educational quality is sometimes considered with uneasiness, because they present us with an idea of the situation but do not account for the reason behind it.

For this, the design of this model does not intend to be an exogenous instrument that could cause some reluctance due to the imposition of standards, but the appropriate referent to start a process to assess university quality in the field of student participation, which can be adapted to the characteristics of every university project or style and to the variables to be assessed in every institution.

Journal of International Scientific Publication:
Educational Alternatives, Volume 11, Part 1

ISSN 1313-2571, Published at: <http://www.scientific-publications.net>

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Journal of International Scientific Publication:
Educational Alternatives, Volume 11, Part 1

ISSN 1313-2571, Published at: <http://www.scientific-publications.net>

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