

## STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT STUDENTS' REPRESENTATION IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT:

*THE 2001 PRAGUE COMMUNIQUÉ EMPHASIZES THE NEED FOR STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE AND INFLUENCE THE ORGANIZATION AND EDUCATIONAL CONTENTS IN UNIVERSITIES AND THE FACT THAT "STUDENTS ARE FULL MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY". ALTHOUGH AT LEAST FORMALLY, THE ASPECTS REGARDING STUDENT REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION HAVE BEEN REGULATED, SOME STUDIES SUGGEST THEIR ABSENCE FROM THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE (PERSSON, 1998; KAMPERIN, 2004; MENON, 2005). CONSEQUENTLY, EVEN IF THE FORMAL RIGHT OF REPRESENTATION IS ENSURED, ITS EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION IS "FAR FROM SATISFACTORY" (BERGAN, 2003). THE PRESENT STUDY EXPLORES THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS REGARDING THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE DECISION PROCESSES IN THEIR ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS. THE FOCAL POINTS ANALYZED REGARD: THE DEGREE OF VISIBILITY AND INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES AND THEIR ROLE IN THE UNIVERSITY, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPRESENTATIVES AND STUDENTS, IDENTIFYING THE MAJOR IMPROVEMENT DIRECTIONS IN THE REPRESENTATIVE-STUDENTS CONSULTATION PROCESS. RESULTS INDICATE THE POOR DEFINITION OF THE GOALS AND THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY TOWARDS THE STUDENTS IN THE DECISION PROCESSES IN THE UNIVERSITY, THE MAIN OBSTACLES IN MAINTAINING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY. THE STUDENTS SIGNAL THE NEED FOR A MORE VISIBLE AND INTENSE ACTIVITY OF THE REPRESENTATIVES, THROUGH A BETTER PROMOTION OF THEIR OWN ACTIVITY AND A MORE DIRECT AND OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH BOTH STUDENTS AND THE MANAGEMENT.*

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**KEY WORDS:** STUDENT PARTICIPATION, STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE, HIGHER EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

According to the conclusions of a study concerning students' participation practices and policies in governing structures of universities, that was conducted in 2003 by the European Council, the issue of student participation and representation are strongly

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supported by a legal framework. In most of the countries included in the study, student representatives have full prerogatives in the leading structures and have the right to vote. The author of the report emphasizes an observed phenomenon: while mobilizing students towards a certain cause is possible, achieving a prolonged interest for that cause and for the university and its governance is much more difficult (Bergan, 2003, apud Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009). The respondents (students, representatives of the higher education institutions and ministries) showed a positive attitude towards the growing influence of students in their host institution. The areas in which student representation is most efficient are those concerned with social, environmental problems pertaining to the institution and also those regarding educational contents. However, in some countries, there is still the Senior Management board takes all the decisions and student governance does not lead to any concrete results. Simultaneously, there is a widespread belief that student representation is assumed by a limited group of elites that rarely make contact directly with the students. (Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to focus on disseminating the information regarding student rights and the results of the debates and decisions that are relevant for them. Nowadays, we can assert that the formal dimensions of student representation mechanisms have been mostly formalized to a large extent, but we lack the studies to confirm the situation. Even if the formal right to representation is granted, its actual use by the students is far from acceptable (Bergan, 2003). At the same time, a survey of the students' perception of their own influence in the higher education leading structures could offer some suggestions that could explain why their level of participation is still modest or inconsistent.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Students are partners of the Higher Education institutions and members of the university community with rights and obligations affirmed by art. 118 in the Law no. 1/2011, with all later amendments. According to this law, students are represented in the consultative, decisional and executive structures within the universities. The student representatives in the Faculty Councils and University Senates are elected by direct, secret and universal election of all the students in the faculty, respectively the university (ANOSR, 2012). The main representational functions of the students in Universities are the following: a) group/ class representative, b) year representative, c) student representatives

in Faculty Councils (counselor student), d) students represented in University Senate (senator students); delegates/ members in the faculty/ university committees.

A study regarding the satisfaction of students from Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, published in 2012 (*Self-Evaluation Institutional Report*), indicates that one of the weakest areas regarding the quality of services, measured by student reports is that of student representation, from the point of view of visibility, motivations and performance of student leaders or the student representatives in Faculty Councils and University Senate. At the same time, in the summer 2012, there have been wide student movements and protests directed towards taking stronger stands and winning a more respected position in relation to the leading structures in the higher education institutions.

The National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania (ANOSR), whose goal consists of militating towards a participatory and equitable Higher Education, conducted a series of studies and published some documents that suggest that the educational system is lacking equity politics, a fact that directly affects the quality of the educational act. (ANOSR, 2011; ANOSR , 2012).

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of the present study is to explore the perceptions of students regarding their participation in the decision making processes in their academic institutions. The phenomena under analysis regard the following issues: the visibility and degree of involvement of students' representatives, perceptions regarding the importance and their actual role in the decision making processes at the Faculty and University levels. Also, the open-ended questions tried to diagnose the main symptoms of the deficiencies in the relationship between representatives and students, and, at the same time, were designed to draw from the respondents various possible improvement directions in the representative-students consultation process.

## **METHODS**

Sixty nine students (14 male and 55 female) from "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iasi have accepted to voluntarily participate in the study, by answering an online questionnaire, send via e-mail, designed to extract their perceptions regarding the degree of involvement in the decision-making processes in the university.

The questions regarded the following areas: *visibility and performance of student representatives, the role of the representatives, suggestions regarding the optimization of the consultation process, strengths and weaknesses identified in the relationship between students and representatives.*

## FINDINGS

### *Visibility and performance of student representatives*

An inclusive culture, one that engages students, teachers, and the administrative staff in a significant dialogue, directly linked to a flowing decision making and revision process, has to diffuse in the entire institution, even more, in the entire field of higher education (Kennedy, 1997; Shor, 1996). Without an active participation in such a process and in creating educational experiences, needed for struggling against ignorance and apathy, they cannot become true members of a „community of learning” (Wolff, 1969). Almost half of the interrogated students declare that they do not even know who their representatives are and more than 50% declare that they didn’t participate in their election. A much smaller proportion declares that they are not consulted regarding the way their rights are respected. At the same time, over 90% of the students who responded to our survey indicate that they never requested the help of the representatives for solving or addressing problems.

*Table 1. Frequency of responses regarding the representatives visibility among students*

Items	Frequency		Percent	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you know the representative students in the decisional and executive structures in your faculty and university?	37	32	54%	46%
Are you periodically consulted by the student representatives concerning the problems that you face as a student (for instance, when the regulations are not respected)?	22	47	32%	68%
Were you invited to participate in consultation meetings (sessions, gatherings) that regard problems specific to the students?	43	26	62%	38%
Have you ever experienced any problem for which you sought for the help of the student representative?	2	67	3%	97%

### ***The role of the representatives***

The study participants' views are diverging when it comes to estimating the importance of representatives in the decisions taken by the management, and their accomplishments are regarded in general as rather "satisfactory" (table 2).

Table 2. . Frequency of responses regarding the representatives role

<b>How important do you think the role of the representatives is in influencing the decisions of the institution managerial staff (establishing strategies and decision making)?</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Not at all (purely formal)	<b>12</b>	<b>17%</b>
Slightly important	<b>25</b>	<b>36%</b>
Important (real)	<b>26</b>	<b>38%</b>
Very important (crucial)	<b>6</b>	<b>9%</b>

At Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, according to the Regulations for the student representatives' election in the leading structures at the University, (2007): students members of the faculty councils have the responsibility to be informed regarding all the represented students' didactic and social activities and to actively participate in their resolution through formal and informal methods. Concurrently, the student representatives in Faculty Councils and Senate can initiate proposals for normative acts for the optimization of their colleagues' activities.

### ***Students' suggestions regarding the optimization of the representatives-students consultation process***

From the enumerated directions of improvement of the consultation practice of the students by their representatives, the following are most frequently invoked: *regular meetings to debate and solve problems, programming the activity and work strategies with the students, self-promotion and encouraging a participatory culture in campuses*. There is a request for mechanisms to ensure the corresponding consultation within the student community and between the students and university management. As Okello (1998) previously noted, if students and academic staff are equally involved in decisions important for the university activity, the first is more likely to identify themselves with the results of such an institutionalized participation process, leading to the reduction of

administrative student-staff problems. This by itself leads to a clearer focus on the quality, nature and programming of representatives in leadership positions and policy-making organisms. When decisions arise in consultation processes and more than one person is employed in the definition of the problem, considering the alternative actions, in determining the possible implications of proposed solutions and structuring responses (Sherman, 1993).

At the same time, to improve their activity, student representatives need to develop specific abilities and competencies. Regarding the competencies that the student representative needs to develop, participants in the study consider it is necessary that they receive training for developing soft skills (communication skills, leadership, negotiation, team-work and conflict resolution) and administrative knowledge.

The communication between representatives and students is one of the main directions that need improvement. Among the enumerated solutions, we mention the following: monthly general meetings with the students, creating an online portal, regular informative meetings in which the representatives inform and report their activity through official; organizing informal activities; surveys to identify concrete problems the students are facing (table 3).

***Strengths and weaknesses in the relation between representatives and students.***

Students were asked to mention at least three positive and three negative aspects identified in their personal or collective experience regarding the activity of the representatives. The most frequent answers regarded: commitment/ engagement (frequency=7), openness/ availability (frequency=12), communication abilities, persuasion and negotiation (frequency=15) as positive aspects and inadequate sharing of information (frequency=10). Reduced/ inefficient communication (frequency=13) *and lack of engagement/ interest* (frequency=12) were identified as the main negative aspects. Most of the respondents, however, did not communicate (frequency=27) or collaborate (frequency=23) with their representatives.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS**

Although the online questionnaire was distributed to a larger number of students, the response rate was extremely low. This fact, by itself, can indicate a lack of motivation among students regarding the issues raised in the survey. Another possible explanation for

the reduced response rate could reside in the nature of the scale, containing a large number of open-ended questions. This fact can demand a higher degree of focus and motivation to invest the effort and time needed for complete.

Future studies will be conducted on this topic of motivations and engagement in the problem of student representation in management structures of universities, with more refined instruments and more refined strategies to ensure a satisfactory response rate.

Table 3. Frequency of responses regarding the optimization of the representatives-students consultation process

<b>General category</b>	<b>Specific measures</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Face to face communication</b>	Regular meetings (e.g. Monthly) between the students and their representatives for debating the existing problems; adequate publicizing of the meetings	<b>24</b>
	Announcing the organization of information meetings regarding Student statute at the highly frequented courses	<b>7</b>
	Organizing annual conferences	<b>1</b>
	Surveys	<b>4</b>
	Panel meetings, debates, focus groups, consultation	<b>6</b>
	Frequent meetings with the representatives or group leaders	<b>1</b>
<b>Visibility and self-promotion</b>	Promotion of the activity at the beginning of the school year and presenting the representation strategy directly to the students	<b>7</b>
	Online self-promotion (blogs, Facebook page) and active engagement in student discussion forums	<b>8</b>
	Public display of the contact data pertaining to the representatives	<b>2</b>
<b>Physical communication media</b>	Setting up a mailbox where students could transmit their problems in writing	<b>2</b>
	Placing attractive posters	<b>2</b>
<b>Organizing meetings and non-formal activities</b>	Informal meetings, outdoor activities, trips	<b>5</b>
<b>Engaging the students</b>	Encouraging participation and presenting the advantages of student participation in the decision making process	<b>10</b>

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study tried to explore the perceptions of the students regarding the activity of their representatives in the leadership structures of the university. Results indicate a need for improving representatives' activity especially regarding their visibility and maintaining their ruling roles.

At the same time, the results show the fact that although the student statute is established through official documents, in practice, their role is not reaching satisfactory level. Moreover, this role is not perceived by the students as a truly important one.

Furthermore, this study, surpass the level of observation, towards the diagnosis of the situation of the representatives and offers a series of suggestions concerning several ways of optimizing the consultation process between the students and their spokespersons (implicitly, between students and the university): from the expansion of direct and virtual communication channels to raising awareness regarding the need to develop specific abilities (leadership, teamwork, public speaking). These identified directions could function as reference frames for the University management in finding and channelling the adequate resources towards developing a culture of active participation in which students should develop the sense of belonging to a „learning community”.

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