

Section 4: Institutionalizing Student Voice through Governance Structures

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This section is centred around student voice as it relates to formal university governance structures. While student voice can take many forms, as this book demonstrates, it has become increasingly important to emphasise the formal avenues for students to exercise their voice. Many (e.g., Klemenčič 2014; Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Raaper 2020) have argued that the opportunities for students to become involved in university governing boards, students' unions, department and course level committees have grown extensively in contemporary universities. This introduction aims to contextualise the strategic importance universities place on student voice. It will also introduce the chapters of this section and provide a synthesis of lessons learned from this section.

Contextualising Student Voice in Governance Structures

There is an extensive scholarly focus on student voice in higher education governance structures. Manja Klemenčič, an esteemed scholar in the field of student governance, explains student representation as a process through which students work in the formal university governance structures to influence the decisions made both on and off campus (Klemenčič 2020; Klemenčič and Park 2018). Students are generally elected to representative roles by other students; they have a mandate for a specific time period, and they are expected to attend certain board/committee meetings as set by the university's academic calendar.

It is known that the late 1960s global student protests were an important catalyst for introducing student representation into higher education governance (Klemenčič 2014; Luescher-Mamashela 2013). These protests responded to a variety of social and educational issues, ranging from a lack of civil rights to archaic university practices and student rights to

be part of decision making. As a result of these widespread protests, it has become a common practice to involve students in university governance in many countries today (Klemenčič 2014; Luescher-Mamashela 2013). One could even argue that the representational practice has become the most welcomed approach for universities to gather a variety of student feedback. Students in these representative roles can be addressed in several constructive ways, e.g., consumers, stakeholders, partners, and citizens/democratic agents (Boland 2005; Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Menon 2003).

While the existing scholarly work has drawn immense attention to student representation and its growing importance in university governance, it has also started to highlight various limitations related to the formalisation of student voice. Scholars (e.g., Klemenčič 2014; Luescher-Mamashela 2013; Raaper 2020, 2022) argue that market forces in higher education have encouraged universities to carefully manage student voice which has led to a greater regulation and standardisation of student representation. In other words, while the opportunities for students to undertake representational roles may have increased, it has become difficult to assess the extent to which student voice is considered in the actual decision-making processes. Klemenčič (2012b) explains that the marketisation of universities has an ultimate effect on student representation: it professionalises and de-politicises student representation for the purposes of institutional marketing and quality assurance.

Research has also highlighted that inequalities exist regarding the social backgrounds of students involved in formal university governance. It is known that ethnic minority students, mature students and students with disabilities are less likely to put themselves forward for these roles, raising questions about the representativeness of student representatives (Bols 2017; Brooks et al. 2015; Lozano and Hughes 2017; McStravock 2022). The background of student representatives is crucial, particularly when considering the extent to which these roles can advocate on behalf of the increasingly diverse student population in higher education.

Chapter Overview

While the scale and importance of formalised student voice has most certainly increased in today's universities, it is less clear how the representational student practices operate and what impact they have. This section aims to tackle this challenge and give voice to a number of scholars who have explored student voice in formal university structures in a variety of global settings, e.g., Finland (Trifuljesko and Medvedeva), Italy (Romito and Colombo; Pastore and Ascorra), the UK (Turner and Winter), the US (Ris, Johnson and Mogilny), Chile (Pastore and Ascorra) and Kenya (Ochieng, Sebayiga, Njane and Kitawi). These authors cover a range of examples related to student representative practices, including student involvement in the university governance structures such as senates and course committees, but also in quality assurance processes and institutional students' unions.

Chapter 18, titled 'Student Agency and Student Impact through Representative Student Associations', provides a thought-provoking conceptual account of student representation in higher education. Klemenčič introduces key concepts - student organisation, governance, agency and impact - that are essential for our understanding of how student voice is enacted through formal university governance. The chapter offers a thorough engagement with an innovative concept of student impact which helps us understand the opportunities that students have to influence their academic and social experiences through representation, activism, leadership, and consumerism, to name a few.

Chapter 19, titled 'Student Participation in Shared Governance at American Research Universities', focuses on students' participation in academic senates in the US. Ris, Johnson and Mogilny demonstrate the incredible diversity of practice, even within the most elite universities in the world, raising questions about the impact students can have through their formal representative roles.

Chapter 20, titled ‘Students’ Unions as Avenues for Inclusion and Participation of International Students? A case from Finland’, provides a thought-provoking insight into the international students’ participation in the Representative Council of the Student Union at the University of Helsinki (HYY), one of the largest and wealthiest student organisations in the world. Trifuljesko and Medvedeva provide an illuminating account of fractures that exist in students’ unions and how international student representatives are often marginalised in student governance structures.

Chapter 21, titled ‘The Joint Student-Teacher Commission in Italy: A Managerial Technology or a Catalyst for Change?’, problematises the initiatives aimed at developing student involvement in university governance. Romito and Colombo introduce an example from Italy: The Joint Student-Teacher Commission. While this initiative aims to empower student voice, the authors demonstrate the complex policy networks that emerge from the Commission’s work and the ways in which student voice is restricted within these networks of power.

Chapter 22, titled ‘Enabling Students’ Voices in a Developing Country Context: Challenges and Opportunities’, provides an example of how students informed educational practices during the Covid-19 pandemic in Strathmore University in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ochieng, Sebayiga, Njane and Kitawi provide a thorough engagement with the concept of student agency. They also offer optimism by highlighting and celebrating opportunities for student voice and the impact it can make in formal university governance.

Chapter 23, titled ‘Examining the Role of the Sabbatical Officer Manifestos and Campaigns in Achieving Change in UK Higher Education’, focuses on the UK students’ unions by demonstrating how sabbatical officers – full- or part-time elected student officers – develop and deliver their campaign manifestos. Turner and Winter show the challenges that sabbatical officers face when developing and delivering their manifestos. They also argue that to increase

the impact of student voice, the campaigns should be perceived as collective activity that unite sabbatical officers, union staff and student population more broadly.

Chapter 24, titled ‘Student Involvement in University Governance in Italy and Chile: A Comparative Document Analysis’ offers a detailed analysis of how student representation in university governance has evolved in two countries with very different educational traditions: Italy and Chile. Pastore and Ascorra argue that the student role in quality assurance processes is heavily shaped by neoliberalism. However, the authors also demonstrate that while the neoliberal policies enforce a normative regulation of student participation in Italy, the Chilean case reflects in the explicit absence of student rights to participate in university governance processes.

Collectively, these chapters represent an effort to understand, unwrap and critique contemporary student roles in university governance processes. While good practices and opportunities exist for students to develop and enact their voice, as outlined by Klemenčič and Ochieng et al., most chapters in this section invite us to reflect on the limitations that exist when students attempt to exercise their voice through formal governance practices, including governing boards, students’ unions, staff-student committees or quality assurance practices. While there is no doubt that student opportunities to exercise their voice through formal governance practices have increased, it is more important than ever to consider how meaningful these practices are and whose voices get heard. This section demonstrates that student voice is increasingly institutionalised through governance structures, but these formalised representative roles and avenues for students to express their voice tend to be carefully managed and contained by university administrators. This also means that while there is a significant infrastructure for student voice to be exercised in higher education sectors worldwide, it is unclear the extent to which these formal avenues are the most efficient and meaningful ways for students to express their experiences, needs and interests.

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