

Student engagement in the University of the Peloponnese: A case study in the framework of the IMEP Project.

Introduction

Student engagement is a multilevel concept that can refer to student representation and participation in higher education [HE] governance, which is one of the foundational values in European HE and a high priority topic in the European higher education policy agenda.

In Europe, where national legislation often defines the relationship of the state with higher education institutions, the development of a legal framework that provides for student participation in university governance is advocated for by various analysts and organizations involved in policy-making. However, the establishment of such a framework, although a necessary condition, does not guarantee *actual* student engagement. This is also indicated by the limited research that was commissioned by the Council of Europe on the issue of student engagement and affirmed in the Bologna Process, where the European Student Information Bureau highlighted the importance of student involvement in university governance. In the Prague Communiqué (2001), Ministers of Education for the first time affirmed that students are full participants in the organization and content of education at universities, marking the official recognition of student engagement in higher education governance. In the Berlin Communiqué (2003), Ministers noted that national legal measures for ensuring student participation are largely in place, and called on the institutions and student organizations to identify ways of increasing *actual* student involvement in higher education governance. Ever since 2003, student involvement has grown and has been unanimously accepted as a principle among all stakeholders in the European Higher Education Area (Popovic 2011).

Student engagement can also refer to taking into consideration student views and opinions through quality assurance and curriculum development, with a view to improve student experiences during their studies. The EU modernization agenda for H.E. has promoted a perspective that addresses the areas of student-centred learning and quality assurance [QA]. It propagates the participation of all stakeholders in QA processes. Student participation is considered essential in internal and external processes of QA (Bologna Process 2005b: 16,21). This perspective assumes heightened importance in Europe, as the Bologna Process has also affirmed student participation and evaluation of modules as an integral aspect of QA processes (Brus et al. 2007; Gibbs and Ashton 2007; Bologna Process 2003,2005b).

In Greece, as in many European countries, legislation shows appreciation for the idea that higher education should play a role in preparing students for life as active, responsible citizens in democratic societies (Klemencic 2011, 74).

(Politicised Students Unions).

In this paper we first present the Greek institutional framework for student engagement in university governance, as shaped over the last 30 years, by Acts

1268/82 and 4009/11. We present data for the period 1982-2014 on student participation in student elections, as we regard this process the apex of student participation when students elect their representatives in university decision making bodies.

We then present the case study on the University of the Peloponnese. Here we explore student views on student engagement with studies and satisfaction with university life, issues which were collectively agreed upon by the IMEP project team.

Methods

In order to trace student participation in the period 1982-2012, we compiled the time series presented in Figure 1 as follows: (a) data on the absolute total number of students enrolled in Greek universities were obtained from the Greek Statistical Service (ELSTAT); (b) the absolute number of students that voted in student elections were obtained from the archives of the daily newspaper “Ta Nea” for the period 1982-2012. “Ta Nea” is a reputable newspaper that follows closely developments in education and publishes annually the results of student elections on a national basis. The source of the data presented by the newspaper are the students’ political organisations in each university; (c) based on the total number of students enrolled and the votes in student elections we calculated abstention rates.

Furthermore a survey was conducted in students of the University of the Peloponnese (n=60). The questionnaire was developed in the framework of the IMEP project (Appendix 1). The initial survey results were further explored through 15 semi-structured interviews, both with students that actively participate in student political organisations and students who are not politically involved.

Provisions of the Greek Institutional Framework

To this effect we analyse abstention rates in student elections over the period 1982-2012 (data presented in Figure 1) vis-à-vis significant moments in the Greek socio-political context. The selected period is marked by two education Acts that introduced different modes of governance of higher education. Act 1268/1982 provided for student participation in university governance and the election process of decision-making bodies for the first time, while Act 4009/2011 assigned a minor role to students, by excluding them from the election process of university decision-making bodies. In Greece student organisations are “political”, i.e. directly connected to and influenced by political parties and function as a major channel for the political socialisation of the student body.

[Figure 1]

Act 1268/82 altered the established power relations in higher education that were based on the authority of full professors, holders of Chairs. It introduced a mode of governance that conflates with Olsen’s vision of the University as internal democracy. As Kladis (2014) argues, during this period there was high social demand for the redistribution of power in higher education. Thus, educational reform was in line with social dynamics. The Act introduced the US model of university organisation, setting the department as the basic

academic unit and its general assembly as the major decision-making body at the department level. Ultimate decision-making power for academic, economic and administrative matters resides with the Senate, led by the Rector. It allotted considerable power to the students, providing for student participation in university governance through indirectly appointed student representatives. The election of the university decision making bodies, (Rector's council, Deanship and Chair of the Department) was based on the total number of the faculty whose vote had a significant weight (50%), and on the vote of the other interest groups that participate in university governance, undergraduate students (40%), postgraduate students (2,5%), administrative personnel (2,5%), technical personnel (2,5%) and lab assistants (2,5%). Thus, for the first time, students could promote their demands for equity and social justice against the arbitrariness of the professoriate. Therefore, participation in student elections became of paramount importance, since student representatives were appointed by student organisations in accordance with the votes they won. Such a mode of governance appears to leave more room for active student engagement in university life. Indeed, in the first five years after the introduction of the Act, the highest participation rates in student elections were recorded. In 1982, approximately 40% of the student body abstained from student elections. Five years later, the abstention rate dropped to 19%. This was a highly politicized phase of the student movement, as in 1981 the first socialist government was elected.

As Bergan notes (2004: 9) there is a problem with actual student commitment to participating and raising sufficient interest in the student body to actually bring most students to cast a vote.

This is also the case in Greece, where the legal framework failed to sustain high participation rates. To interpret this failure, one should take into account the power structure of the higher education field, as established by Act 1268/82. The initial democratic intention to empower the subordinate student body was overridden, as what actually happened was the empowerment of students' organizations and appointed student representatives. Thus student organisations (affiliated with political parties) were in a position to bargain with academic candidates for university decision-making bodies, by ensuring a block of favourable electors (Lamprianides 2004). The public mission of the university was undermined, as candidates competed with each other for the support of student organisations. This would not be troublesome, if support was granted on the basis of candidates' merit or the proposed university policy. However, more often than not, these bargains formed part of petty party politics that had nothing to do with university policy and favoured the personal agendas both of student representatives and candidates for university governance. The situation was further aggravated during periods when a weak student movement or an inactive and apathetic student body could not hold student organisations accountable for their actions, failures or omissions (Lamprianides 2004). In contradistinction to student vote, which became of paramount importance, the importance of faculty vote in the election process diminished, as faculty constitutes a heterogeneous, not easily manipulated group, which rarely offers a block of electors to the candidates. Ultimately, the provisions of the Act led to a situation where academic and political networks

were closely interwoven, allowing for a refraction of the social and political field in the higher education field. Soon enough, the dominant clientelist structure of the Greek society and economy (Mouzelis 1987; 1999) spread in university life.

Since 1989 one may note a steady decline in participation rates. It is of interest that 1989 (known as the “dirty 89”) was a year of substantial political turmoil when the prime minister of the country was accused of corruption and bribery, led to trial and finally acquitted. This was an altogether exceptional circumstance that required the formation of a “special court”. This period is characterized by a generalised public mistrust and allegations of corruption that led to student disengagement with and aversion to politics, as the majority of the student body realized that student leaders used their popularity and power as a springboard to pursue either an academic or a political career. However, mistrust regarding student politics is not a uniquely Greek problem. As has been pointed out the link of student representatives to political parties has always been a contested aspect of student politics. Ensuring the independence of student representation is paramount, not only as a value in itself, but also because perceived political bias leads to further mistrust among students and thus to further political apathy (Klemencic, 2011: 80). In Greece, a survey conducted in 1996 among 700 students of the National Technical University of Athens, concluded that 75% of the students disagreed with the affiliation of student organisations with political parties and the manipulation of their vote. It should be noted that 63% of the students expressed the opinion that the mode of student representation should change (Ta Nea 1996).

In the years 1997-1998, the abstention rates rise again to approximately 70%. The educational reform in 1997, which was never put into effect, provided for changes at all educational levels and a new admission system in higher education. The reform met with the strong resistance of the academic and educational communities. Despite a long series of rallies and demonstrations and conditions of sustained protest that lasted more than three months, student mass participation in politics was not triggered anew. Most students remained apathetic and disengaged from university life. It is worth-noting here that the period 1999-2000 was marked by a major crisis in the Greek stock market that led to a huge loss of wealth and to a breach of trust between the government and its constituency. We don't argue that student abstention rates are directly connected with the wider socio-economic and political processes however, in the long run, the lack of social trust affects all aspects of the public sphere. In the years 2000-2001, student abstention rates reached their higher level, almost 78%. In such cases, questions are raised regarding the legitimacy of student representatives in university governance (Bergan 2004: 9). The introduction of the Act 3374/2005 concerning Quality Assurance in higher education provokes yet again student protests, this time against what was perceived of as a commercialization of education. Under these conditions, in 2005 student abstention rates rise again in relation to the period 2002-2004. Act 3549/2007 provided for the first time for direct universal student participation in student elections, aiming at the disentanglement of student organizations and candidates for the decision-making bodies (Sotiropoulos

2010). Despite the efforts to combat bargaining between student organizations and the candidates, student participation rates did not increase. Once again, it seems that Greek youth is blindly protesting policies without being in a position to actively participate in order to change the rules of the game.

Act 4009/2011 introduced major changes in university governance, drawing on new public management principles. Universities are granted more autonomy from the state. Democratic organization and individual academic autonomy are viewed as hindrances to timely decisions and performance, to be replaced by strong management and inter-disciplinary organization. University Councils, comprising both internal (academics) and external (lay) members, are introduced, in an effort to bridge the gap between universities, society and the economy. The authority for the development of institutional policy and fiscal management is transferred from the Senate to the Council. Accountability towards the state and society is achieved through quality assurance mechanisms, while performance is for the first time linked to budget allocation. With a view to improve university finances, incentives are provided for excellence in research, creation of spin-off companies and patents. The Act introduced a new mode of governance in higher education, excluding students from participation in the election process of decision-making bodies (Rector, Dean, Head of the Department). It attempted to introduce a New Public Management organizational culture, conceiving of students as customers and soliciting student participation in quality assurance processes through course/programme evaluation. The underlying model of student representation tends to be characterized by a depoliticised student government which concentrates on providing student services that complement the institutional quality agenda (Klemencic 2011: 78). Student exclusion from the election process of decision making bodies did not meet again with significant student protests, thus leading to the conclusion that political apathy and indifference is the current dominant stance of the student body.

The Case Study at the University of the Peloponnese

The Greek legal framework provides for student participation in university governance (without voting power). Students are expected to express their opinion in the decision-making bodies.

In the University of the Peloponnese, students refuse to designate representatives in the decision-making bodies.

However, if invited, they do participate in the committees that prepare Faculty Internal Evaluation Reports, and an elected representative of Postgraduate Students participates in the Quality Assurance Unit of the University, which prepares the University Internal Evaluation report.

However the overall participation rate in evaluation/quality assurance processes is rather low, which is to be expected as the process for student evaluation of modules was put in place in 2012.

Up until 2014 printed questionnaires were distributed on a designated day between the 8th and 10th week of each semester and the results were analysed at the Faculty level. This was a time consuming practice that limited the number of

respondents to the ones present on the particular day. In order to involve more systematically individual students in QA the Quality Unit of the University proceed to the development of a platform that stays open for two weeks each semester and facilitates module evaluation surveying students' learning experience in terms of teaching, content of the module, academic support and learning resources. The platform was used for the first time in the academic year 2015-16 to survey the views of undergraduate level students. It is expected that the platform will be expanded next year to include all postgraduate students as well.

Data analysis of the IMEP questionnaire (n=60) indicate that students are generally satisfied by their study experience and feel adequately involved in university life.

- Approximately 65% feel that they are making active decisions about what they study and how they study it, while 73% feel that they are taking responsibility for their learning
- 75% of the respondents feel part of a community and consider they providing adequate feedback about how the course is going.
- They feel that they form part of a community (60%), that they are actively contributing to shaping a community of staff and students (60%) and they have developed a sense of belonging (56%)
- Through QA mechanisms feedback is provided both formally (i.e. questionnaires - 56%) and informally (discussions with students representatives and staff -20%). Students consider that they evaluate especially the teaching and administration of the course and 50% of the respondents report that they have noticed changes on the basis of the feedback they provided.

Conclusion

Although the two modes of university governance have a different potential to promote student participation in university governance, legal regulations do not guarantee their actual engagement in university life. Greek Universities, have operated for more than 30 years under a legal framework that corresponds to a vision of the university as representative democracy (Act 1268/82), providing for student participation, without inspiring student engagement for a long time. Equally, when the legal framework was replaced in 2011 by an Act that hampered student participation in the election processes for decision- making bodies, no significant student protests were organized to resist the change. Thus, under both regimes, student engagement and voter turnout in student elections remained low, indicating persistent student disinterest in university life. This indicates that the root of the problem does not lie only with the mode of governance per se - or an "appropriate" legal framework.

List of References

