

Student Participation in the Governing Bodies of Spanish Universities

Mercedes Llorent-Vaquero¹

¹ Faculty of Sciences of Education, University of Seville, Seville, Spain

Correspondence: Mercedes Llorent-Vaquero, Dpto. de Didáctica y Organización Educativa. Fac. de CC. de la Educación, Calle Pirotecnia s/n, 41013 Sevilla, Spain. Tel: 349-5542-0601. E-mail: mllorent@us.es

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Abstract

Spanish universities are making considerable democratic efforts in their various governing and administrative bodies. This article analyses the role that students play in these in aiding the development of a society where democratic values prevail. To achieve this, documentary analysis is used to explore the different laws and statutes of the universities in terms of student participation, as well as the methodology characteristic of Comparative Education. The first phase tackles the problem of student participation in Spanish universities. Following this, student participation in these bodies is analysed, observing differences and similarities taken from a sample of different Spanish universities. Based on the results obtained, student participation does not quite reach the levels desired. Once the problem is identified a series of proposals are made to increase the quantity and quality of this participation, most importantly increasing the relevance of the student sector in governing bodies, expediting and simplifying electoral processes, supporting the right to association by creating space and providing the necessary training for students to make full use of their rights.

Keywords: participation, students, university, management, democracy

1. Introduction

We are currently immersed in a society in which the “meritocratic” system, where people are valued for their achievements at individual and collective levels, is prevalent. In this respect, the individuals with the highest achievements are sought after in the different professional sectors. Education has always played a fundamental role in encouraging people's quality of life. Authors including Alnaqbi (2016) and Alcántara (2015) hold that the importance of the role of education, especially that of higher education, will increase over the coming years. This increase is observed in three key aspects: social mobility, income level, and political participation. In addition, the possibility of ascending in the social and economic scale largely depends on the possibility of completing higher education. Finally, it is worth highlighting the importance of higher education in strengthening democracy and social participation (Alcántara, 2015).

The current situation of higher education is defined in three major processes: the growing importance of higher education as a factor for development and competitiveness; the growing demand for higher education from the production sector and the population; and the configuration of dynamics for adaptation and change on the part of the universities in response to the challenges of their environment (Valerianovna & Sergejevna, 2015). The importance of higher education for the economic and social development of developing nations is clear. Thus we highlight the need to launch actions that ensure an improvement in quality (Emmers, Jansen, Petry, Van der Oord & Baeyens, 2016; Malihah, Nurbayani, & Supriyono, 2015).

Therefore, there is no doubt of the key role played by the preparation and training of the students to face the labour market. This is a key aspect in the improvement of quality in higher education and will therefore provide further encouragement to the development and competitiveness of the country in question, as the more highly qualified staff in companies and public administration are usually university graduates (Almeida & Chaves, 2015; Weng, 2014).

In the continued search for educational quality, Spanish universities are being transformed at both national and European levels. There are currently two development plans of note: “University Strategy 2015” (Ministry of Education of the Spanish Government, 2010) which aims to encourage the contribution of universities to Spanish socio-economic progress; and the influential “Bologna Plan” which aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) adapting and homologating the studies of universities from the European Union (European Space

for Higher Education, 1998). Students play a central and important role in the development of this space (Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2016; Gago, 2013).

In the pluralist democracies of European Union countries participation, democracy, representation and collegiate bodies are terms that are perfectly assimilated within the different sectors of university communities. In fact, it is in university governing bodies that a clearer illustration of the evolution towards management models more in keeping with the social reality of each country can be found. As freedom and civil participation are stimulated in democratic societies, no institution (public or private) can remain oblivious to these democratic needs.

Thus, alongside teachers and administrative and service staff, students play an important role in the control and management of university centres. With this in mind the necessary mechanisms were created to ensure the participation of the different sectors of the educational community according to their knowledge, experience, concerns, and expectations. The participation of students in universities should be of particular importance as these activities will provide them with the necessary tools for their active integration in society. (Jurado, 2009)

The participation of students in universities is fully legitimated, not just as mere consumers or receivers, but as active members jointly responsible for the institution (Trilla, Jover, Martínez, & Romaña, 2011). Therefore, the involvement of students in governing and administrative bodies ought to be an explicit and visible aim in these universities as the decisions made directly affect this collective, and also because it is a direct way of recognising the educational importance and the effectiveness of these participatory processes among students (Soler, Pallisera, Planas, Fullana, & Vilá, 2012).

From the perspective of university students, the need for student participation and the benefits provided are highlighted. Students note the possibility they are offered in terms of accumulating social capital to set them apart from the rest of students. In general it can be said that students mostly decide to take part in the management and governing bodies of the universities because of their interest in accessing and spreading information; in being in contact with the higher echelons of university policies; and in achieving university learning as well as being able to take part in a collective transformation project (Boni, Lozano, & Walker, 2010).

At present, under the recent Bologna Plan, the Student Statute has been promoted in Spanish universities as part of an internal university democratisation process. Measures are being taken for students and the remaining agents in the educational process to take part in the decision-making process, assuming responsibility for their own education and the management of their own educational level, something essential to achieving the highly desired comprehensive education of the student (Universidad de Oviedo, 2010).

2. Method

The aim of our research is to contribute to the development of a fairer society where democratic values predominate. To do so the following objectives were drawn up:

- Outlining the problems of student participation in governing and administrative bodies of Spanish universities.
- Studying the current situation as regards student participation in Spanish universities.
- Identifying differences and similarities between the different Spanish universities according to student participation in governing and administrative bodies.
- Drawing up proposals to improve participation in governing bodies.

We thus aim to generate increasing awareness of student participation in the organisation and function of governing bodies, related problems and possible lines for improvement. To do so we use documentary analysis to explore the different university laws and statutes as regards student participation, as well as examining the Comparative Education methodology phases proposed by García (1996) and Llorent-Bedmar (2002).

3. Results

3.1 The Problem of Student Participation

Firstly, we believe it is necessary to clarify the term “participation”. On a civic level, participation can become a tool for development, empowerment, and social equity, and so must be meaningful and authentic, involving all agents and developing in different fields and aspects (Lüscher-Mamashela, 2013).

This recognition of the usefulness of participation can be translated to universities, where the intervention of different members of the university community is hailed as an essential aspect of their development and function. Universities require students to participate as active users as they provide a different vision from that of the remaining university sectors (Merhi, 2011).

In addition, in the UNESCO Universal Declaration (1998), university heads and politicians called for students to be represented as a key part of universities and placed on the central axis of their lines of action. In this respect we can state, in keeping with Michavila & Parejo (2008), that as long as students have the right to be organised and represented their participation in these matters will be guaranteed. Moreover, the Bologna framework highlights the need to encourage student involvement at all decision-making levels, legally guaranteeing the means for student participation, and the need to ensure that this participation is active (Michavila & Parejo, 2008).

Following this brief outline we consider it essential to ascertain the information available to Spanish university students concerning possible interest and participation in universities. The study by Soler, Vilá, Fullana, Planas & Pallisera (2011) on the information available to students concerning their representatives at the University of Girona includes relatively high percentages relating to lack of information on the main governing and administrative bodies of the university. Another factor relating to poor participation from students in these bodies was the shortage of time to dedicate to this type of activity, as highlighted in the study.

As regards the significance acquired by student representation in governing bodies, Bergan (2003), Head of the Division for Higher Education and Research of the Council of Europe (COE), states that a survey on student participation in governing bodies of universities in different countries highlighted the limitation of the right to vote of students in matters considered to be of immediate concern to them. Thus they are not allowed to vote in matters referring to personnel, administrative and financial issues, curricula or the awarding of doctorates. There are therefore two ways to interpret these different rights to vote: they can be distinguished depending on the interests of students according to the subject, or the distinction can be made depending on skills. In either case it is difficult to comprehend why students should not vote on financial matters or whether the argument is due to real competences or is simply a formal argument to limit the right to vote.

In fact, the reality is that despite efforts from the university sector to incorporate the debate on student participation into its usual operation, the presence of students in administrative bodies is symbolic and at times non-existent. Even within the reform process of the Bologna Plan one of the greatest weaknesses is student participation, as reported by the European Students' Union (ESU), which notes the absence of regulations to promote participation, and the lack of economic and human resources for student unions (Soler et al., 2011).

Equally, in agreement with Lüscher-Mamashela (2013) as regards the motives for student participation in the government of universities, it is worth noting those relating to their own interests as students can be considered consumers of the services provided by the university, meaning that these interests can be only temporary.

Finally, and in keeping with Jover, López & Quiroga (2011), we can state that there is a contrast between the stance maintained by students who complain of a lack of infrastructures to facilitate their participation, and that of other sectors of the university community who highlight the lack of student interest in taking an active part in governing bodies, starting with their minimal involvement in the election process for student representatives. In this respect there are numerous statutes where the functions to be met by students reflect commitment to an active and responsible presence in the university, and specifically active and responsible participation in meetings of the collegiate bodies to which they have been elected, in addition to contributing to the aims and running of the university.

3.2 Governing Bodies in Spanish Universities

Below we give an overall description of Spanish single members and collegiate governing bodies, after which we will reflect the percentage of student participation found within the different governing bodies of Spanish universities.

Developing Article 27, specifically section 10, and Title Eight of the Spanish Constitution (1978), the Law for University Reform (L.R.U.) is presented as a legal framework for current university studies. This law details a new distribution of university teaching competences between the State, the Autonomous Communities and the Universities themselves, achieving some degree of democratisation of control and management of Spanish universities.

The central idea of the L.R.U. is that the University does not exclusively belong to any of the sectors that make up the educational community but rather constitutes a true public service relating to national and regional interests. The different collegiate bodies that appear in all Spanish universities (España, 1983) were created in response to this.

The research carried out suggests that Spanish universities follow a fairly uniform pattern of government and organisation, and are ruled by single members and collegiate bodies. The single members are:

- Rector, maximum authority and representative of the university, elected by the University Faculty from the professors who belong to it.
- Vice-rectors coordinate and direct specific sectors of university activity and are appointed by the rector.
- General Secretary, also appointed by the rector, attester to the agreements established by the university governing bodies.
- Financial manager, in charge of the economic and administrative services of the university, and also appointed by the rector.

In addition, the collegiate bodies in charge of the government and organisation within the university are made up of:

- Social Council: body for social participation, made up of representatives from the Governing Board, including teachers, students, and administrative and service staff, as well as representing “social interests” in agreement with current legislation.
- University Faculty: representing the University Community, top academic authority body. Made up of the rector and representative teachers, students, and administrative and service staff.
- Governing Board: in charge of executing the guidelines established by the University Faculty. Made up of the rector, vice-rectors, general secretary, financial manager and representatives from each of the sectors concerned: teachers, students, and administrative and service staff.
- Department Council: decision-making and representative body of the university departments. Made up of all the teachers of the department, a student representative, and another representative for administrative and service staff.
- Board of the School: representative of the university community in each of the university centres. Made up of the dean, vice-deans, secretary, heads of department and representatives of teaching staff, students, and administrative and service staff.
- Institute Council: representative body of the University Institute, made up of the director, teaching staff associated to the centre, research fellows, and administrative and service staff of the institute.

Below we include a comparison table based on official data for student participation in collegiate governing bodies of different Spanish universities (University of Salamanca, 2011; University of Oviedo, 2010; Autonomous University of Madrid, 2009; University of Seville, 2008; University of Cádiz, 2007; University of Valencia, 2006; University of Murcia, 2004; University of León, 2003).

Table 1. Student participation in Collegiate Bodies of Spanish Universities

	Social Council	University Faculty	Governing Board	Department Council	Board of the School	Institute Council
Autonomous University of Madrid	6 members of the university community, of whom 1 is a student (17%)	303 members, of whom 81 are students (27%)	56 members, of whom 6 are students (11%)	25% students	27% students	25% students
Cádiz	6 members, of whom 1 is a student (17%)	303 members, of whom 84 are students (28%)	56 members, of whom 5 are students (9%)	28% of members are students, and 1/5 students must be from the third cycle	The Faculty Delegate as ex-officio member and 28% of students	3 doctoral students out of 5 members (60%)
León	6 members, of whom 1 is a student (17%)	Represented by 25% students of whom 2% must be in the third cycle.	56 members of whom 5 are students (9%)	20% students	25% students	The number of research students or third cycle students is not specified
Murcia	20 members, of whom 1 is a student (5%)	75 students out of 300 representatives (25%)	6 students out of 50 members (12%)	30% students	30% students	The number of students is not specified

Oviedo	25 members of whom 1 is a student (4%)	303 members, of whom 75 are students (25%)	5 students out of 53 members (9%)	10% students	30% students	Composition is not specified
Salamanca	31 members of whom 1 is a student (3%)	300 members, of whom 80 are students (26%)	6 students out of 52 members (11%)	25% students	25% students	10% doctoral and post-graduate students
Seville	6 members, of whom 1 is a student (17%)	300 members, of whom 93 are students (31%)	34 members of the educational community, of whom 11 are students (32%)	30% students from first and second cycle. One student from third cycle	30% students from first and second cycle	30% students from first and second cycle. One student from third cycle
Valencia	26 members of whom 1 is a student (3%)	300 members of whom 75 are students (25%)	55 members of whom 5 are students (9%)	Students total half the number of scientific and research staff	30% students	Students total half the number of scientific and research staff

The previous table shows the differences in student participation in governing and administrative bodies according to the statutes of the different universities. In this respect we observe how in the composition of the Social Council there are two groups of participation percentages: universities such as the Autonomous University of Madrid, or the Universities of Cádiz, León and Seville, with 17% student participation; and the universities of Murcia, Oviedo, Salamanca and Valencia, with percentages around 3%-5%.

In contrast, in the case of the University Faculty the percentage of students is similar in most of the universities, mostly 25% and 28% with the exception of the University of Seville, where the percentage is higher (31%). Equally, in the Governing Board we can observe the same situation, with parity between the participation percentages, as they range from 9% to 12%, except in the University of Seville, where the percentage increases to 32%.

As regards the Department Council, there is a wider variety with participation percentages ranging from 10% to 30%, and with the University of Oviedo showing the lowest percentage. In the Board of the School we observe similar participation percentages in the different universities ranging from 25% to 30%. Finally, as regards the Institute Council, data collection was more difficult since the student participation of this government body is not featured in the statutes. However, we can state that there is disparity in the participation percentages, comparing for instance the 60% contemplated by the University of Cadiz to the 10% contemplated in the University of Salamanca.

In general, as regards governing bodies we find lower student participation percentages in the Social Council and Governing Board, with the latter showing the lowest percentage. In contrast, higher participation percentages are found in the University Faculty, Department Council, Board of the School and Institute Council, especially the Board of the School, which has the highest percentage.

4. Discussion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the participation of all the major governing groups within the university provides benefits and particularly an improvement in the quality of the decisions aiding the progress of the institution. In the case of students the benefits of taking part in decision-making lead to an improved educational potential, which can also be seen as a means to attain the educational objectives of the university.

Based on this we list a series of proposals for improving student participation in the governing bodies of Spanish universities. Firstly, following the analysis carried out on student participation percentages in governing and administrative bodies in Spanish universities our main proposal is to study the role of students in these governing bodies and determine whether representation percentages should be increased or reduced. Observation of different functions of each of the governing and administrative bodies suggests the need for greater or lesser student representation depending on the importance of the actions developed by the relevant government body for the student community. We also list below other proposals for improvement based on the information compiled previously:

- The weight of the student sector within governing and administrative bodies should be the same as the other sectors, awarding it the role it deserves.
- Electoral processes should be expedited and simplified, as students are usually excluded from these processes due to their complexity.

- An increased promotion of information on the electoral process and on the representation, functions and rights of students, given that lack of information is another barrier to the participation of this sector.
- Support of freedom of association through the creation of spaces and the encouragement of situations in which students can create networks relating to student participation in the university.
- Provision of the necessary training for students to fully exercise their right to participation.
- Promotion of student involvement in these processes through increased awareness of the importance and impact on the sector as well as motivation strategies relating to participation.

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