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STUDENT INVOLMEMENT IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE: A NEED FOR NEGOTIATED EDUCATIONAL AIMS?

ABSTRACT. The paper argues for the need to increase student participation in university governance, especially in relation to high-level decision-making concerning the aims and mission of tertiary institutions. The paper examines the arguments in favour of, and against, student participation in university governance. It also provides an overview of the findings of recent empirical studies on the topic. The need for a process of negotiation in the setting of higher education aims is emphasised and several suggestions are offered regarding ways of increasing student involvement in the aims-setting process.

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to define the aims of higher education have, over the years, yielded a plethora of perspectives on what is to constitute a desirable end for education at this level. The disparity among educational thinkers regarding educational aims is a natural consequence of the impossibility of adopting one non-contested framework by which to view the mission and functions of the university (Barnett 1997, 2000a). In the absence of a unifying idea of higher education, its numerous stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, parents, employers, policy makers etc.) often choose to subscribe to the mission statement that best suits their own interests.

Contemporary universities face difficulties in meeting the demands and expectations of their publics, leading to what has been described as a crisis in higher education and an end to the monopolistic status of the university in the production of knowledge (Barnett 2000b; Clark 1988, 1998; Delanty 1998; Scott 1984). The new market orientation adopted by tertiary institutions in their attempt to survive in an increasingly competitive higher education arena is associated with a "customer" focus in educational planning and decision-making. In this context, traditional forms of university governance are rejected in favour of more transparent mechanisms with greater student participation in decision-making (Daalder & Shils 1982; De Boer & Goedegebuure 2001; Jones, Shanahan & Goyan 2001). As a result, the extent of student participation in university governance has increased steadily in many countries since the 1960s (Zuo & Ratsoy 1999). The case of Canadian universities can serve in the way of an illustration:

By the mid-1970s, students participated in 78% of Canadian university boards (Houwing & Kristjanson 1975). This percentage continued to increase in the following decades and, in 1995, students were reported to account for 92% of board membership in Canadian universities (Jones & Skolnik 1997).

The present study examines the importance of student involvement in governance for the effective management and future development of universities. In this context, the author seeks to address two main issues:

- The extent to which students should participate in the governance of their universities, especially in relation to high-level decision-making regarding the aims and mission of tertiary institutions. (A high-level decision could concern, for instance, the extent to which a market orientation should be adopted by the university and the type of strategies to be employed in relation to it.)
- The required form of this participation, if it is to contribute significantly to the improvement and growth of tertiary institutions.

The paper begins with an examination of the degree of student involvement in the formulation of the ideas which shape the aims and mission of universities. It then proceeds to examine the first issue defined above, i.e. the need for, and the importance of, student participation in university governance. There are two main parts in this section: the first presents the main arguments in favour of participatory decision-making; the second provides an overview of the findings of empirical studies on student involvement in university governance. Finally, the author tackles the second main issue of the paper and provides a set of suggestions on ways of involving students in university governance, especially in relation to the aims-setting process.

STUDENT INPUT IN THE FORMULATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AIMS

The establishment of the first universities (Bologna, and shortly after, Paris and Oxford) was not based on an expressed view of the mission of higher education. In fact, it was many centuries later that the first attempt was made to define the aim of universities: Cardinal Newman (1852) in the Idea of a University defined the main function of the university as the cultivation of what he described as "intellectual culture" (pp. 94–95). Newman's humanistic conception of higher education dominated educational thought until the 20th century, when the research idea of the university began to emerge. The research era was marked by a clear shift from the study of the

humanities to the pursuit of scientific research. To some, this represented an abandonment of the true idea of the university in favour of a relativistic, utilitarian and fragmented view of higher learning. For instance, Robert Hutchins' book *Higher Learning in America* (1937) set out his concerns over what he considered to be the demise of the American university. Such concerns continue to fuel debates on the aims and orientation of modern universities (Barnett 1990, 1994, 1997; Peters 1979; Aviram 1992).

Recent attempts to approach the question of educational aims at the higher level have been conducted amidst much dispute and controversy. Educational thinkers have long been critical of the adoption of a market orientation on the part of universities, which has led institutions of higher learning to align their mission and aims to the demands of the labour market (Niblett 1990; Neave 1992). The controversy over marketisation and, in a wider context, over what constitutes acceptable aims in higher education is the natural consequence of the multiplicity and diversity of viewpoints on what is admittedly a contested concept (higher education) (Barnett 1985). It is thus to be expected that different individuals and publics will have their distinct, and often conflicting, perceptions of higher education and its mission. However, a brief overview of the idea of the university in history suggests that the task of formulating educational aims has been confined to educators, scholars, and government planners and policy makers. The debates concerning the role and mission of higher education society did not involve the student public as educational thinkers considered it unnecessary, and even harmful, to do so. Thus, the views of students were never allowed to have an influence on what emerged as the idea of the university at different points in time. Even the recent adoption of a market orientation on the part of universities has been based on assumptions and conjectures made by university authorities and governments concerning the nature of students' and employers' needs. I now turn to the reasons for the absence of student input in the formulation of the idea of the university, and in a broader context, of higher education.

The rationale of exclusion

Why were students excluded from debates concerning the aims of universities? One main reason for this exclusion appears to be the prevalent assumption among educational thinkers that the task of formulating educational aims belongs solely to the teacher or educator. R.S. Peters (1973), for instance, considers the formulation of educational aims to be the prerogative of the educator. Even though he acknowledges that "countless 'aims of education' ... are possible", he suggests that the content of such aims should vary according to the "features of a worth-while form of

life any *educator* thinks it most important to foster" (my italics) (p. 17). Thus, even though educational thinkers acknowledge the importance of the student in the higher education process, they are reluctant to involve students in the setting of the aims of higher education. For Ronald Barnett (1988: 249), the "key factor – the principal educator – in the process of higher education is the student", a fact which, in his opinion, calls for a certain degree of humility on the part of academicians in terms of their influence on the educational system. The attainment of the aims of higher education is a task which, according to Barnett, belongs to the student. However, at the same time, the author rejects the suggestion that aims held and defined by the student public should serve as the overall aims of higher education. He believes that a statement of aims is simply a specification of "the presuppositions of the concept of higher education" and doubts whether "the student needs to have any set of aims in front of him/her in order to be able to realise them" (1988: 247). Consequently, in this context, students are expected to adopt and act out a vision of higher education that is not their own.

In addition to the reluctance of educational thinkers to involve students in the setting of aims in higher education, numerous explanations for the exclusion of the student public can be found in the literature on university governance. The following arguments against participation have been frequently put forward (see, for example, Wood 1993): students may not be in a position to effectively promote the interests of their groups; the participation of students in boards can lead to conflict of interest; and students lack sufficient knowledge and experience in matters of decision-making. Other reasons offered for the limited involvement of students include their presumed lack of interest in matters of governance, the potentially negative effect of their involvement on their performance, the limited time of their enrolment, and the need to exclude them from the discussion of "sensitive" issues such as student grading and faculty promotion (Lee 1987; Zuo & Ratsoy 1999). Critics of student participation have also suggested that greater student involvement will shift the existing balance of power at universities and lower academic standards (Lee 1987; Lijphart 1983).

Arguments such as the above are to a considerable extent based on legitimate concerns. It is generally accepted, for instance, that student representatives may not adequately represent the student public. Moreover, their involvement in personnel and tenure decisions may, if allowed, lead to confrontation and empathy between them and academic staff. However, both the review of organisational theory in the area of shared governance and the examination of empirical research on the issue suggest the need

for greater involvement of the student public in the aims-setting process of their universities.

THE NEED FOR PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

The views of educational thinkers

The topic of participatory decision-making in education has been studied mostly in relation to teacher participation in school decisions. The involvement of teachers in decision-making has been found to exert a positive effect on their dedication and commitment to teaching (Hoy & Miskel 1996). Such findings, of course, are only partly transferable to student participation in governance since students, unlike school teachers, are not subordinates in the higher education system. Students are stakeholders, or to use Barnett's terminology once more, the key factor in higher education.

The literature on university governance is replete with arguments in favour of student participation in decision-making. Participation is viewed as an expression of the ideal of democracy embodied in the notion that all stakeholders must be granted an equal voice in decision-making. Participatory democracy is believed to contribute to the personal growth and development of students by enabling them to learn by example, through the adoption of democratic principles in real life situations (Lee 1987). In this manner, participants become more capable of defending their interests while, at the same time, they learn to view their priorities in the context of the overall mission of the organisation. According to the proponents of student participation in academic governance, the importance of the student public in the education process makes it necessary for tertiary institutions to take into account their opinions and concerns. For, students are after all the actual consumers of education and any decision on academic matters will have a direct impact on them (Gould 1973; McGrath 1970). Moreover, the type and quality of the education received while at university can be expected to have a major influence on the student's future career and life opportunities. Given the importance of higher education for the subsequent well-being of graduates, students are entitled to a voice in decision-making that concerns their own future (Lee 1987). The lack of student involvement, especially in relation to high-level decisions concerning the mission of universities, may encourage university authorities to disregard or marginalise issues of importance to their key public.

The benefits of student participation in university governance are not restricted to those associated with the well-being of individual students. They also concern the organisation itself: The practice of participatory

democracy allows for the easier implementation of decisions in that decisions taken after the consultation of all stakeholders are, on average, easier to translate into practice. Additionally, the involvement of students in governance can facilitate the evaluation of curricula and teaching practices through the identification and correction of weaknesses in programmes and instruction (Lee 1987). Student participation can also help build a healthy organisational climate at universities by promoting an atmosphere of openness, communication, solidarity and trust (Wood 1993). The presence of trust can, in turn, reduce the likelihood of confrontation and conflict between administrators and students or faculty and students.

Given that shared governance through student participation in decision-making appears to be beneficial for both students and their universities, the next question to be addressed concerns the extent and nature of this participation. The literature on organisational decision-making suggests that stakeholders should be involved in decisions that they view as important (Bridges 1967; Hoy & Miskel 1996; Hoy & Tarter 1993, 1995). If stakeholders do not have a personal stake in the outcome and/or possess limited expertise in the topic under discussion, they are likely to perceive the decision situation as unimportant. Involvement under these circumstances is not only unnecessary but also harmful as stakeholders, realising that they are not in a position to join the debate as informed participants, may experience disappointment and frustration (Hoy & Miskel 1996). It thus appears important for student involvement in decision-making to extend to high-level, strategic issues as opposed to routine, procedural matters. If their involvement is restricted to the latter, they are likely to consider their participation as a ritual, which is used to give the impression of shared governance when in fact the important decisions are left to the more powerful (Duke, Showers & Imber 1980). Consequently, decisions that concern the very aims and purpose of the university call for the participation of all stakeholders, including students. In this decision situation, students are likely to possess both the interest and the expertise required for their effective participation: the former will be the result of their presence and experience at the university, which will afford them with views concerning future changes and directions; the latter will concern the knowledge they gain as recipients of the educational offering of their institution, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

In addition, the participation of students in the aims-setting process is important for another reason. As suggested by Hoy and Miskel (1996), stakeholder participation in decision-making will yield positive results only in cases where stakeholders embrace the mission of the organisation. Any conflict between the goals of individual stakeholders and organisa-

tional aims will lead to decision outcomes that are not in the best interest of the organisation. Taking this one step further, the best way to ensure the commitment of stakeholders to the mission of the organisation is to include them in the process of its formulation. If the views of the student public are not taken into account in the formulation of the mission of their university, their commitment to the accomplishment of this mission cannot be taken for granted.

An additional danger associated with limited student involvement in high-level decision-making is outlined by Winch (1996), who associates participatory democracy with the accountability of public education. He argues that for public education to uphold its accountability, its aims must be agreed upon by all interested parties. He notes a strong lack of clarity in the aims of British education at all levels and warns that in cases where the main aims of education are not agreed upon by those concerned, there is a danger of "covert" aims dominating the operation of the public education system. In this case, aims will be set by the most powerful groups at the expense of the less commanding publics. To avoid this danger, the author suggests that aims should be set through a process of negotiation whereby the interested parties accept the need for a compromise in the prioritisation of aims and values in education.

The views of stakeholders

In what follows, I report the findings of empirical studies on the topic of student participation in university governance. The selected studies report the views of students regarding their involvement in the governance of their universities. An attempt was made to include all studies conducted in the last two decades and to report findings from as many countries and regions as possible.

Wood (1993) used case studies to examine faculty, student, and support-staff participation in the process of governance at three community colleges in Alberta, Canada. Data were gathered through 51 interviews with public board members, college presidents, presidents of associations, as well as faculty, student and support-staff members. The influence of staff and student members on the board's decision-making was considered to range from limited to moderate. Presidents and public board members said that only in a few cases they were "influenced considerably" by these groups (Wood 1993: 6). However, respondents considered the participation of students and faculty to be necessary stating several reasons cited in the literature for their belief.

In a later study, Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) also studied participatory governance at the University of Alberta. In contrast to Wood (1993) who had grouped student, faculty and support staff in one category, Zuo and

Ratsoy studied exclusively the role of the student public. The authors gathered data through semi-structured interviews with 31 respondents, who participated in the decision-making processes of the main governing and student bodies of the university. Information was also collected through reviews of the minutes of the main bodies and observations of six of their meetings. Once again, respondents were favourable towards student participation as they considered students to be capable of making significant contributions to the quality of decision outcomes.

Probably the largest collection of studies on the topic is found in a Council of Europe Project on Education for Democratic Citizenship (CC-HER Bureau 2000). The project was designed to examine the practices of universities in Europe and the US in relation to the promotion of democratic values and practices. In this framework, studies were conducted in 15 European universities in different countries, and 15 colleges and universities in the United States.[1] Interviews with students (and other stakeholders such as academics) were used to measure the extent of student participation in university governance. Students also reported on their satisfaction with institutional practices. According to the findings, the participation of students in the governance of their universities was weak. Students reported their limited involvement and influence in both the European and the US studies. Respondents were concerned about what they perceived as lack of transparency and consultative democratic processes in the governance process. For instance, students at the University of Bergen[2] were dissatisfied with the extent of their influence on decision-making in relation to several issues. Specifically, they reported that the university did not regularly consult them on academic issues nor did it encourage any involvement on their part in local politics and community matters. They also felt that a small elite of student representatives dominated student opinion, a belief that was shared by most student groups in both Europe and the United States. Faculty members, on the other hand, expressed more positive views on the degree to which the university offered sufficient participation opportunities to its students. However, they also pointed to the need for changes in current practice and acknowledged that the university did not provide adequate information to its students. Information on students' rights, in particular, was found to be lacking at most institutions. At the University of Milan, there were no publications on students' rights. At the Lithuanian Vytautas Magni University, students felt that the institution did not do enough to inform them about their rights, leading them to rely on other students as sources of relevant information.

Additional evidence is found in a recent study of participatory decision-making conducted by Obondo (2000) at the Kenyatta University and the

University of Nairobi. The author investigated the nature and the extent of student involvement in policy-making in higher education in an attempt to examine the link between decision-making practices and student turmoil at the two universities. Focus group interviews and questionnaires were used to collect information from 45 administrators and 100 students. About two thirds of respondents (64%) stated that they were not at all involved in policy decisions at their universities. Moreover, they pointed out that after decisions were made, they were not included in the implementation process. Effective student participation was not possible due to a number of organisational constraints, which included unnecessary bureaucracy and the lack of adequate information. The majority of students (68%) viewed their representatives with mistrust and preferred to take up problems individually with university administrators.

Overall, the empirical data on the topic of student participation in university decision-making suggest that all stakeholders, and especially the students themselves, consider shared governance an essential ingredient of organisational practice at their institution. However, the data also suggest that formal provisions for shared governance at higher education institutions are often not translated into actual democratic practices (CC-HER Bureau 2000). Students appear to be dissatisfied with what they consider to be limited opportunities for participation in decision-making and expect greater transparency from their institutions. The following section focuses on measures that can be used to increase student involvement in governance, especially in relation to high-level decisions.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN THE AIMS-SETTING PROCESS

A first set of measures for increasing student participation in governance is suggested by the findings of the Council of Europe Project on Education for Democratic Citizenship. The fact that students are not aware of their participation rights is clearly a factor which hinders involvement. Universities should inform their students about their rights through the distribution of relevant publications and the placement of information on their internet websites. In addition, faculty and administrators should encourage students to participate in governance since the mere awareness of the right to participate may not lead to higher involvement in a climate of general passivity and indifference. The offering of courses that explicitly address democratic practices and civic education has been suggested as one way of providing this encouragement (CC-HER Bureau 2000).

In addition, for other stakeholder groups to effectively promote student participation, a positive attitude towards student input is required at all organisational levels. In this context, it is important to educate the

members of governing bodies on the merits of student participation in high-level decision-making. If board members lack the understanding of the benefits (both individual and organisational) associated with increased student input, they are likely to resist measures aimed at providing students with additional participation opportunities. Consequently, education programmes and orientation programmes for new board members (Jones, Shanahan & Goyan 2001) can help build a more receptive climate for student input.

A second set of measures concerns the modification of the aims-setting process if it is to allow for greater student involvement in the formulation of the mission of universities. It must be borne in mind, of course, that the process to be followed in the attempt to formulate the aims of universities can be expected to vary to a great extent across institutions and educational systems. However, for any such attempt to possess a reasonable chance of success, the process should be such as to afford all interested parties with an equal opportunity to express their views on the aims of higher education. The findings of the empirical studies presented in the paper point to a strong generalised belief among both students and faculty that a small elite dominates decision-making at their universities (CC-HER Bureau 2000). Such beliefs can be expected to act as a deterrent for students who are unable to imagine a place for themselves in existing power structures. The challenge for universities is thus to devise mechanisms that can ensure the adequate representation of all views in the aims-setting process. For this to be possible, and especially in the case of large publics' survey research may be required to obtain information on the opinions of a representative sample of the relevant group. Surveys of student opinions should be considered before important decisions are made in order to ensure that the feelings of the student body are known to the members of governing bodies. In addition to surveys, the office of student affairs could gather relevant information through the establishment of a service for accepting information from, and communicating with, individual students.

Moreover, specific ways of allowing for increased student input in the discussions and debates taking place at board meetings must be identified. Even though students participate in committees at many levels, their presence is often viewed as a formality to satisfy statutory conditions (CC-HER Bureau 2000). One way of increasing the effectiveness of student participation in university committees is to afford more time to student representatives to present their case in meetings. At present, it is common for students to contribute to discussions through brief interventions, which seldom take the form of strong disagreement with prevalent views. There is also a tendency to restrict input to cases where the decision to be made impacts upon the immediate, short-term interest of students (e.g.

decision to dismiss a student). In contrast, student representatives must be encouraged to prepare and present an analysis of important problem situations, which should put forward alternative solutions along with their major strengths and weaknesses. In this manner, they could form an understanding of the complexities associated with decision-making at high levels and view their interests in the context of the broader mission and policy of their institution.

Finally, the effectiveness of mechanisms designed to facilitate student participation in governance needs to be assessed through organisational audits. Audits could be used to map current practices and limitations in the democratic governance of higher education institutions and identify possible remedial measures. The use of audits would allow for the systematic investigation of the views of stakeholder groups on the issue of governance through the gathering of primary data. The empirical studies discussed in the present paper support the use of audits, and survey research, in general, in that they show that the perceptions of stakeholders, and students in particular, are often at odds with the stated goals and statutory provisions of their institutions.

Two objections to the concept of negotiated aims

A number of objections are likely to be raised against the notion of negotiated higher education aims advanced in this paper. The first one may concern the difficulty that all interested parties are bound to face in arriving at commonly accepted statements of aims in higher education. Discord and disagreement on educational priorities are likely to create conflict over higher education aims both within and across publics, making an agreement on a set of aims an unlikely event. It is thus to be expected that the aims-setting process will often be disrupted, if not terminated, by a number of "irreconcilable differences" in the views of the participating individuals.

The likelihood of conflict on the aims of higher education, however, does not in any way negate the merits of a process of negotiation on educational ends. In fact, a certain degree of disparity is desirable in a healthy debate as its existence will often lead to more informed and wiser choices and decisions. This will be the case if conflicts are not allowed to linger indefinitely ultimately leading to a breakdown in communication among the participants of the debate. For such breakdown to be avoided, ways of resolving conflicts need to be identified in advance. Methods of conflict resolution can be considered and utilised in cases where there is a danger of educational debates being transformed into fruitless and sharp confrontations among participants. Consequently, the possibility of conflict need not discourage any attempt to arrive at commonly accepted statements of

aims in higher education. It should, however, be acknowledged as a serious obstacle in the aims-setting process and dealt with accordingly.

A process of negotiation in the formulation of higher education aims is likely to be criticised on additional grounds: The concept of negotiated aims may not appeal to some of the publics of higher education and most notably to academics and educational thinkers. Negotiation, as a process, may sound appropriate in cases of political differences or out-of-court legal settlements; in the case of higher education, however, negotiation may be viewed as a process that will reduce educational ideals into managerial-style statements of purpose with an associated lack of vision, depth and sophistication. In this context, it may be argued that educational thinkers will be deprived of the ability to "think ahead of their time" in proposing new, and sometimes radical, conceptions of higher education aims. They will, instead, be forced to adjust to the constraints imposed by those views which are prevalent among other parties, thus compromising their ideals with respect to higher education.

Such fears with regard to the effect of a process of negotiation on the "quality" of educational aims can be mitigated on two grounds: Firstly, there is no reason to suppose that some publics of higher education will be unable to think ahead in higher education if allowed to participate in the aims-setting process. Students, in particular, are often known to question and challenge existing structures in higher education to a considerable extent. Secondly, it may be true that higher education aims that do not result from a process of negotiation may, on occasion, better qualify as statements of vision in higher education. However, if higher education aims are not adapted to some extent to the reality of their times, as reflected in the views and aspirations of the various interested parties, they will have little, if any, success in gaining the acceptance and support of those involved in higher education. They will thus remain one party's or one individual's vision of higher education, a vision which will resist translation into positive and meaningful educational action.

NOTES

1. The universities included in the European study were the following: Tirana (Albania), Tuzla (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Cergy Pontoise (France), Oldenburg (Germany), Thessaly (Greece), Jozsef Attila (Hungary), Milano (Italy), Vytautas Magni (Lithuania), Bergen (Norway), Mikolaja (Poland), Samara (The Russian Federation), Ankara (Turkey), SS. Cyril and Methodus (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Tavrida National (Ukraine), Queen's Belfast (United Kingdom).

   The universities included in the US study were the following: Catholic, Clark-Atlanta, Denver, Florida International, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Rutgers-Camden,

San Fransisco State, SUNY at Buffalo, Pennsylvania, Texas-El Paso, and Swarthmore, Trinity and Wheaton Colleges.

2. For a detailed account of the research carried out at the University of Bergen, see Bleiklie (2000).

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