

# Student Impact in Higher Education Globally

## European Kick Off event with Dr Manja Klemenčič

### 7th July 2021

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Dr Klemenčič opens with the theory on student agency.



Check out:  
[https://scholar.harvard.edu/manja\\_klemencic](https://scholar.harvard.edu/manja_klemencic)

- Student agency and the impact of students on college
  - *theory of student agency* as students' capabilities to intervene in and influence their learning pathways and educational environments
  - The study of student politics and student governments in higher education
  - Student voice in university quality
- SIHEG – Student Impact on Higher Education Globally
- Also: SCLT, QA, Internationalization, Civic role of HE, Academic profession, HE reforms

(SCLT is Student Centred Learning and Teaching).

Student agency is the capability of students to have impact on HE, whether as individual or as collective.

There is a lot of scholarly literature on the effects of HE on students, but almost no recognition on the impact that students have on HE: Student politics, representation, activism.

→ ***What does student power concretely mean?***

Since the 1960s social reforms have not been studied. After Lipset there are just some specific examples like Chile, Canadian spring, UK attempt to avoid tuition fees increase, as well as South African fees must fall campaign.

Nowadays surveys and QA involvement (paid jobs) are the trend for student agency in HE. Students are seen more as consumers (in neoliberal systems where students can use their status as consumers to achieve rights and outcomes vis a vis the administrations).

Example of the downsides to the consumerist approach: US private HEIs invest a lot of money in luxury student hostels, at the same time they're not investing in quality of teaching and learning and huge concern on what they're learning. A study measured the changes of

transferable skills like critical thinking between freshman and senior year and there was little to no change).

→ ***Manja's attempt is to widen the scholarly focus on student agency.***

## Student unions' role in widening scholarships on student agency

→ ***How do we define student unions/ governments/ councils/ guilds/ parliaments - "representative of associations of students"?***

General definitions from the participants:

Organisations that unite students who have roles in participating in the policy and governance of higher education; Representation of students and their interests, for example, by working closely with the university councils; student representatives stand up for and help out all students or the organisations representing them; student organisations are there to safeguard the rights already achieved in laws.

Country examples:

- In France, La FAGE does student representation work and we also provide student services to improve students' living and studying conditions.
- For the Czech Republic, SK RVŠ is mainly the advisory body for the Czech Council of Higher Education.
- UDU is a national students' union which operates inside student representative bodies and advocates for students' rights both in the representative bodies and through campaigns on various issues.
- POFEN fights for student rights and solves the student problems. POFEN is now recognized as an equal social partner in all decision-making centers that directly or indirectly concern students and young people.
- ANOSR is a national students union, it represents all of the students on national level and in relationship to the Education Minister and Governments. ANOSR is defined by student participation in democratic processes and voluntary services. Democracy is one of the 12 principles that guide the union life and also a criteria for its members.

***“Student governments are a distinct form of political institutions which organize, aggregate, and intermediate interests of higher education students, provide services for students, and organise student activities.”***

From Klemenčič M. (2020) Student Governments. In: Teixeira P., Shin J. (eds) Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions. Springer, Dordrecht.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1\\_614-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_614-1).

Research

- Investigated through lens of higher education governance arrangements (justifications of student participation in governance) (Ratsoy & Zuo 1999; Michelsen & Stensker 2011; Menon 2005; Klemenčič 2012, 2014, 2018; Luescher 2014)
- Effects of involvement on student representatives' civic learning and future (political) and other employment opportunities (Brookes 2015)
- BUT rarely in terms of the effects of student representation on academic and social college life (Lizzio & Wilson 2009).

### Key concepts of student unions:

- ❖ Organisational resources
- ❖ Membership: voluntary vs automatic
- ❖ Governance Structures
- ❖ Organisational Development:
  - Logic of membership: the organisation develops based on the needs of the members (the members dictate the political agenda of the organisation and its structure).
  - Logic of influence: the organisation structure will resemble the structures of the institutions that would like to be influenced (eg. ESU with working groups mirroring the Bologna key topics).
- ❖ Autonomy
- ❖ Legitimacy, both from below (by the represented body, eg. students) and from above (by the other partners and the government).

## Student unions' role in Multi-level governance of HE policies

Rationales for Student Participation in Public Policy Processes in Europe and transnational student associations:

## Transnational student associations in the European multi-level governance of higher education policies

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### Abstract

The article seeks to advance understanding of the involvement of transnational student associations in European governance of higher education policies within the European Union (EU) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Specifically, the article explores the mechanisms for interest intermediation that exist for transnational student associations in both policy arenas. Three transnational student associations stand out in terms of their involvement: European Students' Union (ESU), Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and European Students' Forum (AEGEE). The findings point to two distinct models of student interest intermediation in European policy-making. Within the EU, the European Commission interacts with all three transnational student associations; however, ESU and ESN participate in more expert and working groups. The roles afforded to each association in relation to the European Commission are demarcated and functionally differentiated. Within EHEA, in neo-corporatist fashion, ESU, as a representative platform of national student unions, holds representational monopoly. In the EHEA and the EU, the involvement of transnational student associations in policy-making can be attributed to the evolving nature of transnational governance regimes in which participation of transnational student associations not only brings expertise to but also aids the legitimacy of the policy processes and outcomes.

financial resources available for political activity. According to Peter van der Hijden, former European Commission official:

[s]everal factors can make a transnational (student) organization effective and influential at European level: 1) Credibility as a representative, democratic organization rooted at local and national level. 2) Student Officials elected at European level have already a 'career' behind them as elected mandate holders at local and national level. They are young politicians, used to defend and negotiate positions. 3) Student Officials rotate between various positions at European level: working group member, board member, vice-president, president, advisor. This practice results in a remarkable continuity and longer presence at the European scene than many national officials. 4) Once graduated the former student officials continue to be active in the (international) higher education sector (as researcher, policy officer, board member or director), whilst maintaining close contacts with active student officials, thus extending their influence beyond their mandate and maintaining a two-way information flow. 5) A Brussels office, allowing frequent formal and informal contacts with other stakeholder representatives, national- and EU officials. (Email correspondence, 20 September 2016)

# ESU in European decision-making

- Pluralist approach of the European Commission, but more clearly demarcated VS representational monopoly of ESU in EHEA
- Traditional bureaucratic idea of organizing with state actors as rule-setters -> policy network like governance
- Changes in governance regimes offer windows of opportunities for stakeholders = ESU to try to influence "rules of the game".

Nowhere else has the world seen this level of student involvement than in Europe. The way we train student representatives is inconceivable elsewhere.

Worrying developments: neoliberal turn in European Higher Education → Similar to the US, HEI structures are becoming more corporate with external boards that have a lot of power over decisions but no students.

Example from Latvia: *"why should students decide about their study fees? It's like letting passengers decide about the train ticket fares";*

→ **Challenges for the democratisation of student unions:**

- Diversity of student body – finding common interests
- Canvassing student grievances – student interests to form student positions (logic of membership vs logic of influence)
- Corporatization of higher education institutions → devolution of decision authority from democratically elected groups to appointed higher education professionals
  - student representatives – paid student administrators – paid student experts -> challenges of legitimacy, autonomy
  - "co-existence of democratic and consumer dimensions in student interests"
- Continued controversies
  - acceptance of students as "peers"
  - Tokenistic involvement
  - "domestication" of students

"Domestication of students": students become too close to the counterparts, in search for personal benefits (eg. letters of recommendation from the administration). That is why it is needed to have accountability to general students of the student unions.

## The SIHEG Research Project - what, why, when, how?

### SIHEG – Student Impact on Higher Education Globally

This research project examines student agency in higher education, maps existing opportunities for students to influence higher education and societies more broadly and investigates student perceptions of impact. Student impact on higher education is conceptualized as students affecting changes in higher education policies and practices and society more broadly.

The guiding research questions for this research project are twofold:

- (1) How students enact agency in higher education (and society at large)?
- (2) How student organizing, student representation and student politics compare across institutions and countries worldwide?

The objective of the research project is to advance the understanding of student agency in higher education and the impact students have on higher education and their societies. The research project is the first large-scale international collaborative research on student agency and impact on higher education globally.

Its revolutionary approach is that the agents themselves are going to do research of their own agency (student unions writing about student politics). It will be the largest and first-ever global dataset on student representation and activism. Students are going to be trained to become researchers so that through this project, the student movement will write its own history, making its case for the relevance of their organisations and the work being done on all levels of representation.

Participation in any part of the research project is voluntary. There is no compensation foreseen for time and effort contributed to the research project.

Nevertheless, it is well worth investing time and attention into this unique and historic opportunity to shape public narrative and visibility on the power of the student movement while in so doing take the lead in directing the advancement of knowledge and actions to enhance student agency and impact in higher education including teaching and training and consultancy work.

#### → ***How will the dataset be collected?***

On the **15th of July** ESU will launch the National-SIHEG (NA- SIHEG) survey via its Board mailing list for national student union leaders to complete until **9th August 2021**. Further details about the survey are found in the Annex of this Transcript.

Throughout August and September a team of co-editors from our Executive Committee will collect and analyse NUS' responses in order to write the European chapter of the volume Student Unions: A Global Perspective.

#### → ***Can my National Union of Students (NUS) participate further in this research?***

Yes (but NOT mandatory for all NUSes)! Within each regional chapter, the editorial team is tasked to author **(5-8 but can be more) national case studies** on student impact.

This [link](#) provides further information. Those unions willing to commit towards the national case studies would:

- Distribute and promote a **Local-SIHEG (LO-SIHEG) survey** for local student representatives among their members (in view of obtaining at least 40 % response rate from local student representatives from member unions). Survey will be launched 15 AUGUST until 15 SEPTEMBER 2021.
- Be willing to conduct **research** leading to a chapter to be submitted to the edited volume Student Unions: A Global Perspective. This will be done between 15 AUGUST - 15 OCTOBER 2021 and includes:
  - reviewing any literature published on their student union,
  - conduct expert interviews with their national stakeholders and
  - analyze formal documents (e.g., laws on higher education, statutory documents of the organization, etc.),
- Participate in a research training workshop, given by Dr Manja Klemencic between the 9 - 13th August (tentatively 12th 3:00 - 4:30 CEST) for the purposes of developing research skills and for collaborative work on the joint publications.

### **ANNEX: The National-SIHEG (NA- SIHEG) survey**

The survey will not be long in order to allow NUSes more freedom to give extensive and critical answers - short answers will not help create a quality comparative chapter. NUSes are encouraged to check in with alumni and to supplement their answers with as many references that you know of/ find to provide a comprehensive past-present-future outlook on the impact of their national movements.

## **NAT-SIHEG Survey for National Student Representatives**

### **Themes covered:**

- 1. Models of student representation and interest intermediation at national level**
- 2. Models of student organizations at national level**
- 3. Key issues in student politics in national (or state/province) context**
- 4. Key conceptions of students and modes of student effects on higher education**
- 5. Demographic information**

## Models of student representation and interest intermediation at national (state/province) level

- How are students represented in national politics within your country (state/province)? Please choose a model that works for your country and describe any variations to the model or describe an alternative model.
  - Neocorporatist/Corporatist/Pluralist/Clandestine/Other
- What are relations between student representative associations/movements and the government/state institutions in your country (state/province)? Please choose a model that works for your country and describe it (offer examples of national laws, seats in national government bodies, frequency of meetings, etc.) or describe an alternative model
  - Formalized structures of interest intermediation/Informal/Political party relations/Contentious relations/Other



## Models of student organizations at national (state/province) level

- Please describe the organizational characteristics of the student association or student movement on the national (state/province) level that you are part of.
  - Please consider: membership (also in terms of geographic coverage), funding/budgets and other organizational resources (property/offices, staff), governance structure and composition of elected student leaders (according to relevant diversity markers such as gender, ethnicity, religion, caste, etc.), political agenda (mostly higher education issues or other national political/social issues), most common mode of political action (lobbying and political advocacy or protests, campaigns), other activities (e.g., projects, commercial services, etc.) and any other relevant information.

## Key conceptions of students and modes of student effects on higher education

- a. In my country, students are widely considered important political actors in national elections.
- b. In my country, students are widely considered pupils who must receive knowledge from their teachers.
- c. In my country, students are widely considered troublemakers who need to be disciplined.
- d. In my country, students are widely considered customers to receive higher education services.
- e. In my country, students are widely considered partners in the academic community.
- f. In my country, students are widely considered future workers who need to gain skills for employment.
- g. In my country, students are widely considered future elite.

## Other perceptions

- a. To influence higher education policy in my country, the only way for students is to go on streets.
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- b. In my country, national higher education policies cannot be drafted without involvement of student representatives.
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- c. In my country, it is difficult for a political party to win seats in an election without involvement of representative student associations.
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- d. In my country, students as consumers have clear consumer rights.
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- e. In my country, it is common for elected student representatives to offer expert advice as paid service to government agencies or other national-level bodies.
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- f. In my country, student representatives are respected by government officials.