Students are citizens

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Abstract

Students are members of the higher education community and have a voice in this community. This paper looks at framework within which students are citizens as well as the role of the student in higher education from the perspective of being a 'citizen'. They along with the institution need to understand the benefits as well as the obligations this status affords both, their respective roles, perspectives and contributions but also the constraints and barriers that may be encountered.

Keywords

Citizenship; higher education community; democracy

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Introduction

Students are members of a particular community, the university. In a democratic society access to this community must not be restricted. Human rights include the right to education at all possible levels according to one's capabilities.

This community must be organized in a democratic manner, which encompasses three aspects:

- Its framework must be defined by legislation and – in greater detail – by the government (i.e. the Ministry of Higher Education) as is normal in parliamentary democracies.

- This framework is characterized by self-administration, which must respect the students' right to be involved in decision-making processes.

- It goes without saying that students have the right to fight for their interests within this framework but also beyond it with the goal to change the given conditions.

The members of the university can claim the freedom of research and teaching, also the rights of information, freedom of expression and coalition. However, all these basic rights are not restricted to professors only.

In what follows, we look at the universities as an institution, which provides or should offer its members a wide range of opportunities to act as good citizens.

We cannot go deeper into the fact that many cities which host institutions of higher education are strongly influenced by the universities, as a high percentage of the electorate are students; in cities like Heidelberg or Tübingen they had a strong share of the Green party's majority.

Access

In the 1950s and 1960s, only a minority (less than 10%) of young people went on to study at the universities.

It was a system of self-recruiting elites, (i.e., most of the students have had parents with an academic background and financial security such as public officers, scholars or teachers, free professions (lawyer, architects, medical doctors) etc.).

Today it is almost 50 % of the young generation who study at all kinds of universities. Nevertheless, there is a remarkable regional disparity. The percentage of academic beginners is in metropolitan areas like Munich and its Southern suburbs, for instance, (more than double than in the marginal areas near the German-Polish border).

Today about 2.5 million students are enrolled while many employers already complain a lack of young people who are interested in apprenticeship, vocational training. There seems to be a lack of skilled workers, too. Therefore, the lobby of (small and middle size) enterprises has become very much interested in better (legal) opportunities for young emigrants or even refugees who can fill the gap.

The main issue, however, is social disparity which has been reduced remarkably, but still exists:

If we look at families where the parents have no academic title, we see about 23% of the children who start to study. If the children have academic parents, 77% of them will be enrolled in a university program. The probability, thus to say, to become academic themselves is three times higher for children with academic parents (Middendorff, Apolinarski, Poskowsky, Kandulla & Netz, 2013). According to international research Germany is one of the few OECD countries in

which more than 55% of the young people have the same qualification as their parents, (i.e., no social mobility upwards can be stated (Valle, Normandeau., & Gonzalez, 2015, p. 88)).

Nevertheless, in the last 20 years, the situation has changed remarkably, due to decent grants and bourses for low income families; not least because of the new type of University of Applied Sciences (with study programs in engineering, business, social work, but not medicine, teacher, physics etc.) which attracts young people in the region who want to learn theory and practice of production and services -partly in combination with a sort of apprenticeship in a company.

There might be cases where the children decided to have a vocational training like their parents: they have experienced how content and successful their parents are, and are aware that the parents want them to continue the shop. And of course, today more than ever, they can be sure that an apprenticeship leads probably to a full-time job.

Anyway, the reports of OECD have repeatedly stated the fact, that in Germany more than in other countries academic careers go alongside social shifts (in terms of income and education). This is, however, no longer true; The PISA 2012 results indicate that the interdependence of the parents' sociocultural background and the performance of the children in mathematics is in Germany around the average, like in other counties.

Hence there are less, (but still some) young people who are excluded from the community of students because of the socio-cultural background of their family.

Diversity

Democracy is often enough confused with the principle of majority. Even if it is deemed to be such a procedure only, it begs the question what it means for the minority.

It would be a poor world where decisions are determined by the answer to the question of which side has more persons, versus in which one there are less followers. Even if the following question is crucial, it has to be discussed in advance: what is the difference between the two (or more) sides?

Hence, citizenship is more than voting. In the best-case scenario, it also includes protecting minorities. Why should some people have fewer rights and minor opportunities – only because the majority, the mainstream does not appreciate their way of life?

It is a procedure, but a principle, too.

The principle results from the fact, that human beings are people, individuals, who have the right of self-determination and who like to live their lives according to the choices they make and their interests...

People are that different also due to natural factors, consequently there is no way to ignore diversity. Each society, each community, also institutions of higher education, have to deal with diversity, (i.e., to respect and acknowledge it).

Hence, students are citizens who experience and promote, tolerate and enjoy the diversity of people.

It means firstly that nobody must be discriminated against, (i.e., disadvantaged) because of

- his/her age,

- gender,

- class or social shift,

- religious belief,

- origin (nationality, ethnic belonging)

- "race",

- physical constitution or

- sexual orientation.

There might be some details to be discussed, for instance the term" race" which makes no sense at all, except as a reflection on former racism. So we rather speak about "racist constructions", the country of origin or ethnicity, also about the visual performance, the colour of the skin etc.

States like Germany have listed the human rights in the so called Basic Law (Constitution), including the obligation to make sure that these rights are in force and become reality. In the same way only recently the law has been renewed that nobody must be discriminated: the defensive right is combined with the positive task (affirmative action) to make sure that individuals have **equal opportunities** (AGG, General law on equal treatment). This concern mostly gender, but also the other categories mentioned above.

Equality is the criteria to analyse and estimate the societal reality. It can be applied to judge real practices like an appointment procedure; if anybody is excluded from the procedure (only) because of his/her gender or any other category of the list above, than she/he can appeal to the courts. There is the law of equal treatment which interdicts any discrimination in a formal way, (i.e.,

everybody can accuse public or private employers if s/he feels disadvantaged because of gender, religion, ethnic origin, age or handicaps, also sexual orientation).

Practically speaking diversity has to do with people who practice a certain way of life. There might be situations in which the protagonists act according to different rules.

Nobody can determine what is the right way of living. Nobody has the competences (faculty or right) to determine what and how a family has to look like. Everybody has to accept the *"Eigensinn"* (stubbornness/obstinacy), the "sense" of living" any person or group has defined for him/herself. Citizenship is empowerment, not censorship.

There is however, one limit, one border: the fundamental rights all other people are entitled, too. We have to find a distinction between "a strange way of life" and the damages a person causes to others (for instance children, or him/herself).

It is also true, however, that daily routines, outfit, attitudes and beliefs, the ways of communication between people do differ remarkably. Sometimes they are not only different but opposite. Differing groups cannot but refuse or reject the convictions or habits of the other ones.

Tolerance is no more than the message that I do not like something or someone, but I cannot change him or her.

As the so-called diversity management shows that diversity is not only something an enterprise has to cope with, but a source of better performance. The same is true for universities. They can become communities which prepare, implement and guide its diversity properly, and thus become more effective and efficient than

traditional mono-cultures. A team of different people is supposed to be more creative and find better solutions to problems.

The staff, however, needs to appreciate this diversity and be able to deal with it, not only by force, but with their own conviction. As we all know, from own experience, it is comfortable to socialize with people who share one's values, life style, working area etc.

But, as we know, too, it is interesting and appealing to get to know new people, to face different ways of life etc. Hence diversity management is focusing on strengthening that second aspect: It is our common truth, that we all appreciate diversity.

Institutional participation

Opposite to the aforementioned fact that students can dominate local politics, the situation within the universities is very much the same everywhere: as far as students are concerned with who should represent the students' part in all kinds of boards and reunions, the interest is extremely low. University wide elections have mostly about 2%, sometimes 5% of people who actually vote. It is a well-known fact that there are no or very few candidates.

What can be the reason for that? Some students volunteer in other associations, do sports. Others have to work part-time for financial reasons. Another reason is that young people do not expect the representation to be efficient and worth the effort. As there is no urge (unlike in former generations) to take part in these elections, it is necessary to inform all students which rights and effects the representative work might have. Actually, it is not easy to convince somebody that, for instance, in a

faculty board of 11 members, two students can change anything. The legislation clearly says that in any case the professors must have the majority of the seats.

The context, however, has changed. To some extent universities define themselves as service providers who have to satisfy their clients. As the universities compete with each other with respect to numerous aspects, like sports facilities, care for children, "good atmosphere", students – an even more if they are somehow representatives – are more than welcome to articulate a clear and critical view on campus before any problems or negative events become public.

Hence most faculties listen carefully to what students tell them. Their delegates have more influence than the figures might show. According to the legislation faculty boards, for instance, decide – within a certain framework - upon the budget: how much money is to be spent for additional courses or excursions etc. The board has the full responsibility to decide which practitioners or specialists are invited to give additional seminars. The boards have the central role in appointment procedures for professorships which means that the students vote like other members of the board; under particular conditions (two favourites) their vote can become decisive.

In general, universities and faculties which give utmost transparency to all decision-making processes, can thus encourage students to take part and vote/be elected. Furthermore, as most students are about to get a leading position afterwards, those processes can be an important learning field for them.

The same is true for the so-called student parliament or student council. It is a kind of self-organisation. In most states, all students have to pay to it a small fee

(maybe 20 € per semester) which amounts – according to the high number of students – to some ten thousand Euros per semester. The parliament or council can spend it for various purposes like support of students in need, sports events, excursions, tutoring etc.

One of the most important decisions concerns the so-called semester ticket: all students have to pay a higher fee, but can use public transportation in the entire city or region for free. It is the council or parliament who negotiates with the transportation companies and presents the proposal to the students who have to decide on it in a sort of referendum.

As this is a very clear and concrete decision, which has an impact on one's personal finances, and is controversial due to the different interests of students (some need and use public transportation, others do not), the participation is relatively high. In some universities, the referendum is only valid if more than 30% of the students vote. In general, the participation is much higher, also because the results are mostly very close. Sometimes a narrow majority comes about by 10 or 50 votes.

It is obvious to see that participation is beneficial, and we see this from the fact that the subject is a clear alternative which touches on personal interests; participation is therefore dependent on what weight the individual vote seems to have.

The so-called Bologna process has created the study programs which do not exceed six semesters for a bachelor degree or even four semesters for a master's degree. There is not much time for students to socialize and organise themselves. In the first semester, they are not yet prepared to join the student board and/or run

for the senate or faculty board.   A year later, they prepare themselves for placement in a company or association, and then shortly afterwards, they have to do their final essays.

Hence, in order to encourage students to become active citizens, they should begin their study programs in the first weeks of the first semester with small groups and mentors (i.e., professors, older students) so they can learn about the institutions and each other. During that period, the decision-making processes within the university should become transparent, so that the new student body is given the opportunity to voice their opinion on a variety of issues and learn how and when to participate in the academic life.

It goes without saying that the legal framework and administrative decisions made by the parliament or the ministry have to be judged and if necessary fought against through actions which bring students from different faculties and universities together. These actions are to be addressed to the particular politicians who are in responsible for the particular subject.

Mobilizing students to take actions on concrete issues has been very successful in the last years. If, for instance, there is a lack of seminar rooms, the students – mostly accompanied by the professors – hold the seminars outside, in the open air, in front of the town hall or the Ministry itself. In some cities, there is a dramatic housing problem, including a lack of dormitories: hence students build up tents in the central park or any other public area – which makes the protest visible to everybody.

Evaluation

All universities have introduced evaluation procedures, be it because of the accreditation they need in the Bologna process, or be it due to their understanding as an enterprise that delivers services to clients and has to improve continuously. No doubt, this is an advantage, also with respect to participation and citizenship, as the professors have to become aware that teaching means to make sure that the students do learn in an efficient way.

The traditional arrogance - it is their problem if they do not understand what I am saying - is long gone. But on the other hand, the evaluation (mostly via questionnaires) leads to a sort of arrogance on the students' side: Let us see what "they" do for us.

It is even more the case if – in Germany only in private universities, state universities are free of charge – the students pay fees and expect to be served with "knowledge" as efficiently as possible.

If universities are managed as a company which delivers services and produces knowledge in an efficient and effective way, participation in terms of meetings or discussions seem to be just time consuming. No debates, just certificates are welcome. Many students, too, expect such a system.

In most cases the questionnaires are edited by the university administration and are the same for all study programs. As such they deal with the conditions of studying, (e.g., access to the internet, sports facilities, ending up with questions like "Do you have the impression that the lecturer has prepared the lecture well? Do the professors respond to emails within 24 hours?)

Often enough the students fill out the questionnaires and never get to know what

the poll results were.

The evaluation process, as described, neglects the fact that universities have to be the location where professors and students do learn together. It is a sort of communication which demands the lecturers to do more than "teach" and the students to do more than "listen": Students are not containers which have to be filled.

If students complain (as part of the evaluation) that the lectures have not been efficient, it is mostly because they themselves were not active, diligent, attentive, or interested enough. In general, the evaluation procedures do not deal with the essentials, (i.e., the knowledge and skills themselves). These are debatable. Textbooks give one view. There are arguments against these as well as alternatives students should know. Beside some introductory lectures about the state of the art, contents have to be presented and discussed in a critical manner. Teaching does mean providing students with learning opportunities. It is them who have to work actively. Often enough, as evaluation results show, students (and lecturers, too, also administrative staff) confuse huge packets of data with knowledge: a black board full of formulas or a power point presentation transparent with dozens of statistics are only half the picture.

Learning is a productive way to deal with knowledge: it is the learner who is the active part.

Hence citizenship in scientific processes means the processing of critical thinking, exercising alternative approaches, problem solving, self-determined learning, production of knowledge and application by the students themselves, in close communication with professors and lecturers.

Students have their own view on problems and solutions, and in some cases even more knowledge than lecturers: specialists teaching IT have to strive to be as up to date as their students.

Deliberation

Traditionally, in German universities (like in most other countries), there was a sort of list of topics which have to be covered during the semester. The syllabus was like "stuff," the students have to go through or, even better, the food they have to consume.

Due to the Bologna process, nowadays, there has to be a handbook for every bachelor or program which informs the student about the details (so-called modules) and defines the capacities and competences the students are expected to acquire. Transparency is the first step! Citizenship means you know where you are, the context you find yourself in and the direction you are moving in.

The module descriptions in terms of competences end the tradition that each professor speaks about" his topics" regardless whether they fit in with the others and/or are important for the program or not. The main progress, however, is given by the fact that the module descriptions do not simply define pieces of useful knowledge but also skills and attitudes (values). Thus, the studying citizen can recognize the purpose this or that seminar or lecture can serve.

Learning processes can be better judged as they are defined as output, in terms of knowledge, skills and values.

There are many truths. This might be more obvious for social sciences, the

humanities than for chemistry, medicine or engineering. Of course, there are facts you need not discuss. But which ones?

Just let us think about, for instance, the fact that a particular medication does help a patient with a particular disease – but other patients not. In most cases the "right" drug has to be found and tested.

Physicians should know how to calculate particular effects of gravity – but nobody has really understood what gravity is. Its impact can be analysed yet its essence is a couple of conclusions from it.

Citizens have to think about the effects and impacts of their practice, in daily life and as experts in their profession. Take engineering as an example. In some areas of Germany, so close to the Polish border, lignite is mined by the open-cast method. While processing the rocks which contain iron, the iron gets in touch with the air and starts to erode – the iron oxides seep into the groundwater and creeks, from there into the rivers – with severe problems for drink water some hundred kilometres away. This is just one example which shows that an interdisciplinary approach and a sense of sustainability are important. Professional standards and active citizenship are close to each other.

If we take the sciences of economy, law, pedagogic, sociology, cultural history etc. into consideration, we immediately find out that the truth is just a sort of probability or plausibility depending on the recognition interest.

If ever, even theology or philosophy is far from preaching dogmatically "the truth".

Students who learn foreign languages not only know how to apply the rules of grammar, but also how to speak about the world, but especially about the country

where that language is used – this ability is only possible though speaking (i.e., taking part in a discussion), finally leading to deliberation. What picture of England is painted by textbooks for English as a foreign or second language?

Teacher education

Concerning citizenship education as a subject in schools, many teachers are not well educated and are in fact purely trained. Knowledge is predominant, while skills and values appear to not be in the picture. Frequently teachers have studied other subjects like history or foreign languages, but nonetheless are required to take over citizenship education teaching duties. Though in Germany there are university programs for teachers in the field of citizenship education or political education or social literacy (the terms are different in the various German states), there are still people teaching the subject without the specific training and examination necessary to certify their competence to do so.

Citizenship education is not only a subject (one or two lessons per week) in secondary schools, but also "a principle" that is to be practised in school life in general. Citizenship has to be a "must" in any teacher education. The teachers of biology, mathematics and sports have to be sensitive to it, too.

The objectives and all details of teacher education towards citizenship should be explained – at this point we can only recommend numerous and various publications by CiCe, particularly the glossary (edited by Ross. A., Berg, W., Dooly, M., Ernst-Vintila, A., and Étienne, R. (Eds.) (2012) *CiCe Democratic Educators Encyclopedic Dictionary* www.cicedeed.eu

Final remarks

All members of universities should be aware of the fact that they are citizens and part of a community of citizens.

Hence everybody is entitled and required to:

- invite the others to participate in diverse areas of academic self-administration, including the question how the process of teaching/learning can be organized better,

- present knowledge as arguable issues which are open to critical thinking, deliberation of controversial issues and awareness for sustainability

- encourage young people who do not have a traditionally academic background to choose a study program

- contribute to a culture of diversity which includes a wide range of attitudes, from tolerance and acknowledgement to appreciation and enrichment.

- design or perform all courses as learning opportunities, which transmit not only knowledge but also train attitudes and skills in a democratic sense.

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