



## The Need of Learners' Participation in the Democratic University Governance



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### Abstract

The participation of students in decision making processes in learning institutions has been a subject of debated due to conflicting viewpoints propagated by different stakeholders opinion from different parts of the world (Magadla, 2007). Therefore, the focus here is on the inclusion of learners as decision-makers in university governance, helping create space for them to argue deliberatively. It is hoped that the recognition of voices and differences, which is central to our argument, will help to give a voice to the voiceless (the learners). In this article, we focus on the role of learners in university governance.

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## 1 Introduction

The Struggle for Democracy in Education extends the insightful arguments Michael W. Apple provided in Can Education Change Society? It provides detailed examinations of both local and system-wide struggles around conflicting versions of democracy. In recent years there has been a strong argument about the entrenching of democracy in universities by the inclusion of learners in university governance activities (Quang & Hong, 2021). Revolutionary changes are occurring in the structure of education governance in universities, and some of the most significant changes are related to the role of learners in university governance. The learners have to carry out university governance functions such as assisting in maintaining order in universities, setting positive examples of discipline, promoting good relations between learners and teachers, promoting responsibility and leadership and supporting the education programs of the university. However, the inclusion of learners in the university governance is fraught with difficulties and contestations. The student governors are not afforded fully opportunity to participate in crucial decision in university governance matters. They are sidelined (Acemoglu et al., 2005; Climent, 2006; Cook & Westheimer, 2006; Huong, 2020). In this article, we focus on the inclusion of learners as decision-makers in university governance, helping create space for them to argue deliberatively. It is hoped that the recognition of voices and differences, which is central to our argument, will help to give a voice to the voiceless (the learners).

## 2 Materials and Methods

### *Democracy in the university*

### *Democratic governance and its benefits in university*

For many people, the word democracy elicits thoughts of freedom and autonomy from government or at least full choice in governmental decisions. The concepts of choice and control are at the heart of democratic education, since it can be defined as the implementation of choice and control for students to be able to guide their own educational plans and goals. Choice, the ability to have autonomy in the direction of one's own educational path, and control, the ability to decide how to approach major educational needs, are the two main principles of democratic education (Cook & Westheimer, 2006; Faubert, 2019; Huong, 2020; Quang & Hong, 2021). Democratic university governance is a self-renewal strategy to be managed collaboratively on a consensual basis by all members of university governance. It will need to be carefully planned and implemented in order to benefit all stakeholders. The democratic decision-making process maintains that the rights of people to participate in deliberation are legally institutionalized without any individuals being excluded.

Democratic university governance could lead to more outcomes for the benefit of not only university governance but also the university community at large. The democratic university governance would broaden stakeholders' understanding of democratic participation where members would be able to listen to each other and in the process of taking binding decisions for the benefit of the university. In participating in public discussions, participants may not only express their own views, but also listen to and learn from others, thus building respect for the viewpoints of others. And in fact, when the university governance members actively listen and understand the views of others, this would enable them to speak and describe their views while working to build a shared understanding. Finally, even if they disagree with the outcome, governance members must accept the legitimacy of a decision if it was arrived at through an inclusive process of public discussion (Chuang et al., 2020; Caurel, 2020; Suacana & Suaib, 2016).

Therefore, the democratic governance in universities, through public discussion, is the only way to respect the uniqueness and "irreplaceability" of each person. Without public discussions in which mutual understanding of key issues, the democratic process will fail. The democratic university governance helps reduce conflict. When groups of people spend much time together over a relatively long period of time, there is always a risk of conflict. Difference and lack of understanding within a university society can easily give rise to intolerance, discrimination, bullying, and even violence. In an authoritarian environment where rank or social position is more important than, say, individual rights, people can feel it necessary for their survival to form alliances for protection or personal favours. This is a perfect breeding ground for discrimination and bullying. If we manage to implement a sense of mutual respect, we will probably make the university yard a nicer and safer place. The benefits of democratic university governance would restrict discrimination (Acemoglu et al., 2005; Climent, 2006; Quang & Hong, 2021; Huong, 2020; Cook & Westheimer, 2006).

In the democratic university governance, some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only when one experiences, practices them. Therefore universities need to perform what they seek to endorse. A democratic university is one that allows all stakeholders to participate in deliberations dealing with the university governance, where they are prepared to live in democracy through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. In terms of this paper, these skills, values, and behaviours are obtained through active democratic involvement of learners in university governance.

#### *The need of learners' participation in the democratic university governance*

Some people think students should only be in university to study, and should not be involved in governance. They say that students are not mature enough to be involved in important decision-making. However, the inclusion of learners in the governance of universities is necessary because it brings some following benefits:

- Learners have insights. Students in university know what is going on, and can contribute practical ideas for change. They have to carry out university governance functions such as assisting in maintaining order in universities, setting positive examples of discipline, promoting good relations between students and teachers, promoting responsibility and leadership and supporting the education programs of the university. They can tell if university resources are well used, if teachers are punctual in the classroom, and what can be done to make the university a better place. Therefore, strengthening the role of learners in the democratic university governance enhances learning. Learning is an individual process. The teacher may have an idea about how to learn, but learning styles differ from person to person. In a democratic environment, learners are given greater freedom to choose how to work and also, to some extent at least, what to learn. Problems with underachievement and lack of motivation are often reduced if the learners are allowed greater freedom to choose what and how to study and, when possible, how to be assessed.
- Students learn by doing. By participating in decision-making, students learn valuable life skills about how to balance different interests, argue a case, and make a presentation. Students will learn how democracy works, and use these skills at home and in the community. In this sense the university allows learners to deliberate and argue, there is open communication and learners are given access to information, which shows that there is a link between theory and practice in the university. Thus, the practice of democracy in university governance secures the future existence of sustainable democracies. Children don't do as we tell them to do; they do as we do. It is no use talking about democracy in our universities if we don't practice it. And it is not enough to let students decide only about simple things like the color of the classroom walls when they need repainting. They must be given influence, and thus learn the responsibility of true participation, in matters that are central to their learning and their daily life in the university: teaching methods, university policies, term planning, budget issues, and recruitment of new staff, etc. This is certainly not done overnight, and there are no standard methods suitable for all, but we are convinced that this is the best way to carry out democratic citizenship. People who want to become masters must learn to master and a genuine striving for democracy in a country must be evident and practiced from an early age (Huong, 2020; Acemoglu et al., 2005; Climent, 2006; Cook & Westheimer, 2006). But if you have learnt from practical experience to overcome at least some of the usual problems in democratic decision-making, your faith in democracy will probably be strengthened, and you will be more willing to participate actively in politics, locally and, perhaps, nationally.
- Participation creates ownership. Students who have been involved in creating something are much more likely to understand it, see its importance and be committed to it. For examples, rules and regulations developed with student participation are more likely to be fair and respected. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Students are fully human and have certain basic rights, including the right to participate in all matters affecting them. They are capable of forming their views, having the right to express their views. But if we really want to implement democratic values in society, we need to practice them in our daily work. This is particularly important for leaders of all kinds of organizations, especially of universities (Gunter, 2012; Huong, 2020; Englund, 2000; Quang & Hong, 2021). The current trend in the international community recognizes the right of children to access education, and also requires the right of students to participate in decision-making.

### 3 Results and Discussions

The inclusion of students in the governance of universities is a practical way to promote democratic values and develop democratic university governance. The irony is that although the democratization of university governance has given all stakeholders a powerful voice in university affairs, learners' voices are, seemingly, being silenced. At present, processes of debate and decision-making in university governance often marginalize learners because the norms of discussion are biased towards expression that is favourable to educators.

Some principals feel it is not good to invite learners in issues like educator misbehaviour and educator conflicts as these might affect the dignity of the educator towards learners. The principal complained that learners were only looking for faults and they liked to criticize. The learners did not play a positive role in university governance. The principals feel that too much student involvement in university governance violates their sense of professionalism. They are reluctant to work with students and they regard them as the intruding and troublesome. They are resistant to collaborate with student leaders because they have become accustomed to functioning without student leaders being central to their work. They feel that they have enough mounting professional strain without the additional pressures of entering into partnership with students (Hrastinski, 2008; Liu et al., 2020; Lung-Guang, 2019).

The manipulation of learners by teachers inhibits the development of the democratic participation of learners in university governance. The absence of student experience from university governance brings about the systematic silencing of the student's voice. The alienation of learners from such an important decision-making body leads to learners' frustration and this could have a negative impact on education. Thus, universities need to maintain the integrity of shared governance and give students a voice on campus. It is very important that students speak for university projects and programs.

A key principle of democratic university governance is that decisions be based on consultation, collaboration, cooperation, partnership, mutual trust and participation of all affected parties in the university community. The university governance structure will cover all the university's stakeholders, not excluding learners. The Representative Council of Learners must be established at each public university. This Council provides learners with the opportunity to participate in university-related decision-making. The student's leaders have the following roles:

- Represent views and interests of all students, including the marginalized and those with special needs, in university governance and decision-making and in the university committee.
- Contribute to developing and monitoring university plans and use of funds.
- Communicate information between university/village management and students.

This Representative Council of Learners provides students with the right to be heard and an opportunity to improve their university. Pupils will also need to be responsible. They need to act in a way that is thoughtful, fair, respectful and inclusive. The meeting of all the student representatives will constitute the Learner Council. The council will have its own democratically elected leadership, which will include a chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary and two representatives of the university committee. Other leadership positions may also be created as needed or desired by the Learner Council. The student representatives on the university committee will receive their mandate from and report to the Learner Council. All student representatives/leaders will serve for a term of one year and be eligible for re-election. A senior teacher/counselor will attend Learner Council meetings as an observer. The role of this person will be to facilitate capacity development of Learner Councils and serve as a conduit of information between students and teachers/university administration (Learner Council leaders will also communicate themselves with the university administration). This teacher/counselor will be carefully chosen, preferably by the students themselves, to ensure he or she is able to play a facilitative role and avoid dominating or manipulating Learner Council meetings (Magadla, 2007; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Heller & Yukl, 1969).

The Learner Council will meet once a month and more often if necessary. A summary of key issues of Learner Council, teacher/staff and university committee meetings will be presented and discussed at a monthly university meeting of Learner Council. This meeting should not be dominated by the Head-teacher/teachers, or simply an avenue for them to make announcements, but rather an opportunity to share information from and dialogue on key issues among the entire university community. The mere presence of an educator who is also an adult could intimidate learners. This shows that they were not free and there was no open freedom of speech for learners. Parents who are members of the university committee will be invited to participate in the meeting. The meeting should be jointly organized and run by the Head-teacher and Learner.

The entire process should be characterized by principles of respect, inclusiveness, transparency, honesty and other values consistent with child friendly and rights-respecting universities. Clearly, the democratic system described above represents a major departure from current practice at university level. Clear guidelines and procedures will need to be developed, and a strategy devised to promote the idea/concept at all levels. Change will take time, and require significant capacity development, including documenting lessons learned, sharing good practice, etc. A careful plan of how to do this will need to be developed, and will be part of the program to university committee capacity building program (Bayeh, 2016; Blair, 2000; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Van Veelen & Van Der Horst, 2018).

## 4 Conclusion

In recent years there has been a strong argument about democratization in university governance. Democratization includes the idea that stakeholders such as parents, teachers, students and community members “must” participate in the activities of the university. The current trend, in the international community recognizes the right of the student to access to education, and also requires the right of the student to participate in decision-making. The inclusion of students in university governance is a practical way to promote democratic values and develop democratic university governance. Thus, in public universities, students must be represented on the university governance structure. These universities must establish the Representative Council of Learners, elected by the students. The student representatives in university governing bodies provide the students with a legitimate role to play in university governance.

### *Conflict of interest statement*

The authors declared that they have no competing interests.

### *Statement of authorship*

The authors have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The authors have approved the final article.

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