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# The Role of Students in the Governance of Public Higher Education: a Case Study of Malta

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of this paper is to analyse the extent of student involvement in higher education governance by considering Malta as a case study. When analysing participation within institutions, two main players are involved: students and staff.

**Methodology:** The author uses a hybrid of methodological tools to analyse the subject matter. A review of the existing literature is compounded with document analysis and the collection of unpublished institutional data.

**Findings:** Student participation in the governance of higher education institutions (HEIs) is becoming a pressing reality. Students, who are the institutional clients, are a crucial key player in the manner in which HEIs are governed and managed. Therefore, HEIs have an interest in ensuring effective student participation. Various mechanisms are available and student participation is not always at an optimum level.

**Value Added:** This paper analyses in detail two main mechanisms of student participation: elections and academic feedback. A qualitative analysis is provided in order to measure the extent of participation. Elections are an important tool to elect student representatives while study-unit and course feedback provide valuable information to improve teaching and learning.

**Recommendations:** Further research is required in order to determine the quality of student participation in academic boards and committees. Therefore, the quantitative analysis is to be embraced with qualitative data. Furthermore, HEIs are to study ways in which they can create more participatory tools within their complex governing arrangements. The issue of involving more established student societies, which are not intrinsically part of the governing structures, is also essential.

**Key words:** governance, students' participation, public higher education & resource management

**JEL CODES:** I21 Analysis of Education, I23 Higher Education – Research Institutions, I28 Government Policy

## 1. Introduction: students as the institutional clients and a vital resource

Students are nowadays an important player in the shared governance concept and therefore in the decision-making of higher education institutions. Students are the institutional clients and are at the core of the institutional attention. Higher education literature, both scholarly and reports published by the EU institutions and Malta's public agencies, define students' participation in terms of the level of enrolment at tertiary level. There are few studies that focus on student participation from a governing and managerial point of view. This is not the reality since students, in addition to the crucial role of human resources, are an essential resource to be considered in the governance and management of higher education.

## 2. The research methods employed and materials used

The research design involved a review of the existing literature and an analysis of institutional data that was specifically requested by the author. The existing literature includes: first the analysis of the current national legislation acts, the proposed institutional acts that are intended to decentralise some of the legislative powers in the hands of institutional governance, international declarations that pertain to student participation and scholarly literature of the subject matter.

Institutional head count data was requested from the two main public higher education institutions that comprise public higher education in Malta. These are the University of Malta (UM) and the Malta College for the Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). The analysis and the eventual compilation of institutional head count data, that was never published previously, provides a clear and a precise picture of the situation at hand which could potentially help national policy-makers and institutional leaders to take the necessary decisions in order to improve the current governing situation.

## 3. The current state of knowledge: the involvement of students in institutional governance

As from the 1999 Bologna process, the recognition of students as major stakeholders in shaping their own institutional destiny has been gaining significant importance (Klemenčič, 2012 & Popovic, 2011). In the Berlin communication (ENQA, 2003), the European Ministers of Education highlighted the stance that students are to be considered as full partners in the higher education governance. The Budapest declaration, which assessed students' participation and governance, focused on the importance of student participation which is ultimately the key for better performance and an increase in quality of higher education (Nyborg, 2011).

The declaration highlighted that:

Students are not consumers of higher education, but significant components within it. Consumers are not involved in management of processes, but students are co-responsible of higher education management, as higher education is developed for students. Students are the main beneficiaries of increasing the quality of higher education. Students should have more impact in decision-making and governance of higher education, which must be a community of students and professors who are equally responsible for its quality (Nyborg, 2011, p. 1).

According to the declaration, students have four stages of participation. The first stage involves open access to documents concerning institutional policies and decision-making structures but no consultation process is actually in place. The second stage embraces a consultation process but there is no guarantee that the student opinions and their views are taken on board by the decision-making authorities. The third stage includes a dialogue between students and decision-making bodies but there is still no guarantee that decisions proposed by the students are implemented. The fourth stage is the highest level of participation where students are continuously involved in decision-making, from agenda-setting to the implementation of decision-making (Nyborg, 2011). In addition to the levels of participation, the declaration stressed the problem of students' passivity in the decision-making process. Students are risking of being diluted by new stakeholders who became important key players as a direct result of new public management and changes in the governing structures.

Therefore as early as 2001, students' participation has been recognised as part of higher education governance and as from 2003 onwards it has been a major pillar of the higher education *modus operandi*. This particular development has wiped the idea that students are just a 'passive receptor' and to the contrary have become primary agents who could help HEIs to achieve their main performance targets (Das, 2014, p. 66). Student participation became a core foundational value for European higher education (Klemenčič, 2012).

Student participation in the governance and managerial engine of higher education institutions is also important because it helps to en-

sure that students themselves get the best possible experience while studying. It is an effective way of gauging the students' perceptions and explores ways on how HEIs can improve their internal structural arrangements in order to ensure quality and standards of the services provided by the institutions (Kandiko & Weyers, 2013).

The perspectives adopted by scholarly authors focused on the determinants of student participation (Kouba, 2018), the changing conceptions of student participation (Klemenčič, 2012) and the degree of student participation in governing bodies (Planas, Soler, Fullana, Pallisera, & Vilà).

### 3. A brief contextual analysis of Malta's higher education governance

Before discussing the results, this section provides a brief outlook of Malta's public higher education governance. The Maltese public higher education sector is almost entirely funded by the central government and has increased substantially in the last ten years. Funding is outlined in the annual budget speech of the Minister for Finance and the respective budget votes pertaining to higher education institutions are published each year in the Financial Estimates of the Ministry responsible for Finance. Other sources of financial injection are EU funds, especially the European Regional and Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). Institutions are scrutinised by a centralised managing authority (the Planning and Priorities Co-ordination Division – PPCD) in order to obtain these funds especially to ascertain that funding is in line with the nation's priorities. Therefore, higher education institutions depend on the decisions take at a central government level. State funding and the dependency of higher education institutions on the state to finance their operation is becoming a challenge for Maltese governments especially if the policy of massification is to continue in the coming years.

Policies on a national scale are also crafted at a central level by the Ministry for Education and Employment. The Higher Education Strategy, which is a pol-

icy initiative between the Ministry and the National Commission for Further and Higher Education, discusses the development of higher education in Malta and the way forward for a sustainable future of the sector (MEDE & NCFHE, 2014).

From a legal perspective, the governance of Malta's higher education rests entirely on the Education Act, Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta. The law was enacted in 1988 and it provides an explanation of the different functions of the Education Directorate and its co-operation with schools, colleges and not least with the University and MCAST, the duty of the state to provide education, a defining framework of further and higher education, details concerning the governance of colleges, the University of Malta and MCAST and other important considerations such as the teacher's profession and the financial provisions. Throughout the years, the Education Act was amended substantially with the more recent amendments being effected as from 2010 onwards (Education Act, 1988).

The Education Act also highlights the role of important central agencies such as the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) which was set up in 2006 and is the main national authority with the power vested in it as the competent authority for licensing, accreditation, quality assurance, and recognition of Higher Education providers; the promotion and facilitation of lifelong learning and vocational education; maintaining the Malta Qualifications Framework; ensuring the compilation and, where necessary, the updates regarding the skills, competences, knowledge and attitudes of jobs at the labour market which are crucial for higher education institutions to design their courses and the validation of informal and non-formal learning (Education Act, 1988, p. 37).

In addition to these roles, the NCFHE acts as the main research and consultative arm for the Government, it serves as a structured dialogues with the different stakeholders involved in this sector, the liaison with European Union institutions, maintenance of the Quality Assurance Framework, administration of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), development of National Strategy in Higher Education and acts as a medium of infor-

mation to the general public (NCFHE, 2013, p. 10). The Commission also recommends policies related to both the education and financial domains in order to address sustainability issues from various point-of-views. These include financial sustainability, building the necessary structures to provide effective guidance to students when it comes to their educational pathways, research, innovation and knowledge transfer.

From an institutional perspective, the main provider of tertiary education in Malta is the University of Malta (UM). The second largest public HEI is the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). MCAST has been offering courses at degree level as from the year 2009. In addition to public institutions, tertiary education is also provided by a number of private institutions which are mainly franchises of either American or British universities. The number of private institutions is increasing substantially every year. An interesting comparison is made between the University of Malta, which is a higher education institution of more than 400 years old and MCAST which is a relatively recently established college that was set up in the year 2000. Given its old history, which dates back to 1592, the structures of the University represent a mix of a traditional approach and a business-like orientation in order to adapt to today's realities (University of Malta, 2019).

Institutional structural details and key decision-makers are outlined in sections seven (7) and eight (8) of the Education Act. Both sections explain the governing arrangements of the UM and the MCAST. It outlines (i) the main functions of both institutions and their respective role in the higher education sector; (ii) the governing bodies which are responsible for the resource management and academic affairs of both higher educational institutions; and (iii) the principal officers (Education Act, 1988, pp. 41–64). The UM's main governing and decision-making bodies are the Council, Senate and Faculty or Institute Boards. The principal officers which are the main decision-makers are the Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor, Rector, Pro-Rectors, the Secretary, the Deans/Directors and Deputy Deans of Faculties or Institutes (Education Act, 1988, p. 43). On the other hand MCAST is composed of

a Board of Governors, an Administrative Bureau, a Principal who acts as the Chief Executive Officer and an Administrative Director whose role is distinct from that of a Registrar (University Act, 1988).

These roles and the structural arrangement of three main colleges namely: the foundation, the technical and the University college are compared with the University's governing structures in order to assess whether certain differences are the result of purely historical traditions, academic reasons or organisational cultures. The governing ethos, decision-making powers and performance management are analysed within an international perspective and by referring to the proposed new University Act (MEDE: 2017) that is planned to replace the Maltese Education Act that was enacted in 1988.

The new University Act entails that the established Education Act is going to be repealed and instead a new legislation will come into force at an institutional level rather than at a macro-level. This strategic move would certainly influence the governance and management of Malta's higher education. The analysis of institutional acts also includes an assessment of how such a decision strengthens the autonomy and the discretion of higher education institutions in their respective governing and management decisions. The policy decision of embarking on a framework of separate institutional acts is to be reviewed from a coordinative mechanism aspect. Separate acts, even if governed through a generic education act to act as an umbrella framework, could prove a challenging task in order to co-ordinate separate governing structures effectively. The structures dimension is to be analysed not only from an institutional level but also from a national and multi-level perspective.

The eventual decision to repeal the present Education Act and transform it into distinctive institutional acts has a parallel underpinning element towards the revision of the present governing arrangements within the institutions and which are not necessarily mentioned in the acts. The present governing arrangements have been in existence at the University of Malta for quite a long time, more than 30 years ago. All present University's resource-decision-making are taken at the University Council which meets approximately five to six times a year.



## 4. The results of the research originating from the author

The results of the research conducted by the author are classified into three main categories, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. The three different categories of student involvement in higher education governance

<p><b>Students` resource management</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Students participation in elections and governing channels.</li><li>2. Students involvement in governing structures through feedback.</li><li>3. The role of alumni in institutional development.</li></ol>
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Source: own study.

### Students' participation in elections and governing channels

Bergan (2004) analysed the extent and level of students' participation among representatives from 15 European countries as part of a report commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. The report analysed students' participation by considering the Bologna process from different perspectives. The survey revealed that in most countries, students have the right to participate, discuss and be part of all decisions taken by the Boards irrespective of the nature of the issue being considered. On the other hand, in 8 countries, students are only allowed a participatory and decision-making status on purely students matters and are not in any way involved in the institutional decision-making apparatus. When it comes to voter turnout it was discovered that as a general pattern, less than half of the student population elects the student body and in some cases the turnout is in the level of one-third of the students' population.

In Malta's system of participatory mechanisms, students' participation happens in a clearly defined governing framework. The University of Malta through the Education Act provides the possibility of students' representation and therefore participatory decision-making on Faculty Boards, Senate and Council. MCAST's students' representation is concentrated in the Council of Institutes and Institute's Boards of Studies.

What is missing is a clear mechanism of student participation at a national level. Student participation, if any, is limited within the institutional set-up. This raises important consideration of student influence on a higher national level with regards to policy and budgetary options. A consultative and communicative framework is to be developed in the form of periodical conferences as well as through continuous feedback through the surveys conducted by NCHFE and NSO. A missing participatory link at a national level could bring about serious gaps when crafting national policy.

University of Malta statistics exhibited in Table 2 shows that student participation in order to elect representatives on Senate and Council, the highest governing organs, are at a low level. In the period 2011 until 2018, participation ranged from a negligible percentage rate of 0.97% in May 2014 to 12.40% in November 2016. All percentage rates in fourteen different elections under study were less than the mark of 15%. Such a low turnout persisted even though the University introduced electronic elections for the first time in November 2014, although there has been a three-fold increase from approximately 4% to 12% in a span of four years. This entails that the use of information technology can indeed be a useful tool to increase the students' participation.

**Table 2. UM Students' Turnout during Council and Senate Elections**

	Nov 2011	May 2012	Nov 2012	Nov 2013	May 2014	Nov 2014	
Total Student Population	11,538	11,538	11,350	11,510	11,510	11,476	
Senate Election	-	491	930	266	112	529	
Council Election	425	-	-	357	-	-	
% of voting	3.68%	4.26%	8.19%	2.31%/3.10%	0.97%	4.61%	
	Feb 2015	Nov 2015	Feb 2016	Nov 2016	Mar 2017	Nov 2017	Mar 2018
Total Student Population	11,451	11,893	11,856	11,765	11,765	11,692	11,449
Senate Election	-	864	-	1,458	-	1,425	1,289
Council Election	-	1,162	-	1,130	-	1,425	
% of voting		7.26%/9.77%	-	12.40%/9.60%	-	12.19%	11.26%

Source: own study.

Nevertheless, students are still not recognising the benefits and importance of students' participation at the highest decision-making bodies. These statistics also reveal that despite the large number of students' societies at the University of Malta, participation is concentrated at a lower, local and informal level rather than through formal higher-level decision-making bodies.

Table 3 portrays the reality that the level of students' participation is a different story when it comes to elect their representatives on the students' council, *Kunsill Studenti Universitarji* (KSU). The percentage rate of voting during KSU elections is very strong when compared to Council and Senate elections. The rate is between three of five times higher and has reached the rate of 58% in 2018. This shows that while students are alienated from the university's governing bodies, they are much more interested to elect and participate in their own students' council. This can be attributed to the partisan politics that has infiltrated the KSU elections by having the two largest political parties in Malta, the PL and PN backing Pulse and *Studenti Demokristjani Maltin* (SDM) respectively.

Table 3. UM Students' Turnout during KSU Elections

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total Student Population	11,510	11,451	-	-	11,449
KSU Election	4,196	3,855	-	-	6,631
% of voting	36%	34%	-	-	58%

Source: own study.

Another form of student participation can be observed through student societies. An impressive total of 54 students' societies are formally recognised at the University of Malta. While most of them represent a confined and a specific interest related to a particular academic area such as Psychology, Geography, Theology, Laws and teaching, there are a number of students' societies that represent a generic interest. These societies include *Grupp Studenti Għawdxin* (GUG), We are – the University of Malta LGBTQQI Organisation, *Kunsill Studenti Universitarji* and Youth for the Environment (Y4TE). Having such a high number of University's recognised students' societies raises the question of how these student groups could be interlinked to the governance of the University of Malta.

There are no specific elections at MCAST University College, but the same pattern can be observed with regards to MCAST general student elections. Students' representation at MCAST is at the level of the Council of Institutes. MCAST'S Council of Institutes is represented by 14 members of staff most of them high-ranking officials and 2 students representatives which percentage-wise is 14.3% of the total council membership. Even though MCAST provides the possibility for having a student representative per Institute and two student representatives in the Council of Institutes (COI), in many instances student representatives are either uncontested or when the elections are held, the participation level is still very low. In certain circumstances, the vacant posts available are not filled through such elections. This is a reflection of what happens at the University of Malta when

elections for students' representatives are held at an Institute or Faculty Board level. Table 4 shows that the approximate percentage of students' participation during MCAST elections is 3% which is lower than the University's percentages but within the same bracket.

Table 4. Students' Turnout during MCAST Elections

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Total Student Population	6170	6244	6417
Election	189	164	180
% of voting	3.1%	2.6%	2.8%

Source: own study.

## Students' involvement in the governing structures through feedback

Students' participation in the governance of HEIs can also be assessed through other tools, such as a structured and formalised institutional feedback mechanism. In practice, student feedback can possibly lead to a change in a programme of study or to a collaboration between different entities in offering a programme.

The University of Malta conducts a study-unit online feedback exercise every semester in which students have the opportunity to voice their opinion on the content delivered, the pedagogy used, the administrative services offered and the performance of the lecturers concerned. Surprisingly, such an important feedback tool is absent at MCAST, although it is exploring options to introduce online students' feedback.

As can be noticed in Table 5, except for the year 2009 in which there was an annual participatory rate of 43.05%, the participation rates in the years 2008 until 2018, varied between 30 to 40% and in the last three years was on the decline and has reached a low level of 23%. If the rate continues to

decrease, the validity of this online feedback exercise maybe in jeopardy. The participation of students in such an exercise is crucial for the university to obtain the necessary feedback to ensure standards and quality assurance in the courses delivered. If need be remedial action is taken to improve certain aspects of teaching and administrative domains.

**Table 5. Response Rates – University of Malta Online Feedback**

Year	Study-Unit Average Response Rate	Course Average Response Rate
2008	38.24%	
2009	43.05%	
2010	33.10%	
2011	33.08%	
2012	35.28%	
2013	35.52%	
2014	39.95%	25.37%
2015	37.95%	38.72%
2016	28.15%	31.59%
2017	26.00%	30.82%
2018	23.21%	

Source: own study.

The participation rate for course feedback, that was introduced in 2014, is at the same levels of study-unit feedback, with percentage rates that vary between 25 and 39%. The University of Malta is changing its study-unit feedback in order to try to attract more responses from students by revamping the image of the feedback exercise and by allowing students to just answer one questions rather than the entire survey in order to eliminate student fatigue.

Student participation is not limited to participation in elections and in the feedback exercises. There are other forms of participation that cannot be measured but are of immense importance in influencing decision-making and the strategic orientation of either the Faculty or Institution concerned by actively participating during a Board meeting or at a University level during Senate or Council meetings.

In Academic Year 2016/17 the University of Malta introduced a study-unit entitled: Student Representation at University which was meant to make students cognisant of the impact student representation may have on the University's responsiveness to changing educational needs, to help students become more conversant with University structures and increase student awareness regarding the University's response to societal needs. In the first year 13 students registered for this unit but in the second and third year of its offering no students registered for this unit. This lack of interest question the level of interest from students in being actively involved in the University's governance.

## The role of alumni in institutional development

The role of student participation can be extended after graduation. As from the nineteenth century, in anglophone countries alumni had an essential role in the governing machinery and were involved in electing the university's governors. They also had two seats in the governing board as was the case with Dalhousie University (Pietsch, 2012). The concept adopted two centuries ago, that alumni could be a determining factor in improving the institutional standing, could be applied to today's realities.

The contribution of the enrolled students in improving the institutional performance can be significantly strengthened by allowing an active role for alumni. Alumni can influence performance indicators that include the following: first, student recruitment by spreading a positive image and act as an institutional ambassador. This role assists institutions to restore and improve their reputation and trust among the external stakeholders. Second, building new and strengthening existing relations with the external stakeholders especially if alumni have become high-ranking officials with external stakeholders after they have graduated. Building bridges is not only limited to government entities and NGOs but also to the general public (Arceo, 2010). Third, acting as a role model for students and injecting a sense of inspiration and assisting students to overcome their academic and wellbeing challenges.

This role is a determining factor towards achieving a higher student retention rate. Fourth, providing the necessary expertise in programme design as well as funded project management and research initiatives. This function strengthens the institutional research platform and visibility that influence the number of collaborative projects that the HEI is engaged in (Ildris, 2015).

The UM's alumni services are spread from an e-platform to bridge academia to employability in the form of career plus to the organisation of conferences of events. However, there is no alumni participation in the governance and management of the University. Therefore, the role of alumni is strictly confined with the brand image of the University and public relations. In fact, alumni are within the responsibility of the Communications Office. Marketing efforts are concentrated in the form of a bulletin and the University of Malta alumni newsletter entitled Luminary.

The idea of conveying a role model is approached by organising an outstanding alumni achievement award and by ceremonially awarding an honoris causa to prominent international and local public figures such as Ban Ki-moon, Romani Prodi and Vaclav Havel.

The number of alumni at the University of Malta have been encouraging since 48,397 students have a record on the student database although just half, 21,974 students activated their UM account and therefore had the possibility to use the university's resources. With the introduction of GDPR, which has been enforced by the European Union on all EU member states as from May 2018, the number of alumni that had activated and accepted to be involved in the alumni database reached a low number of just 1,500. This shows that measures adopted at a multi-level perspective can substantially undermine the institutional efforts across the years.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The attempts made by the author to present an analysis based on qualitative data brings into light the limitations of evidence-based management. Not all



performance measures are identifiable or measurable. Indicators that can never be measured include the extent of student representativeness and their effectiveness in faculty boards, council and senate meetings. These are important facets of students influence on higher education governance. Most universities, including the University of Malta, are seeing their study-unit and course feedback declining. This is partially due to the lack of action by the institutions to take the necessary decisions and the inability to build an effective bridge between students and the governing apparatus.

Further research can shed light on the influence of national and institutional legislative acts to promote students' representation on boards and committees. Should higher education national legislation make student representativeness a requirement? Should minimum thresholds of students' representatives be introduced?

The interconnection of governing structures and student representation is also an aspect worth studying. How could governing structures be altered to ensure more effective student representation?

Another important governing facet that is to be studied in future research are the factors that motivate students to participate in governance. Is there is a difference between student involvement in their own unions and students involvement in University governance?

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