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Promoting students' participation in the multinational environment of Latvian institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

This article is devoted to students' civic participation as an important priority in developing youth policy. Issues concerning participation are dealt with both in Latvian and the EU policy documents, their aims, objectives, and principles. The aims of the youth policy are focused on the implementation of civic participation and democratic values in real life. Its various objectives provide for more active youth engagement in various activities within the institutions of higher education and in national-level social and democratic processes, as well as more support for various forms of students' civic participation.

The purpose of the article is to summarise and analyse the results of various studies concerning the content of students' participation and the forms of its implementation. Materials and methodology. The theoretical approach – the analysis of literature and documents. The empirical approach – surveys. There have been carried out both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data. Results. The studies concerning students' civic participation in Latvia reveal several factors promoting the enrichment of students' participation in various social integration processes.

It is concluded in the article that in order to promote students' civic participation it is necessary to pay attention not only to macro-level participation, i.e. participation in political and social activities, the involvement of young people in political decision-making at the national and municipal level, but also to develop institutions of higher education as models for the society, thus promoting the development of the experience of participation both among students and the academic staff in the actual integration process in the multinational academic environment.

Keywords: *higher education, civic participation, civic activities.*

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, there has developed a new situation in Latvia as a result of political, economic, and social transformations. Along with the consolidation of basic human rights, the declaration of civil society, equal rights for all individuals, and respect for different values, the factor of participation is also brought to the foreground as a precondition for successful process of integration. Nowadays, the essence of civic participation is focused on reducing the proportion of government hierarchy and power relationships.

Nowadays, the higher educational establishments are regarded as the institutions facilitating the development of social consciousness and as the environment for citizenship education. They function as the carriers of changes – as a model of modern, multinational civil society supported by local culture promoting the development of the experience of participation both among students and the academic staff. Latvian institutions of higher education have always been heterogeneous as far as their ethnic and linguistic compositions are concerned. This gives students an opportunity to exercise participation in various integration processes in the academic environment.

As a result, higher education has to tackle specific objectives – to create preconditions for the development of active and enterprising citizens who are open to changes, do not shy away from problems and are ready to resolve them in a creative and competent way based on the knowledge and skills acquired through lifelong learning.

The article is devoted to students' civic participation as an important priority in developing the youth policy in Latvia. Issues concerning participation are dealt with both in Latvian and the EU policy documents, their aims, objectives, and principles. Generally, the aims of the youth policy are focused on the implementation of the idea of civic participation and democratic values in real life. Its diverse objectives provide for more active youth engagement in various activities within the institutions of higher education and in national-level social and democratic processes, as well as more support for various forms of students' civic participation.

The purpose of the article is to summarise and analyse the results of various studies concerning the essence and the content of students' participation and the forms of its implementation in various civic activities.

Materials and methodology. The theoretical approach – the analysis of academic literature, normative documents and studies. The empirical approach – a students' survey.

1. The normative basis for students' civic participation and key studies concerning this issue in Latvia.

In Latvia, the key policy documents regulating the issue of participation are 'Youth Law' (2008) and 'The Guidelines of Youth Policy for 2009–2018' (2009). Based on the principles identified in 'The Guidelines of Youth Policy for 2009 – 2018' there has been developed a special 'Youth Policy State Programme for 2009 – 2013'. In this document, there have been defined specific measures how to achieve the goals of the youth policy:

- youth participation and useful utilisation of leisure time;
- promoting socially-economic growth of young people, competitiveness, and social inclusion;
- improving the quality of life of young people;
- promoting youth initiative and participation in decision-making (The Youth Policy State Programme for 2009 – 2013, 2009).

- Several core principles permeate through the above mentioned youth policy document:
- The principle of participation — grants young people the opportunity to participate in the debates concerning the decisions affecting youth policy before the decisions are taken;
- The principle of equal opportunities — grants young people the right to participate actively and without any discrimination in various social, political, cultural, and economic activities;
- The principle of information accessibility — requires providing young people with information corresponding to their development needs;
- The principle of considering the interests of young people — provides that the interests, rights, needs, and possibilities of young people have to be considered tackling any youth-related issues;
- The principle of youth integration — promotes intercultural dialogue in all stages concerning the development and the implementation of the youth policy.

In these policy documents, participation is more focused on political and social activities, on involving young people in making decisions which affect the youth policy at the national and the municipal level.

In the recent years, there have also been carried out several studies in Latvia concerning the aspects of social integration where the issues concerning civic participation and identity have been considered as well. However, compared to other states, there have been very few studies devoted to the manifestations of the civic engagement of young people, students in particular. For this reason, this can be considered as a topical issue in Latvia at present.

According to the results of 'The Study of the Social and Political Activity of Latvian Youth' carried out in 2008, young people mainly get information from their friends (72%); quite often they use the internet (28%); more seldom - billboards (19%) and mass media (18%), while only 20% of the respondents get information from school. In the study, both young people and experts mention lack of information as one factor hindering participation along with such factors as lack of interest and time (The Study of the Social and Political Activity of Latvian Youth, 2008).

In the study 'The Development of Youth Identity and Participation' (2005) the authors have emphasized the need for participation skills and have modelled 4 possible scenarios for the development of youth engagement in the next 10 years:

1. The opportunities increase, but the skills remain at the present level. The Youth Law is adopted; the responsibility of various ministries concerning the issues of youth engagement is streamlined; interest in youth activities is increasing — as a result, there are more favourable preconditions for faster increase in youth participation.
2. The opportunities do not change, but the skills stay at the same level. The Youth Law is not adopted; in some municipalities support for the youth is considered as a priority, which leads to regional inequality with regard to youth

participation – all in all, the issue concerning youth participation is dealt with in an unorganized manner.

3. The opportunities do not change, but the skills are developed. There are no significant institutional changes at the national level as far as support for the youth activities is concerned – as a result, young people acquire the skills promoting participation in a non-formal way, mainly through participation in non-governmental organizations.
4. The opportunities expand, and the skills are developed. This is the most optimistic scenario, which provides for both the streamlining of the institutional environment and the consolidation of the youth participation skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, the probability of this scenario is low. (Koroleva, Snikere, Trapenciere, Trapencieris, 2005, p 29).

It has to be noted that the latest studies pay particular attention to considering the processes of youth civic engagement and integration within the context of the increasing migration and globalization processes as well as accession to the multicultural European Union (Pigozne, 2010).

Since low and ineffective civic participation of young people has been pointed out as one of the most topical issues both in the normative documents and the studies mentioned above, it is important to develop proposals for its promoting in the Latvian institutions of higher education.

2. The content of students' civic participation and the forms of its implementation in civic activities.

According to the purpose of the present study, there was carried out a students' survey in two Latvian institutions of higher education (Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy and the University of Rezekne) in order to find out how students understand the notions "participation" and "civic participation", and how they interpret the implementation of civic participation in civic activities. The sample included 136 students, with 97 1st year students of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy and 39 1st year students of the University of Rezekne among them.

According to the academic literature, participation refers to a combination of three core abilities - self-determination, co-determination, and solidarity - which has been independently developed and is subject to each individual's personal responsibility (Klafki, 1991, 95).

In response to the survey question concerning the content of the notion "participation", most of the students (84%) in all the groups agreed that the content of the notion "participation" was very broad. Actually, participation can manifest itself in all spheres of human life, at various levels and in various forms. Participation is a means, an end, and a process rather than separate events. According to the respondents (52 %), there can be singled out both direct and indirect forms of participation. Direct participation appears at different degrees of activity – starting from attending different events and

finishing with organizing events, development and implementation of projects, development of skills and bringing out self-initiative. Direct participation was characterised more precisely as manifestations of activity in various social-demographic groups and even according to various social-demographic characteristics: sex, age, social-economic status, place of residence.

Indirect participation was generally characterised as the participation that an individual can realize “without doing anything” or without “intending”, “noticing” it, “unwittingly”, i.e. just by his or her presence or existence.

Here are some of the key ideas of the 1st year students concerning the core content of the notion ‘participation’:

‘Participation means being frank, open, and friendly – collaborating. It is a moment when people help each other. Our life would be much brighter if there were more people who would be ready to sacrifice their time, in order to work for the sake of other people, for the future. Participation is a value that has to be appreciated and respected, since an individual who helps us has been open, kind and willing to do good for us.’

‘Participation is collaboration in a certain activity or process. A person might not even realize that he or she is involved in some process. For instance, each individual is indirectly involved in shaping the life of the state.’

‘Nowadays participation has the same meaning as joining in. Participation is a voluntary activity to a certain extent. There can be imposed participation in some exceptional cases where we do not actually want to participate. Participation can also be understood as being engaged in various activities and events.’

‘Participation is a process where an individual can work together with other people, can help someone in a certain activity at school, at work or at home. Throughout all our life, we take part in resolving other people’s problems and difficulties. Our life is participation. It is a process that refers to human interaction.’

‘In my opinion, participation implies self-demonstration. It also involves individual’s right to obtain all kinds of information; for instance, concerning political issues, topical social issues, etc. By means of participation an individual gains new experience and enriches information, which is very important when acquiring a new profession as well.’

In response to the question concerning the core content of the notion ‘civic participation’, most of the students pointed out that civic participation was closely connected with the development of civil society (11%), strengthening of patriotism (26%), environmental protection (37 %), and being loyal to one’s state (26%).

The responses of the 1st year students clearly show the diversity of the content of the notion:

‘Civic participation refers to individual’s engagement in the matters of the society and the state. Without the interest of the population in the state matters there can appear a gap between authority and society. Active civic participation leads to the situation that the interests of the majority are represented. Civic participation also strengthens the political integration of the population. Civic participation means taking part in the elections, in the dwellers’ meetings at the blocks of flats.’

‘Civic participation is an integral part and a characteristic of a democratic society. Civic participation refers to the active engagement of the population in the political and economic processes of the state. The most typical example of civic participation is taking part in the elections. The more actively society expresses its opinion concerning various state issues, the better the work of state administration and politicians should be. Civic participation also implies involvement in non-governmental organizations, which makes it possible to better protect the interests of a certain social group and to lobby them. Civic participation also refers to the analysis of the normative acts of the state and expressing ones’ opinion in order to improve and amend them. Civic participation excludes indifference to the processes taking place in the state; it is not “sitting in a cave” and grumbling that “everything is bad, and nothing is happening.” Another typical example of civic participation is a referendum – it is an opportunity for people to initiate amendments in the normative acts and to make the parliament amend or rescind a law by the opinion expressed by the majority of voters. In this way, people can control the work of their deputies.’

‘To me, civic participation is associated with civic consciousness, with citizens’ duty to their state, country and fellow-citizens. Civic participation manifests itself in elections, protests, expressing proposals, writing letters, taking part in events. Besides, civic participation also involves maintaining one’s land in good order, improving and protecting it. It also implies supporting one’s fellow-citizens, not being indifferent to what is going on around you, not passing by, but joining in because it also affects you and your country.’

‘To me, the notion “civic participation” refers to responsibility first of all - responsibility to oneself, one’s closest people, and the state. Civic participation concerns each individual; it’s just that nowadays some people have forgotten their responsibility or pretend not to notice it.’

‘In my opinion, civic participation means the engagement of each individual in the social, political and public matters in their state. Civic participation refers to people’s interests, representation of common interests and bringing them forward; it implies making decisions affecting the state processes and events (e.g. elections); it means coming up with new ideas and putting new discoveries in social practice.’

‘Without people’s interest in the state matters, there can appear a gap between the state and the society, various social groups and individuals. Active civic participation means that the interests of the majority are represented, people are united. Civil society is a society where individuals cooperate with each another and with the public authority resolving the issues of social importance. Civil society also ensures the protection of the interests of those groups that can not protect themselves using economic and political measures.

‘Civic participation, in my view, refers to citizens’ involvement in improving their state and resolving political issues. It is important to me as a citizen of this country what happens in my homeland, to join in and not to stand apart. I take part in the parliamentary elections; I love my homeland, and it is important to me that things are put in order. I take part in the spring cleaning activities. The environment is important to me and so is the micro-environment – my family; protecting them is the duty of each citizen.’

On the other hand, responses to the question concerning their own ‘personal civic participation’ confirmed the well-known fact that among students, like among the youth in general, there are more active and more passive individuals, and the same level of activity can not be required or expected from everybody.

Engagement in various civic activities is the voluntary choice of each student. It was emphasized by 79 % of the respondents. A lot of them (65%) pointed out that they were too busy with other things (studies, business, work, family), so they could not be actively involved in various activities related to civic participation.

The main emphasis was put on engagement in the traditional mechanisms of representative democracy – parliamentary and municipal elections and referendums.

A considerable number of the respondents pointed out their active involvement in environmental protection, students’ self-government and corporations.

According to the results of the survey, about 20% of the students are unwilling to take part in various civic activities and can be considered as very passive. On the other hand, 65% of the students willingly take part in various social activities, while 15% of the students demonstrate high level of civic activity and are actively engaged in tackling various political issues (take part in students’ self-government, competitions, develop projects, participate in conferences, charity activities, strikes, pickets, boycotts, marches, etc.).

The responses of the 1st year students show the diversity of the content of the notion:

‘My civic participation is my active engagement in the social and educational life of my district (I participate in various projects and events, charity activities that improve both my own life and that of other people – my friends, colleagues, neighbours, and my students – as well as bring joy and are morally and aesthetically rewarding). Political and economic processes in this country are

important to me. Therefore, as the citizen of Latvia, I actively participate in various electoral processes.'

'My civic participation manifests itself in helping my town, in making it clean and tidy, first of all.'

'My civic participation mainly manifests itself as involvement in various state events and processes – elections, protests, developing proposals for various regulatory documents which can affect the life of my state, its image and essence. I realize my civic participation lending a hand in tidying my town and keeping my own little plot of land in order as well as raising my children as good citizens and not being indifferent to the problems of my fellow-citizens, as far as it is possible.'

'I worry about my state and want to change something in myself and others so that we could live better, without thinking whether we would have a future. We have to be united and focused on one common goal – to make our state such that our children would not be ashamed of it.'

'I try to publish articles in all the local periodicals, and by means of these publications I want to show how many smart, hard-working and good people we have among us. And all together we are developing this country as well as we can, with our individual work, conscientious work for the sake of all of us.'

'I take part in the elections and trade union meetings; I also attended the forum in order to express my opinion. I participate in protest campaigns and strikes. My civic duty is to take part in various debates concerning issues which are topical to me and where I have something to contribute.'

All in all, the students' responses demonstrate that the experience of civic participation enables them to see new opportunities both for themselves and for the state and society in general.

A significant number of the respondents emphasized their active engagement in environmental protection and students' self-government.

It is very important for the students to be aware of the need to look for the opportunities of self-actualization by developing their ability of selectivity, which is connected with responsibility, decision-making, and determination of ones' life values.

Participation is an integral part of the process of higher education; it is a means, an end, and a continuous process rather than a separate event. Having been involved in education, people can not remain passive; on the contrary, they strive for active participation in social activities. Moreover, both the academic staff and the students are engaged not only in studies and research, but they can also take part in the university administration and affect the decision-making processes at the university. Accepting the challenge of life-long learning is an opportunity to learn a lot apart from the classroom activities and to gain the practical experience of civic participation.

Conclusions

1. Participation emphasizes individuals' self-determination, self-responsibility and self-activity; it characterises the way of individuals' advancement throughout his or her life. Participation is closely linked with individuals' value orientations.
2. When encountering difficulties, young people do not perceive them as problems but as new opportunities and challenges since civic participation provides opportunities not only for collaboration, but also for joint decision-making and co-determination.
3. In order to promote students' civic participation, it is important to pay attention to this issue not only in the macro-context, i.e. participation in political and social activities, engagement in the decision-making processes affecting the youth policy at the national, regional and the municipal level, but also to participation at the mezzo- and micro-level context, using institutions of higher education as the integration models of the civil society. It would ensure a more stable evaluation of the participation experience both of the academic staff and the students in the actual integration process in the multinational environment of the institution of higher education.

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