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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The role that student clubs and associations play in citizenship education within Latvia

Inese Jurgena¹ and Zigurds Mikainis²

¹Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy (Latvia);

²Rezekne Higher Education Institution (Latvia)

Abstract

As a result of social and economic transformations a new situation has developed in Latvia at the beginning of the 21st century. Along with the formation of civil society, issues concerning the social, legal, and spiritual life of the student population have come to the fore. New features of behavioural culture and standards of thinking can be observed, as well as a readiness to live in a democratic environment. The younger generation perceives freedom and equality as necessary preconditions for various activities, and as an opportunity for individual self-actualisation. The institutions of higher education play an important role in the formation of social consciousness and serve as the environment in which citizenship can be developed. One of the most important aspects of the educational environment are the various student interest groups and clubs, the main purpose of which is to promote students' readiness to live in civil society by developing their creative potential and public administration skills. The activities of clubs and associations create preconditions for meeting the varied communication needs of young people as well as the real application of personal initiative and responsibility. As for the development of citizenship, the activities taking place in such clubs help provide important social spaces in which positive social experience can be acquired. At this level, students' citizenship mainly manifests itself as active participation in public administration, involvement in definite socially important activities, and direct participation in the development of economic, political, and cultural life. It should be noted that these activities can be realised both individually and through active group cooperation in various organisations. The purpose of the article is to study and analyse the various student clubs and associations within higher education institutions in Latvia that are aimed at the development of citizenship.

Keywords: *youth policy, citizenship education, student clubs*

Introduction

Along with the formation of civil society, issues concerning the social, legal, and spiritual life of student population have come to the foreground. The young generation perceives freedom and equality as necessary preconditions for varied activities, as an opportunity for individual's self-actualization.

One of the most important subjects of educational environment is the aggregate of various student interest groups and clubs, the main purpose of which is to promote students' readiness to live in civil society by developing students' creative potential and public administration skills.

As to the development of citizenship, the activities taking place in the clubs can be regarded as a particular social space and an opportunity for acquiring positive social experience. At this level, students' citizenship mainly manifests itself as active participation in public administration, involvement in definite socially important activities, and direct participation in the development of economic, political, and cultural life.

The purpose of the article is to study and analyse the experience of various student clubs and associations in the institutions of higher education in Latvia aimed at the development of citizenship.

1. Issues concerning the youth policy in Latvia

The awareness of youth policy as an area concerning civil society and democratic policy is gradually developing and strengthening in Latvia. The youth policy is an aggregate of purposeful activities promoting the comprehensive development of young people as full-fledged members of society thus stimulating their social inclusion and citizenship education.

In the last years, Latvia has managed, first, to streamline legal regulations concerning the youth policy; second, to develop and implement effective models of mutual cooperation (inter alia by attracting young people as partners); third, to develop and maintain an effective model of communication understandable for all subjects of the policy, which fulfils both informative and communicative (feedback) functions.

In this respect, a very important factor has been the transition from the principle that the youth is a target group or a subject to the principle that the youth is a partner both in the policy development and implementation, from work with the youth to collaboration with the youth. This trend in the youth policy activates the participation of young people and their civic responsibility, as well as provides better opportunities for education and employment in general.

The most essential national document determining the youth policy in Latvia is "Youth Law". Its purpose is to improve the quality of life for young people aged 13 to 25 promoting their participation in decision-making and social life, as well as supporting youth work. The "Youth Law" defines the parties involved in the implementation of the youth policy and their competency in the field of this policy, youth participation in the development and implementation of the youth policy, as well as the key principles for allocating finance for youth initiatives, their participation in decision-making and social life, as well as youth work (Youth Law, 2008).

According to this law, youth work is a set of planned youth-oriented practical measures, which ensure the implementation of the youth policy, the development of value-orientations of young people, and the consolidation of universal human values.

On the other hand, the purpose of “Youth Policy Guidelines 2009 – 2018”, another long-term policy planning document for the next ten years, is to achieve the implementation of a harmonized youth policy and its coordination by identifying the priority directions of activity and policy results, working out the vision of development in connection with the quality of life of young people and the implementation of the youth policy. This document also highlights the key issues that need to be dealt with in the field of the youth policy (Youth Policy Guidelines 2009 – 2018, 2009).

The key issues concerning the youth are:

- The low participation of young people in social activities and youth organizations;
- Lack of up-to-date information about the opportunities of participation at the state level;
- An important factor promoting youth participation is the financial support for the implementation of youth initiatives. In Latvia, the financial support granted to youth initiatives and youth organizations is insufficient;
- There is no uniform classification of youth organizations and no uniform mechanism for the registration of youth organizations;
- There is no methodological and financial support for providing the work of student self-governance in educational institutions; as a result, their cooperation at the regional, national, and international level is not facilitated;
- The youth opinion concerning their possibilities to influence the decisions of local and national governments is critically low, which does not indicate that there is a practice of youth involvement before making decisions which concern the youth policy (Youth Policy Guidelines 2009 – 2018, 2009).

In order to tackle the issues outlined above, there has been developed The Youth Policy State Programme for the Years 2009 – 2013 (The Youth Policy State Programme for the Years 2009 – 2013, 2009).

The above mentioned programme is mainly focused on the development of youth centres in local governments. However, one of the issues concerning the youth policy that needs to be dealt with in Latvia is the advancement of citizenship education with a particular emphasis on youth participation in decision-making and the efficient use of leisure time, active participation of young people in various youth organizations, youth initiative groups, clubs, etc.

2. The institution of higher education as open educational environment for the sustainable development of the community

Nowadays, many institutions of higher education, being viable, self-developing, self-organizing, and self-assessing systems of educational environment, learning both from their own experience and that of other institutions, are expanding their functions and increasing their target audience, thus becoming educational environments for the whole society. In the current crisis situation, this trend in the work of the institutions of higher education is connected not only with the attempt to preserve their own viability and

secure prospects for the future, but also with the humanistic approach in their activity taking care of the sustainable development of young people.

According to the concept “Education for Sustainable Development” adopted by the UNESCO (The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005 – 2014, (2007)), education for sustainable development is a multi-disciplinary, lifelong process, which includes the extensive learning experience of participation both in the formal and informal environment of the programme.

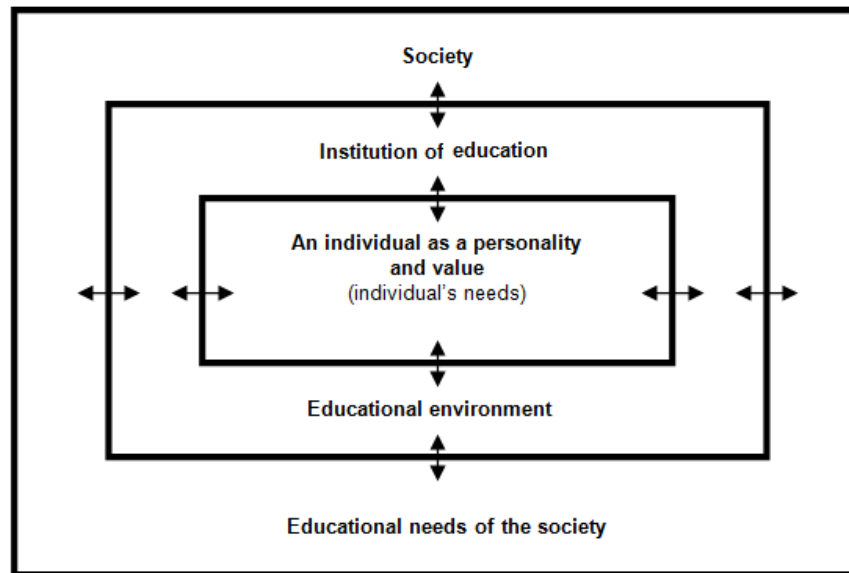
In order to ensure the implementation of the above-mentioned principles in the institutions of higher education, it is important to use the concept “education in the community” as the basic framework, focusing on the developing experience in citizenship education acquired by the institutions of higher education and students.

Education in the community is a very broad and multi-dimensional notion. Its content is closely related both to providing open, multifunctional educational environment, respecting the interests and needs of the local society (community), and to problem solutions offered by lifelong learning. Education in the community provides an important stimulus for the members of the community to take part in social activities and to improve their quality of life (Akande, 2007).

The interpretation of the notion “education in the community” refers to education which is organized in a particular educational institution of the community. According to several scholars, in many western countries local universities start assuming the role of multifunctional centres providing various educational services (Fairbairn, 1978; Johnson, Bell, 1995; Jarvis, 2001).

The idea of the institution of higher education as an educational community makes it possible to provide scientific justification for various processes taking place in the environment of higher education in Latvia. The institution of higher education provides a democratic, open environment of lifelong learning which facilitates the development of individual's personality; besides, it is a free environment since the institutions of higher education, being humanistically oriented democratic educational environments, represent the interests of the whole local society and respect the educational needs of its members. Moreover, it meets the needs and interests of a particular individual as the member of this society and a unique personality. The institution of higher education serves as an intermediary between the needs, goals, and interests of the local society (community) and those of an individual. This three-dimensional model of interaction (society (community) ↔ the institution of higher education ↔ an individual as a personality ↔ society (community)) leads to the conclusion that the institution of higher education is an important component of interaction with its own tasks, competencies, and a broad range of functions. In the 21st century, when there is a global need for the humanization of the world society, when there can be observed the devaluation of spiritual values, including citizenship values, the institutions of higher education play an important role providing the environment for the development of personality and the education of the society.

Figure 1. The model of interaction between a community, the institution of education and an individual (according to Katane, 2007, p. 39)



The present article is based on the model of the institution of higher education as a humanistic, purposeful, multifunctional, and open educational environment, which has been developed by Latvian scholars.

Nowadays, the mission of the institution of higher education is to ensure the viability of an individual, community, and itself in the changeable environmental conditions and sustainability in the future perspective. The readiness of the society to change, perfect itself and develop depends to a great extent on how creative, rich in initiative, and ready for change the institution of higher education is. The status of the institution of higher education as the guarantor for sustainable development of the community also depends on the fact whether the institution of higher education is democratic and whether it ensures the implementation of citizenship values in practice.

3. Clubs as the form of students' self-actualization in citizenship education

In the Latvian society, there has appeared a need for a radically different approach in providing the system of social education in *micro-socium*, which envisages educational activities organized by cultural and educational institutions.

In order to involve students in the social life of the institutions of higher education, it is necessary to have an efficiently organized system of activity focused on the development of a socially-mature personality.

In order to accomplish the education of active citizens, it is necessary to create a particular social space (social organizations, societies, associations, clubs, etc), thus

creating pre-conditions for developing the active civic position of the youth and individuals' self-actualization. At present, various clubs experience a real boom as the forms of social education various forms of student clubs are also very popular. The issues concerning student clubs are becoming increasingly important in view of the necessity to organize citizenship education in the institutions of higher education.

‘A club is the form of education which refers to the youth associations of different age-groups; it is based on common interests and needs, thus creating an opportunity to involve young people in socially significant, varied activities. Within the framework of club activity, there is created a uniform system of value-orientations and uniform organization of the social experience of individuals’ (Kotova, 2010, p. 5).

Promoting the activities of student clubs in the institutions of higher education increases the opportunities for students' self-actualization and citizenship education based on the ideas of humanistic psychology concerning the realization of human potential. Student societies and clubs facilitate their involvement in social life, advance the actualization of students' social functions as members of society, and prepare students for self-development. Students' self-actualization in the process of club activities is one of the most important means for the development of personality; consequently, the functioning of clubs is one of the most important components of educational process in the institutions of higher education nowadays. If we regard student clubs as an essential factor of students' self-actualization having an impact on students' socialization, it has to be admitted that students' extracurricular activity is of the same importance as their curricular activity.

In several educational institutions in Latvia (Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, Riga Technical University, the University of Latvia), there have developed debating clubs (hereinafter DC) – an interesting form of activity with regard to citizenship education.

The DC of the University of Latvia holds national and international debating contests and training sessions, organizes debates at schools and the institutions of higher education, as well as helps to organize other events promoting discussion about topical social and political issues. The key objectives in the activity of the DC of the University of Latvia are:

- to improve argumentation skills and the standard of rhetoric in the society, particularly among young people;
- to provide financial support for debate participants in tournaments and training sessions;
- to promote discussions on debatable issues in Latvian society;
- to train people in the art of public speaking;
- to educate future politicians;
- to develop the culture of parliamentary debates in Latvia.

The term “parliamentary debate” refers to a “game”, the main purpose of which is to persuade the panel of judges and the audience in some debatable issue, to outdo the opponents with well-thought-out arguments, exciting speech, and pertinent questions. It

is a popular “sport” in many universities in the world since it transforms arguing, which has always been good entertainment, into a valuable instrument for students’ development. In Latvia, the “game” of parliamentary debating is known as the “British parliamentary debate”.

The game “British parliamentary debate” has a particularly dynamic style. In this game, four pairs of debate participants compete after 15 minutes of preparation time; they symbolically represent the current government (proposition) and opposition coalitions. The World Universities Debating Championship, one of the major international student events, also takes place in the same format.

It should be noted that the Debating Club of the University of Latvia, or the society “ULDC”, is the biggest parliamentary debating club in Latvia. More than 250 students from the University of Latvia, other institutions of higher education and secondary schools, as well as individual debating enthusiasts attend the training sessions organized by the ULDC. The first training session was organized on 4 April, 2007. A model debate was held in the Big Hall of the University of Latvia, where the best Latvian debaters competed with the young debating enthusiasts of the University of Latvia. Since that first debate, training sessions take place regularly, i.e. every week, also during the examination period. This is the fifth year since the debates have been held on Mondays and Wednesdays, sometimes during the summer holidays, too. The DC of the University of Latvia is a non-governmental organization, the society “ULDC”, which was granted the status of public benefit organization in the summer of 2010 (University of Latvia Debate Club, <http://debates.lu.lv/>).

The UL students point out that during the training sessions the participants acquire the skills of public speaking; they learn not only to speak, but also to listen and to provide precise arguments to support their position. Debating also helps to train the sense of time and the ability to say the key points in a concise way, as well as to react quickly to unexpected turns in the debate and to see the most essential ideas, values, and arguments. Debaters can think and speak in a structured way; they are also able to see the arguments of the opposite side. Moreover, debating considerably expands students’ world outlook (University of Latvia Debate Club, <http://debates.lu.lv/>).

We believe that public speaking skills and the ability to provide arguments to support one’s position are among the most important requirements for a successful career in almost any area. Debating teaches to process information quickly and efficiently – to select the needed information and to discard the redundant one, which considerably facilitates the process of studies at the institution of higher education, too.

At the same time, the debate is a game – intellectual and very exciting – therefore, the process of learning is more than interesting. It gives an opportunity to discuss topical issues with similarly-minded young people and to acquire friends in all Latvia during debating contests and tournaments. During the tournaments, it is possible to debate in Latvian as well as make use of the English language skills.

In order to stimulate students’ active participation in elections, a particular attention is paid to the organization of the so-called “pre-election” public debates. For instance, in

2011 the DC of the University of Latvia organized a public debate in connection with the upcoming parliamentary elections. The motion was: “This government will grant the permission to vote only to those people who have passed the exam”. During the debate, students representing four different departments had to provide arguments for and against the motion concerning voters’ examination before the election. During the contest, there were singled out the criteria characterising the choice of a careless voter and the criteria characterising a smart voter.

Some of the themes which have been offered for the debate by the DC of the University of Latvia are as follows:

- the government is going to legalize the same-sex marriage;
- the government is going to grant funding only to those universities that will considerably increase their admission requirements;
- the government believes that Latvia needs the progressive taxation;
- the government is going to grant citizenship to all non-citizens living in Latvia;
- this government is going to donate part of the tax revenues for UN international aid programmes (University of Latvia Debate Club, <http://debates.lu.lv/>).

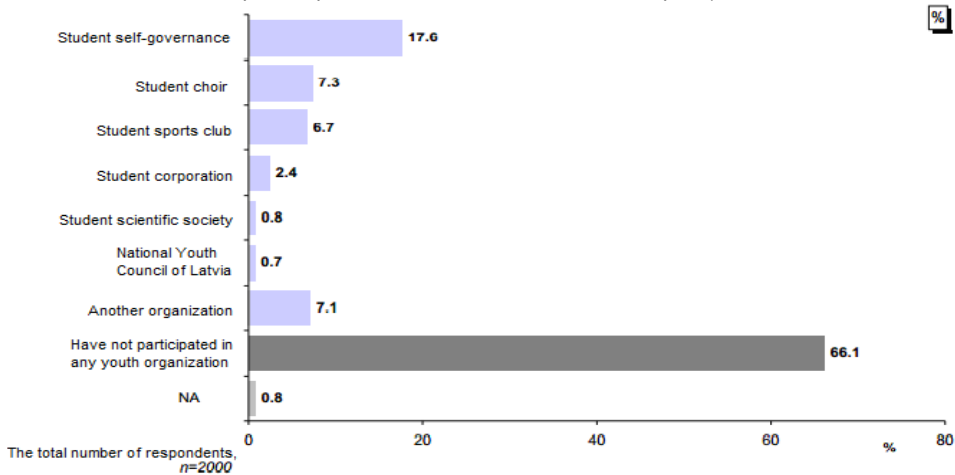
As it was mentioned above, at present various club activities are gaining recognition as one of the most important educational instruments. Individually oriented forms of club activity are becoming particularly popular: social clubs, educational studies, internship schools, and development clubs. It should be admitted though that the resources of the clubs (material resources, personnel, active membership, methodologies) are not fully and efficiently used.

4. Latvian students’ motivation to join student clubs

Having analysed and evaluated the role of Latvian student clubs and associations in citizenship education, their current problems and difficulties, it has to be noted that in the recent years several studies have been conducted in Latvia concerning students’ participation in various youth organizations and clubs. These studies provide valuable material characterising the social life of Latvian students. The documents concerning international and national processes in higher education (e.g. the Bologna Process, Lisbon Treaty) consider students as the basis for the formation of knowledge society. It is important to study students’ opinions in order to evaluate the existing education policy and to develop the strategy of higher education.

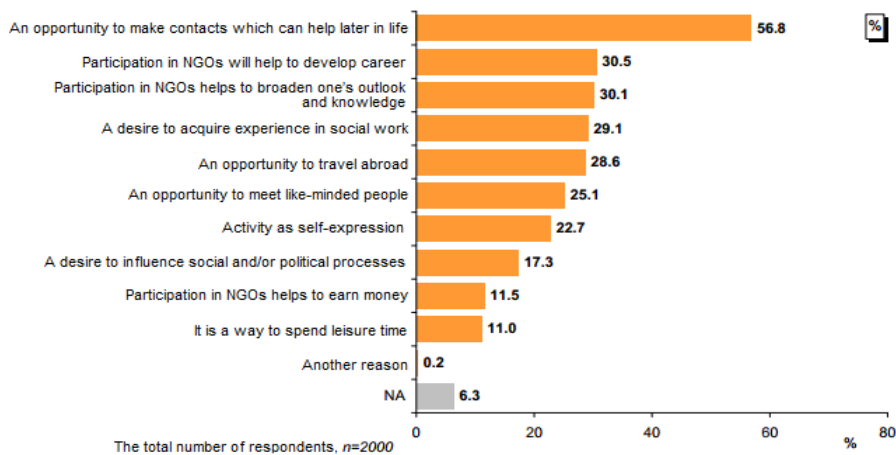
In 2009, the marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS carried out a study involving 2000 full-time students from state-funded and private institutions of higher education in order to analyse students’ participation in youth organizations. According to the study, 66.1 % of the respondents were not involved in these organizations. Most often the respondents mentioned participation in students’ self-governance – 17.6%. More than 5 % of those questioned mentioned a student choir (7.3%), a sports club (6.7%), but 7.1 % indicated that they were involved in other student interest clubs.

Chart 1. Student participation in youth organizations and clubs (according to the marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS, 2009, p. 60)



According to the students, the main motivating factors for their participation in youth organizations and clubs are: the opportunity to make contacts which can help later in life (56.8%), an opportunity to develop one's career (30.5%), an opportunity to broaden one's outlook and knowledge (30.1%), an opportunity to gain experience in social work (29.1%).

Chart 2. Students' motivation to participate in youth organizations and clubs (according to the marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS, 2009, p. 59)



All in all, there appears a distinctive opportunity to break and overcome the view dominating in the Latvian society that only politicians holding power can have a decisive impact on the current social and political processes in Latvia. Over a half of those surveyed (52.9%) rated politicians' influence as very big. Other institutions and social

groups were rated like that less frequently (under 15% of the cases). Overall, three quarters (75.1%) of the inhabitants of Latvia surveyed rated politicians as the most influential political group.

Conclusions

1. Nowadays, the institutions of higher education play an important role in the development of social consciousness and serve as the environment for citizenship education. One important subject of the educational environment is the aggregate of student clubs, associations, and interest groups, the main objective of which with regard to citizenship education is to prepare students for life in civil society by developing their creative potential and public administration skills, organizing leisure time activities, and creating preconditions for meeting their communication needs, personal initiative, and responsibility.
2. The system of higher education has the potential to educate a new type of specialists for a new social reality. The university is a structure where would-be professionals and active citizens acquire the forms of social participation not only in theory, but also in practice, are involved in them, and thus develop necessary character features, skills, world outlook, and civic activity.
3. Student clubs promote the active participation of young people in decision-making and social life, broaden students' opportunities to gain knowledge and acquire skills, as well as spend their free time in a productive way and implement civic activities.

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