# Student Representation in University Governance after Bologna

## What a Seat on the Senate Is Worth

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Student participation became a principle of European higher education governance before it became an instrument, and the distance between the two is where two decades of reform have stalled. This article examines the seat that a student occupies: the three functions that a representative performs, the committee that decides nothing, the election that produces a specialist, the channels that compete with the senate, the training that is never budgeted, and the measures by which influence can be demonstrated rather than asserted. It argues that representation is a professional role with a cost, that its quality depends on access to information and to support rather than on the number of seats, and that the instrument which improves it is an annual account of what a representative changed.

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## 1. The Model That Bologna Assumed

Bologna did not invent student participation and it did not specify it. The declarations named students as partners in the construction of the European Higher Education Area, and the ministers who signed them assumed that a principle stated at the European level would be implemented at the institutional level by the actors who already had a reason to implement it. The assumption was reasonable and it was incomplete.

The principle travelled faster than the instrument. A ministry can require a student seat on a senate in a paragraph of a law, and the same ministry cannot require that the seat carry information, preparation, advice and time. Two decades later the seats exist in almost every system that signed the declarations, and the quality of what happens in them varies far more than the legal forms suggest.

The consequence is that the European comparison of student participation measures presence rather than influence, and a measure of presence is satisfied by a reform that changes nothing. The instrument that the area lacks is a description of the role: what a representative is expected to know, what she is entitled to receive, and what she is accountable for.

## 2. Three Functions of a Representative

A representative performs three functions, and institutions usually fund the first and expect the other two.

The first is the mandate: to carry a position that a constituency has agreed into a body that would otherwise not hear it. The second is the intelligence: to explain to the constituency what the body is doing, and why a decision that looks arbitrary is a constraint of law, money or time. The third is the negotiation: to trade a priority for a concession in a room where the trade is not visible from outside.

The three require different skills, and one person usually performs them badly at once. A representative who spends her term explaining the institution to the students has no time to negotiate with it, and a representative who negotiates without explaining is removed at the next election by a constituency that believes she has joined the other side.

The separation is the first question of institutional design. An institution that wants the mandate and the negotiation in the same person

must give her a staff, and an institution that will not give her a staff should expect her to choose one of the two and to be judged on it.

## 3. The Legal Form and the Practice

The legal form is a paragraph: a proportion of seats, an elected mandate, a term of one or two years, a right to receive the papers. The practice is a set of conditions that the paragraph does not mention and that determine everything the paragraph was meant to achieve.

The agenda arrives two days before the meeting. The papers run to a hundred pages, of which the relevant annex is forty. The vote falls at the end of a session that has lasted four hours. The student member has a seminar at the same hour and arrives for the vote. Nothing in the paragraph is violated, and the seat is empty in the only sense that matters.

The remedy is administrative rather than legal, and it is cheap. An agenda published a week in advance, a summary of each item written by the office that prepared it, a rule that no substantive item is taken before the student members have received the papers, and a calendar agreed at the start of the year: four measures, none of which requires a statute.

## 4. The Committee That Decides Nothing

Every institution has a committee on which a student sits and which decides nothing. The committee has a mandate to advise, a membership that includes a vice-rector, a minutes secretary and a schedule of three meetings a year.

The presence of the student in that room legitimises a decision that was taken elsewhere, and the legitimisation is the reason the committee exists. A reform that abolishes the committee improves nothing, because the decision will still be taken elsewhere and will still need a body that appears to have consulted.

The instrument is not abolition but disclosure: a published list of the bodies that decide, with the item each body decides and the point at which student opinion is taken. A list of that kind shows a new representative where to spend her term, and it shows the institution which of its committees is a formality.

## 5. The Election That Produces a Specialist

Where the seat is contested, the campaign rewards the student who already speaks the institution's language: the one who has sat on a faculty committee, who knows the regulation, who can name the dean. That student is the best candidate available and she is also the least descriptive of the constituency she is elected to carry.

The mechanism is not a defect of the students. It is the ordinary logic of any election in a large, low-information electorate, and it produces the same result in staff elections and in national parliaments. The consequence is a body that is more competent and less representative than the student population, and the two qualities are traded against each other.

The design that keeps both is a second chamber: a large assembly of programme delegates that meets twice a year and sets the mandate, and a small executive that negotiates within it. The assembly supplies the descriptive legitimacy, the executive supplies the competence, and the mandate connects the two.

## 6. The National Union and the Institution

Two channels carry student voice in most European systems, and they operate on different objects. The national union negotiates with the ministry on the framework: fees, grants, admission quotas, the legal status of the student. The institutional representative negotiates on the local application of that framework: the timetable, the assessment rules, the allocation of places.

The two channels are frequently staffed by different people who do not speak, and the gap between them is where the student interest is lost. A national union that wins a maintenance grant and cannot describe how it will reach the student in a residence in a regional city has won a headline. An institutional representative who negotiates a hardship fund without knowing that the ministry has changed the eligibility rule has negotiated a fund that cannot be paid.

The instrument is a joint calendar and a joint briefing: the union tells the institutions what it is negotiating and when, the institutions tell the union what the local effects are, and each publishes the other's summary. The cost is one meeting a quarter and the effect is a channel that carries information in both directions.

## 7. The Channel of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is where student participation has been most thoroughly formalised and most narrowly instrumentalised. The standards require a student member on an expert panel, a student questionnaire in the self-evaluation, and a student contribution to the site visit.

The formalisation produced a professional cadre of student experts, trained by the agencies, who read institutional reports and ask questions that the institutions have learned to answer. That cadre is a genuine achievement of the Bologna process and it is also a separate profession, distinct from the representative who sits on the senate and distinct from the student who fills in the questionnaire.

The weakness is the feedback loop. A panel writes a report, the report names a weakness, the institution writes an action plan, and the students who supplied the evidence do not see whether the plan was implemented. The instrument that closes the loop is a follow-up report written for students, in the language of students, published on the same day as the report of the panel.

## 8. The Information That a Representative Needs

A representative can function with four documents, and most institutions supply none of them.

The first is the budget line that pays for the item under discussion, which tells her whether a proposal is a choice or a constraint. The second is the regulation that governs the decision, which tells her which body can change it. The third is the data on the population affected: how many students, in which programmes, with what characteristics. The fourth is the calendar of the next decision, which tells her whether she has a month or a year.

The four are held by four different offices and none of them is secret. The barrier is not confidentiality but the absence of a request that the institution is obliged to answer, and the remedy is a standing entitlement in the statutes: a request from the student body for these four items is answered within ten working days.

| Channel | Who holds it | What it can change |
|---|---|---|
| Senate | Elected students | Regulations and the budget |
| Quality assurance | Student experts | The teaching and learning process |
| National union | The national leadership | The framework and the fee |
| Programme delegates | Every cohort | The timetable and the assessment |

**Table 1** Channels of student influence and what each can change

## 9. The Senate and the Argument

What changes a vote in a senate is rarely the moral force of the student case, and it is usually the presence of a costed alternative.

A student member who says that a fee increase will exclude students from low-income households has stated a value that every member of the body already shares. A student member who says that the increase will remove four hundred places from the programmes with the lowest completion rate, that the faculty has already modelled the effect, and that a phased introduction over three years would preserve both the revenue and the places, has made an argument that a rector can accept without losing the budget.

The capacity to make the second argument is what a training programme should build, and it is what the current arrangements almost never build. The instrument is a small analytical office, shared between the student body and the institutional research unit, which produces a one-page costing within a week of a request.

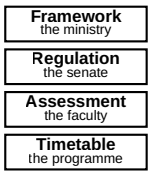



**Figure 1** Where the four decisions of a student's life are taken

## 10. The Training That Is Never Budgeted

Every institution that takes representation seriously spends money on it, and the money is small. An induction of two days, a mentor who has held the seat, a handbook of the regulations that the representative will meet, and a travel budget for the national meetings.

The absence of that spending is not a decision against representation. It is the ordinary fate of a cost that belongs to no budget line: the student body has no funds, the registrar has no mandate, and the office of the rector assumes that the students organise themselves. The result is that each cohort relearns the institution from the beginning, and the institutional memory of representation is one year long.

The instrument is a line in the budget of the institution, defended as a cost of governance rather than as a service to students, with a figure calibrated to the number of seats. An institution that spends the equivalent of one junior salary on the training of its student members has bought a body that can read its own papers.

## 11. The Part-Time Student and the Four O'Clock Meeting

The meeting is at four in the afternoon, and the students who work are not there. The students who are not there are disproportionately the

ones the social dimension is about: the mature student, the student with a child, the student who commutes from a town with no evening service.

The exclusion is not intentional and it is systematic. A committee calendar set by the availability of the senior staff, who work in the building, will always favour the students who also work in the building during the day, and those students are the youngest, the most residential and the least likely to have a household to support.

The remedy is a calendar negotiated at the start of the year, with one meeting in each semester held in the evening or online, and a rule that a decision taken in a meeting that no part-time student could attend is open to objection for ten days. The rule costs nothing and it changes the composition of the room.

## 12. The International Student Who Cannot Vote

In an institution where a fifth of the student body holds a foreign passport, the representative body is elected by the other four fifths. The international students have no mandate, no seat, and no route to the agenda except through a member of staff who takes an interest.

The exclusion is legal in most systems, because the right to vote in student elections is attached to the status of a registered student and the registration of an international student is frequently shorter than the electoral cycle. It is also the exclusion of the constituency with the highest stake in the decisions that the body takes, since the fee, the residence rule and the language requirement apply to them most sharply.

The instrument is a non-voting seat with speaking rights for the international association, plus an annual report on the conditions of international students presented to the same body. A seat without a vote is a compromise, and it is better than the silence that precedes it.

## 13. The Cost of Holding a Seat

Representation is unpaid in most European systems and it is not free. The representative gives up study time, and the study time is the only asset she has. She gives up income if she works. She takes on a public

role in which every decision is attributed to her personally, and the attribution outlasts her term.

The cost falls hardest on the students with the least margin, and the effect is a selection bias that no amount of exhortation corrects. A student who needs to earn to pay the rent cannot spend fifteen hours a week in meetings, and the students who can are the ones whose families can carry the delay.

The instrument is a recognition of the role in the academic record: credits for the training, an extension of the maximum period of study for the term of office, and a modest stipend for the executive positions. None of the three is expensive, and each of them changes who can afford to stand.

## 14. The Measure of Influence

An institution that wishes to know whether its student representation works can measure four things within a year, and none of them is the number of seats.

The first is the proportion of agenda items on which the student members received the papers a week in advance. The second is the number of amendments proposed by the student members that were adopted. The third is the number of decisions reversed after a student objection. The fourth is the number of students who can name their programme representative.

The four are administrative facts and one survey question. Their publication, annually, in the same report as the other governance indicators of the institution, is the instrument that converts representation from a symbolic commitment into a monitored function.

## 15. The Partner and the Adversary

Bologna speaks of students as partners, and the language of partnership is the language of a shared project. The older tradition of student representation in several European systems is adversarial: the student movement as a counter-power that contests the decisions of the institution and defends the interest of a constituency that the institution would otherwise ignore.

The two are not alternatives and the attempt to choose between them has weakened both. A representative who is only a partner is co-opted, because she shares responsibility for decisions she did not shape. A representative who is only an adversary is excluded, because the institution stops bringing her the papers that would let her contest anything.

The position that works is a division by object: cooperative on process, adversarial on outcome. The student body agrees with the institution on the timetable of a consultation and contests the substance of what the consultation concludes. Written into a protocol of relations, that division gives each side a predictable role.

## 16. The Sequence of an Institutional Reform

An institution that decides to improve representation can do so in a sequence, and the order matters more than the ambition.

The first step is the calendar and the papers, which cost nothing and which make the existing seats functional. The second is the training line in the budget, which makes the seats competent. The third is the analytical office, which makes the arguments costed. The fourth is the second chamber, which makes the mandate descriptive. The fifth is the protocol of relations, which fixes the division between cooperation and contest.

A sequence of that kind takes three to four years and it does not require a change of the law in most systems. A reform that begins with the law and the structure produces new bodies with the old conditions, and the old conditions are what the students experience.

## 17. The Academic Who Also Sits

Staff representation in the same senates offers a comparison that the student case rarely uses. An academic member arrives with a discipline, a research record, a departmental base and a career interest in the decisions that the senate takes. She is not trained for governance either, and she is prepared by a career of reading documents and defending positions in public.

The asymmetry is not one of intelligence and it is one of support. The academic member has an office, a telephone, a secretary and the right to ask the registrar for data. The student member has a laptop and a

term of one year. An institution that equalises the support rather than the seats has done more for participation than one that adds a seat.

The comparison also disposes of an argument. Student members are sometimes described as unable to judge academic matters. The academic members of the same body judge financial and legal matters in which they have no training either, and the body accepts their judgement because they have the papers and the time to read them.

## 18. Conclusions

Student participation became a principle of European governance before it became an instrument, and the distance between the two is visible in the conditions under which the seats operate rather than in the statutes that create them.

Three conclusions follow. The role needs a description: the functions of mandate, explanation and negotiation, separated where one person cannot carry all three, and supported by an analytical capacity that produces a costed alternative within a week. The conditions need a rule: papers a week in advance, an agenda published, a calendar that a working student can attend, and an entitlement to four documents that the institution must answer. And the effect needs a measure: amendments adopted, decisions reversed, and the proportion of students who can name their representative, published every year alongside the other governance indicators of the institution.

A system that has done the three has implemented the principle of Bologna. A system that has done none of them has implemented its sentence.

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