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Partners or Counterparts?

Student Involvement in Management and Quality Assurance at Lund University

By Christian Stråhlman¹

There is an increasing demand from students and their organisations all over Europe for involvement in quality assurance. Today, this demand is met with a wide international understanding that student involvement is a key factor in quality assurance. Student representatives and organisations are involved in the development and execution of quality assurance processes in many higher education institutions. While involvement is desirable, it puts higher demands on student organisations to act professionally.

Sweden has a long tradition of student involvement in higher education. Swedish legislation entitles students to representation in all decision-making and preparatory bodies at universities. At Lund University this has evolved into a student partnership model where student representatives have full insight as equal partners in university management. This has been a successful and appreciated model. This paper discusses how the partnership model has evolved, how it is maintained and how the student voice has changed.

Background

In the 19th century the first student unions were established at the universities of Lund and Uppsala. Already in the 17th century the students at these universities had founded student societies, called student nations, which were modelled from similar societies at the universities in Paris. Membership was mandatory for all students. In 1908 the State decided that the mandatory membership should be extended to involve student unions. By that time, the student unions had begun to develop their political agenda concerning education and other political matters. In the 1940's, the student unions were granted representation in some university bodies with specific focus on educational matters. Due to the mandatory membership each student was given the right to vote in elections of student representatives. The obligation to join a student union was removed from legislation in 2010.

Student involvement is proclaimed in the Swedish Higher Education Act:

Students shall be entitled to exert influence over the education in the institutions of higher education. The higher education institutions shall work towards students taking an active part in the work with further development of the education. (chap. 1, sect. 4a)

This is the legislative cornerstone of student involvement. It states that universities are obliged to ensure that students can participate in quality assurance. The Act also states that there have to be student unions at each university. In 2000 a more detailed paragraph was issued granting the student unions representation on all formal and informal bodies at the universities:

Students at higher education institutions are entitled to representation on all decision-making or preparatory bodies at the institution whose activities are of importance to educational programmes and the students' situation. If a decision or preparatory work is to be undertaken by one single person rather than a body, information shall be given to and consultation be held with a student representative in good time before the decision or conclusion of the preparatory work. (Higher Education Ordinance, chap. 3, sect. 9)

A simple and straightforward interpretation of this paragraph is that students must be involved in each decision-making process on equal terms. With few exceptions this is what universities in Sweden have done. Students are involved in all issues at the university. With this amount of formal representation it has become natural for student representatives to take a more active part in the day-to-day management of the university, and, at some universities, to become an integral and equal partner with the academic leadership. One may regard this as a step up from the simple reactive stakeholder role to a pro-active, responsible and accountable partner role.

Student involvement and partnership at Lund University

Lund University, with more than 30 000 students, is organised in eight faculties, each undertaking both education and research. Decision-making and management takes place on three organisational levels: institutional, faculty and department. Each level has a similar internal organisational structure and has student representatives on its boards and management groups. Representatives are elected by the students enrolled at the Faculty or Department. Governing boards have at least three student representatives.

The Vice Chancellor answers to the board. His/her responsibility is shared with the Pro-Vice Chancellor. Together with three Assistant Vice Chancellors, the Head of Administration, and the President and Vice President of Lund University Student Unions' Association (LUS), they form the University Management Board. The University Management Board and the deans of the eight Faculties form the Dean Council. The two groups have alternating, bi-weekly sittings. Together they are the heart of the management of Lund University. Strategic and financial issues are all discussed and decided in one of these groups before the Vice Chancellor issues the formal order. Formal orders concerning strategy, policy, financial and legal matters are issued during weekly sessions attended by the President and Vice President of LUS.

The university also has a number of administrative groups responsible for a range of functions including funding, planning, communication and maintenance. Students are entitled to representation in these groups.

To elect representatives and to assert influence at the university the students in Lund have organised themselves into nine student unions, one at each Faculty plus one for third cycle students. They share some important characteristics: they are democratic, they are independent from the university and they rely to a large extent on voluntary work. The student unions at Lund University estimate a total number of 1 050 student representative seats to fill. The student unions have a hard task finding enough representatives to fill these seats.

In university policy student participation is regarded as one of the cornerstones in its internal quality assurance.

High requirements will be established for student involvement [...] Among the conditions for quality assurance will be effective student influence at all levels. (from Strategic Plan for Lund University 2007-2011)

Students and their representatives should not be viewed as counterparts, rather than partners in the University's activities. A good dialogue between the University at different levels and students, where students are involved as much as possible in the university's activities, provides the best basis for the proper functioning of quality assurance. Close cooperation between students and the University must be pursued. It is nonetheless necessary as a precondition for a more formalized student influence that the students and their organizations are independent of the University. (from Guidelines for student influence at Lund University)

There is an important distinction between student representatives as counterparts and student representatives as partners. Partnership with student unions lays a greater responsibility on student representatives to work with strategic issues. Students are required to have a greater knowledge of the university and of all issues discussed in the groups and boards. To cope with this, student representatives in the most important strategic groups must take leave of absence from their studies to work full-time at

their student unions as student representatives. There are approximately 25 students on leave from studies at the student unions in Lund. Besides representation, a great deal of effort goes into development of the union agenda and training and education of representatives. Since there are more than 1 000 students active in the student unions this cannot be ignored. There must also be a clear university policy that student representatives are valued. Having a representative function must not have a severe negative consequence for their studies. It must be possible for those who are elected as full time representatives to delay their studies for a year.

The student partnership model requires accountability from both parties. The student unions must trust the university to provide them with all the necessary information to participate in university management. Also, the university must be trusted to include student representatives every time a new issue is decided upon or prepared, and not to disclose “sensitive information”. The university must trust the student unions and student representatives to be well informed about the issues at hand, and to be briefed on the student opinion. The partnership model has proven successful since students have been given the opportunity to act as well-informed and reliable “critical friends”. University executives and students share the same vision and want the best possible education and research. When students are included as partners, more opinions can be raised, and student expertise is made use of. Management and students share a common goal – to achieve the highest possible quality of education and research.

Student partnership in university management – Two cases

This section contains two examples of how students have been involved in specific processes at Lund University. They are chosen to illustrate how student partnership is implemented.

Creating a new QA-policy

Quality Assurance at Lund University is based on a policy adopted by the University Board. The policy is valid for four years before revision. It is complemented by an action plan adopted by the Vice Chancellor. Since student involvement is considered an integral part of QA, student representatives are included in the process of creating the policy. The policy was last revised in 2008. The Quality Assurance Board was responsible for the process. They decided to form a working group chaired by the Evaluation Officer. One person working with educational development, two teachers and one student were also in the group. The group produced a policy draft, later discussed by the QA-Board (12 members, including 3 students). A final version was sent to the Vice Chancellor for discussion in the University Management board and in the Dean Council. Finally, a decision was taken by the University Board.

Note that the process involves students at all levels. In this case the policy discussion passes a number of students with different views and expertise. For the university the drawback of this system is that there is not only one fixed student opinion. Students, just like other groups of people, often have different views on the same issue. Student representatives also have different roles and expertise at different levels. An issue can be passed by students in four or more fora, and the work done by students in the working group is quite different to that of the student on the University Management Board. When students are included as partners it is essential to allow the student collective to be heterogeneous. Representatives may be elected by their unions to voice opinions decided through an internal democratic process. But they also have the responsibility to weigh together opinions in the student collective and to bring this opinion into debate with the university management.

With a partnership one allows students to participate behind closed doors. What happens there stays there. These student representatives must be trusted by their electors. It is not possible for the general student to know whether his/her representative acts according to the union’s decisions. As the student unions increasingly work in the inner circles it is harder to explain to the other students what the student union does. When a partnership is not in place it is much easier for student representatives to voice opinions in public. As student unions become less lobbying and more managing, the students might feel that they no longer know how student unions work.

This could be a paradox. For the student unions at Lund University it has been important to be backed up by the university. The university helps the student unions to provide fora where they can present themselves and their activities. Also, university executives present the student unions to external partners as the “true” student voice. To avoid conflict within the student collective, it is in the university’s interest to help keep the student unions respected and democratic. Nevertheless, a situation may occur where a student union is more strongly backed by the university itself than the student collective.

Expansion of Lund University Campus Helsingborg

Lund University has a campus in the neighbouring town of Helsingborg. It is a small enterprise compared to the activities in Lund. There are 2 000 students in Helsingborg and 30 000 students in Lund. The University Board has decided that the number of students in Helsingborg shall be raised considerably. This development has been suggested by the University Management Board and is backed by the student representatives. However, there has not been a consensus in the Dean Council. It is believed that an expansion of Campus Helsingborg will draw funds from existing activities in Lund and some Faculties have pronounced themselves against the expansion. The student representatives at faculty level have differing opinions as well. The student voice is not unanimous. There is, however, a consensus among the student unions that there is a need for more student counselling and library opening hours in Helsingborg, things that already affect the current 2 000 students.

In the Campus Helsingborg case, student representatives express different opinions in different fora. The issue to be solved is how to allow the student collective to have a joint opinion on one issue, but not on another. The student representatives in the Council represent all students at the university and they have to act against other student representatives at faculty level. These students may be backed by the management at their faculties. When this situation occurs, the management is faced with two contradictory student opinions. The opinion of student representatives at the institutional level is diminished since there obviously are contradictory student opinions. One is led to believe that the representatives at institutional level are powerless. This is not necessarily the case. Even if students disagree on one issue, participation is still necessary in order to work with those issues where students are all in agreement. Participation is still desirable, even if the student collective or the student unions do not have the same agenda. In this case there is a need for the students to raise issues about the working environment which is not possible without participation.

A different problem is the need to make compromises with university executives. Since student representatives are partners in university management, they are expected to stand behind decisions taken in e.g. the University Management Board. If there are different opinions they should be voiced internally; externally the board is unanimous. Since it is almost always easier to change policy from within, this is a price that needs to be paid. But it is difficult for the student representative to stand behind policy which is against the students’ wishes, even if it is a compromise (unbeknownst to the students at large). One must always bear in mind that there can be a conflict between representing students and representing the university.

The net effect in the Campus Helsingborg case is positive for the students. Student-centred issues have been raised thanks to the student partnership. Even if the student voice is divided and diverse, it shows that the partnership model works. The diversity of opinions, even in the student collective, can be useful for the decision-making process. As students generally are good at raising opinions from all levels to the level at which decisions are made, the institutional level catches more of the intrinsic voices before a decision is made. Student representatives can sometimes serve as whistle-blowers.

A need for improvement

In 2007 LUS performed an evaluation of the student involvement at the faculties and the departments. The student unions were asked about their view on student involvement at their faculty and their departments, and if there were problems that the university needed to address. The student unions applauded the good communication with academic leaders at faculty and department level, to some extent also with administration executives. Also, student representatives feel that there is positive response to

student participation in certain groups and boards. Student representatives feel appreciated and respected by the academic and administrative staff. In most cases, student unions feel that there is a working student engagement at all levels of the university.

On two major points the partnership needs improvement. The first is exchange of information between university and student unions. Some academic leaders do not inform the student union of decisions made, as required by the law. This is especially problematic at the departments where many decisions are delegated to the prefects, and often no advisory management groups are present. But also, some teachers are unaware of “student rights” and do not know when to inform and seek advice from the student union. The second main complication to a fully working student involvement is an unclear organisational structure of the university. When organisation is unclear, student representatives are often excluded from voicing their opinion as decisions are made in fora where students lack access.

A necessary prerequisite of student partnership is a clear communication between university and student union. Student representatives have short terms of office since their time as students are limited by the length of their study programme. Student representatives at Swedish universities are often elected for a one-year term. Therefore, the student representatives often, but not always, are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the university since they often lack experience of university management. This disadvantage is enhanced if the university has an unclear organisation and delegation. A student union wanting to express its views in a certain matter must first know where that matter is discussed and who has the power to decide upon it. This risk is minimised if the university strives to act according to its mandate. Formal preparatory bodies should be created to a high extent. There is a distinct correlation between a working student involvement and student representation in advisory and preparatory bodies. The student unions have asked for a wider use of this preparation, since it provides the best dialogue between the university and the student union. A request from the student unions is that the university should list all bodies acting at the university on the university website. Transparency in decision-making is a means to a better dialogue, not only between academics and students, but with all co-workers within the university.

If you believe in the model, then how this improvement should be designed, decided and implemented is a question which should be handled by students and university together in dialogue. After all, that is what partnership is all about.