SALTO
PARTICIPATION &
INFORMATION

From Student Participation to Democratic Impact

Strengthening Democratic Participation and Civic Engagement in European Higher Education



From Student Participation to Democratic Impact: Strengthening Democratic Participation and Civic Engagement in European Higher Education

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List of Abbreviations

AISBL - Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif (international non-profit association)

CRC/C/GC/12 - United Nations document reference: General Comment No. 12 on the right of the child to be heard

EASLHE - European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education

ECEM - Enriching Communities through Engaged Mobilities (project)

ECTS - European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EHEA - European Higher Education Area

ESU - European Students' Union

EU - European Union

EUA - European University Association (EUA Bologna handbook)

HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI - Higher Education Institution

KA131 - Erasmus+ Key Action 1 – Learning Mobility of Individuals (higher education)

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QA - Quality Assurance

RFCDC - Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe)

STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TEFCE - Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education

UN - United Nations

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

Foreword

Democracies ultimately stand or fall on the strength of participation. Institutions, elections, and norms may supply the architecture of democratic life, but what holds that architecture together is the willingness and capacity of citizens to take part in it meaningfully: to deliberate, to organise, and to hold power to account. In contemporary Europe, none of this can be taken for granted. Trust in representative institutions has come under visible strain. Information spaces are increasingly contested by manipulation and interference, to the point where roughly three in four young Europeans report exposure to disinformation within a single week (European Parliament, 2025). Disengagement, moreover, runs deepest precisely among the young, whose democratic habits are still taking shape:

at the 2024 European elections, turnout among 15–24-year-olds was estimated at 36%, compared with 51% overall (European Parliament, 2024).

Higher education occupies a pivotal position in relation to this problem. It reaches an unprecedented share of each generation of Europeans at the very moment when their political identities are consolidating, and it hosts well over a million learners in cross-border mobility every year: in 2023, the EU alone enrolled 1.76 million tertiary students from abroad (Eurostat, 2025), out of some 7.3 million internationally mobile students worldwide (Gutović et al., 2026). It also commands the pedagogical and associational infrastructure through which participation can be practised rather than merely taught, from curricula and governance bodies to student unions and community partnerships. Whether that infrastructure is put deliberately to democratic use or left to chance is the question that this publication sets out to answer. Answering it also means keeping in view that the reach of higher education is partial. However large the share of young Europeans it enrols, it does not reach the whole youth population, and positioning it as a privileged space for democratic learning risks reproducing inequalities between young people who enter higher education and those who do not. Its democratic role is therefore best understood in connection with the wider youth and community settings beyond the campus.

The publication's answer can be stated at the outset. European higher education lacks neither commitments to participation nor examples of good practice. What it lacks is integration: between the EU's democracy agenda and its education programmes,

between EU programme priorities and national implementation, between institutional strategy and operational support, and between what students actually do and what their institutions recognise. What is needed, accordingly, is not a single European model, but an integrated framework in which the incentives set by Erasmus+, the strategies of National Agencies and ministries, the structures of institutions, and the initiative of students reinforce one another. To that end:

- the publication reviews how students become democratically engaged and what that engagement changes;
- identifies five gaps that keep good practice from becoming the norm (recognition, institutional support, funding, communication and visibility, and measurement and evidence);
- and sets out recommendations on how the Erasmus+ programme, National Agencies and ministries, higher education institutions, and student-led organisations can close those gaps.

The strategic framework for the European Education Area places active citizenship among the core purposes against which education systems are to be judged, alongside equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2021). The European Strategy for Universities sharpens the point for the sector. It declares universities 'key to promote active citizenship, tolerance, equality and diversity, openness and critical thinking' and, through them, to protect European democracies themselves (European Commission, 2022, p. 10).

Since then, **the emphasis of European policy has shifted from proclaiming values to specifying the means of participation**. The 2023 Recommendation on citizen participation, adopted within the Defence of Democracy package, recommends that Member States put in place structured and inclusive frameworks for involving citizens in policy-making, and expressly endorses deliberative formats, among them citizens' panels and citizens' assemblies, as instruments for building more resilient democracies (European Commission, 2023). Whatever name they are given, such formats rest on a common idea: a broadly representative group of citizens, often selected by lot, learns about an issue, weighs evidence and competing arguments together, and formulates considered recommendations for decision-makers.

The European Democracy Shield, presented in November 2025, incorporates this agenda into the Union's overarching democratic strategy. It rests on the plainly stated premise that **'Engaged and empowered citizens and an active civil society are the backbone of democracy'** (European Commission & High Representative, 2025, p. 20). Its third pillar draws citizenship education, media and digital literacy, and participatory and deliberative tools into a single programme of democratic reinforcement, with a

purposeful focus on young people. It also specifies the instruments through which that reinforcement is to be pursued: an EU citizenship competence framework to inform curricula and training, a European Citizens' Panel on democratic resilience, and the stated intention that the next Erasmus+ programme should place particular emphasis on citizenship education, civic engagement, societal resilience, and media literacy. Within this architecture, education is no bystander to democracy policy but one of its principal delivery systems.

It is within the Erasmus+ programme that this delivery becomes operational through education and training. The Erasmus+ Regulation, Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council, embeds the promotion of participation in democratic life among the programme's objectives (European Union, 2021). The Programme Guide translates that mandate into one of four horizontal priorities, 'participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement' (European Commission, 2025, p. 10). This priority applies across every sector and action, alongside inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, and the environment and the fight against climate change. The horizontal approach is a decisive design choice, because it establishes participation as a standard against which all projects are conceived and assessed, rather than a theme reserved for a subset of them.

Delivery, however, still requires additional support. The explanatory statement of the European Parliament's implementation report on the programme found Erasmus+ actions in the field of citizenship education 'considerably lacking in systemic impact' and argued that making civic engagement a priority of learning mobility in higher education would help to achieve the objectives of the European Strategy for Universities (European Parliament, 2023, Explanatory statement). Policy has since progressed. The Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move', adopted in May 2024, extends the participation logic to learning mobility itself. It calls on Member States to encourage all learners, educators, and staff 'to participate in the life of host communities', including through volunteering, and to enrich mobility with training in civic engagement, intercultural awareness, and media literacy (Council of the European Union, 2024, p. 10). The European Solidarity Corps completes the picture, since its entire rationale lies in engaging young people in activities that benefit communities. Taken together, these instruments define a clear programmatic expectation:

the mobility and cooperation the EU funds should produce not only competences and careers, but citizens.

Ensuring that these policy goals are implemented in practice is the mandate of SALTO Participation and Information, the European Commission's thematic resource centre for the participation priority across Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, hosted by

the Estonian Education and Youth Board. The centre exists for what is arguably the hardest part of the policy cycle: the translation of the horizontal priority into tangible projects, curricula, or partnerships. Through its research, its quality standards for participation processes, its work on information and media literacy as a precondition of meaningful engagement, and its cooperation with National Agencies, the centre has developed a cross-sectoral account of what genuine participation requires and of where implementation falls short of ambition. The present publication extends that account into higher education, the sector in which the participation priority meets its largest constituency and, as the evidence assembled here demonstrates, some of its most persistent implementation gaps.

The publication arrives, moreover, at a time when higher education is itself the site of an ongoing debate about what student participation should mean. That question has moved decisively beyond whether students should have a voice at all. A generation of comparative research has shown formal student representation to be a near-universal feature of European higher education governance, institutionalised in law, statute, and quality assurance (Klemenčič, 2024). The relevant questions now concern depth and form, and they run along three lines.

The first concerns **decision-taking**: whether students sit in governance as co-decision-makers with real weight over strategy, budgets, and educational design, or merely as consulted parties whose presence legitimises decisions taken elsewhere. Successive rounds of student-led monitoring of the Bologna Process have repeatedly shown this distinction to separate formal from effective participation (European Students' Union, 2024). The second concerns the **representative bodies** themselves. Student unions across Europe have professionalised, gaining expertise, confidence, and continuity in the process. Yet they operate under funding and regulatory conditions, and within consumer-oriented policy discourses, that can pull them away from political representation and towards service provision, with real consequences for their capacity to act as schools of democratic agency (Klemenčič & Park, 2018; Raaper, 2020). The third imports into **the university the deliberative turn visible in democratic innovation at large**. Citizens' assemblies and sortition-based panels have spread across Europe in response to democratic disaffection (OECD, 2020; Pilet et al., 2023), and the Union has institutionalised the format in its own policy-making through the European Citizens' Panels. Universities and student bodies have begun to experiment with deliberative and assembly-style formats of their own, which reach beyond elected representatives to the ordinary student on questions ranging from institutional strategy to sustainability. For the Erasmus+ participation priority, this represents an opportunity to explore how to improve student mobilities by creating stronger links between students, institutions, and local communities.

The Enriching Communities through Engaged Mobilities (ECEM) project examined the civic dimension of international mobility. Coordinated by the Erasmus Student Network

together with the Academic Cooperation Association, SGroup Universities in Europe, the Institute for the Development of Education, and CitizensLab, it started from the observation that engagement and inclusion, though both horizontal priorities of Erasmus+, are too rarely pursued in combination. As documented in project findings, **students who engage with their host communities through volunteering, service-learning, and locally anchored activities develop a stronger sense of belonging, greater agency, and intercultural competence, and these gains are greatest for those with fewer opportunities.** Nevertheless, such engagement remains the exception rather than the rule of mobility, and where it exists **it tends to rest on committed individuals rather than on institutional design** (Kalinova-Schmieder et al., 2024; Kalinova-Schmieder et al., 2025). The project's work on service-learning identifies the same pattern within institutions. Staff recognise the value of community-engaged pedagogy, but find its implementation constrained by unclear recognition of learning outcomes, weak support structures, fragile funding, poor communication of opportunities, and the near-total absence of engagement from monitoring and quality assurance (Skledar Matijević & Fodor, 2024). These constraints correspond to the five gaps that this publication addresses.

The publication is organised in five chapters. **Chapter 1** sets the scene by examining how students become democratically engaged: through participation in governance, the professionalisation of representation, citizenship learning within the curriculum, and the associational life of student organisations. **Chapter 2** traces what that engagement changes, from student activism to personal, academic, and democratic development, and asks what makes engagement meaningful. From Chapter 3 onwards, the focus deliberately narrows to the forms of engagement that can be linked most directly to learning mobility and to Erasmus+, namely community engagement, volunteering, and service-learning. **Chapter 3** identifies the five gaps in current approaches, **Chapter 4** sets out recommendations addressed to the Erasmus+ programme, to National Agencies and ministries, to higher education institutions, and to student-led organisations, and **Chapter 5** concludes. The publication is written for these four constituencies, together with the researchers and practitioners who work alongside them, and it asks each of them to read with a single question in view: what would it take, concretely, to improve participation in democratic life within the European Higher Education Area?

I. Setting the scene: how do students become democratically engaged in higher education?

1.1 UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Linking civic engagement with higher education has a long history. The tradition dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily to the work of John Dewey (1916), and aims to promote the connection between higher education and citizenship through experiential learning (Annette & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 63). The central question within this tradition concerns how to construct a curriculum that enables the civic education of students through active learning, problem-based learning, and service-learning. Integrating classroom instruction with work in the community also allows experience to be transferred from the community to academic study (Crittenden & Levine, 2013). Beyond simply 'making' citizens, the broader influence of higher education on citizenship can be discerned along several lines. One is the preservation and development of critical traditions of thought, which provide resources for the flourishing and re-conceptualisation of the notion of citizenship in any given society (Annette & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 61), with certain disciplines having a particularly strong impact – notably political science, philosophy, and sociology (Hillygus, 2005). If democratic competences are an objective for all students, however, the question arises of what meaningful integration looks like in STEM, health sciences, and highly specialised professional programmes, where civic learning is not an obvious curricular fit (on how different higher education experiences relate to political engagement, see Perrin & Gillis, 2019). European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (https://www.eoslhe.eu/) and CommunityEngagement.eu (https://community-engagement.eu/practice/) provide a useful overview of existing activities throughout Europe.

The university is also depicted as a major contributor to civic virtues through the diffusion of practical wisdom and behaviour in society, with frequent references to equality and social justice (Annette & McLaughlin, 2005, p. 62). Democratic engagement of students in higher education is one such area of wisdom and behaviour that is diffused into society, either directly by students and alumni, or indirectly through other roles of universities in social life (Klemenčič, 2010). Democratic engagement of students is described using various terms, ranging from 'student participation', which conveys the political nature of student behaviour within and beyond the campus, to 'civic

engagement' and 'activism'. Access to higher education, by contrast, is a precondition of students' democratic engagement rather than one of its forms and can represent an enabling factor when it comes to their participation.

It must be noted that the concepts employed in this publication are closely related, but they are neither synonymous nor interchangeable. **Democratic participation** is understood here as involvement in collective decision-making and, crucially, in the processes through which decisions are deliberated, shaped, and taken. **Civic engagement** is a broader concept, encompassing individual and collective action undertaken in pursuit of a community interest or public cause, irrespective of whether such action entails influence over formal or informal decision-making processes. **Community engagement**, in the context of higher education, refers more specifically to the reciprocal relationship between higher education institutions and the communities in which they are situated, including forms of collaboration, knowledge exchange, and joint action. **Volunteering** denotes unpaid activity undertaken for the benefit of others or of a community, while **service-learning** is a pedagogical approach that intentionally combines community-based service with academic learning and structured reflection.

These forms of engagement may substantially overlap and can reinforce one another, but they should not be treated as equivalent. Volunteering, for instance, may foster civic competences, solidarity, and a sense of collective responsibility without necessarily affording participants any influence over the decisions that shape the issue or community concerned. Similarly, community engagement or service-learning may create meaningful opportunities for learning and contribution without, in themselves, constituting democratic participation. For the purposes of this publication, an activity is therefore considered to constitute **democratic participation** when those involved have a meaningful opportunity to influence decisions or processes that affect them. Where such influence is absent, the activity may nevertheless represent valuable civic engagement, civic learning, community engagement, or service, but should not be conflated with participation in democratic decision-making.

The same conceptual distinction is important when considering **participation and citizenship**. The two concepts are closely connected: democratic participation is an important expression of active citizenship, while citizenship can provide the rights, responsibilities, identities, and institutional frameworks within which participation takes place. Yet participation cannot be reduced to citizenship, nor does citizenship necessarily entail active participation. Democratic participation may be exercised by people in a range of civic and social positions, including those whose formal citizenship status does not confer full political rights. Conversely, possessing citizenship rights does not, in itself, constitute participation. The concepts should therefore be understood as related dimensions of democratic life rather than as interchangeable terms.

Regardless of the specific terminological framing, which itself carries conceptual

significance and distinctions, the literature broadly identifies four main forms of students' democratic engagement in higher education:

A student participation in university governance and student governments;

B student representation in quality assurance (QA) processes and their increasing professionalisation;

C the curriculum, both as something students can help to shape and as a means of education for democracy;

D student associational activity, general activism, and engagement in (protest) politics and democratisation, including democratic innovation.

Each of these forms is first characterised briefly below, and then examined in more detail in Sections 1.2 to 1.5.

a) Student participation in university governance concerns the involvement of students in decision-making processes within their institutions (Persson, 2004; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). This strand of literature highlights the importance of student voice and representation in shaping university policies and practices, including teaching, learning, research, and engagement with external stakeholders (Little et al., 2009; Seale, 2010). It also emphasises the civic-educational dimension of this form of participation and its transformative potential for enhancing the democratic legitimacy of institutional decision-making and improving service delivery through greater institutional responsiveness (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

b) Student representation in quality assurance (QA) is closely related to participation in governance and can be seen as a specialised form of it. With the expansion of quality assurance processes in higher education, the role of students has become increasingly professionalised, reflecting the growing significance of student leaders and representatives in evaluation and accreditation at institutional, national, and transnational levels (Klemenčič, 2011; Klemenčič et al., 2015). Most attention in this evolving and predominantly professional literature focuses on developing the competences and skills necessary for effective student leadership and advocacy, and on the structured training and support systems required to enhance student representatives' capacity to influence QA and related policy processes (European Students' Union, 2015).

c) The role of universities in education for democratic citizenship is an important strand of this literature, since democratic participation may be both an intentional learning goal and an outcome that is anticipated but not explicitly stated among declared learning outcomes (Biesta, 2010). Two related but distinct questions need to be kept apart here: students' participation in shaping higher education curricula, which belongs with the

governance forms under a) and b), and the curriculum as a means of developing students' democratic competences, which is the focus of this strand and of Section 1.4. Higher education institutions, and universities in particular, carry a significant responsibility to promote civic virtues and democratic competences among students (Klemenčič, 2010). This can be pursued by directly and deliberately integrating democratic participation into the formal curriculum (for instance, through course and module designs that strengthen students' political literacy) and through teaching and learning methods, particularly experiential and work-based learning, that reinforce the dispositions and behaviours associated with democratic citizenship (Battistoni, 2017; Naval et al., 2022). Crick's seminal framework for citizenship education combines three strands: social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998). The classroom level, including the hidden curriculum, deserves particular emphasis. Governance structures and activism directly involve only a minority of students, whereas teaching and learning settings reach almost all of them. Students learn democratic norms and practices through their everyday experience of participation, inclusion, deliberation, and power relations in the classroom, including competences in democratic dialogue, deliberation, and the constructive management of disagreement that are increasingly important in contemporary democratic societies.

d) In contrast to the focus on the formal curriculum, the literature on student associational activity, general activism, and engagement in protest politics and democratisation shifts attention to co-curricular and extramural activities, which constitute an important and irreplaceable part of student life. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which students engage in activism and political movements to promote social change, given the historical role of students and student movements in challenging existing power structures and advocating for social justice and equality (Altbach, 1989). Student associations are central to these processes, acting as catalysts and drivers of student engagement, providing essential services, and advocating for students' rights and interests (Klemenčič, 2011; Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2011).

These forms differ considerably in the influence and decision-making power they give students, in how firmly they are embedded in institutional structures, and in the power relations within which they operate. Formal representation can give students a vote on institutional decisions but binds them to institutional rules and procedures, whereas associational life and activism are more independent but usually influence decisions only indirectly. Moreover, it must be noted that these forms of students' democratic engagement shape personal, academic, and professional development and co-create universities as sites of citizenship (Bergan, 2004), in which students' democratic citizenship is fostered through governance structures, internal practices, curriculum design and delivery, and relationships with external stakeholders. Together, these

elements contribute to the development of active and responsible citizens prepared to participate in and sustain democratic societies.

The ECEM project has explored different forms of student engagement linked to their international mobilities, volunteering, and service-learning.

The research positions student mobility as a key driver of global citizenship and intercultural understanding. By integrating principles of active citizenship and community engagement into mobility programmes, institutions can align their efforts with broader societal goals, such as promoting inclusion, sustainability, and social cohesion. This alignment underscores the transformative potential of education to address global challenges and create equitable, interconnected communities.

Kalinova-Schmieder, N., Lepore, S., Paranhoz, B., Costa, B., & Fodor, A. (2024). Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17056019, p. 7

1.2 STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

Student participation in university governance refers to the involvement of students in the decision-making processes and administrative functions of higher education institutions (Persson, 2004; Klemenčič, 2012). A distinction is useful here between decision-making, the wider process through which institutional decisions are prepared, debated, and adopted, and decision-taking, the point at which a decision is formally made. Students can occupy different positions along this continuum, from being informed and consulted, through advising and co-deciding, to taking decisions themselves. This participation is considered an important element in promoting democratic values and enhancing the educational experience (Bergan, 2004; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013), and has gained renewed significance in the context of the Bologna Process, which identified students as 'full members of the higher education community' entitled to participate in and influence the organisation and content of education (Bologna Process, 2001, p. 1; Klemenčič et al., 2015). At the same time, the broader trend towards greater institutional autonomy and new public managerialism has reframed student participation in more functional terms – as a means of strengthening collaboration and improving governance – while also tending to shift student representatives from active decision-taking to more advisory roles (Luescher-

Mamashela, 2010, 2013). This points to a tension that runs through the publication, between the student as citizen and the student as consumer. Universities are expected to foster democratic agency while operating under pressures related to funding, employability, performance indicators, and marketisation, and these competing institutional logics shape how much weight student voice actually carries.

Luescher-Mamashela (2013) distinguishes several ways of considering student involvement in university governance. One perspective highlights the developmental and educational significance of participatory processes, arguing that involving students in governance helps them develop critical thinking skills and a sense of civic responsibility (Bergan, 2004; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). In this view, public universities are seen as sites of democratic citizenship, where students learn how democracy functions both conceptually and through direct experience of influencing the conditions that affect them (Bergan, 2004; Bleiklie, 2001, as cited in Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). This is complemented by a more consequentialist argument that students, as the primary beneficiaries of educational provision, possess first-hand information on the effectiveness of institutional policies and practices, so their input leads to better-informed and more legitimate decisions and policies (Klemenčič, 2020; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). The benefits of participation can thus be organised across three levels: for students individually, in the form of critical thinking and a sense of civic responsibility; for institutions, in the form of better-informed, more legitimate, and more responsive decisions; and for democratic life more broadly, as democratic practice learned on campus is carried beyond it. The question is therefore not only whether students are represented, but what changes as a result of their participation, and for whom.

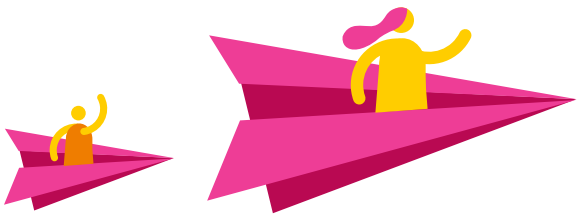
Another strand focuses on the structural and procedural aspects of student participation (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Persson, 2004). It emphasises the need for universities to establish effective channels for student participation, such as student councils and representation on decision-making bodies at various levels, from departmental and faculty committees to senate and council (Persson, 2004; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). This includes formal structures such as student governments, representation on university committees, and feedback systems such as student surveys and course evaluations (Klemenčič, 2012; Klemenčič et al., 2015). These mechanisms provide students with platforms to express their views and influence university policies, although their effectiveness can vary considerably depending on the institutional context (Persson, 2004; Planas et al., 2013). Formal mechanisms do not capture all voices equally. They tend to attract students who already have the time, confidence, institutional knowledge, and other resources to take part, which raises the question of how less represented students can be reached through informal channels, deliberative formats, outreach, and other approaches that do not depend on entering established representative structures (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020).

The literature suggests that universities should not only inform students about

opportunities for participation, but also actively encourage their engagement by restructuring participation processes and clarifying the roles of teaching staff and the coordinators of those managing bodies closest to students, to create the conditions for meaningful participation (Planas et al., 2013). Research reveals that active student involvement can lead to more democratic and transparent decision-making processes, ultimately enhancing the quality of education and institutional accountability (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Klemenčič, 2020).

Studies have shown that student participation varies across national and institutional contexts, with some universities offering more opportunities for participation than others (Persson, 2004; Pabian & Minksová, 2011). The effectiveness of student participation generally depends on universities' willingness to create a supportive environment and remove existing barriers to participation (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Planas et al., 2013). Key factors facilitating student participation in higher education governance include, in addition to partnership conditions and the active encouragement of student participation supported by the provision of necessary resources, information, and training, the establishment of formal mechanisms for student participation, effective communication between students and administration (including clarification of roles and responsibilities) with transparent channels ensuring the validity of feedback, and the general promotion of democratic values and practices within university governance structures (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Planas et al., 2013; Klemenčič et al., 2015).

On the other hand, inadequate information, preparation, and support for effective student participation in university governance, the perceived limited impact and value of participation, and institutional constraints such as asymmetric power relations and limited time for student engagement due to academic commitments emerge as major obstacles (Planas et al., 2013; Palma et al., 2023). Whether students can take part at all also depends on the language, time, access, confidence, and support that participation processes require, conditions that weigh most heavily on students from rural and remote areas, students with fewer opportunities, and those facing social or institutional barriers. Another structural challenge is the high turnover of student representatives, as the transient nature of studentship makes it difficult to accumulate institutional knowledge and maintain continuity (European Students' Union, 2018; Klemenčič, 2020). Even where formal mechanisms exist, student representatives may be overshadowed by executive leadership in managerially run universities, with their role shifting from active decision-taking to a more advisory one (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010).



1.3 THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF STUDENT REPRESENTATION

Professionalisation is treated in a section of its own because it has become a distinct field of practice, with structured training, expert pools, and support systems at national and European levels, and because it largely determines how effectively students can use the formal rights of participation described in Section 1.2. The professionalisation of student representation in university governance involves equipping student representatives with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for effective participation in governance processes. This has become particularly significant with the increased involvement of students in quality assurance, where structured training and expert pools have been established at both national and European levels (Klemenčič et al., 2015; European Students' Union, 2018). Professionalisation includes developing expertise, maintaining professional conduct, fostering engagement, promoting effective communication, and advocating for student interests (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Klemenčič et al., 2015). These aspects collectively enhance the effectiveness and impact of student representatives within governance processes (Klemenčič, 2012). Professionalisation is not confined to formal representation, however. Student-led organisations also recruit, train, and support volunteers who organise peer support, civic engagement, and activities in the wider community, and this capacity-building is equally important to students' democratic participation.

The literature on the professionalisation of student representation covers several key areas. One strand focuses on student expertise and knowledge. Student representatives require a comprehensive understanding of the higher education system and the specific issues they address (Klemenčič et al., 2015). This knowledge enables them to make informed decisions and contribute meaningfully to discussions and decision-making processes (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). It also ensures that the student perspective is adequately represented and considered in governance matters (Klemenčič, 2020). In quality assurance, this expertise has been institutionalised through national and European student expert pools, where prospective members typically undergo structured recruitment, training, and continuing professional development before serving on review panels (Klemenčič et al., 2015).

The literature also emphasises professional conduct. As full members of governance bodies, student representatives work to the same professional standards as other participants, such as meeting deadlines, maintaining the quality of their contributions, and adhering to rules and procedures (Klemenčič et al., 2015). Shared standards of this kind support effective collaboration among all members and help ensure that student contributions are given their full weight (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Engagement and participation are highlighted as important elements. Despite having

formal rights to representation, students often do not exercise these rights, with low voter turnout in student elections and difficulty recruiting candidates widely reported (Bergan, 2004; Klemenčič, 2020). Facilitating active student participation in governance processes therefore ensures that their voices are heard and that they can effectively influence decisions (Klemenčič et al., 2015), which also fosters a sense of involvement and empowers students to advocate for themselves (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Furthermore, the professionalisation of student representation also highlights the importance of communication and collaboration. Positive relationships with teaching staff, institutional management, administrators, and other stakeholders are vital for effective student representation (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Establishing trust and maintaining open lines of communication enable student representatives to collaborate effectively with others, making the governance process more inclusive and democratic (Klemenčič et al., 2015; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). A persistent challenge is the asymmetry of expertise and information between staff and student representatives, which structured induction, mentoring, and handover practices can help to mitigate (European Students' Union, 2018).

Finally, the role of advocacy and representation should not be overlooked (Klemenčič et al., 2015). Contrary to the perception that student representatives are mainly occupied with social events, representatives in practice prioritise voicing students' views on academic matters and other issues that affect them (Klemenčič et al., 2015). This advocacy role ensures that the diverse needs and interests of students are recognised and addressed in governance decisions (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Professionalism in this respect is also linked to organisational independence, as autonomy from institutional or other pressures (e.g., from political parties) enables genuine representation of students' interests (Klemenčič et al., 2015; Klemenčič, 2024).

1.4 DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION AS PART OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION COURSEWORK

Higher education institutions play an important role in educating students as citizens and transferring democratic values, thereby contributing to the development of democratic citizenship (Pavlin et al., 2013). Universities serve as sites of citizenship education (Bergan, 2004), with democratic participation at their core. They are expected to equip students with the capabilities required for active citizenship, including critical thinking and empathetic understanding (Nussbaum, 2010). The Bologna Process emphasises the civic mission of higher education by highlighting the importance of preparing students for active citizenship in a democratic society (Klemenčič et al., 2015). Gallagher (2018) asks whether promoting the civic and democratic role of higher

education should be regarded as the next challenge for the European Higher Education Area. This role should not be read deterministically, as if attending university automatically generated stronger democratic values. Students enter higher education already differing in socio-economic background, prior civic exposure, political efficacy, and willingness to participate, and universities themselves are not uniformly democratic environments. Part of the apparent civic effect of higher education may therefore reflect who enters it rather than what it teaches, and that effect varies between institutions (van Mol & Perez-Encinas, 2022; Findlay & Hermannsson, 2019).

Before turning to the curriculum as a means of democratic education, it is worth noting how curricula themselves are shaped. Higher education curricula draw content from a vast pool of subject-specific knowledge and are reconstructed in formats well established within each discipline, with topics grouped into categories in a chronological or sequential manner (Coate, 2009). Each higher education curriculum is a social force in itself and a product of the interplay of academic considerations, internal and external constraints, and power relations; yet, until recently, the process of its construction by academic institutions remained virtually uncontested. In many European systems, states have traditionally left curriculum content largely to academic institutions, although this is starting to change as more attention is paid to the role of higher education as a citizenship educator. The greatest freedom in shaping the curriculum is at the postgraduate and doctoral levels, where fewer people have the capacity to make specialist judgements about the appropriate content and pedagogical approaches, and the production of academic knowledge through research makes the curriculum the least controlled (Coate, 2009, p. 78). Students' own participation in shaping curricula, for example through programme committees and course evaluations, belongs with the governance forms discussed in Sections 1.2 and 1.3. The remainder of this section concerns the curriculum as a means of developing students' democratic competences.

Higher education has traditionally assumed that students will become critical and deliberative citizens, able to understand and participate constructively in society and the state (Arthur, 2005). The university's civic role has historically accompanied its function of producing technically skilled and capable graduates. However, Arthur (2005) argues that this role has become distorted: the structures of higher education allow the study experience to pass without any thorough and intentional engagement with questions of character, civic obligation, and democratic virtue. Increased curricular control and pressures for labour market relevance, along with narrowly specialised curricula, have driven the trend of the 'technical transformation of higher education' (Arthur, 2005, p. 2), in which the civic content of curricula is not even considered a desirable outcome. This publication accordingly locates the weakening of collective participation in the structural individualisation and consumerisation of higher education, rather than in any generational individualism of students themselves, which connects with the tension between the student as citizen and the student as consumer noted in Section 1.2.

Biesta's (2011, p. 47) call for a knowledge democracy rather than a knowledge economy addresses these trends and highlights the university's vital role in contemporary democratic society and the state, with participation and active citizenship at its core.

Since the 1990s, there has been renewed interest in this dimension of education, with studies on the didactic efficacy of certain techniques in promoting civic competence, as well as research into the political socialisation of individuals (see Naval et al., 2022), helping to ensure that this aspect of education has remained on the agenda – perhaps now more than ever, given the rise of illiberal tendencies across democratic societies.

Intentional learning about democratic participation can occur through the implementation of the curriculum itself (Pavlin et al., 2013) and may be included in formal coursework, with democratic participation forming part of the required learning outcomes. This form of learning, as one of the most institutionalised means of acquiring political knowledge and, to some extent, values, attitudes, and behaviour (Ichilov, 1994; Hoskins et al., 2008), takes place in an organised, structured context that is intentional from the learner's perspective. It may take the form of separate or specialised courses, integrated topics, or cross-curricular themes woven into all specialised subjects of the formal curriculum (Bîrzéa, 2000). It includes citizenship education courses, political science courses with civic components, and courses across disciplines that integrate civic learning objectives.

Learning democratic participation through coursework also includes service-learning, arguably one of the most extensively studied and institutionalised modalities of citizenship engagement in higher education. Service-learning combines community experience with classroom instruction and reflection, requiring students to participate in community activities while instructors guide them to contextualise their experience within broader academic frameworks (Nishishiba et al., 2005). Service-learning is not the only format of this kind. Work-experience or placement modules, often hosted in the non-governmental sector, can follow the same logic of experience combined with structured reflection and praxis. The provision may go by many names, but it is the process rather than the label that matters most for citizenship education and learning.

According to perspectives that consider universities important venues for citizenship education (e.g., National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012), political literacy, inquiry, and action should be included among the educational objectives for every university student, as those who receive high-quality citizenship education are more likely to understand public issues, view democratic participation as a means of addressing shared challenges, and participate in civic activities (Aller & Tangonan, 2023). While considerable attention has been given to citizenship education in secondary schools, relatively little emphasis has been placed on the role of higher education in teaching democracy. Nevertheless, citizenship education through coursework is the form of learning most frequently assessed according to criteria for

funding and public accountability, and is supported by formal curriculum-centred teacher training (Pavlin et al., 2013). However, there is no core curriculum that defines students' preparation and no uniform set of learning objectives, and its impact on participation and citizenship remains largely under-researched (Pavlin et al., 2013).

Experience with democratic participation as part of coursework indicates that, although it provides knowledge, skills, and dispositions valuable and necessary for democratic societies (Naval et al., 2022), coursework alone is insufficient. Beyond formal coursework, the way teaching and learning are organised, including the hidden curriculum of classroom participation, deliberation and power relations, also shapes students' democratic learning, and it does so for almost all students (see Section 1.1). Furthermore, introducing democratic participation in this manner carries the risk that such content is perceived as having relatively low prestige within the prescribed disciplinary knowledge, as democratic participation specifically, and democratic citizenship more broadly, are often regarded as second-class or supplementary topics (Naval et al., 2022).

An example of such a formal curriculum initiative is the Core Curriculum Programme of the University of Navarra's Core Curriculum Institute (University of Navarra, 2026). The programme provides training for students and academics by teaching cross-disciplinary subjects included in all university programmes to foster a spirit of solidarity and the critical capacity to freely form one's own convictions. Although it has no dedicated academic staff, it delivers 18 compulsory ECTS credits common to all degrees: Anthropology (6), Ethics (6), and two 3-credit 'Cultural Keys' subjects, which students can take through an inter-faculty pathway designed for larger groups or through the Great Books programme, which follows a more individualised and participatory approach.

The results of the Service-Learning during Student Mobility Survey indicate a continuing need to raise awareness among HEI professionals on what service-learning means, as defined by the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE, 2021). The majority of the HEI respondents recognise the benefits of a curriculum that integrates service-learning. The staff agree on the perceived benefits for students and see the value in incorporating service-learning in the design and implementation of mobility programmes. There is therefore a clear need for HEIs to create or enhance quality and accessibility opportunities of service-learning experiences for their incoming international students. Within the scope of the ECEM project, making service-learning more accessible to international students, particularly mobility

students, requires addressing various aspects such as language barriers, cultural differences, logistical challenges, as well as the confusion between service-learning and independent volunteering.

Skledar Matijević, A., & Fodor, A. (2024). Service-Learning: Enriching Communities Beyond Borders. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17341340, p. 29

1.5 STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Student associations may in many ways be considered central to higher education and society, serving several functions that contribute to both academic success and civic engagement, and have played a key role in many democratic initiatives that have transformed societies in the past. These organisational structures have evolved over time, adapting to changing educational landscapes and societal needs (Altbach, 1989; Klemenčič, 2024).

They typically include national student unions, which are umbrella organisations operating at the national level and representing student interests across multiple institutions; institutional student unions or guilds, which represent the general student body at a specific higher education institution; faculty or departmental student associations; special-interest groups such as clubs, societies, and associations focused on specific activities or interests; student political organisations, issue-based movements, international student organisations, and alumni associations, as well as transnational student associations active at the supranational level (Klemenčič & Galán Palomares, 2018; Klemenčič, 2024). Beyond these structural distinctions, student organisations are commonly classified along a continuum from primarily political to primarily service-oriented, with most combining both purposes (Klemenčič, 2014). A further distinction is useful between student organisations and student-led organisations. A student organisation may involve or serve students without students necessarily leading its decisions, and its governance may include institutional oversight or other actors. In a student-led organisation, students retain decision-making authority over its activities and strategic direction. This publication uses 'student-led organisations' where the argument concerns students exercising agency through organising, and 'student organisations' when referring to the broader category. Formal associational life is only part of the picture. Much contemporary participation is informal, episodic, issue-based, digital, or hybrid, particularly among students who do not join established representative organisations, and the time and money that

associational involvement requires are unevenly distributed across social groups (Rubin & Wright, 2017).

Student associations play a crucial role in university governance by providing a formal platform for student voices in decision-making processes (Persson, 2004; Klemenčič, 2012). They advocate for student interests on various institutional committees, contributing to the democratisation of higher education and society more broadly (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). In some contexts, student associations have been central to driving wider societal changes, as demonstrated by their role in democratisation efforts in numerous countries (Altbach, 1989; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014). Student organisations may also contribute to quality enhancement beyond formal representation in quality assurance bodies, for example by gathering student feedback and facilitating dialogue with academic staff (Mirică & Abdulamit, 2014). Their activism extends beyond campus boundaries, establishing students as catalysts for social change (Altbach, 1989).

As indicated above, another important function of student associations is to provide services (Klemenčič, 2012), not only to their members but also to the wider target groups they serve. How membership is defined also varies considerably between organisations and across Europe, and in some systems all students are automatically members of the students' union. Formal membership should therefore not be treated as a straightforward proxy for democratic participation or representativeness. With the increasing marketisation of higher education, many associations have shifted their focus to catering to students as 'consumers' of education (Brooks et al., 2016). This includes providing support services, organising events, and facilitating extracurricular activities that enhance the overall student experience (Klemenčič, 2014). This shift has wider implications for the political agency of student associations, as a focus on individual consumer rights can displace collective representation and advocacy (Brooks et al., 2016). It is a further expression of the tension between the student as citizen and the student as consumer noted in Section 1.2.

Student associations play a vital role in fostering a sense of community within higher education institutions. They provide platforms for students to engage in social activities, which research has linked to improved academic self-efficacy and overall student well-being (Griffiths et al., 2021). This community-building aspect also extends to alumni associations, which maintain connections between graduates and their alma maters. These associations often contribute to the ongoing development of the institution (Klemenčič et al., 2015).

Within the academic research community, student associations are increasingly active in promoting student-centred research initiatives (Klemenčič et al., 2015). This approach fosters productive partnerships among students, academic staff, and the wider community, leading to the generation of new knowledge and valuable community

resources. Globally, student associations have established networks and alliances to address key issues in higher education (Klemenčič & Galán Palomares, 2018). Within the European Higher Education Area, the European Students' Union (ESU) has played a particularly prominent role, advocating for students' rights and interests in the Bologna Process and other supranational policy forums, and contributing to standards and guidelines that shape the future of higher education (Klemenčič et al., 2015; Klemenčič & Galán Palomares, 2018; Klemenčič, 2024).

Although student associations play an important role in higher education, they face several challenges. These include maintaining internal legitimacy among the student body and external legitimacy with institutional and political stakeholders, avoiding co-optation by institutional leaders, governments, or political parties, and balancing the diverse needs of an increasingly heterogeneous student body (Klemenčič, 2014). Their ability to act also depends on practical conditions: sustainable financing, access to spaces and infrastructure, institutional support, capacity building, and continuity as volunteers and leaders change. These conditions affect not only participation in governance, but also the capacity to provide peer support, organise activities, and connect students with wider society. Despite these difficulties, student associations remain essential components of higher education governance, contributing to institutional decision-making and broader societal development (Klemenčič, 2024).

One of the ECEM project's main objectives was to bridge the gap between international students and the local community by increasing the understanding of how internationalisation and volunteering on exchange benefit those communities, and more specifically, by designing voluntary local-engagement activities for students that can be replicated across Europe. To reach this objective, a series of activities was implemented throughout the duration of the project, starting with a 'Learning Through Engagement Lab', a training event that took place in October 2023 in Berlin, bringing together students, student representatives, higher education staff, and workers of civil society organisations.

Kalinova-Schmieder, N., Uritu, M. O., Moura Abrantes Lopes Nunes, T., & Priori, A. (2025). Impactful Volunteering on Exchange. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16684830, p. 5

II. What civic engagement changes: activism, learning, and democratic development

Chapter 1 mapped the main forms of students' democratic engagement. This chapter turns from forms to effects, asking what engagement changes for students and for democratic life. It begins with student activism, then considers personal, civic, and academic development, and closes by asking what makes engagement meaningful.

2.1 STUDENT ACTIVISM AND DEMOCRATIC AGENCY

Student activism typically involves the public expression of new ideas and the shaping of public debate on various topics, using methods such as public debates, plenums, campaigning, media engagement, and demonstrations within the university environment (Brooks et al., 2015). It also includes efforts to introduce new forms of participation and representation in university governance and beyond (Klemenčič, 2014). These actions are usually oppositional and aim to challenge existing power structures or policies within universities and broader society (Altbach, 1989), but this is not always the case. Student activism is treated here not as a self-contained campus phenomenon but as one of the ways in which active citizenship develops: a formative experience through which students adopt democratic practices and prepare for civic engagement, both during their studies and afterwards.

Much attention in the study of student activism is devoted to its historical roots and sociopolitical context (Altbach, 1989; Klemenčič et al., 2015). This includes examining the evolution of student activism over time and across different contexts, such as the cyclical nature of student movements (Altbach, 1989); the role of students in major historical events, such as the protests of 1968, including les événements of May 1968 in France, when students joined forces with workers to protest and demonstrate for change (Klimke & Scharloth, 2008; Klemenčič et al., 2015); the privileged backgrounds of student activists (well-educated, urban, and relatively wealthy) (Bourdieu, 1988; Altbach, 1989); differences in student activism between developed and developing countries (Altbach, 1989; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015); and the global spread of certain activist ideas and tactics (Klemenčič, 2024). Another important dimension of student activism is

its influence on national political systems and regime changes (Altbach, 1989; Luescher-Mamashela & Mugume, 2014), as well as its long-term impact on students' political engagement and active citizenship (Crossley, 2003, as cited in Klemenčič et al., 2015; Hillygus, 2005).

Technology significantly shapes how students engage in political processes. The rise of social media and digital platforms has transformed the landscape, enabling rapid organisation and mobilisation, and supporting more decentralised and inclusive forms of activism (Bosch et al., 2020; Klemenčič, 2024). These platforms have facilitated the emergence of online student movements that transcend geographical boundaries and intersect with traditional activism (Klemenčič, 2024). Campaigns such as #FeesMustFall clearly demonstrate this influence, as student activists intentionally use the dynamic interaction between online and offline spaces (Bosch et al., 2020). Technological advances have also changed the nature of activist communication and information dissemination (Klemenčič, 2024).

The dynamics of student activism are often driven by dissatisfaction with existing political and educational systems (Klemenčič et al., 2015; Mendes & Hammett, 2023). While this activism can lead to reforms, it also faces challenges such as repression and co-optation by political authorities (Altbach, 1989; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015). Student activism is frequently linked to the development of a ‘radical habitus’ or disposition towards further political activism (Crossley, 2003, as cited in Klemenčič et al., 2015), a tendency to lean towards leftist ideologies (Altbach, 1989; Klemenčič, 2024), and influence from global political trends (Klimke & Scharloth, 2008). Additionally, the specialisation of students towards either informal activism or formal governance (Klemenčič, 2014), as well as the impact of campus culture on the prevalence and nature of student movements, determines this complex dynamic. Research on 'street citizens' likewise treats protest as a mode of political participation and citizenship in its own right rather than a marginal activity (Giugni & Grasso, 2019), and shows how economic crisis and austerity reshaped patterns of mobilisation (Giugni & Grasso, 2015).

2.2 PERSONAL AND CIVIC DEVELOPMENT

Civic engagement can be a powerful tool for student development at the individual level (Naval et al., 2022). It links academic study with community involvement, preparing students for active and informed citizenship while enhancing their educational experience (Annette & McLaughlin, 2005; Battistoni, 2017). It contributes to both personal and academic growth, as both structured and unstructured opportunities for civic engagement can yield positive outcomes for students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Naval et al., 2022). The timing matters. Mannheim's classic account of generations holds that the

ideas and practices absorbed in youth tend to shape an outlook that lasts, and that young people who work through shared formative experiences can form distinct 'generation units' (Mannheim, 1928/1952). Democratic practices learned during higher education may therefore stay with students long after they graduate.

These benefits do not follow from participation as such. They depend heavily on the quality, intensity, and inclusiveness of the experience (Kahu, 2013; Yorio & Ye, 2012), and the distinction between participation and meaningful participation matters: creating more opportunities does not by itself produce democratic development.

One area of impact is the development of civic skills and competences (Hoskins et al., 2008; Naval et al., 2022). When students participate in activities that address the problems of the student body or wider society, they develop the motivation and ability to address societal issues actively (Battistoni, 2017). These activities include building skills in collaboration, communication, and critical thinking applied to real-world contexts (Battistoni, 2017; Nussbaum, 2010). Participation in civic activities also enhances students' sense of social responsibility and community connectedness (Astin & Sax, 1998; Annette & McLaughlin, 2005). As students engage in their communities, they gain an understanding of how these communities operate, the challenges they face, and the diversity within them (Battistoni, 2017). This often leads to a stronger commitment to community life and collective action (Astin & Sax, 1998; Hillygus, 2005).

The development of student voice and leadership capacity is another significant outcome (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Seale, 2010). Initiatives that offer students opportunities to influence civic agendas and lead public discussions enable them to develop and assert their voices on public issues (Klemenčič et al., 2015). This process empowers students as active civic participants (Klemenčič, 2010). Civic engagement experiences also foster important social-emotional and interpersonal skills (Annette & McLaughlin, 2005). Students often report growth in areas such as empathy, cultural awareness, and the ability to engage in respectful dialogue despite differences (Nussbaum, 2010).

2.3 ACADEMIC GROWTH AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

From an academic perspective, civic engagement is linked to improved student success and retention (Astin & Sax, 1998; Griffiths et al., 2021). Community-based academic work can support traditional academic goals, while incorporating civic engagement into coursework can increase students' motivation and engagement by strengthening the real-world relevance of their studies (Battistoni, 2017).

Applying knowledge in practice deepens students' understanding of academic concepts and theories (Naval et al., 2022). Regular use of interdisciplinary approaches in civic

engagement activities encourages students to make connections between different fields, resulting in a more holistic and nuanced understanding of academic subjects (Naval et al., 2022). Civic engagement experiences also offer opportunities for experiential learning, which can be particularly beneficial for students who struggle with traditional classroom-based instruction (Battistoni, 2017). Experiential learning is understood here in the sense developed by Kolb (1984): a cycle that moves from concrete experience through reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation to active experimentation, so that learning arises from the reflective transformation of experience rather than from experience alone.

Civic engagement often involves collaborative work, fostering teamwork and leadership skills that are highly valued and enhance students' ability to participate effectively in group projects and class discussions (Battistoni, 2017). These practices promote metacognition (reflection on one's own thinking and learning processes), which is linked to improved academic performance (Annette & McLaughlin, 2005). Moreover, by engaging in causes beyond their personal lives, students may discover new areas of interest within their discipline or identify gaps in existing knowledge, thus informing their future academic pursuits (Hillygus, 2005).

2.4 FROM ENGAGEMENT TO IMPACT: WHAT MAKES IT MEANINGFUL?

Realising the full potential of civic engagement requires thoughtful implementation (Battistoni, 2017; Naval et al., 2022). Simply adding components to courses or introducing new processes and mechanisms is insufficient (Biesta, 2011). The approaches with the greatest impact integrate civic learning deeply into the curriculum, provide structured reflection, and position students as genuine partners in university governance (Klemenčič et al., 2015; Battistoni, 2017).

Three conditions are particularly important if volunteering and service-learning are to contribute to democratic outcomes, and not only to civic, social, or educational ones. The first is meaningful influence: participants need a real say over what is done and why. The second is structured reflection, which turns experience into democratic learning. The third is reciprocity with community partners, who should help to define needs, shape activities, and judge their value, rather than simply host students.

Meaningful participation is not always consensus-building. Participants disagree, have unequal access to information, and may challenge institutional priorities. How disagreement is handled, whether students can safely challenge authority, and whether institutions avoid absorbing or neutralising criticism are therefore part of what makes

participation meaningful.

Frameworks developed for children's and young people's participation offer useful benchmarks here. Lundy's (2007) model holds that voice is not enough and that participation requires space, voice, audience, and influence, while Hart's (1992) 'ladder of participation' separates genuine participation from manipulation, decoration, and tokenism. The nine basic requirements for meaningful and ethical participation, set out by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and developed into practical guidance by Save the Children, hold that participation should be transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009; Save the Children, 2021). Since most students enter higher education from school and youth settings, these benchmarks also help to connect the participation that young people experience as teenagers with the participation they encounter as students.

The Erasmus programme offers a telling test case. It is one of the EU's main instruments for promoting active citizenship in higher education, yet the evidence on how far it achieves this is mixed. Golubeva et al. (2018) find that students who are on, or have returned from, mobility associate democratic values such as human rights, equality, and democracy with active citizenship far more often than those who have not yet gone abroad. However, they find no link between Erasmus participation and actual engagement in university, community, or European-level activities, and the students themselves rank increased civic responsibility as the least important outcome of their mobility. The authors conclude that civic growth does not follow automatically from mobility, and that students need to take part in meaningful extracurricular activities for it to happen. This is consistent with the argument of this publication: associational life, community engagement, and student activism are the channels through which mobility can become a school of active citizenship.

The ECEM project identified the impact of volunteering at three levels, on individual students, institutions, and society at large:

- **Individual Impact:** Students develop leadership, teamwork, and communication skills while fostering empathy and social responsibility.
- **Institutional Impact:** Universities benefit from enhanced community partnerships, improved student satisfaction, and greater alignment with sustainability goals.

Global Impact: Volunteering contributes to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by addressing issues such as poverty, education, and environmental sustainability.

Kalinova-Schmieder, N., Lepore, S., Paranhoz, B., Costa, B., & Fodor, A. (2024). Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17056019, p. 7

III. Towards a European framework for civic engagement in higher education

Chapters 1 and 2 examined the full range of students' democratic engagement, from governance and representation to curriculum, associational life, and activism. From this point, the focus deliberately narrows to the forms of engagement that can be linked most directly to learning mobility and to the instruments of Erasmus+, namely community engagement, volunteering, and service-learning.

As seen in the previous chapters, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to contribute not only to skills development and employability, but also to democratic participation, social cohesion, and engagement with local communities. These expectations are reflected in European policy discourse, including the Erasmus+ programme's emphasis on participation in democratic life and common values. Yet despite growing recognition at policy level, civic engagement remains unevenly embedded in higher education systems and only partially connected to internationalisation and student mobility.

Ongoing European-level dialogues and practice-oriented initiatives point to a shared conclusion: civic engagement secures its greatest impact and value when it is treated as a core dimension of higher education rather than an optional add-on. International student mobility offers underused opportunities to connect academic learning with local communities, enabling students to engage meaningfully with societal challenges while strengthening their sense of belonging, agency, and responsibility.

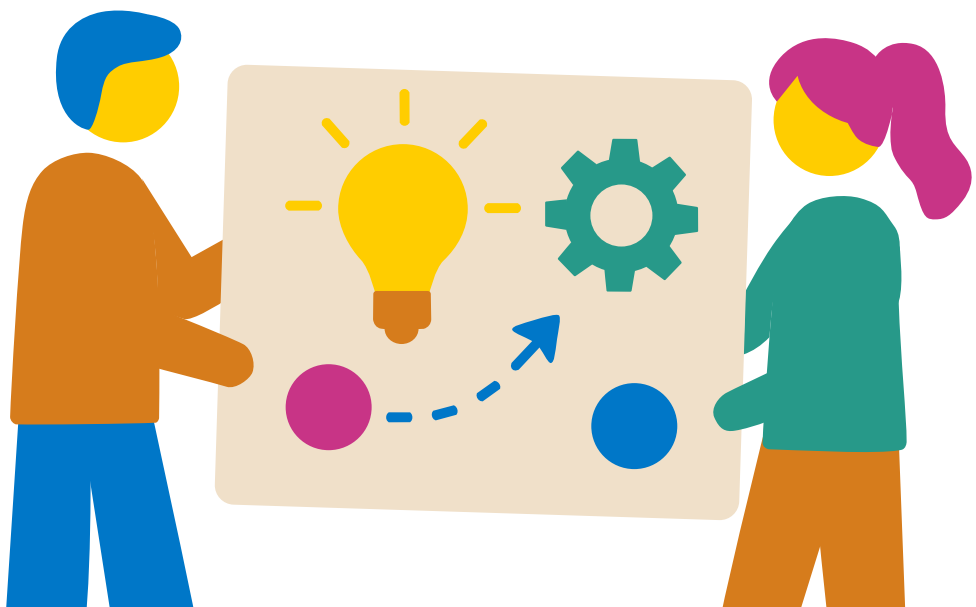
At the same time, experience from across Europe shows that civic engagement initiatives often remain fragmented, dependent on individual efforts, and insufficiently supported by institutional structures or funding. Moving towards a more coherent European framework therefore requires addressing a set of recurring gaps while clarifying the roles of key actors at European, national, institutional, and student levels. The framework developed here builds on existing European reference points rather than replacing them. The Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) describes the values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding that democratic participation requires, and offers a shared European language for the competences discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (Council of

Europe, 2018). The TEFCE framework, 'Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education', gives institutions a tool for self-reflection on their community engagement (Farnell et al., 2020). The present chapter complements both by concentrating on the conditions under which learning mobility and student-led initiatives can be connected to civic engagement in the communities where students live and study.

3.1 BRIDGING INTERNATIONALISATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Internationalisation and civic engagement are often discussed separately, yet in practice they reinforce one another. Community-engaged learning formats, such as service-learning, allow students, particularly those on international mobility, to apply disciplinary knowledge in local communities at home or abroad. Through engagement with local organisations and communities, students develop transversal skills, intercultural competence, and democratic awareness, while communities benefit from fresh perspectives, additional capacity, and long-term partnerships. For this exchange to be reciprocal rather than one-sided, communities need to be more than hosts or beneficiaries. They need the power to define needs, shape activities, and judge their value, and the workload that hosting students places on local organisations needs to be acknowledged.

However, civic engagement is still too often positioned at the margins of internationalisation strategies. In many institutions, it appears primarily in strategic narratives rather than as an operational priority supported by resources, incentives, and clear responsibilities. Where engagement exists, it is frequently driven by motivated individuals rather than embedded in institutional frameworks. As a result, opportunities to align international mobility with local impact remain underexploited.



Embedding civic engagement in Erasmus+ mobility – two scenarios

Scenario 1 – A semester exchange
A student spends a semester at a partner university under Erasmus+ Key Action 1 (KA131). The learning agreement includes a credit-bearing service-learning module that the host university runs with a local civil society organisation. The organisation helps to define the task, the student contributes throughout the semester, and structured reflection and assessment are built into the module, so that the credits are recognised at home like those of any other course.

Scenario 2 – A blended intensive programme
Three or more universities from at least three countries design a blended intensive programme around a challenge identified with a municipality or local organisation in the host city. In the online component, students prepare with the partner. During the physical component, which lasts between 5 and 30 days, they work on the challenge together. The programme awards at least 3 ECTS credits for work that the community partner helps to assess (European Commission, 2025, Part B).

3.2 FIVE GAPS IN CURRENT APPROACHES

Five recurring gaps stand between the recognised value of civic engagement and its systematic integration into higher education. They correspond to the constraints identified in the ECEM project's work on service-learning (Skledar Matijević & Fodor, 2024).

The first gap, and one of the most persistent, concerns recognition. While many institutions acknowledge the value of civic engagement in principle, students' learning outcomes are not always recognised in ways that are meaningful to them. Certificates or micro-credentials may exist, but they are often poorly understood, inconsistently valued, or disconnected from curricula and progression pathways (Kušić et al., 2022; OECD, 2026). Recognition through credits or integration into assessed courses is likely to carry more weight for students than add-on certificates, particularly for those balancing work or other responsibilities.

The second gap concerns institutional support. Responsibility is frequently placed on international offices or individual academics without providing additional staff, training, or mandates. Academic staff face high workloads and complex internal procedures, while administrative structures are not always designed to facilitate collaboration with external partners. Without dedicated support, civic engagement initiatives remain fragile and difficult to scale.

The third gap concerns funding, whose constraints further limit sustainability. Civil society organisations often lack the resources to supervise and mentor students, and the time they invest in hosting them is rarely funded or recognised, while universities struggle to allocate staff time without earmarked funding. Although European programmes offer relevant frameworks, funding instruments are not always sufficiently flexible, visible, or aligned with the realities of community-based engagement.

The fourth gap concerns communication and visibility. Students are not always aware of engagement opportunities or discover them too late to participate meaningfully. Differences in terminology across countries and institutions add to the challenge: activities may exist under various labels, but their civic dimension is not always recognised as such. As a result, existing practices remain under-communicated and undervalued.

The fifth gap concerns measurement and evidence. The lack of systematic measurement limits strategic development, since civic engagement is rarely captured in institutional monitoring systems, quality assurance processes, or mobility reporting. Without agreed indicators and evidence of impact, engagement activities struggle to gain visibility and institutional priority. Evidence of impact should also include community partners' own assessment of whether the engagement met the needs they identified, not only students' learning outcomes. Indicators of participation also need to be distinguished from indicators of democratic impact. Counting membership, attendance, votes, or activities is not the same as assessing perceived political efficacy, the diversity of voices represented, actual influence on decisions, deliberative capacity, or sustained civic engagement, and validated instruments such as the Civic Engagement Scale can support the latter (Doolittle & Faul, 2013).

IV. Recommendations for action

What the preceding chapters show, above all, is that civic engagement delivers most when it is built into the core of higher education, not attached at its margins. Moving towards a more coherent European approach therefore requires action at several interconnected levels. European policy frameworks, national implementation, institutional strategies, and student-led initiatives need to reinforce one another so that civic engagement can become a structural element of higher education, internationalisation, and student mobility.

The recommendations below respond to the recurring gaps identified in the previous chapter – recognition, institutional support, funding, communication and visibility, and measurement and evidence – and clarify the roles of the main actors involved. They share a common test: whether a measure increases students' actual influence over decisions, rather than only the number of occasions on which they are consulted. They also carry a tension that implementation needs to manage. Embedding participation in institutional strategies, credits, quality systems, and funding can make it more sustainable, but it can also turn participation into another institutional process that is measured and managed, so student initiative and the independence of student-led organisations need to be protected as participation becomes more formal. The recommendations also aim to counter the pull towards treating students mainly as consumers of services, noted in Chapter 1, by positioning them as co-decision-makers in the design and assessment of civic engagement.

4.1 ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME

At Erasmus+ programme level, clearer signals and incentives can help mainstream civic engagement across higher education. Civic engagement should be incorporated more explicitly and systematically into the next Erasmus+ programming period and related European higher education strategies, building on the programme’s existing emphasis on participation in democratic life and common values.

Rather than introducing entirely new instruments, this could build on existing priorities and implementation frameworks, while providing clearer guidance on recognition, partnerships with civil society organisations, and the use of available funding streams. The European Democracy Shield, which notes that the Commission's proposal for the next Erasmus+ programme would place particular emphasis on citizenship education and civic engagement (European Commission & High Representative, 2025), can serve as a driver for this change and help establish community engagement as a core programme objective rather than an optional add-on.

Specific civic engagement dimensions and indicators should also be included in programme priorities and quality frameworks so that interaction with local communities is monitored, valued, and rewarded. Furthermore, student-led organisations can support National Agencies and HEIs in monitoring these quality standards, particularly by gathering direct feedback from students on their opportunities to engage with local communities. Member States should be encouraged to recognise service-learning and community engagement as important dimensions of Erasmus+ mobility objectives, drawing on existing conceptual frameworks and tested models.

Future policy guidance and calls for proposals should reference and build upon the existing knowledge base and practical resources. Greater emphasis on examples, peer learning, and practical guidance would support higher education institutions in translating European policy objectives into practice and signal clearly that civic engagement is an expected element of programme implementation.

4.2 NATIONAL AGENCIES AND MINISTRIES

National Agencies and ministries play an important role in shaping how European priorities are interpreted and implemented. National implementation therefore needs to translate strategic intent into operational support.

Developing national strategies or action plans for civic engagement in higher education can help move beyond ad hoc initiatives and create more coherent conditions for implementation. Such strategies should connect civic engagement more clearly to existing mobility schemes and European priorities while adapting them to national higher education contexts.

Funding incentives should be aligned with the structures and processes required for meaningful engagement between higher education institutions and civil society organisations. National Agencies and ministries should also address barriers that prevent student organisations from accessing this support, including legal registration and eligibility requirements, complex applications, and the need to cover costs before

reimbursement. Clear guidance, proportionate procedures, and advance payments where possible would make funding more accessible to smaller organisations. Linking civic engagement more clearly to funding, monitoring, and quality frameworks can create stronger incentives for institutional uptake and help ensure that initiatives do not depend solely on motivated individuals or short-term project funding.

National Agencies and ministries can also play an important role in facilitating peer learning and capacity building among higher education leaders and practitioners. Experience from other policy areas suggests that peer learning among university leaders, rather than top-down guidance alone, can be particularly effective in fostering change. Cross-sector networks bringing together higher education institutions, student organisations, and civil society actors can further support the scaling of engagement practices beyond early adopters. They can also connect higher education initiatives with youth work, schools, and other community settings, so that democratic learning does not remain limited to those who enter higher education.

4.3 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

For higher education institutions, the key challenge is sustainability. Civic engagement is most effective when it is embedded in institutional missions, internationalisation strategies, and curricula rather than relying on individual enthusiasm. Institutions are encouraged to recognise civic engagement as a legitimate learning outcome and to integrate it, where appropriate, into curricula and credit frameworks. Service-learning and other forms of community-engaged learning, such as work-based placements with civil society organisations, can be incorporated into existing courses so that engagement is not framed as an additional task for students but as a meaningful component of their learning experience.

Engagement in governance and in the classroom matters as much as engagement in the community. Institutions are encouraged to give student representatives a decision-taking rather than only an advisory role on the bodies that shape curricula, internationalisation, and community partnerships, to respect the independence of student representation, and to experiment with deliberative formats such as student assemblies or panels on institutional priorities. They can also support teaching staff in using participatory and deliberative methods in the classroom, which reach almost all students.

Institutional support structures are equally important. Higher education institutions are encouraged to establish or strengthen structures such as centres for engagement, staff training, and partnership offices that can facilitate long-term collaboration with community actors. Academic and administrative staff need sufficient time, support, and

clear roles and responsibilities if engagement activities are to become sustainable and scalable.

Staff involvement in civic engagement also deserves recognition within workload models and institutional incentive structures. Without such recognition, responsibility is likely to continue to fall on individual academics or administrative staff whose capacity to develop and maintain partnerships is limited.

Higher education institutions are encouraged to develop recurring partnerships with student organisations, municipalities, and civil society organisations to identify local needs and create accessible opportunities for international and local students to participate together. Community partners can be involved in designing and reviewing activities, and the time and resources they invest in supporting students deserve recognition. Formal representation reaches only part of the student body. Institutions are therefore encouraged to complement it with informal and deliberative channels, such as open student assemblies, panels selected to reflect the diversity of the student body, and targeted outreach, so that students who do not join representative structures, including those facing linguistic, financial, time, or other barriers, can also influence decisions that affect them.

Institutions can also draw on existing resources and tested models to design locally anchored engagement opportunities that are inclusive, reflective, and academically integrated. Resources developed through projects such as ECEM demonstrate how volunteering, service-learning, and other forms of local community engagement can be connected more systematically to international mobility. Participation also involves disagreement. Institutions are encouraged to set out how disagreements with student representatives and community partners are handled, to protect students who challenge institutional decisions, and to respond publicly to student proposals, including when they are not adopted.

4.4 STUDENT-LED ORGANISATIONS

Students are both primary agents and beneficiaries of enhanced civic engagement practices, and student-led organisations act as crucial intermediaries between universities, communities, and students themselves.

Their networks enable peer-to-peer learning, rapid dissemination of opportunities, and bottom-up innovation. Student-led organisations can use existing resources and evidence as a basis for advocacy and peer mobilisation, increasing awareness of community-engaged opportunities and of the possibilities associated with mobility.

Strengthening student-led organisations' capacity and voice at local, national, and European levels can enhance democratic participation while ensuring that civic engagement reflects students' motivations and realities. Student-led organisations can also help connect students with local communities and civil society organisations and contribute to the design of engagement opportunities that are relevant and accessible.

Together with their institutions, student-led organisations are encouraged to protect organisational memory against the short and cyclical nature of studentship, for example through formal handover procedures, mentoring between outgoing and incoming representatives, accessible institutional archives, and staggered terms of office. Where institutions fund or formally recognise student-led organisations, these arrangements need to be designed so that they do not make the organisations dependent on the institution for their positions or priorities.

Networks connecting student representatives with institutional leaders and policy forums need to be strengthened so that student voices inform the design, recognition, and assessment of engagement activities. This is particularly important if civic engagement is to be embedded structurally rather than developed primarily through top-down institutional initiatives.

Student-led organisations are not the only channel for student voice, however. If they become the main intermediary, already-engaged students may be heard repeatedly while less organised, commuting, working, international, first-generation, or otherwise time-constrained students remain peripheral. Inclusiveness of reach, including students who are not connected to organised student bodies, is therefore an explicit criterion for the recommendations in this chapter.



V. Conclusion: towards a coherent European approach

The growing emphasis on civic engagement in higher education reflects broader societal expectations of universities as democratic and socially responsible institutions. Higher education is increasingly expected not only to contribute to skills development and employability, but also to strengthen democratic participation, social cohesion, and engagement with local communities.

The evidence reviewed in this publication shows that civic engagement can contribute to students' personal, civic, and academic development while strengthening connections between higher education institutions and the communities around them. International student mobility offers particularly significant opportunities to connect academic learning with local engagement, enabling students to develop intercultural competence, agency, and a stronger sense of responsibility while contributing to the communities in which they study.

Yet the civic engagement potential of European higher education and student mobility remains significant but under-realised. Effective projects, practices, and tools exist across Europe, but they remain unevenly recognised, supported, and measured. Engagement activities are still frequently fragmented, dependent on individual initiative, and insufficiently connected to institutional strategies, funding mechanisms, quality assurance, and internationalisation.

The central challenge is therefore not the absence of good practice. It is the absence of systematic integration. A more coherent European approach does not require a single model of civic engagement, but better alignment between European policy objectives, national implementation, institutional incentives, and student initiative. Recognition, institutional support, funding, communication, and measurement need to reinforce one another if civic engagement is to become sustainable rather than remain dependent on isolated projects or committed individuals.

The evidence and practical models developed through ECEM and related initiatives demonstrate that such integration is feasible. Service-learning and other forms of community-engaged learning, volunteering, and locally anchored engagement can enrich mobility experiences, connect students more closely to host communities, and

contribute to broader objectives such as inclusion, sustainability, social cohesion, and democratic participation. The task now is to move from individual examples and temporary initiatives towards structures that allow these practices to become a normal part of the higher education experience.

This requires alignment across levels of governance and practice. European frameworks can provide direction and incentives; national actors can translate these priorities into enabling conditions; higher education institutions can embed engagement within their strategies, curricula, and support structures; and student-led organisations can ensure that participation remains connected to students' experiences, motivations, and voices. Their roles are different, but their actions are mutually dependent.

The broader aim is not simply to increase the number of civic engagement activities available to students. It is to strengthen the capacity of higher education to function as a space in which democratic participation can be learned, practised, and sustained. By embedding engagement more structurally into internationalisation and mobility, recognising and rewarding civic learning, and strengthening connections between students, institutions, and local communities, European higher education can contribute more systematically to democratic life and societal well-being.

The research, tools, and implementation models developed through this cross-European work should therefore be understood not as ends in themselves, but as foundations for a sustainable, inclusive, and effective European approach to civic engagement in higher education. The evidence and available tools demonstrate both feasibility and impact. What is now required is sustained commitment and stronger alignment across policy, institutions, and practice.

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