Student Voice inside a European University Alliance: giving students the power of change

La metodologia Student Voice nelle alleanze universitarie europee: dare agli studenti il potere del cambiamento

di
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Abstract:

This paper aims at presenting a survey dedicated to students, which investigates the awareness and beliefs they have about being part of the European Union and a European university alliance. Indeed, the recipients of this research are students belonging to the 6 founder institutions and to the other 7 partner universities included in the UNITA Universitas Montium alliance. The purpose of the tool, that will be implemented starting from December 2022, is to represent a starting point into the promotion of a new perspective of change and innovation in the university learning field: from a transformation process thought by the institution for the students to a transformation made by the students themselves in active cooperation with all the members of the institutions of the alliance. The finality is to give birth to a common and ad hoc way of work which strives for the achievement of shared values and citizenship on people from different contexts but linked together by a common academical identity.

Abstract:

L'articolo presenta un questionario dedicato agli studenti, atto ad indagare il grado di consapevolezza che essi hanno sull'appartenenza all'Unione Europea e ad un'alleanza universitaria europea. Infatti, i destinatari della ricerca sono gli studenti delle 6 università fondatrici e delle 7 università partner incluse nell'alleanza UNITA Universitas Montium. L'obiettivo di questo strumento, che sarà diffuso da dicembre 2022, è di rappresentare un punto di partenza per la promozione di una nuova prospettiva di cambiamento e innovazione nell'apprendimento universitario: da una trasformazione pensata dalle università per gli studenti ad una promossa dagli studenti stessi in collaborazione con tutti i membri delle università dell'alleanza. Il fine è l'individuazione di una visione lavorativa comune per il raggiungimento di valori condivisi e cittadinanza europea in persone provenienti da contesti differenti ma legate da una comune identità accademica.

Parole chiave: Student engagement; higher education; European universities alliances

1. Introduction

This paper aims at presenting a tool built to understand university students' perception on the internationalization of higher education institutions, with a particular focus on the European university alliances' reality.

1.1 The European scene on higher education

Nowadays, the universities around the world are asked to think about their learning paths, programs, and connections not only inside the single institution but also and especially within a network with abroad partners, in an international view. The European context, specifically, for a long time strives to identify a common framework in order to create a European education area (European Commission, 2020). In 2018 already, the European Commission started to share guidelines to promote key competences for lifelong learning, especially focused on STEM and digital skills for all the age ranges, and first directions on reaching a European education area (European Commission, 2018), as well as achieving common values among all the instruction levels related to active citizenship, civic and intercultural skills and critical thinking. An important attention has been given to the active role that schools need to play inside the educational communities through a first knowledge and understanding of the European education context as well as the participation to e-twinning initiatives (European Council, 2018). Moreover, in September 2020, the European Commission provided more detailed directions to build up a European education area within 2025 (European Commission, 2020). This document gives an explanation on the six levels in which a common European educational vision should be defined: at first, on the quality level which includes the proficiency of digital, transversal and multilingual skills; inclusion and gender equality as a second goal; green and digital transition, with the establishment of an action plan on digital instruction and various fundings for projects with the use of digital strategies and tools; a focus on the role of teachers and trainers, specifically concentrating on teaching staff's mobilities, higher education area by promoting a stronger cooperation among institutions, more frequent mobilities and an easier and more automatic recognition of skills achieved in foreign countries, as well as a special attention to

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digital education; a final attention is given to geopolitics' issues as well (European Commission, 2020).

The first promoter of the networks among higher education institutions has been the French President Immanuel Macron who, in his Sorbonne speech in September 2017, proposed the creation of at least 20 European Universities by 2024, as environments in which students could learn abroad and in at least two languages as well as places drivers of educational innovation and excellence (Macron, 2017). Starting from that, in the same year at the Gothenburg Summit, some of the European Union members submitted different proposals specifically related to the higher education academies, with the aim of creating a bottom-up network of universities in which students could obtain degrees by combining their academic path in different institutions among Europe and actively contribute to the international competitiveness of the European universities (European Commission, 2017). The conclusions of this Summit gave consequently birth to the first European Universities Initiative (European Universities Initiative, 2017), which will be deepened some years later, in the May 2021 Council Conclusions on the European Universities (European Commission, 2021), in which it have been reproposed the achievement of values like the excellence dimension of higher education, research and innovation, the promotion of gender equality inclusiveness and equity, transnational cooperation among European higher education institutions and the transformation of higher education. At the moment, the European Universities Initiative is included in the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 program, and it represents the starting point for the birth of the first European universities alliances, which put together different European institutions that cooperates to reach common goals and action lines.

European alliances are powerful entities that, for a long time by now, serve as a tool to promote the achievement of effective cooperation and shared European citizenship and values among different higher education institutions. The transformation process and the complexity the education field is facing in these last few years are features which link together many different contexts, inside and outside the European Union; this is the reason why a common action strategy is required. The alliances are currently working on this challenge, at least at a European level, to promote a common change of perspective in the education field, which involves all the actors who have a role in it, from teachers to students. Most of the time, however, the transformation action is seen as a process which necessarily starts from the institutions while the actors are mere recipients of the initiatives promoted. The risk of this mindset is to foster too much general actions that do not comply with the diversity and needs inevitably present in differentiated contexts. To make people engagement effective in this transformation, we need to start from people themselves, as it is well described, indeed, in the previously mentioned Gothenburg Summit which, not by chance, talks about a bottom-up approach to create a university network (European Commission, 2017).

This initiative already brought out a considerable number of European alliances in the last few years. For the first time, indeed, in 2018, the European Commission launched the first call to the European higher education institutions to submit proposals to start testing first models for European Universities. In November 2019, the first network of European Universities already started to cooperate, as much as that, in July 2020, 24 alliances have been set up (European Commission Press release, 2020) and the European Commission showed the first results of this cooperation. The survey implemented by the Commission itself, revealed that the 96% of the institutions stated that they would

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have better handled the Coronavirus pandemic if their European alliances had already been completely operational, and they expressed how much the established networks helped them to face the crisis (European Commission Press release, 2020). This first success has been confirmed by the establishment of an amount of 41 European alliances in November 2020. The implementation of this innovative initiative is still ongoing, and it is now included in the 2021-2027 Erasmus program, as mentioned above, in synergy with Horizon Europe and other instruments form the European Union (European Union, 2020). Moreover, in 2022, the European Commission shared a communication on a European strategy for universities which provided guidelines on the potentials and contributions that the alliances can bring to promote excellence and innovation in the academic community. The document, indeed, points out the power that the higher education field has in challenges like solving big societal issues along with promoting inclusiveness and gender equality and explains the future goals of the European strategy for universities; it focuses especially on four key objectives to be reached by mid-2024: strengthen the European dimension in higher education and research, support universities as lighthouses of the European way of life, empower universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transition and reinforce universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership (European Commission, 2022). In this first key objective, for instance, a distinguished focus is given to the role of students and to give them facilities to encourage and make their mobilities across the European Union easier and well recognized. This is the main goal of the joint European degree, which attests learning outcomes achieved at an international level or the European Student Card Initiative, which helps students to join mobilities in a more accessible way (European Commission, 2022).

1.2 UNITA Universitas Montium

Inside the European University alliances landscape, there is a specific consortium, UNITA Universitas Montium (UNITA, 2020), in which the research project we are going to present here is included. This alliance is a network among 6 founders European universities to whom, in the last period, other institutions have been added. The first 6 universities are: Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy, which is the leader institution of the network, Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, France, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, France, Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara, Romania and Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain. The new partners are represented by Università degli Studi Roma 3, Italy, Università degli Studi di Brescia, Italy, Universidad Publica de Navarra, Spain, Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania, Instituto Politecnico de Guarda, Portugal, Haute Ecole Spécialisée de Suisse Occidentale, Switzerland and Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Ukraine, for an overall amount of 13 cooperating institutions. These universities share with each other their belonging to rural or mountainous areas which need initiatives aimed at promoting their full inclusion in the innovation process of the academical world. They cooperate for the identification of a common action line and to reach goals related to different disciplinary areas: from learning innovation, creation of a virtual internationalized campus, to research on renewable energies, circular economy, and bioeconomy and, moreover, the promotion of the active use of similar languages through intercomprehension (Blanche-Benveniste, Valli, 1997) and multilingualism (Aronin, Singleton, 2008). Just this year, the alliance reached its first two years of work and success, confirmed by the increased number of associated institutions.

Inside the work of the alliances, many different working groups have been established, in order to reach the various goal promoted by UNITA. Among them, we want to introduce the Teaching and Learning Center's Network, a research team which specifically deals with teachers' training, Faculty Development (Bergquist, Philipps, 1975) and innovative learning, with a focus on digitalization (Popova, 2018). All the activities carried out by the network aim at building a teaching and learning center of the alliance, in which all the members cooperate to promote common strategies for all the institutions belonging to the consortium and to provide tools specifically created by and for the alliance. One of the new challenges of the working group is related to the active inclusion of students firstly inside the work of the learning center and consequently in the university community's everyday life. We cannot, indeed, think about the improvement and innovation of teaching and learning without considering the needs and the features that the main recipients and actors of these initiatives could point out during their higher education path. In this regard, a validated methodology named Student Voice (Rudduck, Wallace, 1996) could be a starting point to implement this goal.

1.3 The Student Voice methodology

For long time, the international research provided several contributions on the currently well-known methodology named Student Voice. The approach started in the early 90's/2000's in the anglophone context with the leading aim of promoting a concrete and effective students' engagement in their learning paths, at different educational levels, from lower to higher grades (MacBeath et al., 2003). The initiative started from the awareness that students are not only passive receivers of knowledge and skills taught by teachers but also, and most importantly, active players of their own expertise, with specific requirements and suggestions to express (Cook-Sather, 2013). Their contribution, indeed, can represent a resource for the institutions they belong to (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996) in addition to the chance to establish and strengthen the connection and cooperation between students and faculties (Grion, Dettori 2015). This realization functioned as the starting point to the very first change of perspective: from a vision of change and learning improvement potentially promoted only by the teaching staff to a transformation directly enabled by students' intervention (Cook-Sather, 2022). The benefits that can be assigned to this new perspective are numerous: first of all, the chance given to students to operatively contribute to their own learning results and the necessity, for them, to take the responsibility of reflecting on their personal learning path through the exercise of a strong critical thinking (Cook-Sather, 2010); moreover, the research perspective on didactics switches from a work for students to a work with students (Fielding, Bragg, 2003); lastly, the active engagement of learners in this process develops a sense of belonging to a democratic community inside the institution that will be consequently extended to a democratic community feeling, in the society they will live in (Rudduck, Fielding, 2003). The methodology, which took hold very fast worldwide, especially in the USA, is however in still need of strengthening in many contexts. This approach was supported as well by the Dublin Descriptors (Ministerial Conference, 2001), a series of indicators developed by a group of experts from different countries for the three cycles of the Bologna Process (Bologna Process, 1999) related to the outcomes students are supposed to achieve after the completion of a curriculum and a qualification of studies. They do not represent strict rules but a general description of the features a common qualification of studies should provide. Here are the descriptors' elements: knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge, and

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understanding, making judgements, communication skills and learning skills. All these elements are manifestly related to the European higher education guidelines described above. It is clear that, to make students able to meet these criteria with excellence, they need to be actively involved in the decision-making of their learning process and path, through a concrete cooperation with the teaching staff and all the stakeholders inside the university community (Cook-Sather, 2014). In this regard, the Student Voice and all the research projects experienced for this purpose over the years presented concrete instances of strategies in which students played a real role of responsibility in the construction of learning approaches and tools with teachers. To give an example, one of the main remarkable actions of students' engagement was born at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. It represents an initiative, called Students as Change Agents (Dunne et al., 2014), aimed at concretely listening to students and promoting their work in partnership inside the university, in different areas, from inclusion and diversity until student-faculty partnership concerning the teachers' course design. The success of this approach brought to its spread at an institutional level. In the Italian context too, we can find many instances of initiatives experienced to implement the Student Voice approach, even if they are still localized projects applied by motivated and involved teachers (Di Vita, 2017). What we still need and is currently missing, in this regard, is a shared and institutionalized approach as the only way to really make students 'engagement an effective part of the institutions' pedagogical identities. Even if we have evidences of the efficiency of this methodology at different school levels, the innovation and research question that we want to investigate with this investigation is about the feasibility of the Student Voice in an international context as well, in which students are asked to find a common vision of being part of the university community, in different fields and faculties, with colleagues belonging to different contexts and backgrounds but inside the same European university alliance.

2. Involving students in an international higher education context: an explorative survey

In this regard, this contribution aims at presenting a survey which investigates students' beliefs and feelings on being part of the European Union and the opportunities this condition can give to their future career, as a base to design new inclusive and endorsed learning initiatives promoted by the students themselves.

Starting from this fact, our proposal aims at making use of this approach as a potential successful tool in the university alliances. To promote an effective change of perspective, students need to be involved in their learning process, as active change agents of their academic life, with a view of cooperation and exchange among other academical figures from different contexts. The Student Voice, from this perspective, could represent the best tool to make this aim real since it could let them develop an effectual transformation that starts from themselves, from their shared needs and their objectives that will help them building a sense of belonging, firstly at an institutional level and consequently in the society they will live in in the future (Fielding, 2007).

Since this aspect represents a new feature of students' life, they need to be prepared and well trained to develop, above all, the consciousness of the chance they have, to really contribute to shape the future of learning values and avoid the fear of not being able to face a non-traditional path. That is why, first of all, we have the intention to investigate students' thoughts and feelings about being part of a European reality. Starting from these findings we will consequently provide ad hoc activities and

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proposals, especially suggested by the students themselves, to make them really engaged in their learning path and in everything concerns their academic life inside the different institutions. Specifically, the topic investigated will be the following: the perception of the European dimension of education and work, microcredentials (Crow, Pipkin, 2017) in an international context, linguistic conditions for joining a mobility program, new scenarios of mobility (as virtual or blended mobilities), incoming staff and students as a way to promote internationalization, thematical mobilities and mobilities inside the alliances as a chance to get a focused job training in a European view, student engagement (Shulman, 2005) and a final focus on European University alliances and UNITA. These different points are all aspects in which students could really make the difference by promoting initiatives and projects starting from their own perceptions and related needs.

3. Research method and sampling procedure

We decided to firstly apply a quantitative method (Trinchero, 2002), with the use of a survey as the main tool of research, to collect as much information as possible on the current situation of the sample selected. The findings we will gain, indeed, will provide us two crucial advices: primarily, we will understand which topics are in still need of deepening due to poor information on that; secondly, we will find out the topics that, instead, have aroused particular interest in the students who took part in the research. These aspects both represent crucial starting points for the cooperation we hope among students and students with faculty to get involved in the institutions' community. Nevertheless, we are aware of the importance of clarifying the quantitative data obtained by the survey. For this reason, we will try to improve our findings by using a following qualitative method (Trinchero, 2002) in which a smaller group of students will be selected to deep the topics previously introduced with the questionnaire.

For the first research part, which will start at the beginning of December 2022 with the survey's implementation, the sample includes all the bachelor and master's students belonging to the 13 universities inside UNITA. The questionnaire construction started with the aim of answering the following research questions:

- o To what extent are students in UNITA conscious of the implications of being part of the European Union?
- o Are students aware of being part of a European University Alliance and of the advantages this condition can bring them?
- o To what extent are students conscious and willing to take actively part to the international university community life?

After the definition of these starting points, we consulted the President of the UNITA Students' Assembly, a group of representative students of all the institutions inside the consortium, to brainstorm on the most crucial and appropriate topics to include in the survey. After the drafting, we took advantage of all the Students' Assembly members as a sample of students for the first submission and validation phase of the tool. After their approval and the changes suggested, we presented the final version of the questionnaire to the directory working group of UNITA for the final acceptance. Concerning the implementation phase, we are going to ask the cooperation of some representatives of professors belonging to the different universities. We will ensure that the selected teachers are not

only part of different UNITA institutions but also from different departments and disciplinary fields, in order to guarantee an as much heterogeneous students' sample as possible. Since we must rely on the willingness of the teachers to cooperate with us in the students' recruitment process and we are not selecting the participants with probabilistic sampling procedures, we will manage a non-probabilistic sampling (Bailey, 1995). The faculty will, indeed, ask their students, during courses, to fill the questionnaire. We consider that this strategy could bring us more chances to receive answers from the recipients instead of just spreading the survey through other tools. The answers will be collected within one month in which we will start the first data analysis. We will originally focus on the frequencies' review, to understand the main features of the respondents and the topics already known by the students and/or that aroused more interest. After that, we will provide the analysis of different correlations among the results and the biological/academic peculiarities of the research participants. Since the total amount of students included in the 13 universities of UNITA is around 248000 subjects, we hope to receive a huge and important number of completed surveys.

The qualitative part (Trinchero, 2002) will be dedicated to a selected sample of students, around 100 participants, from the 13 universities as well, that will manifest interest in taking actively part in focus groups (Barbour, 1998) aimed at developing thoughts and strategies on the previously mentioned topics. This session will be crucial to deep the quantitative data at first, but also to start the students' engagement process in an international context, with first brainstorming opportunities. We will now explain how the focus groups will be organized. Considering that the survey deals with 8 different topics, we wish to put up 16 working groups made of 6/7 people per team. Each set of participants will discuss one of them, in this way every topic will be handled by two teams. This condition will be useful for us to compare the data obtained on the same subject, but with different people involved. The groups will work on answering the following research questions:

- o After the observation of the analyzed surveys' data, for which reason do they think students expressed positive or negative interest in that topic?
- o Which solutions and strategies can be proposed to promote students' engagement and interest on that topic?

These questions will be answered in 1 or 2 focus groups' sessions of 1:30 hours each. The meetings will be recorded, after the consent of the students involved, in order to analyze more in details the results gained by the discussions. The data analysis will help to understand which aspects of the internationalization of higher education need to be improved and to have a first idea of the outcomes gained by the cooperation among students from different institutions and backgrounds with the same objective.

We considered this intervention a real necessity because, even if the alliance's reality is an established fact by now, too many students may not be really aware of the chance they can have in being part of an international consortium as well as the huge role they can carry out in the promotion of change in the higher education field, with their active involvement and strict cooperation with the teaching staff and all the members of the institutions. Only with these intentions we can effectively switch to a university established and built up by teachers, students, and stakeholders, all at the same level.

4. Conclusions

As emerged in the literature analysis above, the European Union is giving for long time many directions and guidelines that point out the importance of developing European citizenship and values, in different contexts. In the academic field, we cannot think of putting these principles in practice without the active involvement and consideration of students as main actors of the university communities. The Student Voice confirmed the efficiency of engagement activities in the increasing of motivation and interest on different themes and in the construction of their learning paths, in cooperation with the teaching staff. The current challenge is to implement this methodology in an international environment, in which students and the academic staff are asked to cooperate with colleagues from different backgrounds and academical experience. This aim is more relevant than ever in a world in which people are more and more asked to move abroad, earn new knowledges and skills in foreign countries which, moreover and particularly inside the European Union, are required to cooperate and identify common ways of action. This change cannot be reached, however, without the full involvement of students and without starting from their interest and needs. This research wants exactly to meet this goal by directly asking them their level of awareness and interest on some of the main topics faced by the UNITA alliance and that can develop a better sense of belonging to Europe. The deeper investigation of these aspects will represent the first starting point to let students concretely work to find new solutions and strategies to promote a new students' role in the university field and a better achievement of the required skills thanks to the built of personalized and inclusive paths in cooperation with teachers and other colleagues.

The first results will be shared from early spring 2023 in order to consequently start the qualitative part of developments of the themes through discussions and cooperation activities among students from the different alliance's institutions, to give birth to common paths and goals, in a European view.

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