

Perceptions of stakeholders on the problems facing higher education: Implications for student engagement and university governance

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Abstract

Stakeholder theory analysis and research on the participation of stakeholders in university governance point to differences in the salience of different stakeholders in institutional planning and decision making. Despite their importance as the key public of higher education, students have been reported to be less influential in university governance in comparison to other groups. This is true of many countries, including the Republic of Cyprus. In this context, the paper investigates whether perceptions of problems facing higher education in Cyprus differ between two stakeholder groups, namely, students and high-ranking administrators. Qualitative research was used to collect information from 20 graduate students and four high-ranking government officials and/or administrators. The analysis of the data points to important differences in the perceptions of the two groups both in terms of the identified problems and the proposed solutions to these problems. This suggests that one reason for the limited and/or more passive role of students in university governance may relate to the fact that they have different views regarding the nature and/or importance of problems facing higher education. The findings of the study are used as the basis for suggestions that can enhance student engagement in higher education, especially in relation to strategic planning, university governance and the formulation of higher education policy objectives.

Keywords: student engagement; university governance; strategic planning; higher education stakeholders

Introduction

According to stakeholder theory, stakeholders are actors who may benefit or lose from the activities of an organisation and who maintain an interest in the performance of the organisation (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). Higher education stakeholders include a large number of actors with a potential impact on the planning and governance process. The importance of students as stakeholders in university governance has been highlighted in recent decades. Despite differences across countries and institutions, student representation in institutional decision making has been described as “close to universal” (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013, p. 1442). Several studies point to the benefits of student involvement in the governance and functioning of universities (see, for example, Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Planas et al., 2013; Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999). Even though students are recognised as a key stakeholder of higher education, their power in strategic planning and decision making has been put into question. Students are considered to constitute a passive stakeholder group, with limited, if any, input in important decisions (Neave, 2000; Sin & Neave, 2016). The

limited involvement of students in decision making can be expected to apply to higher levels of decision making associated with the formulation of the universities' mission and strategic plan.

The importance of strategic planning for the effectiveness of higher education systems and institutions points to the need for investigating the role and power of different stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process (Kettunen, 2015). Typologies of stakeholders have been developed in an attempt to identify and describe higher education stakeholder categories and study their influence on university decision-making processes. Even though typologies are very useful in the understanding of the role and/or behaviour of various stakeholders' groups, they are not sufficient for an in-depth understanding of stakeholder perceptions and motives. This may result in limited understanding of stakeholder actions, especially in relation to the degree of their participation and influence on decision making. Thus, in addition to the formulation of typologies, it is necessary to investigate the perceptions and motives of different higher education stakeholder groups. However, perceptions and motives occur within, and are influenced by, specific contexts. Before embarking on research on stakeholder perceptions in higher education, it is important to review the contextual factors that may have a role in stakeholder behaviour and engagement in particular. The paper focuses on the perceptions of two groups of stakeholders in Cyprus and their implications for student engagement in higher education. A brief overview of the context of the study is provided below.

The context

Higher education in the Republic of Cyprus is offered by both public and private institutions. At present, there are three public universities and five private universities in Cyprus. In addition to universities, there is a large number of tertiary non-university institutions operating on the island.

As regards the funding of higher education, the system is different from that observed in most European countries which use funding formulas to arrive at the size of public grants for higher education institutions. In Cyprus, public grants are allocated to higher education institutions after a process of negotiation which is partly based on a budget estimate provided to central authorities by various institutions. The public funding of higher education allows undergraduate students enrolled in public universities to have access to free education. This is not the case for private institutions which charge fees for all their programmes (Department of Higher and Tertiary Education, 2021). The reliance on state funding (for public institutions) and the centralisation of the educational system make the Ministry of Education and Culture an extremely important stakeholder in the educational system. For both state and private institutions, the Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for quality assurance and accreditation in an attempt to regulate and enhance the provision of higher education. In 2016, the Cyprus government formed a quality assurance body, namely, The Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Higher Education (CYQAA). It is the body responsible for monitoring the quality of higher education and ensuring the implementation of

relevant legislation.

Even though policy documents and government publications highlight the importance of the link between higher education and the labour market and the employability of higher education graduates (Department of Higher and Tertiary Education, 2021), employers are not involved in the design of courses and/or curricula and in the formulation of institutional strategic plans. Each higher education institution has its own mechanisms (e.g. career offices) for facilitating the employment of graduates. Moreover, a separate public body, namely, the Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA) is responsible for facilitating the employment of graduates through specific schemes and incentives. The HRDA maintains close links with employers and contributes significantly to the development and employment of graduates of secondary and tertiary education. However, the relatively weak links between the HRDA and higher education institutions do not allow for the systematic involvement of employers as stakeholders in the institutional decision making process.

In higher education, the participation of students in governance is based on the policies of each institution. Student voice is sought in the form of participation in institutional bodies and all institutions make provisions for the representation of students in such bodies. For instance, the Senate of the University of Cyprus (the largest state university in the country) consists of 28 academics and 6 students (University of Cyprus, 2021). In the same institution, there is also provision for student representation at other levels (e.g. faculty, departmental etc.). However, relevant research conducted in Cyprus indicates that higher education students assume a relatively passive role in the governance process. In a survey of 135 students at the University of Cyprus, respondents reported that their involvement in the management of their institution was very limited. This was especially the case for high levels of decision making. The perceived degree of involvement was associated with student frustration and dissatisfaction (Menon, 2005).

As previously mentioned, similar findings have been reported in other countries (Falqueto et al., 2020; Sin & Neave, 2016). Students have been found to be weaker than other groups in relation to their input in strategic planning and policy formation, in particular (Švaikauskienė & Mikulskienė, 2017). This suggests that it is necessary to investigate the motives and perceptions of students as stakeholders and identify reasons for lower levels of active participation and engagement in the governance process. Moreover, a comparison between student perceptions and perceptions of other stakeholders can provide valuable information on possible differences between stakeholder actions and behaviour. Consequently, the motivation for the present study is largely derived from previous national and international research findings on the engagement of different stakeholders in higher education.

Aims of the study

The paper examines the perceptions of two groups of stakeholders regarding the most important problems facing higher education in Cyprus as well as the

solutions proposed by each group. Specifically, it investigates the perceptions of senior higher education officials and administrators, on the one hand, and higher education students, on the other. High-ranking officials were selected in an attempt to collect information on the views of tertiary education stakeholders who are likely to possess a high degree of salience associated with the triggering of managerial action (Mitchell et al., 1997). The second stakeholder group (students) represents the core community and the key public of higher education institutions (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

In this framework, the paper investigates whether differences in the salience of stakeholders are associated with differences in the perceptions of important problems facing higher education and of possible solutions to these problems. The perception of problems has been chosen as a point of reference for this investigation since problem identification constitutes the first stage of the strategic planning process. Differences at this stage of the strategic planning process are likely to have a major impact on the interest and engagement of stakeholders in the process itself as well as on their level of influence on decision making. If important differences emerge in the perceptions of students and high-ranking officials, the role and engagement of students in university governance will be put into question since, in essence, their participation and input will be limited by the fact that they do not share the perceptions of other stakeholders regarding the importance of problems they are expected to address and the solutions they consider appropriate.

The paper aims to make a contribution to the international literature on student engagement and participation in higher education. In a study of stakeholders at the University of Portsmouth, Chapleo and Simms (2010) point to a gap in the literature regarding public sector stakeholders and emphasize the need to consider stakeholders in relation to their potential impact on the strategic direction of the organisation. Seale et al. (2015) draw attention to the fact that despite commitment to the support of partnerships of various stakeholders in higher education, actual ways of enhancing student participation in the higher education experience have not been discussed at length in UK policy documents. Moreover, Carey (2013) points to a theory and research deficit in relation to student engagement in higher education. In this context, findings from several countries are needed to provide additional evidence on the topic of stakeholder participation in higher education and student engagement, in particular. The present study attempts to provide relevant evidence from a small European country; this evidence can inform the literature and enable comparisons with relevant findings from larger countries and/or educational systems, especially in the European framework.

Background

Stakeholder theory and university governance

Freeman (1984, p. 84) defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives.” This suggests that, in higher education, several stakeholder categories can be identified including governing bodies, administrators, employees, clienteles and

communities (Burrows, 1999).

Donaldson and Preston (1995) propose three main dimensions of stakeholder theory: descriptive, instrumental, and normative. The descriptive dimension has been used in research to describe organisational characteristics and behaviours. The instrumental dimension utilises data to investigate the links between the management of stakeholder groups and the achievement of organisational goals. The normative approach constitutes the core of the theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995); it emphasises the ethical and philosophical principles for the operation and management of the organisation. In his seminal work, Freeman (1984) highlights the significance of the ethical component in management decisions and its importance in creating value for all stakeholders.

Attempts to investigate the role and importance of various stakeholders in university governance and decision making have resulted in typologies or classifications of groups based on certain criteria. Stakeholder theory puts forward classifications based on the relative importance or salience of different stakeholders. A popular classification was developed by Mitchell et al. (1997) who used three main classificatory attributes in order to investigate the influence of stakeholders on university decision-making processes:

1. The stakeholder's power to influence the organisation. Power is defined as a case where one social actor (A) can influence another social actor (B) to do something that B would not have done without the influence of A. For instance, universities are forced to implement more cost-conscious operating practices as a result of pressure from students, parents and legislators.
2. The legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the organisation. This refers to a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate in a context of socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs. Stakeholders that have emerged as important based on this attribute include local industry representatives.
3. The urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the organisation. This is the degree to which stakeholder claims are associated with immediate action. For instance, this is seen in cases where greater emphasis is placed on research in certain fields (e.g. health/life sciences) at the expense of others.

The above attributes can be used to develop a typology of stakeholders depending on the extent to which they are present or absent. Stakeholder salience is related to the cumulative influence of these attributes based on the perceptions of organisational managers. Three categories of stakeholders can be identified depending on the extent to which they possess one or more attributes at a certain point in time: Definitive stakeholders possess all three attributes; expectant stakeholders possess any combination of two of the three attributes; and latent stakeholders possess only one of the three attributes. The typology constitutes a dynamic scheme in that stakeholders can move from one category to another based on changes in the possession or loss of one or more attributes. Thus, the typology developed by Mitchell et al. (1997) provides a useful framework for the identification and investigation of the role of different

stakeholders in higher education. The identification and analysis of stakeholders enables universities to develop relationships with them through their representation in institutional governance structures (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

Additional models of stakeholder classification can be found in the literature (see, for example, Mainardes et al., 2012). Moreover, some attempts have been made to investigate decision making processes and activities at higher education institutions through the combination of stakeholder analysis with other perspectives. Alexander and Hjortsø (2019) combined a stakeholder perspective with an activity system perspective to examine the nature of participatory curriculum development in universities. Their research illustrates the complexities associated with the inadequate management of stakeholder relations due to competing agendas and diverging interests among different stakeholder groups. This points to the need for further research on the complexities and challenges associated with the engagement of different stakeholder groups in institutional decision making.

Student participation in university governance

Student participation in governance is considered to have important benefits both at the individual student level and the institutional level. Participation encourages students to adopt democratic ideals and practices, which facilitate personal growth and development. At the institutional level, through student participation in governance, universities can improve by taking into account student feedback and increasing the quality of their educational offering. Moreover, the participation of all stakeholders in institutional governance is considered important for the promotion of a positive organisational climate characterised by tolerance, openness and trust (Menon, 2003). Even though the limitations of student participation in governance have also been recognised in the literature (see, for example, Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999), the benefits are generally considered to outweigh the 'costs'.

Differences in the needs and levels of power of stakeholders can result in conflict, with a negative impact on the effectiveness of higher education systems and institutions (Ian & Hjortsø, 2019). As some stakeholders promote their interests at the expense of others, the need for interest balancing emerges. However, balancing interests is difficult in that some stakeholders are not given opportunities to express their opinions, resulting in a situation where some opinions are not taken into account in decision making (Švaikauskienė & Mikulskienė, 2017). This has been reported to be the case with the student stakeholder group.

Consequently, policy makers and institutional officials can make important decisions based on their perspective and analysis of the situation and impose their decisions on students. The limited empirical research on the role of stakeholders in higher education strategic planning provides evidence to this effect. Falqueto et al. (2020) conducted research in Brazil to determine the level of influence higher education stakeholders have on institutional objectives. They found that the most influential stakeholders included those with a high

degree of influence on the strategic planning process such as government ministries, upper-level institutional management and external audit bodies. Based on their findings, the least influential stakeholders were students and society as a whole. Švaikauskienė and Mikulskienė (2017) also found that students were weaker in the policy formation process in comparison to other stakeholders, which they attributed to the lack of the necessary capacities on their part. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that actual student participation in decision making is lower than desired, pointing to the need for measures aimed at promoting student involvement in university planning and governance (Higher Education and Research Committee Bureau, 2000; Planas et al., 2013).

The participation of students in governance and decision making will be higher in cases where they perceive a problem or a situation as important to them. According to Hoy and Miskel (2013), stakeholders should be involved in decision making if they have expertise and a personal stake in the outcome. If stakeholders are encouraged to participate in decision making on an issue and/or problem they consider insignificant or irrelevant, they are likely to reject participation or avoid participating in a meaningful manner. The low and/or passive participation of students in governance may be partly due to the fact that they do not agree with the specification of problems and priorities in higher education formulated by other stakeholder groups and especially planners and policy makers. In their discussion of a participatory project in a UK higher education institution, Seale et al. (2015) found evidence of student resistance to attempts to include students in participatory projects and initiatives. In this situation, it is more likely that more powerful stakeholders in higher education impose their decisions on less powerful groups. This could have a negative impact on the institutional planning and decision-making process since the goals and perspectives of various stakeholders may be conflicting. Hinton (2012) points to the importance of an agreement among those called to implement strategic plans in higher education and draws attention to the fact that in many cases strategic plans in higher education are not implemented to a great extent.

The first component of the strategic plan is the mission statement, which takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of the institution and/or the system and puts forward a statement of purpose for the future. An in-depth identification and analysis of problems, threats or weaknesses is a very important element of the mission statement. However, perceptions of problems and weaknesses may vary considerably among stakeholders, given the differences in their position and levels of power and influence. In this context, it is important to investigate whether different stakeholders have similar perceptions regarding the main problems facing higher education. In this paper, we focus on two stakeholder groups: students who, despite their importance as the key public of higher education, have been reported to be the least influential stakeholder; and policy officials and administrators, who, in contrast, are considered to be among the most influential stakeholders in higher education strategic planning.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the framework of stakeholder theory as discussed by Freeman (1984), and Donaldson and Preston (1995). Of the three dimensions identified by Donaldson and Preston (1995), we used the descriptive approach in order to describe and subsequently compare the perceptions of two stakeholder groups. Moreover, the normative dimension was also relevant in that data collection instruments enabled respondents to refer to values they espoused as higher education stakeholders.

Data on the perceptions of higher education officials and graduate students were collected through qualitative research. Specifically, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with four officials and 20 graduate students in Cyprus. The sample was selected through criterion sampling since the individuals included in the sample were chosen based on their positions, experience or postgraduate student status. The four officials were linked to positions and organisations which have an important role in the formulation and implementation of higher education policy in Cyprus. A brief description of the profiles of the four officials is provided below to the extent that this is possible without compromising the anonymity of respondents.

- R1: Female, retired, previously high ranking official at the Ministry of Education and Culture (Department of Higher Education)
- R2: Female, high ranking official at the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (CYQAA)
- R3: Male, high ranking official at a private university in Cyprus
- R4: Male, high ranking official at two public universities in Cyprus (at different points in time)

R1 had retired one year prior to the interview and had served for five years in the same high-level position at the Ministry of Education and Culture, where she was Director of a major organisational department. After her retirement, she maintained collaboration and communication with Ministry of Education and Culture officials. R2 is a very experienced academic who had served in several high level academic posts prior to her appointment as a high ranking official at the CYQAA. R3 is the Executive Vice-President for Administration at a large private university, while R4 is also a very experienced academic and high-level administrator who retired one year after the interview.

The students were all graduate students at the Department of Education of the University of Cyprus. Graduate Education students were selected because they were considered more likely to have an opinion regarding the problems associated with higher education in Cyprus and to be in a position to propose solutions to these problems. Of 20 student respondents, 17 were female and three were male. This is consistent with the much higher representation of women in graduate programmes offered by the Department of Education at the University of Cyprus. As regards their first degree, most had similar backgrounds in that eight were Pre-primary Education graduates and ten were

Primary Education graduates. Of the remaining, one was a Greek language graduate, while another was a French language graduate.

The questions used in the interviews were formulated to meet the research objectives of the project. Thus, questions were asked in order to investigate the following:

- The main problems faced by higher education in Cyprus, with possible reference to three levels (Ministry of Education and Culture, higher education institutions, and societal/economic level)
- Solutions/measures that can contribute to the solution of each problem

In order to minimise problems related with the use of interviews for data collection, only one interviewer was used. The interviewer was trained by the main researcher and was observed during two pilot interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. After the transcription of interviews, the collected data were analysed through the constant comparative method where theory generation is grounded in that the data lead to the theory rather than vice versa (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this context, joint coding and analysis were used in an attempt to generate theory. In agreement with Glaser's (1965, p. 438) description of the approach, the data were coded "only enough to generate, hence, to suggest, theory". In adopting this approach, we recognise that the collected data do not allow for the testing and generalisation of the theory, which can be achieved through quantitative analysis of larger data sets.

Findings

Problems of higher education (students)

The first question concerned the main problems facing higher education in Cyprus. The two groups of respondents identified several problems, which differed both across and within groups. It appears that the two groups had different points of view based on their background and role in higher education. For students, the main problem was graduate unemployment and related issues. Even though some students were employed (in some cases underemployed), most did not expect to find a job relevant to their field of study (Education). The reason for this was the large supply of graduates, which exceeds the demand for teaching positions. Respondents were well aware of this, as seen in their comments:

A problem with higher education in Cyprus is the high rate of unemployment. Many young people go to university, devoting four years of their lives, and upon completion of their studies they never get a job in the field of their studies. They never apply what they learn. It is sad that young people have the enthusiasm at the beginning and end up working in cafes and other jobs which have nothing to do with their studies. (Female, first degree in Pre-primary Education)

The number of admitted students does not correspond to the real needs of the Cyprus economy, which results in the production of unemployed graduates. (Male, first degree in Greek language)

In their attempts to identify problems, several students went beyond the mere recognition of the graduate unemployment problem to what they considered to be causes of the problem. For instance, several respondents appeared to link the unemployment problem to the fact that higher education institutions in Cyprus do not offer the field of study preferred by prospective students. This was considered to be a major problem in the case of state universities, which do not charge fees at the undergraduate level and are often preferred by students for this reason. Other related problems highlighted by respondents included the lack of communication between higher education institutions and the labour market, and the fact that employers do not offer satisfactory terms of employment to graduates due to the abundance in supply.

A second category of problems was related to institutional and systemic factors in higher education. In this context, students were critical of institutions of higher education and government policy makers with respect to policies they considered problematic. At the state level, some respondents were critical of the fact that state universities did not have (financial) autonomy in that they were funded by the state to a great extent, as seen below:

The Ministry of Education of Cyprus is in many cases an obstacle in the development of higher education. There is no support for universities in material resources. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

At the level of society and the economy, there is a constant reduction in the funding of institutions of higher education, which in turn causes several problems. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

It is interesting to note that the role of students in university governance was mentioned by respondents. One referred to the participation of students in university governance:

As regards the management of higher education, a major source of problems is the lack of participation of students, who know the problems, but their opinion is not heard. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

Another respondent was very critical of the fact that students are represented through associations affiliated with opposing political parties, which leads to conflict:

At the institutional level, the main problem is the political party affiliation, which exists among student associations. While their aim is common, they end up in opposed camps, having completely different views on student issues. (Female, first degree in Pre-Primary Education)

A third category of problems was related to various specific factors which concerned higher education institutions. For instance, respondents were critical of the fact that universities, especially private ones, charged fees they

considered high. One student criticised tenure at state universities, saying that this prevented the employment of Cypriot academics who had a successful academic career abroad.

Problems of higher education (officials/policy makers)

The four officials/policy makers referred to several problems, which included problems at the state, institutional and societal level. Officials did consider graduate unemployment an important problem but did not focus on it to the extent that students did. Respondents considered graduate unemployment to be the natural consequence of the abundance of graduates and simply acknowledged that this was the case.

...the abundance of graduates of both public and private institutions, which results in graduates not being able to find a job. (R4)

If I am not mistaken, I read this at one time, I think that in proportion to the population, Cyprus is the third country in university graduates. So, this...creates employment problems. (R3)

A major category of problems for officials and policy makers included legal and financial constraints which, in the opinion of respondents, did not allow universities to develop. This was especially the case for state universities, which, as previously mentioned, rely on state funding to a great extent.

At this point, we do not have the framework that will allow state universities to develop as organisations because of the legal framework that is still in place since 1989...The legal processes do not allow universities to develop in the manner they choose. (R4)

A university has the right to decide the admission criteria of its students on its own... It is not right for the Ministry of Education or for teacher unions to be opposed to one method of admission. (R3)

Quality issues were also highlighted by respondents, who noted the need for standards that will ensure that Cyprus is competitive and conforms to international guidelines in higher education. The official at the CYQAA (R2) highlighted the fact that the Agency was formed in 2016 and that prior to that institutions offered programmes which did not always conform to specific criteria. The need for standards was also emphasised by other officials as seen below:

Before (2016) all institutions and programmes functioned without any control and evaluation...One of the most important problems is that each (institution) functioned by putting together programmes ...without having in mind the criteria to which they should conform. (R3)

Additional problems were mentioned which appeared to be linked to, or influenced by, the position of the official in the higher education system. Thus, the high ranking official in private higher education (R3) referred to the perceived inequality between public and private institutions and to the fact that private institutions do not have the same access to public funds, which limits

their ability to improve and develop their programmes. The retired high ranking official at the Ministry of Education and Culture (R1) considered student composition to be a problem in higher education in that the percentage of foreign students is low, especially in state universities which offer very few programmes in English.

The same official (R1) mentioned several organisational/managerial issues, which include lack of communication among stakeholders, and the need for specific and measurable objectives. Moreover, the lack of participative models of decision making was mentioned by the high ranking official at the CYQAA (R2), who referred to the fact that in many cases, and especially in private institutions, the involvement of academics and other stakeholders in governance may be limited.

In the identification and discussion of problems, both officials and students appeared to be influenced by their status and role in the higher education system. Thus, some problems considered very important by one group were not mentioned by the other. Within groups, certain individual factors played a role such as the status of student (employed versus unemployed), or the role and responsibilities of the official. It is important to note that both groups agreed on the importance of graduate unemployment as a problem facing higher education. However, students exhibited greater anxiety and discussed the issue in greater detail while officials tended to view it as one of many problems facing tertiary education in Cyprus.

Proposed solutions to problems (students)

The proposed solutions were strongly linked to the identified problems and differed across the two groups. As expected, students emphasised the need for changes to facilitate employment after graduation from university:

...communication of universities with the labour market and changes in the programme of studies. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

...emphasis on growing professions. Higher education institutions should offer programmes of study in related fields with a sufficient number of admission places. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

It is important to note that student recommendations were not necessarily embedded in a customer-driven, market-oriented paradigm. In some cases, students referred to specific changes that they thought were necessary at the institutional level in order to enhance graduate employability. Several respondents recommended changes in the culture of the organisation: One student mentioned that values were important, saying that in recent years the higher education system placed emphasis on the importance of efficiency and effectiveness at the expense of democratic ideals, social justice and ethical considerations. Organisational values and practices made it more difficult for students to have a voice, prompting a student to say the following:

At meetings, students should be properly represented and not participate only in the discussion of superficial topics; the most important thing is that

their views are taken into account. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

In relation to the above, it appears that students were aware of the fact that within the educational system, there was resistance to new ideas and changes.

To achieve change within an organisation, first of all, the people working for this organisation must become aware of the benefits of change. (Female, first degree in Primary Education)

Overall, students were more likely to propose specific measures to problems related with their institution. However, in some cases, they adopted a broader perspective, viewing the University of Cyprus as one of many institutions in Cyprus and in the world. In this context, they highlighted the need for competitiveness and improvement both on a country and on an institutional level.

Proposed solutions to problems (officials)

Officials referred to the need for legislative changes and measures that would improve the quality of higher education. Given their expertise and experience, they discussed the matter in greater length and depth. One of the respondents provided a summary of proposed measures as follows.

The first measure is the change in legislation for public universities, which should be done immediately. The second concerns...the greater autonomy of universities so that they can manage the budgets in the way they see fit. The third is that there should be more cooperation with the private sector, at least in some programmes of study. The fourth...is the cooperation among public universities. As regards the enrolment of foreign students, all obstacles should be removed in the case of public universities. (R4)

In general, officials were more aware of the complexities of the problem of graduate unemployment and were thus less likely to propose “simple” solutions. The retired high-ranking official at the Ministry of Education and Culture (R1) emphasised the need for closer collaboration between universities and the labour market. She also discussed specific programmes that aim at facilitating graduate employment.

There was...there is a programme through which students are placed in the industry, in companies in order for them to acquire experience. In this way, it is easier for them to find jobs. But this must become more systematic and mainly, we must follow graduates because in other countries they do this. They follow the path of the graduate. (R1)

Moreover, several measures were mentioned in relation to the organisation and management of higher education. The official at the CYQAA (R2) highlighted the need for more participative decision making.

Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the perceptions of two groups of respondents on the problems facing higher education in Cyprus and on possible solutions to these problems. The first group (students) identified several problems, the most important of which was graduate unemployment. Other problems included institutional and systemic factors, while reference was made to the perceived limited participation of students in the governance of their institutions. The second group (officials/policy makers) also considered graduate unemployment to be a major problem even though they tended to focus less on this issue in comparison to student respondents. Additional problems discussed by officials included legal and financial constraints, and quality issues in relation to the need for standards and guidelines. In their responses, officials often referred to the recently formed CYQAA while students did not mention this organisation, which may indicate that they were not aware of its existence. The solutions proposed by both groups were based on the prior identification of problems. Proposed measures included legislation changes, greater autonomy for universities, and measures to tackle graduate unemployment.

The two groups were in agreement regarding one of the main problems facing higher education (graduate unemployment) but differed in the extent to which they discussed the problem and, in the importance attached to it in relation to other problems. Overall, problems considered important by one group were considered less important and/or were not mentioned by the other. For instance, students discussed the private funding of higher education to a much greater extent than officials. This points to the influence of personal involvement on the perceptions and beliefs of different stakeholder groups. It also points to the difficulty of balancing interests in higher education strategic planning in that the variety of stakeholders with different levels of influence and conflicting interests results in a highly complex organisational and/or systemic environment.

The findings have implications for higher education policy in relation to student engagement and governance in tertiary education: First, the participation of students in decision making may be influenced by the fact that they have different perceptions of problems and different priorities in comparison to officials and policy makers. This may result in students rejecting participation or being passive participants in decision-making processes. It is thus necessary for policy makers to investigate the perceptions of different stakeholder groups before attempting to define problems and begin the strategic planning process in higher education. The awareness of the perceptions of different groups will facilitate the specification of shared aims and objectives and will ensure that the participation of different stakeholders will be significant and meaningful.

Second, it appears that certain stakeholder groups may lack knowledge and awareness of important developments in higher education in their country. One such development in Cyprus is the formation of the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education. The lack of awareness on the part of students is in agreement with previously reported findings on the relatively weak position of students in the governance process (Falqueto et al.,

2020; Menon, 2005; Švaikauskienė & Mikulskienė, 2017). In this respect, it is important for policy makers to educate all stakeholders by providing information on developments that may influence their perceptions of problems and possible solutions to them. In addition, ways of enhancing the effectiveness of students and their representatives in the governance process should be explored. Student feedback data collected in the framework of institutional research should be expanded to include data on the perceptions of students regarding the mission, strategies and problems of the higher education organisation and/or the system as a whole. Strategies for improving the efficacy of student representatives in particular should be formulated and adopted given the importance of the latter in the governance process. Such strategies include the organisation of preparatory seminars for newly elected representatives, the provision of more e-participation opportunities for students, and the development of protocols for consulting with, and gathering data from, students (Li & Zhao, 2020; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Even though measures such as the above may prove effective in enhancing the participation and/or engagement of students in higher education, the difficulties associated with improving student engagement should be acknowledged. One of the difficulties relates to the criticism directed at the student engagement 'movement' despite the prevalence of a higher education policy focus on student engagement in many countries (Kahn, 2017). In a critique of the assumptions of the student engagement narrative, Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) draw attention to the conceptual confusion associated with student engagement in the literature, which allows for different interpretations and perspectives. According to the authors, the student engagement movement has resulted in attempts to identify certain measures or practices as a panacea to enhancing student engagement. This has occurred within an externally imposed, market-driven agenda which fails to acknowledge the opposition and possible resistance of the student population to the approaches and perspectives of other stakeholder groups. Thus, the mere policy-driven focus on student participation and engagement may not necessarily result in a stronger voice and better outcomes for university students (Seale et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The differences between the two groups of stakeholders presented in this study suggest that those involved in the higher education strategic planning process may face several challenges. If perceptions of problems and solutions differ significantly among stakeholders, their needs and expectations will also differ. This will make the formulation of a common policy agenda extremely difficult. Research on the needs and expectations of different stakeholders can be an important component of the planning process as long as the results are taken into account and the higher education system and/or institution are in a position to realise the benefits of the collected data. In addition, it is important for higher education policy makers to be aware of the diversity and the complexity associated with different groups of stakeholders. Typologies of stakeholders can be an extremely valuable tool in the attempt of policy makers to understand the interests and influence of different groups. However, our findings suggest

that typologies are necessary but not sufficient in an investigation of stakeholders and their role in university governance and strategic planning. Our findings also suggest that attempts to engage students in higher education may fail because of a limited understanding of the perceptions, motives and attitudes of the student stakeholder group. This may result in a situation where the popular metaphor of students as customers or consumers does not provide a framework for the active and critical engagement of students in higher education. Instead, the metaphor of students as pawns may be a more appropriate view of the role of the student in higher education (Tight, 2013).

The present study points to the importance of considering more than one perspective in strategic planning in higher education. It also points to one reason for the limited participation of students in institutional governance, which is the fact that their perceptions and priorities differ from those of other stakeholder groups. Overall, data on stakeholders' perspectives appears to be a much-needed input in the strategic planning process in higher education. In a discussion of effective planning in higher education, Voorhees and Cooper (2014) highlight the importance of not moving to solutions before a full understanding of the nature of the problem. The investigation of the perceptions of more than one group at the early stages of planning and decision making can lead to a more accurate assessment of the current situation and serve as the basis for measures that will improve the governance of higher education systems and institutions. It is hoped that future research will provide additional evidence on this topic.

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