Strengthening Student Voice in Higher Vocational Education

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Summary

This preliminary research explores the concept of 'student voice' and associates student voice with the core assignment of Higher Vocational Education: vocational preparation (qualification and socialisation) and general education (general education and emancipation). A theoretical analysis is followed by a case study of student participation within the Hague University of Applied Sciences: how does student voice manifest itself and what are hindering and supportive factors? (Half-)open interviews among students from various faculties and a questionnaire put to all students involved in participation councils, are used to generate insight into the various 'forms and degrees that student participation may take on and suggest possible ways to strengthen these. The conclusion of the theoretical study is that three forms of participation, 'being heard', 'collaboration' and 'leadership', jointly contribute to the development of a learning and work environment in which shared responsibility is taken, based on openness, respect, equality, reciprocity and shared responsibility, for the development of the different parts of the learning community and for the university as a whole. Based on the empirical research, it is concluded that there is scope for improvement for the Hague University of Applied Sciences, which would entail involving students more seriously in decision-making, at classroom, curricular and organisational levels.

Introduction

The ambition of the Hague University of Applied Sciences (henceforth also referred to as THUAS) is: 'Let's Change. You. Us. The World'. Universities of Applied sciences are for higher vocational education. THUAS has 27'000 students coming from 147 different countries and 1'900 staff members. It is one of the most diverse University of Applied Sciences (henceforth UAS) in the Netherlands. Course completion rates need to improve, the education offered needs to be engaging, feasible, activating and challenging. The student must come first and deserves 'high support' (THUAS, 2017; 2019). Student centeredness and inclusivity are high on the agenda of the board of directors. Study success and student wellbeing need to be enhanced and the student's development as a global citizen within a pluralist society should be supported. Besides vocational qualifications, efforts are also made to equip students for life in general. Many Dutch UAS choose a student-orientated approach. This prompts the question as to the actual role of the student. Do management and professionals within Universities of Applied Sciences think, decide and act on behalf of the student? Or are students to be dialogue partners contributing on equal terms to their professional development by discovering how they might connect their talents to professional and social issues within the chosen profession and beyond. In order to allow scope, within our education programmes, for general education and emancipation, besides vocational qualifications and socialisation, serious student participation in higher education is essential. How can all players contribute to university education, research and policy, at

classroom, curricular and organisational levels? The challenge of allowing young people to participate in decision-making, raises the management issue as to what would be required in order, as a higher education institution, to be a democratic institute in which students and staff are jointly responsible for a learning and work climate that invites individual and collective learning. Does THUAS fulfil such commitments? How student orientated is it really? In the first part of this article, we will discuss the complexity of student voice as a concept. The complexity lies in the fact that there is no consensus on how it should be defined, that student voice can easily be manipulated when implemented and the challenges universities face when they take student voice seriously. At the end of the first part, we will justify the chosen definition and improve the Mitra model. In the second part, we will discuss the results of our preliminary research at THUAS using this new model to categorize the results.

Methodology

This preliminary research is a twofold study, comprising a theoretical exploration and an empirical study conducted at THUAS. In this research we have chosen to first focus on students and how they experience their participation. The research question is: How can we strengthen student voice, so that it contributes to the student's personal development and that of THUAS? The main question implies five sub-questions: 1. How can we define student voice? 2. What does student voice mean for the development of the student and the university? 3. What are supportive and hindering factors for student participation? 4. How does student voice manifest itself at THUAS? and 5. How can we strengthen student voice at THUAS? The theoretical exploration provides answers to the first three sub-questions. The empirical study then answers sub-questions 4 and 5.

The existing literature on student voice is extensive. In this preliminary research, we studied recent review articles and searched for further literature, containing answers to our first three theoretical sub-questions (1, 2 and 3), using the snowball method from these review articles. We used key words for student voice, student partnership combined with hindering factors or supportive factors and review or meta-analysis. Definitions, descriptions and operationalisations for the concept of student voice found in the literature were analysed. Benefits and impediments ascribed to participation were identified. The empirical part of our study encompasses a round of open interviews, a round of half-open interviews and a round involving a closed questionnaire put to all students involved in formal participation activities. We used mixed methods first qualitative strands and increasing the quantitative strands (Creswell & Plano Clarks, 2006). We started with explorative qualitative research to get a better understanding on how student voice was perceived at THUAS. In the first phase, fourteen open interviews were conducted with seven students, three deans, three confidential counsellors and one policy officer. Five of the seven students in these open interviews are active in student councils, representing various courses and are strongly involved with THUAS. The open interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded— both open and axial coding—by at least two independent coders, using the Constant Comparative Method (Boeije, 2002). The results of the open interviews and those of the theoretical study were used for the construction of the semi-structured interviews and the online questionnaire. In the second round of interviews, we conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews among students from all faculties, both active and non-active in different kind of councils. In the semi-structured interviews, the 49 open questions were divided in the three participation levels (class, curriculum and organisation) and eight questions were dedicated to the councils. The students for this second phase were selected by asking managers and lecturers from all seven university faculties for the names of

students who are active and non-active in student councils. In this way, respondents are evenly distributed across faculties, academic years and according to the extent of their formal involvement. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The qualitative part of the interviews was analysed using cross-case analysis. This means comparing the students' answers to analyse similarities, differences and to identify emerging themes across faculties (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The quantitative questions were analysed using frequencies. Based on the results, a closed questionnaire (48 closed questions and two open ones) was developed (see appendix 1 for its summary) and distributed online among all students participating in governance (General Council, Faculty Councils, Degree Programme Advisory Committees). Of the 128 online questionnaires sent out, 37 were (partially) completed and returned (29% response rate). The returned questionnaires came from students from all faculties and various academic year cohorts. Among the student respondents in this preliminary research, those active in student participation were overrepresented. We also used level of votes in choosing students and teachers/staff who would take part in the different councils.

Student Voice, instrumental and controversial

The theoretical study provides insight into singular case studies that mainly report positive effects. Criticism of these studies largely focuses on how student participation is organised and the practical barriers responsible for the absence of positive effects. This paragraph summarises some of the findings of the theoretical study underlying the choice for our definition presented at the end of this paragraph: in what way is student voice used by universities, at what level do students participate and what are the main challenges universities face when implementing student voice programs.

Instrumental nature of student voice

During the last thirty years, the number of studies on 'student voice' has steadily grown. There is no unequivocal definition. It has been referred to as 'student participation', 'student involvement', 'student engagement', 'students as partners in learning and teaching' and as 'educational leadership'. The studies show that, depending on underlying views, student voice is valued in different ways. Charteris and Smardon (2019) distinguish system orientated approaches from student orientated approaches. The system orientated approach values student participation predominantly for its role in enhancing study outcomes and for its contribution to externally determined goals and ambitions. It is an instrumental approach to student voice. Student oriented approaches, on the other hand, emphasise its positive value for students' personal development (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). The two approaches can be mutually exclusive, but also mutually reinforcing.

The frequently cited authors Quaglia and Corso (2014), situate student voice within educational reform agendas and hence represent the instrumental approach to student voice. The idea is, that students with higher aspirations perform better and have higher levels of social awareness, which contributes to better study results. Their questionnaire, based on the aspiration model ('My Voice'), operationalises the instrumental approach and is normative in nature. Positive scoring is linked to better study performance and to implicit values regarding cooperation: 'I put forth my best effort at school', 'I am encouraged to practice good citizenship at school', 'Getting good grades is important to me', 'I push myself to do better academically', 'I work hard to reach my goals', ''. And: 'Teachers recognize me when I try my best', 'Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful', 'I enjoy working on projects with other students', 'other students see me as a leader'. The scope for students

to research, and challenge and change educational practices, forms of cooperation and policy, appears to be absent in this approach. In an instrumental approach, students do not contribute to decision-making at the level of the classroom, the curriculum and the organisation. Students are perceived as consumers, not as partners, or at least less so. If we were to challenge students to do so, student voice might affect power relationships within education. It is therefore interesting how far student participation extends in practice.

Participation possibilities

Democratizing Education

Leadership
Students show (personal) leadership in education, research and policy.

Characteristics:
Autonomy
Independence

Expected benefits:
• Student wellbeing
• Study results
• Sense of comitmunity
• Global citizenship

Critical participation

Collaboration
Students and Staff work together in partnerships in education, research and policy.

Characteristics:
Equality
Reciprocity

Being heard
Students are heard with regard to their experiences with study results in education, research and policy.
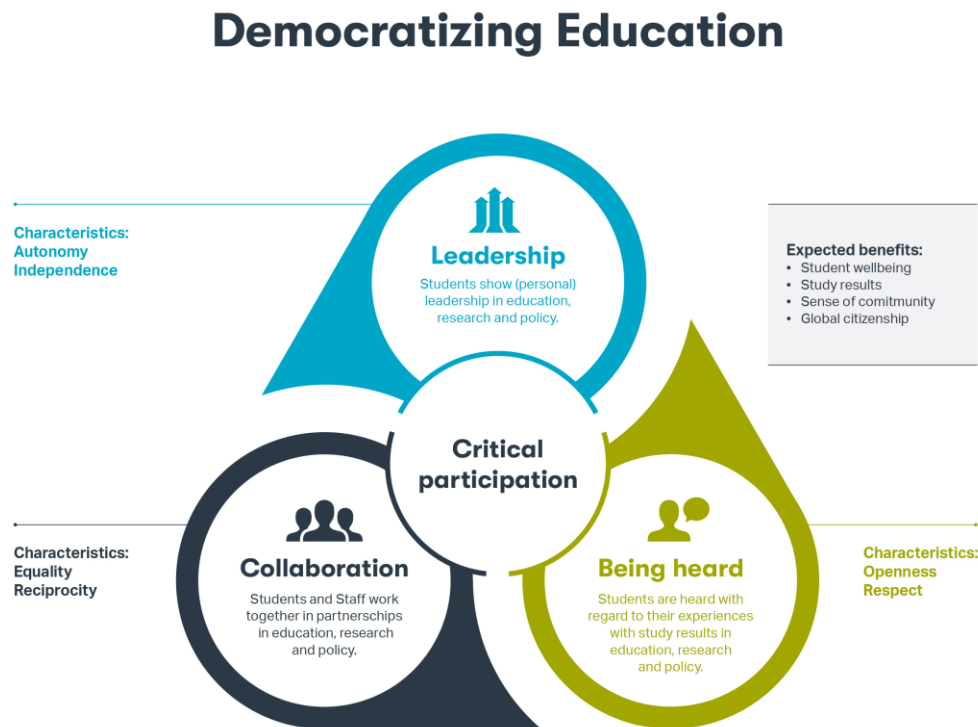
Characteristics:
Openness
Respect

Figure 1 Verhoeff & Guérin (2021) adapted from Mitra.

Mitra distinguishes three levels of participation in 'the pyramid of student voice' (Mitra 2005, 2018; Mitra & Gross, 2009). At the base of the pyramid ('being heard') students are asked about their opinions via, for example, questionnaires. They are thus given a voice without responsibility and decision-making authority. Students are consulted, decision-making lies in the hands of the staff. The level above this is 'partnership' ('collaboration'). Students and staff collaborate to deal with issues and find solutions. This is a shared responsibility, in which students take part in decision-making regarding important choices. At the highest level, students are in the lead ('leadership'). Students have the authority and the responsibility to initiate, implement and make decisions regarding (project-defining and guiding) activities and projects in education, research and organisation. In this case, students have control over their own education and research (customisation/ownership), but also on the level of the organisation, for instance the role of chairperson in a representative body. Mitra's uses of a pyramid as a visualisation and the names given to the different levels, suggests that the lowest level is conditional on higher levels and that reaching the 'highest level' is the desired objective. This interpretation is too simple and does not match Mitra's theoretical model, as all levels have their value. Therefore, we have chosen another visualisation, as well as adapting Mitra's model.

Controversial nature of student voice

Transcending the instrumental character of student voice, requires that students are not only heard, but also that they collaborate fully in partnerships and student leadership. Various case studies report that such forms of participation lead to motivation, self-awareness, student wellbeing, better study results, a sense of community, broader education and credible citizenship education (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healy et al., 2014). Young people who participate and show leadership, have the power to release energy in others and to inspire. "In this way students lift up people in their communities, often despite structural political and social marginalization" (Lyons et al., 2020, p. 2). The studies also indicate that the quality of the collaboration is a condition for success. If participation is not well-organised, it can even be counterproductive. This is an extra reason to identify the conditions required for the realisation of the positive effects of participation. This inevitably involves openness and respect, but in more far-reaching forms of participation also: equality, reciprocity, shared responsibility, and at the highest level also autonomy and independence. In addition, the importance of inclusivity is highlighted: the idea that that all students participate (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Bovill, 2017; Mitra & Gross, 2009). All this implies enabling critical participation from all members working on student voice to improve continuously participation by addressing the challenges faced, by involving marginalised students, and by developing trust among the different layers of the University.

Student voice is controversial. It touches on issues of power and inclusion: who determines what is important, what happens and who is included? Various factors hinder more extensive participation (Brasof, 2015; Fielding 2001; Fletcher, 2014; Lyons et al., 2020; Bovill et al., 2016). The staff thwarts the development of student voice, if it uses the students' voice for its own purposes (fundraising, advertising) and when it fails to give leeway to students, due to prescriptive external demands, such as those of professional groups or the education inspection. The way we organise our education can also have an obstructive effect, via mechanisms of selection and exclusion, closed-system agreements (learning outcomes, Key Performance Indicators), which tend to be incompatible with open learning processes and the unpredictable outcomes of partnerships, and also by failing to facilitate participation (insufficient professionalisation, a lack of budget, time constraints, not awarding study credits for participation work, not using appropriate language). Students might also 'disqualify' themselves (do I know enough? Am I really capable of doing this?). Furthermore, the diversity of student voice can be undermined if the 'chosen' individual wrongly believes they speak on behalf of all students. Reinforced by praise, exaggeration and the romanticisation of qualities demonstrated by such an individual student, the infallibility of the student is suggested. The dangers of, for instance, 'whitewashing', 'showboating' and 'tokenism' require explicit justification of how and to what extent all students can participate within the educational institution (Fletcher, 2014). This touches the essence of the democratic content of THUAS.

Conceptualisations of student voice

The sub-questions: 2. What does student voice mean in the development of the student and of the university? 3. What are supportive and hindering factors for student participation? These have been answered through the literature used for defining our theoretical model. For the first sub-question: 1. How can we define student voice? We have demonstrated that there are various definitions. We will now justify the definition chosen.

Student voice has significance for the development of both the student and THUAS (apparent in study results, student wellbeing, a sense of community and citizenship) through a combination of various forms of participation, whereby students themselves contribute to how their own education takes shape and also to research and the organisation of their educational institution. Student voice manifests itself in THUAS as a democratic institute where:

1. students are listened to in an open and respectful way (being heard);
2. students are included in partnerships, in which staff and students collectively take responsibility for (re)design, implementation and evaluation of education and research, partnerships based on equality and reciprocity (pedagogical partnership);
3. students share leadership of the university and are included in collective decision-making within the university, by participating in the process of decision-making regarding strategy, policy and implementation of research policy and education policy on all levels of within the institution (collaborative leadership).

Student voice is visible in various domains (classroom, curriculum and at an organisational level) and concerns all matters, in and around the school, about which students, formally and informally, can exercise co-decision-making, both individually and collectively. Putting critical participation in the centre of our model implies that students and staff (teachers, managers and others) define together what student voice means. Therefore, in this study, we have chosen an open definition, that of Fletcher (2017):

> "…*student voice as any expression of any learner about anything related to learning, school or education*" (p. 58).

This broad definition does justice to the fact that students themselves partly determine its meaning and how it takes shape in the school.

Student Voice at THUAS

Our two empirical sub-questions concern the way in which student voice manifests itself at THUAS, and how this can be strengthened. This will be supported by knowledge gained from literature study. In this paragraph, we begin by asking the question as to what extent students themselves feel that they are heard; then we discuss the different forms of participation and how these are valued by those students involved within the participation structure and in regular education and research. First, let us discuss briefly the limits of our research.

Limitations
This preliminary study has its limitations which justify further research. For one, the target group of respondents, is relatively limited, and the active and more engaged students, members of participatory councils, are overrepresented. This may lead to some aspects having yielded too positive results. Differences were apparent between the group of respondents comprising of active participants (questionnaire) and the mixed group (semi-structured interviews). In addition, the response may mainly involve students with higher levels of involvement. The online questionnaire was sent to all students involved in participation; the response was 29%. A number of students reported questionnaire-tiredness and a lack of faith in visible incorporation of results in new policy, which dampens cooperative willingness.

Welcome, but not yet heard

In the open interviews, with which we began our preliminary research, the question was asked: 'When do you feel heard as a student within The Hague University of Applied Sciences?'. Students feel heard when there is openness, respect, equality, reciprocity and an exchange of substantive information and arguments. Although all student respondents (open, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire) in our research feel welcome at the university, a majority believes that the school could do more to listen to students, to take their input seriously and to incorporate it in new policy. With the help of the literature, we are able to interpret this difference. Besides openness, respect, equality and reciprocity, the literature emphasises the importance of 'leadership': of personally contributing to determining the content and direction of education, research and policy, at both an individual and a collective level. The group of students involved in participation councils, is more positive about the extent to which they feel heard than the group of students who do not all partake in participation councils. The average 'score' given by students in the semi-structured interviews to indicate the extent to which they feel heard, is 6, 8 out of 10 for the first group, and 6 for the second group. Students *do*, incidentally, want to voice their opinion and contribute to decision-making regarding their own education and training policy (64%), particularly about matters such as testing policy, timetabling, exams, study facilities and communication in general.

(Non-)participation in formal participation councils

In formal participation councils at THUAS, the participative voting rate of students and staff is low. A mere 7,5% of eligible voters actually voted in the elections held in June 2020. Of the 280 seats, 64 candidates were appointed without election. In Faculty Councils, 10 student seats and 7 staff seats are vacant; in education committees 43 staff seats and 27 student seats are currently vacant. In total: one third of participation seats are not filled.

> *"You can't have an influence on policy, unless you become a member of a participation council. For many students this is a step too far, but they do want to have influence. Democracy is hearing the voice of the people and in our case the voice of the students and lecturers."* (Student Public Management, Law & Safety, THUAS, open interview round)

A large majority of the students questioned in the semi-structured interviews, declare that they are not interested in active participation. In these semi-structured interviews, various reasons are given for not standing for election. There is unfamiliarity with participation work. Students do not have a clear picture of what it entails, and how they can have influence. Students who choose not to participate, also lack the faith that they will truly be able to make a difference. Negative past experiences with sharing their opinion in school, reinforce such feelings. Having other priorities (family, work, hobby) and being satisfied with current practices, are also reasons given for not participating. Having doubts about one's own competencies may lead to students not standing for election as well.

Appreciation of formal participation in councils

According to the literature, positive effects of participation require openness, respect, equality, reciprocity and shared responsibility. The formal climate of discussion THUAS is valued positively by the students active in student councils (tables 1 and 2 – Results of the questionnaire).

Table 1 - Discussion in formal councils (N=28) – Frequencies in percent

	Disagree strongly	Dis-agree	Agree	Agree strongly
I have the feeling that I can contribute to the discussion and to decision-making	4	7	64	25
Members listen well to each other's arguments	0	4	61	36
The chairperson makes an effort to give everyone a turn to speak	4	11	36	50
Everyone's contribution carries the same weight	0	21	54	25
Students feel free to voice any of their opinions	7	32	39	21

Most experience that they are genuinely able to contribute to the discussion and to decision-making, that members listen to each other's arguments, that the chairperson makes an effort to give everyone a turn to speak and that everyone's contribution carries the same weight. A majority believes there is a harmonious climate of deliberation, in which dialogue is stronger than conflict, and that there is a relaxed atmosphere of respect and togetherness. However, according to the answers given in the questionnaire, there is also room for improvement.

Table 2 - Appreciation of the meeting climate in the formal councils (N=32) – Frequencies in percent

	Agree strongly	Agree Moderatly	(Disagree) strongly
Harmonious (versus conflictuous)	63	25	19
Dialoog (versus confict)	66	13	22
Relaxed (versus tense)	63	19	19
Respectful (versus disrespectful)	72	9	19
Togetherness (versus everyone for him/herself)	59	16	25

The chairperson at such meetings is more than likely a member of the staff delegation (70%) and the agenda of the management is usually guiding. A small minority of the students (9%) indicates that they are pursuing their own agenda and have specific goals they wish to achieve. And, although most of the students state that they feel free to voice any of their opinions (62%), 37% indicates to have never asked a critical question about the programme. Almost half of the students reports feeling inhibited regarding their personal contribution (48%). Finally, only 42% consider the debate to be strong and substantive. The students believe that meetings of the participation council could gain in strength by inspiring and deepening substantive debate.

On the part of the students involved in participation, substantive debate can become stronger by them taking (more) time to consult the students they represent on content-related issues, putting more time into dossier research, agenda and strategy development and deliberation. More than half the students indicate that this does not happen. Favourable for the students' experience that their voice makes a difference, seems to be: listening to the students, seeing them as equal dialogue partners, taking their issues seriously,

perceiving their contribution as a shared task and being open to new insights and solution directions. Reference is also made to supplying documentation in a timely manner, the importance of professionalisation and the facilitation of participation activities.

Appreciation of participation in research and education

In education and research at THUAS, participation also occurs on various levels.

'*Being heard*'

Although teachers treat students in a friendly way, they frequently fail to (timely) respond to students' mails and do not always mark students' work within the specified timeframe. Students are structurally heard through the National Student Questionnaire (Nationale Studenten Enquête (NSE)) and via (written) course evaluations. Fewer than half of students complete questionnaires, while somewhat higher numbers participate in oral evaluations (60%). As many as three quarters of the students indicate that results are subsequently not shared with them, which means that this basic form ('*being heard*') fails to meet the conditions required for this to be meaningful for students' learning and development.

'*Collaboration*'

Students and staff may collaborate in matters concerning the design and implementation of education, research and education policy. Students sometimes participate in such discussions, but not often. In the semi-structured interviews, just 2 of the 17 students report having been involved in the process of curriculum reform. Sometimes students are involved in organisational matters, for instance in the form of 'trial lectures' for aspirant teachers. The fact that there is no feedback as to why the students' preference is subsequently ignored, makes students feel like 'guinea pigs' instead of partners. Three quarters of the students state that they have never been involved in advance with the development of their own education programme. Again, in the semi-structured interviews, students declare that they are sometimes informed by e-mail about a change to a programme and are later asked to give their opinion retrospectively. 'Inappropriate', is how students experience this form of involvement. According to the respondents, implementing education and research together with the staff is a rare exception at the Hague University of Applied Sciences. Students are in favour of such involvement. It would be more motivating when the students' own questions are taken as a starting point. Furthermore, students feel the university should do more to involve students fully in research tasks. Student participation in partnerships that invigorate enthusiasm and a sense of community is limited, and restricted to a small selection of students.

'*Leadership*'

The participation at which *student leadership* is assumed, requires the appreciation and mutual encouragement of critical and independent thinking, both in the formal participation as in the classroom. The group of students involved in formal participation is more positive about the extent to which students are challenged to be critical and independent than the mixed group of students. However, in the participation council group also, only a mere 37% indicate in the questionnaire that there is room for conflicting perspectives in the learning material or with regard to social issues. Scope for an independent student voice is sometimes limited. The students we spoke to, in the semi-structured interviews, show more reluctance. Fewer than half indicate that sharp substantive debate is fostered in class and

that students are encouraged to ask critical questions. It would seem that students involved in participation, also feel less inhibited in the classroom than students who are not.

Leadership may also be apparent through the scope for choosing the content and pace of one's own study programme. This leeway seems narrow. From our questionnaire, only 33% of the students involved in participation councils, indicate that the university is open to considering students' individual wishes regarding content and progress of their studies. And, no less than 89% agree with the statement "Here, 'Rules are rules', if you wish or need to depart from these rules, you are referred to an exam committee or dean". As few as 16% of students involved in participation feel that the university thinks along with the student when they are unable to comply with the rules. Students' own contributions are not broadly visible; this applies to education programmes as well as to research.

Hindering and supportive factors

In the semi-structured interviews, a number of factors are mentioned that contribute to far-reaching student participation. We have already mentioned the features of a positive climate for dialogue, in which our university students and the university are each responsible for their meeting preparation and their attitudes and behaviour during the deliberation. In addition, the scope for students' contributions, both regarding giving feedback to the teacher and giving room to students in partnerships when it comes to matters of research design, implementation and evaluation, is strongly dependent on the teacher in question. According to students, the character of the individual lecturer (open, social, eager to learn) determines whether they are prepared to seriously discuss all opinions or that they will tend to ignore such opinions or approach them defensively.

> *"Some lecturers really have a passion. And some teachers give me the feeling, that they are not really interested: I am here, I have to teach, I do have to ensure that you get your degree, so I do everything to make that happen, but that's it really."*
> (Student Technology, Innovation & Society, THUAS, open interview-round)

If individual circumstances so require, students can turn to deans, confidential officers and exam committees. This, too, is dependent on the person in question, as is confirmed by deans and confidential counsellors.

> *"I sometimes ask myself, when did we start to see students as a troublesome by-product? (…) Many teachers' main focus is on the subject-content, send information one way. The idea that 'all students cheat', that our thinking is fuelled by suspicion (…) But are students still permitted to make mistakes? If they make mistakes, students are punished. But then I think, come on, … how are we to learn?"* (Dean THUAS, open interview-round)

The three deans and the three confidential counsellors interviewed in our study, point towards upscaling, increased regulatory burden and profoundly influencing the primary process by imposing general efficient business processes, that unconsciously infringe on professional space. It requires courage on the part of teachers to make room for students when this means deviating from the general rules. An atmosphere of mutual trust and a sense of security asks for a kind of leadership that facilitates open learning processes, offers leeway for professionals and students in the workplace and has a corresponding perspective

on the development of young professionals. When there is no such leadership, or so our discussion partners believe, student participation will remain limited.

Advice regarding expanding student participation are in line with the factors just mentioned: a management culture that vigorously supports open learning processes and, with an eye to this, broadens the professional scope of researchers/teachers, asking the management to speak out on learning and development of student, staff and university and, with that in mind, to furnish a safe and ambitious learning and work climate, together with all players within the learning community.

Conclusion

Student Voice holds different definitions and, therefore, can be implemented in various way. In order to avoid tokenism and instrumentalisation is it vital to take students' voice seriously through the democratisation of our institute THUAS. Various forms of participation ('being heard', 'collaboration' and 'leadership') demonstrating openness, respect, equality and reciprocity, contribute to vocational preparation and also help to equip students for life in general. The results of our preliminary study into participation within THUAS, shows that student voice mainly manifests itself at the most basal level of '*being heard'*. Positive effects will be limited, due to a lack of openness and respect: student respondents report that there is little feedback regarding outcomes, and student input is often not visibly incorporated. More far-reaching forms of participation ('*collaboration*' and *'leadership'*) do occur but are restricted to '*the happy few'*. It seems that for many, it is not possible to map out their own learning pathway through equal partnerships or to influence decision-making regarding the development and implementation of education, research and policy. For those involved in formal participation councils, opinions regarding the extent to which and ways in which students can participate, are more favourable than in regular education and research settings. The respondents not taking part in formal participation councils have little interest for them. Besides a supportive atmosphere for dialogue, more far-reaching student participation makes demands on learning and work context: regulatory scope and justification pressure, culture of the educational programmes setting in question, leadership and management philosophy. Strengthening student voice, would mainly involve dismantling obstructive regulatory systems and the dissemination of certain norms and values at all levels of the organisation, so that the student is not only heard but can also truly participate in decision-making.

This preliminary research informs us, i.e., researchers, teachers, staff and management, on the steps that must be taken to improve student voice within THUAS, but also beyond THUAS. Not all UAS in the Netherlands are working on strengthening student voice within their institutions since they focus more on the development of future professionals. This vocational context is challenging and creates new opportunities as student voice does not end at the door of our university, but should also be taken into consideration in the extensive traineeships that are parts of programs' curriculum. Furthermore, this preliminary research helps to contextualise international research for THUAS while, at the same time, reveals common challenges such as power relation. It asks us to change how we engage students in participation, but also how to unravel the mechanism leading to our students' disengagement in all forms of participation.

Appendix 1

In the (online) questionnaire for all students participating in councils, questions were asked about:
- Background variables such as age, gender, field of study, membership of study association.
- The extent to which respondent feels being taken seriously at THUAS (expressed in a grade).
- The student's motivation to stand for election and to participate in councils (including substantial contributions, personal development, representing students' interests, better education, better research)
- The respondent' experiences in councils (consultation of fellow students, appreciation of the consultation climate, equipment (knowledge, skills and compensation))
- Students' experiences with the climate discussion based on statements such as 'participation gives me energy', 'I am curious about the results of the discussion', the manager is curious about my opinion', 'I have the feeling that I can actually contribute to the discussion and decision-making', 'I achieve a lot for students in the council', 'I always dare to say what I think', 'Everyone's input weighs equally'.
- Students' experiences with participation at classroom, curriculum and organizational levels based on statements such as 'teachers are interested in students' opinions', 'teachers are easily accessible', 'there is room for students to decide for themselves what they want to learn', complaints from students are rapidly dealt with', 'students are involved in the evaluation of the curriculum', 'teachers indicate clearly what they do with the evaluations of students', 'when students cannot always comply with the rules, the program, together with the student, looks for a solution.
- Open questions: 'what can help to make your voice heard?', 'what advice do you think is important for THUAS student in order to make the student's voice better heard?'
- important advice to THUAS student to make the student's voice better heard?'

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