

Recommendations for improving the position of student representatives in administrative roles



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Table of contents



Introduction	3
Orientation and meeting practices	4
Compensation and credits	6
Materials and communication	8
Composition of administrative and institutional bodies	10

Introduction



The Universities Act and university regulations ensure students have extensive opportunities for participation and influence in university governance. However, the law and regulations provide only a framework for participation, within which there is a large amount of flexibility and opportunities to create practices that promote student participation.

Measures to promote participation and make student representation tasks more attractive are particularly important now, because in recent years the number of applicants for student representative positions has been decreasing. The reasons behind the decline are multifaceted, but the decline is explained at least in part by the weakening of structures that enable extracurricular activities in connection with studies. For instance, since the conditions relating to students' livelihoods and duration of studies have been made more stringent, this has had a negative impact on the time available to students for such activities as influencing.

This paper contains recommendations for improving the position of student representatives in governance. Problems related to the position and participation of students are not easy or straightforward to fix, but with these recommendations it is possible to take steps towards improving students' opportunities to have an influence on student affairs. Improving the diminished involvement of students is important so that decisions reflect the perspective of the entire university community. All the recommendations presented in the paper can be advanced within the university's decision-making process.








Orientation and meeting practices



University students come from a wide range of backgrounds, and their life situations vary widely. All members of the university community must be ensured equal opportunities to participate in decision-making, regardless of factors such as language, disability or having children. Students also engage in influencing student matters from a different position relative to other members of the university community. For example, students may not be able to attend administrative meetings during the summer. In addition, their terms are often shorter than those of other members, and turnover is more common, especially with the increasing prevalence of secondary application rounds. Therefore, it is important

that the university has structures to support student representatives' work and ensure continuity. This allows participation for those students who join the decision-making process in the middle of a term or who cannot participate during the summer due to summer jobs, for example. To accommodate the needs of all community groups, it is also important that the schedules, working methods and locations for meetings and other gatherings be agreed collectively. Meetings and gatherings must be organised in such a way that they can be conducted in the university's official administrative languages, which are Finnish and/or Swedish and English, with the aid of an interpreter if necessary.

Recommendations

-  The university must provide orientation about the activities of the past term for student representatives.
-  The schedules of meetings must be determined well in advance, and must be published well in advance. Matters that concern degree students must not be discussed at times when degree students are often unable to attend.
-  It must be possible to participate in the meetings of administrative bodies using the university's languages of instruction, examinations and degrees, with interpretation if necessary.
-  To enable the participation of international students, student representatives should have access to interpretation services in English.
-  The meetings and other gatherings of administrative and governing bodies must be held in locations that are accessible and barrier-free for their members.
-  The practices for the meetings of administrative and governing bodies, including remote participation practices, must be agreed collectively at the beginning of the term, taking into account the summer months and other more difficult times for students.
-  Universities must treat meetings of statutory administrative bodies and of the bodies preparing for them as an acceptable reason for absence from classes.

Compensation and credits

Student representation helps students gain valuable skills and knowledge. Students also bear significant financial and legal responsibility. However, expertise is not always recognised adequately, and there may not be sufficient compensation for taking on responsibilities. For instance, in some universities or their governing bodies student representatives are not paid compensation, or its amount is not

equal to what other members of the body receive, or the process for obtaining credits for engaging in student representation is complicated. It is important that the skills of students and the work they do for the university community, as well as the responsibilities that come with student membership, be recognised in the form of compensation for participation and credits that contribute to their degree.

Recommendations



A student representative must receive credits for each membership in an administrative or governing body. The number of academic credits must be based on the demandingness of the role and the amount of work it requires.



The number of credits and the criteria for determining them are agreed upon by the student union and the university. However, the student must be able to include at least five credits for this work in their degree.



Student representatives must receive financial compensation for all meetings and other gatherings of administrative and governing bodies that require the presence of all members. The amount of the compensation must be based on the level of responsibility, the demandingness of the role and the amount of work it requires.




The amount of compensation is agreed by the student union and the university. Students must receive at least as much compensation as members of other community groups, excluding any chairperson's compensation.


Materials and communication


The democracy of decision-making also requires that members of administrative bodies be equally informed and capable of making decisions on the matters at hand. Decision-making should also be transparent so that the entire university community has the opportunity to influence decisions through their representatives, and so that all members of the university community are aware of decisions that affect them. Currently, there may be significant difficulties related to the accessibility of meeting materials or communication about decision-making. These difficulties may include, for example, delivering


meeting materials to members of the administrative body too close to the meeting, resulting in insufficient time for review or discussion, or communication deficiencies, which may require student representatives to act as intermediaries. It is important that meeting materials be provided to members in a timely manner and in a way that is accessible to everyone. The most accessible means is email. To ensure openness and accessibility to all, materials must be provided and communication carried out in the official administrative languages of the university and, when necessary, also in English.

Recommendations

 Meeting materials must be delivered to members of the administrative bodies and made available to the entire university community at least five business days before the meeting or other event.

 Materials must be provided to the regular members and substitute members of administrative bodies by email.

 Materials and meeting invitations must be sent in the university's official languages of instruction, examinations and degrees and, if necessary, also in English at the request of a member of the administrative body.

 The decisions made during meetings must be communicated to the entire university community on the day following the meeting in the university's official languages and in English.








Composition of administrative and institutional bodies




The realisation of university democracy requires adequate representation from each group within the university community, i.e. students, professors and staff. For students' voices to be heard in decision-making and to ensure that student representation is not solely the responsibility of any one member, it is recommended that multiple student representatives be selected for statutory governing bodies following the tripartite principle. In

some cases, even a single member can have significant influence, especially in the case of small universities with a limited number of members in their governing bodies. To ensure continuity in decision-making and flexibility in student representation, deputy members for the ordinary representatives must also be appointed. The conditions for university democracy must be ensured by strengthening the tripartite principle of universities.

Recommendations

-  In all statutory governance bodies, the basic principle should be to adhere to the tripartite model and, where allowed by Universities Act, to implement an equal tripartite system.
-  The tripartite principle should be observed among the presidency of the collegium and the common multi-member governance body.
-  The presidency of the collegium and the common multi-member governance body must be made available equally to all groups following the tripartite principle.
-  Foundation-based university boards must include representatives from all community groups.
-  There must be student representation in the group whenever the preparatory group deals with matters affecting education, study and the daily lives of students. Among the key groups of this kind are the preparatory groups for administrative bodies, education councils, teaching development committees, and working groups responsible for curriculum development.
-  Student members must be selected for various university, faculty and department-level leadership groups.
-  In principle, each student representative serving on governance bodies must have an appointed deputy member. A deputy member can be appointed either to a specific person or be generally available in the event of an absence.



The National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) is a student organisation which represents approximately 140,000 students in Finland. All student unions in Finnish universities are members of SYL. A student union is a public corporation which is governed by the Universities Act.

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