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*FROM FORMAL REPRESENTATION TO PARTICIPATORY
IMPROVEMENT; STUDENT VOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION*

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TOPICS

STUDENT PARTICIPATION

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH
QUESTIONS**

ITALIAN FRAMEWORK

LESSONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS



- Student participation has become a fundamental principle of the European Higher Education Area and is explicitly recognised within the ESG framework as a key dimension of student-centred learning (ENQA, 2015).
- Contemporary higher education policies increasingly encourage universities to involve students not only as learners but also as active contributors to institutional development and quality enhancement (Bologna Process, 2020).
- Research highlights that meaningful student engagement can improve educational quality, institutional responsiveness and the overall learning experience (Cook-Sather, 2006; Bovill, 2020).
- Despite these developments, important questions remain regarding how participation is organised and whether student contributions effectively influence institutional decision-making (Fielding, 2004).



- Internationalisation today extends beyond mobility and increasingly concerns the quality, inclusiveness and attractiveness of higher education institutions in a global environment (Knight, 2004).
- Universities are expected to create learning environments capable of responding to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations, including international students (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).
- Student participation provides valuable insights into educational experiences, support services and institutional barriers that may affect internationalisation outcomes (Leask, 2015).
- Consequently, student voice can be understood not only as a governance mechanism but also as a strategic resource for institutional competitiveness and global engagement (Knight, 2004; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).



- The literature identifies different approaches to student participation, ranging from students as consumers providing feedback to students as partners actively contributing to institutional development (Healey et al., 2014).
- Partnership models emphasise collaboration, co-creation and shared responsibility between students and academic staff in educational and organisational processes (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).
- Although participation is widely recognised as beneficial, the relationship between student voice and institutional learning remains underexplored in higher education research (Bovill, 2020).
- Furthermore, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how participation may support broader institutional goals such as internationalisation and organisational improvement.



- This study examines how student participation is institutionalised within the Italian quality assurance framework and how it contributes to continuous improvement processes.
- The analysis explores the conditions that enable or constrain meaningful student participation in governance and quality assurance activities.
- A qualitative and comparative approach was adopted, drawing on the AVA 3 framework, ESG standards and selected European quality assurance models.
- The study is informed by organisational learning perspectives that emphasise the role of evidence, dialogue and reflection in institutional development (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990).



THE ITALIAN QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK



- Within the AVA 3 framework, students are formally recognised as active actors in quality assurance processes and continuous improvement cycles.
- Joint Student–Teacher Committees (CPDS) represent one of the most distinctive features of the Italian model, ensuring structured participation within institutional governance.
- These committees are responsible for monitoring educational provision, teaching quality and student support services, while formulating proposals for improvement.
- The Italian framework therefore offers a useful case for exploring the opportunities and limitations of institutionalised student participation.



FINDINGS: STRENGTHS OF THE ITALIAN MODEL



- Student participation is embedded within formal governance structures, ensuring continuity and institutional legitimacy across quality assurance processes.
- The CPDS mechanism creates regular opportunities for dialogue between students and academic staff and promotes a culture of shared responsibility.
- Participation is linked to monitoring and evaluation activities, allowing students to contribute directly to discussions concerning educational quality.
- Overall, the Italian model provides a robust institutional architecture that recognises students as relevant actors in quality enhancement.



FINDINGS: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS



- Access to meaningful evidence and institutional data remains uneven and may limit the capacity of student representatives to formulate informed proposals.
- Student participation is often affected by limited training opportunities and by the discontinuity generated by frequent turnover among representatives.
- In many cases, the outcomes of participation are not sufficiently visible, making it difficult to understand how student contributions influence decisions.
- As a consequence, participation may risk becoming procedural and symbolic rather than generating concrete organisational change.



- The findings suggest that the key issue is not whether students are present in governance structures but how their participation is supported and utilised.
- Students should be considered knowledge carriers capable of providing unique insights into learning processes, educational practices and institutional experiences.
- Participation becomes meaningful when students can access evidence, contribute to its interpretation and engage in informed dialogue with decision-makers.
- This perspective shifts the focus from participation as representation to participation as an epistemic contribution to institutional learning.



- Universities increasingly require mechanisms capable of capturing diverse student experiences and responding to rapidly changing educational contexts.
- Student participation can help institutions identify challenges affecting international students and improve the inclusiveness of educational environments.
- Meaningful engagement contributes to the development of trust, belonging and institutional responsiveness, all of which are relevant for international attractiveness.
- Quality assurance and internationalisation should therefore be viewed as interconnected processes supported by active student involvement.



CONCLUSIONS



- The Italian experience demonstrates that formal representation is an important starting point but does not automatically guarantee effective participation.
- Meaningful student voice requires access to information, adequate preparation, transparent feedback mechanisms and visible follow-up actions.
- Universities should strengthen participatory processes by recognising students as partners in institutional learning and continuous improvement.
- Moving from participation as presence to participation as epistemic contribution may enhance both quality assurance and internationalisation strategies in higher education.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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