

Un ponte tra educazione e partecipazione civica: il ruolo delle università nel sostenere i percorsi giovanili nelle democrazie europee

A bridge between education and civic engagement: the role of universities in supporting youth pathways in European democracies

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ABSTRACT

This contribution explores the role of universities in shaping young people's pathways toward participation in European public decision-making. Against the backdrop of declining traditional political engagement across European democracies, it reflects on the critical challenges and opportunities higher education presents for fostering democratic citizenship. The study draws on phenomenological research involving in-depth interviews with 26 young representatives from prominent European youth organisations, such as the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum. While the research identifies various contexts as pivotal to youth engagement, this contribution focuses specifically on the university experience, exploring how it can serve as both a catalyst and a barrier to civic participation. The youth participants highlighted universities as spaces where supportive mentorship, participatory practices, and opportunities to engage in student bodies fostered political participation. Conversely, institutional rigidity and limited recognition of extracurricular activities were seen as hindrances to engagement. This paper argues that universities, while not solely responsible for fostering democratic citizenship, hold a vital role in bridging academic education and societal challenges. By enhancing their role, universities can empower young people to contribute meaningfully to democratic life, positioning themselves as bridges between education and civic action.

Il contributo esplora il ruolo delle università nel sostenere i percorsi dei giovani verso una partecipazione attiva nei processi decisionali pubblici europei. In un contesto caratterizzato dal declino dell'impegno politico tradizionale nelle democrazie europee, la riflessione si concentra sulle principali sfide e opportunità che l'istruzione superiore presenta per la promozione di una cittadinanza democratica. Lo studio si basa su una ricerca fenomenologica condotta attraverso interviste in profondità con 26 giovani rappresentanti di organizzazioni giovanili europee, come l'Advisory Council on Youth del Consiglio d'Europa e l'European Youth Forum. La ricerca ha identificato diversi contesti come cruciali per la promozione della partecipazione politica giovanile; in particolare, questo contributo si concentra sull'esperienza universitaria, esaminando come essa possa agire sia da catalizzatore sia da ostacolo per la partecipazione civica. I giovani partecipanti hanno evidenziato come le università possano rappresentare spazi in cui il supporto di mentori, le pratiche partecipative e le opportunità di partecipazione agli organi studenteschi possano favorire la partecipazione politica. Al contrario, la rigidità istituzionale e il limitato riconoscimento delle attività extracurricolari sono stati indicati come ostacoli all'impegno civico. L'articolo sostiene che, pur non essendo le uniche responsabili della promozione della cittadinanza democratica, le università svolgono un ruolo cruciale, sostenendo i giovani nel contribuire significativamente alla vita democratica e posizionandosi come ponti tra educazione e azione civica.

Keywords: university, youth participation, European democracies, youth pathways, pedagogical research

Parole chiave: università, partecipazione giovanile, democrazie europee, percorsi dei giovani, ricerca pedagogica

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Introduction

The interwoven relationship between education and politics has long posed a central challenge for contemporary societies (Dewey, 2011). In a dynamic environment where both democracy and education are called upon to mutually reinforce each other, individual freedom and collective justice depend on this interconnection (Bertolini, 2003; Biesta, 2012). As centres of knowledge and public discourse, universities occupy a strategic role in catalysing youth engagement in public decision-making, particularly within European institutions (Viganò, 2021). Historically, universities were conceived primarily as mechanisms for selecting the future elite, a view rooted in traditional and often exclusionary models of higher education. However, over the last several decades, transformative reforms, notably the emergence of the mass university and various legislative adjustments have reoriented this role. With an increased emphasis on student-centred learning, modern universities now seek to integrate academic rigour with active civic engagement (Attinà, 2024). The higher education mission extends well beyond mere transmission of theoretical knowledge. It encompasses the cultivation of critical thought, civic responsibility, and the practical skills necessary for students to navigate complex political processes at European levels (Viganò, 2021). By incorporating extracurricular and co-curricular experiences, such as participation in student bodies, community-based projects, and interdisciplinary research initiatives, universities can serve as dynamic engines for political socialisation. Such experiences expose students to the interplay between theory and praxis in real-world decision-making, highlighting education as an indispensable lever for social transformation and the promotion of the common good (Milani, 2017; Culp, Drerup, Yacek, 2023).

1. A qualitative investigation into youth participation in European democracies and the role of university experiences

This article investigates the multifaceted role of universities in shaping the civic pathways of young people in European democracies, examining both the opportunities they provide for fostering democratic engagement and the challenges inherent in aligning academic environments with the demands of active citizenship. This study, conducted between 2023 and 2024, utilises a qualitative approach firmly rooted in phenomenological traditions to examine young people's lived experiences within European public decision-making institutions (Mortari, 2007; van Manen, 2016, 2023). Data were collected through online interviews conducted with 26 young representatives from key European youth organisations, such as the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum (Sità, 2012; O'Connor, Madge, 2017). A snowball sampling technique was employed over a seven-month period, facilitating access to participants able to provide rich, in-depth narratives (Emerson, 2015). The geographical diversity achieved through the online format ensured a broad spectrum of perspectives across the continent. Thematic analysis was applied systematically via NVivo software to decode recurring themes and patterns embedded in the interview transcripts (Coppola, 2011; van Manen, 2016).

Among the diverse contexts identified as pivotal to youth engagement, the university experience emerges as notably influential, alongside other key contexts such as the family, school, youth organisations, and local community. Interviewees collectively acknowledged universities as critical environments where their political interests were either nurtured or, at times, challenged. For many young people, university life represented a key turning point. For some, participation in extracurricular activities was instrumental in developing leadership, teamwork, and social skills vital for political engagement. These activities provided avenues for stepping outside the classroom and engaging directly in processes that translate into civic participation. For instance, a participant described the transformational impact of the Erasmus programme:

It really helped me to understand a different culture, to do my best to understand what is going around me. But it also provided me with a brand-new world for me. [The city is] very multicultural. I mean, students from all over the world are there. And that was a turning point in my life. I mean, I came back and the way that I was phasing, even life, it was completely changed or improved I would say. And that's when I started [...] looking for more opportunities regarding going around or experiencing

other situations. And that's when I found out about the youth exchanges programs and the non-formal education (Interview 12, 2023).

Several interviewees stressed the value of participating in student bodies. These forums, often perceived as microcosms of broader political processes, provided the impetus to acquire first-hand experience in leadership, advocacy, and activism. One young participant recalled their involvement in a protest against a proposed law on higher education that aimed to introduce additional testing for graduates: "There was a core group of students, including me, that put it on display how banal this new approach towards higher education was. And thankfully we stopped also that law." (Interview 17, 2024). Such experiences not only reinforced their political consciousness but also demonstrated the tangible impact of student-led advocacy. Another participant shared how collective action in campaigning against additional academic years yielded demonstrable change in the university's administrative policies. "It was a time in my life that I understood the power that I have if I speak up, and if I make people collaborate," (Interview 4, 2023) they explained, highlighting the transformative effect that organised student activism can have on educational policy.

However, not all experiences were positive. Some respondents encountered considerable institutional resistance. In one account, a young individual detailed the challenge of balancing academic commitments with external political activities due to the inflexibility of university scheduling and the reluctance of professors to accommodate extracurricular involvement:

During my university years, I was a very active student and often found myself asking for permission from my professors. You know, 'I'm a very hard-working student and my grades are very good. But I want to join this outside activity. If I don't come for three days...' and they weren't really cool about it. [...] Sometimes they would say, you know, 'Maybe it would be better if you weren't so active. Just focus on your lessons and classes.' But I mean, it's not entirely negative, you can expect to hear such comments from your professors because they are very academically oriented (Interview 6, 2023).

These narratives illustrate a duality: while supportive academic mentors and flexible institutional practices can act as potent catalysts for civic participation, rigid academic structures may inadvertently stifle political engagement. In a notable instance, one participant recounted how their professors were amenable to rearranging examinations so that they could attend the General Assembly of a European youth organisation.

When I was supposed to come to the General Assembly, a professor wanted us to have a test on that day. I kindly explained to the professor that I was part of the [European youth organisation]. They asked for a letter from the European Union, and then I could take the test on another day. I came back a week later, happy, and took the test (Interview 10, 2023).

In another case, the flexibility extended to supporting international seminar participation, with a professor permitting a project presentation online while the rest of the class attended in person.

Moreover, mentorship emerged as a recurrent theme. Several interviewees recounted the profound influence of individual professors who not only supported their academic endeavours but also actively fostered their political and intellectual growth. One respondent reflected, "Always our journeys have to do with people. [...] I consider him to be my mentor. He is the one that really made me go deeper regarding political sciences." (Interview 12, 2023). Another highlighted the role of professors who, by sharing their own civil society experiences, illuminated the broader significance of civic participation:

They gave me their reasoning behind why people should participate, which was influential for me because we live in a context where participation is not seen as important. There are influences, political ones, that influence you not to participate. [...] They opened my eyes on the importance of citizens participating in public and political life (Interview 20, 2024).

2. Universities building bridges towards youth democratic participation

The varied experiences shared by young participants underscore the complex role of universities as both enablers and, at times, inhibitors of political engagement. On the one hand, the dynamic, inclusive atmosphere fostered by extracurricular activities and supportive mentorship catalyses the development of civic skills and instils a sense of political agency. On the other hand, institutional rigidity and an overemphasis on traditional academic metrics can discourage students from fully realising their potential as active citizens. This multifaceted role is integral to understanding the broader challenge of bridging the gap between academic education and civic action. Universities, as institutions of higher learning, have the capacity to promote critical thinking, foster active engagement, and ultimately prepare young people to address complex democratic challenges. They can do so not only through formal teaching, but also through research, interdisciplinary studies, and participatory laboratories that can be made available to the wider community. These spaces, when intentionally designed, become contexts where knowledge production is intertwined with democratic practices, allowing students and researchers alike to engage with real-world issues, co-create solutions, and reflect collectively on their roles as citizens within diverse and evolving democracies (Ratotti, Biffi, 2024). However, for these institutions to fulfil their bridging function effectively, they must embrace both reform and innovation, promoting flexibility in academic scheduling, giving recognition to non-traditional educational pathways, and nurturing mentorship that extends beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries (Deželan, Bacalso, Lodeserto, 2023). It requires universities to acknowledge and validate learning that occurs in diverse contexts, such as activism, volunteering, or peer-led initiatives, as meaningful contributions to both personal and academic development. The challenge of fostering civic engagement among young people cannot be considered peripheral to the university's mission; it lies at the very core of what it means to educate in contemporary democracies. Increasingly, higher education institutions are called upon to act as bridges between academic knowledge and democratic practice, not only by connecting with local communities but also by recognising the formative value of informal and non-formal educational experiences. In doing so, universities expand their civic mandate, equipping students with the critical tools and political agency necessary to navigate and contribute to public life. By supporting diverse modes of engagement, from structured student governance to spontaneous extracurricular initiatives, higher education institutions can empower youth to navigate the complexities of civic life and contribute meaningfully to democratic processes (Percy-Smith *et alii*, 2023). Recognising both the opportunities and challenges inherent in this role is essential. It demands a commitment to institutional flexibility, the endorsement of innovative educational practices, and the willingness to mentor and support young people as they negotiate the intricate pathways of democratic engagement. By reconciling the academic with the civic, universities can contribute significantly to the formation of a more inclusive, participatory, and resilient democratic society. This reconciliation implies overcoming the artificial divide between intellectual formation and civic responsibility, acknowledging instead that democratic engagement requires both analytical competence and affective commitment. When universities cultivate such integration, they not only fulfil their educational missions, but also reaffirm their public and democratic purpose, offering students the tools, the spaces, and the relationships necessary to imagine and enact alternative futures grounded in justice, solidarity, and collective care.

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