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# **Student representation and power relations at Lund University**

*The students' perspective on Lund University's governance structure*

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## Abstract

This study aims to illuminate the power relations that are developed between student and non-student representatives while performing governance at the context of Lund University. Furthermore, the influence of these incidents on student's contribution is investigated, highlighting the strengths and the weaknesses of this representation structure. For this purpose, the study utilizes semi-structured interviews with current student representatives, coming from different levels of governance. As a qualitative approach on the issue, a holistic grasp of the students' perspective is sought. Student representation has been an expression of a more inclusive agenda that has characterized higher education institutions since the commencement of the Bologna process back in 1999. Generally, many universities have included students in their decision-making processes, as they are great sources of information and feedback, enhancing their overall experience in higher education and developing skills and values that will serve them in their political, social, and labor life later.

The findings show that students captivate a central role in steering decisions at Lund University, being meaningfully involved in the majority of governing boards and are provided considerable space for communicating their views. However, power relations between the students and non-student members of these boards still exist, affecting both the interaction among the two groups, but also the ways that students pursue their demands and organize themselves. Knowledge and experience have been signaled as key elements in this process, while the essentiality of student unions is prevalent, as a place of inter-level communication and preservation of opinions' continuity. This study can function as a guide for which aspects of student representation require more careful consideration at this specific context. Last, this research can be the base for similar inquiries in other institutions, enabling comparisons among them and identifying good practices for enhancing students' input.

Key-words: Student representation, student engagement, higher education governance, power relations, participatory development

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## Abbreviations:

- EHEA – European Higher Education Area
- FB – Faculty Board
- HE – Higher Education
- HEA – Higher Education Act
- HEI(s) – Higher Education Institution(s)
- HEO – Higher Education Ordinance
- LU – Lund University
- LUS – Lund University’s Student Union
- SU(s) – Student Union(s)
- UB – University Board
- UHR – Universitets- och högskolerådet / The Swedish Council of Higher Education

# 1. Introduction

Research on Higher Education (HE) governance practices has started to gain considerable momentum during the last years, following the commencement of the Bologna Process<sup>1</sup> and the creation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Moving towards the fulfillment of its main objectives, students have been recognized as integral parts of a university's community and their inclusion in various processes has been prioritized. As Axelson and Flick (2011) note, student engagement has been considered to be a sign of institutional excellence. Student participation has been perceived to be beneficial for students and university alike, but for the society as a whole (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

However, several scholars have questioned the capacities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to encourage student participation in their governing bodies (Planas, Soler, Fullana, Pallisera & Vilà, 2013), with students themselves feeling excluded from the process of decision making (Menon, 2005). This failure to mobilize effectively the student body has been investigated in various levels and contexts, taking either a local or a global perspective. In this field of inquiry, several theories have been applied and developed, pointing towards different directions. The main explanations are centered on perceptions the different stakeholders have regarding student participation in teaching (Bartley, Dimenäs & Hallnäs, 2010) or in HE governance (Carey, 2013a) and the relations among them, the structures hindering student involvement (Carey, 2013b), and the increasing prevalence of the consumerist discourse in HEI processes and mentality (Little & Williams, 2010). Especially the consumerist discourse has been put in the spotlight, as universities are required to justify their academic competitiveness and are held accountable for their expenditures (Little & Williams, 2010), while seeking more linkages with the labor market for their students.

The effectiveness of student representation is multidimensional and, therefore, communication between the different actors in equal terms is essential to facilitate the integration of students in HEIs' governance. Nonetheless, some studies have highlighted the existence of power relations between staff and student representatives, which influence the latter's capability in engaging in decision-making (Bartley et al., 2010; Carey, 2013b), calling for greater distribution of power (Planas et al., 2013). Reportedly, students have assumed a

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<sup>1</sup> The Bologna Process is a Europe-wide initiative which aims, among others, in increasing *compatibility between educational systems* and encouraging the *modernization of education and training systems*, through including various actors, from international institutions to students (European Commission, 2016).

limited level of participation and influence, through exclusion of certain topics from the agendas in governing bodies (Carey, 2013a) or changes being primarily initiated and controlled by staff members (Carey, 2013b).

Taking these into consideration, it is interesting to explore these power dynamics that are developed in various HEIs in order to observe the convergences and divergences, and be able to identify good practices towards the enhancement of student representation. Recognizing this need, this study intends to investigate how student representatives are included in governance at Lund University (LU), through examining their contribution in it and what hindrances they have experienced while participating in such bodies. The literature lacks the student representatives' perceptions from Sweden, but this paradigm can provide interesting insights on the matter, especially due to the country's global status in terms of innovation and democracy.

As an active member of the Social Sciences Student Union at LU, I have seen first-hand the devotion that these individuals put into representing the student body. Therefore, I considered it important to seek if this effort has been acknowledged in its full potential by their colleagues. In my understanding, student representation is an expression of institutional development; acknowledging human rights and values as equality and respect, besides its benefits for the personal development of each participant. This research provides qualitative insights on the power relations in place at a specific HEI, which can be used as the base for further investigation on the topics of student engagement, student representation and the role of SUs. The exemplar of LU is to be followed, but space for improvements still exists.

## 1.1 Aim and research questions

The purpose of this study is two-folded, but both objectives have a common underlying parameter; they depend on students' perceptions on this issue. Firstly, it is intended to research if LU's model of representation encourages the input of students in equal terms to non-student actors participating in the governing bodies. On the other hand, the determination of how power relations influence this input is sought. This case cannot be generalizable, but it can provide an orientation towards what HEIs should consider, if student participation is prioritized in an institutional level. Therefore, the research questions of this study are:

- What expressions of power relations do student representatives perceive that are developed between them and non-student members while participating in the governing bodies of Lund University?



- How do these power relations influence the input of student representatives?
- What are the main advantages and disadvantages of Lund University's representation processes of students in decision making within its governing bodies according to the student representatives?

The concepts of power relations and participation are central in this study. In regards to the participation-related end, the theoretical base is the classic work of Arnstein (1969) on citizen participation. In order to contextualize her *ladder of participation* into education, an adaptation made by Bartley et al. (2010) is used, who replace the notion of citizen with that of a student. Furthermore, through the necessary analysis of the literature overview, the aforementioned theoretical perspectives are combined with the findings of Carey (2013a), who understands student representation as the product of the interplay between the influences by culture, structures and stakeholders' relations (mentioned as *biography*).

Regarding methodology, the general orientation is qualitative; such research questions necessitate the illustration of the plethora of views rather than focusing on figures. Concerning data collection, semi-structured interviews are applied. The focus is on current student representatives in governing bodies of the university, irrespective of governance level (university, faculty, departmental). As a result, the selection of participants is purposeful, including people who volunteer to take part in this study.

The main point demonstrated in the findings is that student engagement in governance is strong at LU, making the input of students effective in promoting change within the institution. With the existence of relevant national laws and internal regulations, students are guaranteed to participate in discussions around decision-making. LU's culture is even more encompassing though, with students' perspective occupying a significant position in all levels of governance. However, even with implementation of several mechanisms that facilitate the input of students, this study shows that power relations among student and non-student actors are still persisting. This power imbalance is evident in the interaction between the two groups and affects students' behavior in fulfilling their representational duties.

The roadmap in this quest is the following; in the beginning the study focuses in presenting the contextual information about LU's governance structure. Then, student representation is clarified as a certain type of student engagement in HE and the theoretical significance of such an activity in a HEI is examined. This is complemented with underlining the importance of Student Unions (SUs) in the process, the influence that originates from the consumerist

discourse, and the presentation of noteworthy empirical evidence. Next, the theoretical framework that guides this investigation is explained in detail. After the methodological component, where I analyze how the data collection process was organized, the analysis of the findings takes place with the categorization of the data that correspond to the research questions. Last, a discussion which links these findings to the theoretical framework and other empirical literature positions this paper among relevant studies.

## 2. Background Information

### 2.1 Laws and regulations

In order to be able to examine the student representation schema that is organized at LU and deliver well-grounded answers, a short review is necessary regarding the laws and regulations that determine how student representation is manifested. The laws regarding HE concern decisions that are nation-wide and are followed by all institutions that provide such education in Sweden<sup>2</sup>.

There are two main documents<sup>3</sup> that regulate HEIs' process; Higher Education Act (HEA) and Higher Education Ordinance (HEO). Both documents include sections that are involved in and affect how student representation is materialized, as they set a basis for HEIs to structure internal processes and meet these expectations. As documents with a general effect, the parts that can be linked to student representation are mostly connected to the composition of the highest governing bodies in the HEIs, the Board of Governors (or University Boards hereafter). However, according to the HEA, *students are entitled to representation when decisions or preparations are made that have bearing on their courses or programmes or the situation of students* (Chapter 2, Section 7). As a consequence, the establishment of Student Unions is authorized, in order to *monitor and take part in the development of courses and programmes as well as the conditions applying to studies at the higher education institution* (Chapter 4, Section 9).

In addition to these, LU has internal policies, that more specifically regulate the routes that student have to exercise their rights. LU, as a rather old institution (established in 1666),

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<sup>2</sup> The Swedish Council for Higher Education (Universitets- och högskolerådet in Swedish, "UHR" from now on) is the primary responsible, under the supervision of the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, for, among others, the *promotion of widening participation in higher education* (UHR, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The information in this section of the thesis is drawn from the UHR's international website, and these two documents do not comprise an official translation of the original Swedish text.

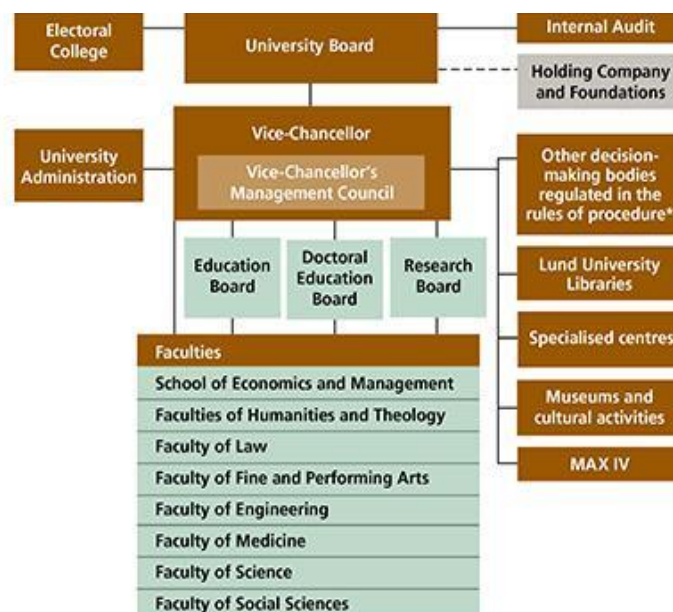
considers student influence to be essential <sup>4</sup>in accomplishing its *overarching goal, the highest quality in education and research* (LU, 2012:1). Furthermore, students are entitled to have representatives in decision-making and preparatory bodies, with few exceptions<sup>5</sup> (LU, 2013a). SUs are in charge of appointing student representatives in such bodies and, therefore, the responsibilities and rights to represent students are delegated to SUs, which are the main forces of student representation at LU.

All in all, the central role that SUs have undertaken in influencing the decision-making at LU is apparent, but this also highlights the commitment of LU to actively integrate students in its processes, through acknowledging the multiple roles of student representatives and facilitating their education-related tasks.

## 2.2 Governance structure at Lund University

Focusing more on LU as an organisation, this section attempts to explain the structure of the basic bodies that comprise LU, which gives an insight in the way this study is designed and which aspects are taken into consideration. The general structure of LU can be visually demonstrated as follows:

Picture 1: LU's organization structure (taken from LU's website, 2016)



\*Disciplinary Board, Staff Disciplinary Board, Investigation Committee on Scientific Misconduct, Admissions Board, Board of the MA/MSc in Secondary Education.

<sup>4</sup> In order to facilitate students' inclusion into the processes, the University allows students to elect their representatives during scheduled teaching hours (LU, 2013b:5) and provide alternative examination possibilities to elected student representatives who miss course components while exercising their representational duties (LU, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions are *the assessment of individual students' study performance and the processing of individual human resources matters* (LU, 2013a:17).

Beginning with the more general dimension, there is a range of bodies whose responsibilities are limited to a specific faculty or discipline, but have a more collective and transdisciplinary mandate. For this study, all such bodies comprise the university-wide level. As already mentioned, the highest governing body is the University Board (UB). The UB is responsible in leading the LU's operations and ensuring *that they are carried out efficiently and in accordance with the law* (LU, 2012:5). Its scope is rather wide, generally designing the organization's policy, touching upon aspects as reports, budgetary records, rules and guidelines for procedures<sup>6</sup>. Decisions made by the UB concern all the University's bodies and services. Its members are elected for three years, except the students who change annually. Besides the UB, some other notable university-wide bodies<sup>7</sup> are the Vice-Chancellor's Management Council and the Central Education Board.

The second level encompasses the bodies that are involved in faculty-wide issues. The University is organized into nine faculties<sup>8</sup>, each with a great deal of organizational independence, as they are responsible for all the processes within them, following the regulations and policies set by the UB. Generally, all the Faculties have similar structure, with the faculty boards (FBs) being central. The FBs have the oversight of all educational, research, finance, and organizational activities of the respective faculties. Aside from the FBs, the faculties have several boards and committees, either decision-making or advisory, with more specific duties<sup>9</sup>. Differences among the faculties exist, stemming from the characteristics of each area, the number of students and infrastructure. In the following picture the organizational structure of the Social Sciences Faculty, this study's main research area, is illustrated:

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<sup>6</sup> For a complete list for the decisions that such a board makes, check Chapter 2, Section 2 of HEO (UHR, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed list of such bodies, their role and composition can be found in "Rules of Procedure for Lund University" (LU, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The faculties are: Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Fine & Performing Arts, School of Economics and Management, and Faculties of Humanities and Theology. The Faculties of Humanities and Theology have formed a unified academic area, having the same Dean and joint bodies and Board, and Student Union.

<sup>9</sup> Such examples are education boards, management boards, research boards and so on.

Picture 2: Faculty of Social Sciences organizational structure, taken from the Faculty's website, 2016)



The third and last level of organization is the departmental level. The departments, following the frameworks set by the University and the respective faculty, are managing aspects connected to education, research and quality within their territories. They are led by the Department Boards (DBs), including teaching, student, and other staff representatives. As there are several departments in each of the faculties a variety of committees exist, which decide or advise on specific matters. In this level, most usual are the programme boards, which supervise the development and teaching of study programmes.

It becomes apparent, through this short overview of the organizational structure of LU, that many of the responsibilities of the University have been carefully delegated from higher to lower levels. While in the first level the decisions mostly concern policies and general regulations, the third level is focusing more on educational development and excellence. Adhering to the laws and regulations set on a national level, students are entitled to participate

in the majority of boards in all levels. It should be noted, however, that they are, in most cases, the minority, in relation to the academic staff.

### 2.3 Student Unions, election procedures and membership

Students at LU, both undergraduate and postgraduate alike, are organized in Student Unions (SUs), which exercise and safeguard students' rights, through representing students in decision-making processes in all three levels of organization. According to the HEA, SUs are *democratically organized* and their primary goal is *to monitor and take part in the development of courses and programmes as well as the conditions applying to studies at the higher education institution* (UHR, 2016). There are nine SUs at LU, eight of which correspond to the different faculties and one that represents all the students that are on a doctoral level, irrespective of discipline.

Each of the SUs has differences on manpower, depending on the admitted students in their faculty. The SUs are led by their Representative Assemblies (RAs), which are directly elected by the student members, through predetermined annual election procedures. The RAs, besides being in charge of policy-making for the SUs, are responsible for electing people in several representative positions and positions of trust<sup>10</sup>. Each SU has a Board and full-time working students, who are also elected by the RAs and are responsible for the SU's daily operations. In order to achieve better cooperation among the different student bodies, SUs at LU are members of the Lund University's Student Union (LUS), which acts as an umbrella organization. LUS organizes assemblies, the *LUS Ting*, with representatives coming from the different SUs, which is in turn responsible for electing student representatives for the university-level bodies.

However, not all students are by default members of their SUs. After the abolition of mandatory enrollment in one of the SUs in 2010, several student organizations in Lund formed Studentlund<sup>11</sup>, a combined alliance which secured the social and financial preservation of these associations, through the facilitation of multiple memberships. Thus, students, in order to become members of SUs and take part in their processes, pay a membership fee every semester. Although this situation permits the phenomenon of students being non-members and, consequentially, unable to participate in election processes, the

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<sup>10</sup> With the number of available representation positions outnumbering the people volunteering for them, it is usual that people candidating eventually get elected, due to a lack of counter-candidacies.

<sup>11</sup> Organizations involved in the establishment of Studentlund are most of the SUS, the Academic Society (AF) and Lund's student Nations. The AF is responsible for several cultural activities in the area of LU, while Nations focus more on social activities for students.

national Student Union Ordinance (Sveriges Riksdag, 2009) requires that student representatives represent non-member students too.

Generally, it is evident that students at LU have a saying in electing – directly or indirectly – their representatives in all the governing bodies that they are entitled to representation. The existence of several SUs ensures that student rights are protected, taking into consideration the idiosyncrasies coming from different disciplines or educational levels.

### 3. Literature overview

This chapter aims to provide a fundamental overview of key concepts that concern this study. A basic understanding of these concepts is important to fully grasp the importance and struggles that have characterized this sub-field. At first glance, the relation between students and their involvement in governance might be falsely misinterpreted or even be underestimated in terms of depth. However, the following installment illustrates the complexity of such activities and the intertwinement of various notions and actors in this process. Commencing from the most general dimension, student engagement, the outline is methodically narrowed down, discussing specifically student representation in governance and the importance of student unions, as main forces of student organization for safeguarding and exercising their rights. Then, the notion of consumerism and its interplay in student inclusion in governance is presented, before concluding with empirical evidence derived from noteworthy, pertinent studies.

#### 3.1 Student engagement

When students are positioned in the academic context, they are allocated into various interrelated roles as agents of the HEI they are enrolled. The shift towards an increasingly democratic environment due to the Bologna process requires the clarification of the concept of student engagement in the various processes taking place in an institution.

Before deciphering what engaging students can entail, it is important to examine some conditions relating to HE, which are subject to alterations during the last decades. First, the expansion of HE has resulted in the diversification of the student identity, including youth people coming from various societal strata and, in most countries, are ‘representative of the general population’ (Altbach, 2006). As the students become an increasingly amorphous group, HEIs are expected to incorporate strategies and activities that aid students in fulfilling their objectives (Zepke & Leach, 2010) while in an academic context, but, in parallel, such

expansion can influence the ways communities are developed within HEIs (Rouzer, De Sawal & Yakaboski, 2014). Moreover, the emergence of different types of HEIs, like vocational colleges and pro-profit educational institutions, whose focus evades the traditional academic culture, has drawn attention to the provision of optimal student experiences (Altbach, 2006). As all people enrolled in such institutions are encompassed under the umbrella of a “student”, it becomes inevitable to avoid comparisons between life standards provided in the various universities and colleges. Such changes affect the organization of internal processes of HEIs in facilitating the needs of the student body, as it has happened, for example, in the shrinking role of the student unions in the case of UK (Rouzer et al., 2014).

Putting aside the struggles that the progressively enlarging and manifold student body poses, the attention is drawn on the measures that could increase student engagement. Student engagement has been a rather contested term (Axelson & Flick, 2011), as it has been used in a variety of contexts and disciplines, frequently overlapping with student participation or involvement. In a meta-analysis of the relevant definitions, Trowler<sup>12</sup> (2010) has identified three aspects of student engagement, which are interconnected without having clear-cut lines between them. *Individual student learning* refers to the outlook (interest, concern) of the individual on her learning practices. *Structure and process* includes the level of input that students have in decision-making processes within HEIs. This category especially deals with activities that concern student representation and existence of measures that safeguard students’ contribution. Last, *identity* concerns issues in a student perspective, aiming to provide answers to belonging-related questions.

This categorization can be understood as a three-fold path that studies relating to student engagement have generally chosen, usually focusing in one aspect of it. The remark made by Axelson and Flick (2011:41), that a *narrower definition of the term [student engagement] is needed*, despite focusing in the individual student learning experience, can be generalized in the rest of the types. The rejection of a more holistic approach can be attributed on the fact that studies investigating student engagement are not usually descriptive, but mitigation-oriented, and in order to be capable of identifying hindrances in the engagement practices a more structured and precise identification tool or definition is necessary. An interesting definition for student participation, however, is *participation that entails a fair chance to influence the students’ study situation and experience involvement* (Bartley et al., 2010:151).

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<sup>12</sup> For further argumentation on the various definitions of student engagement, Trowler (2010) provides a rather extensive overview on the definitions of this concept.



Such phrasing, despite the vagueness of *fair*, enables the researchers to be more open to different interpretations of the data corpus, without limiting it, while pinpointing a reality where students' actions are marginalized. In the case of this inquiry<sup>13</sup>, as the interest lies upon the power relations between students and non-student members in the governing bodies at LU, the emphasis is on the *structure and process* realm by Trowler (2010).

Moving on in defining what student engagement and participation entail, it is important to clarify which students' attitudes exist during their academic life. Students are undertaking three main roles during their academic life (Popović, 2011), which can be linked to the focuses of student engagement by Trowler, discussed above. The first, *students as learners*, prioritizes issues connected to the learning experience of the students, the role they undertake as co-producers of knowledge and their contributions in ensuring the high quality of studies. *Students as members of the academic community* refers to the accessibility and partnership in governing structures. Last, *students as citizens* bases upon the concepts of democracy and active citizenship and their development within HEIs.

But still, one can argue why it is important to consider student voices in academic life. Literature with reasoning for and against student participation has been rather extensive – especially towards perceiving it as an asset for educational purposes. The triptych of student roles and student engagement definitions is apparent when grouping the gains of involving students in university processes. Accordingly, three *rationales* have been identified for why HEIs are pursuing student engagement (Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams, 2009); the most frequent aspect is the augmentation of student experience; the second concentrates on enhancing reactivity on emerging issues; and the third on opinions perceiving the students as partners in a wider learning community.

Focusing more on engaging students in university governance, the spotlight is turned towards the value it can have for the different stakeholders. According to Lizzio's and Wilson's (2009) categorization, firstly the *functional* dimension tries to answer how the university can, as an established institution, take advantage by students' contributions. Secondly, the *developmental* dimension aims to determine in what aspects the students themselves can benefit by taking part in the HE governance. Third and last, the *social* perspective is

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<sup>13</sup> It should be clarified that, for this research, there is no distinction between the terms student engagement and student participation and they are used interchangeably, despite the fact that concerns about the usage of the two terms have been reported, as it is supported that *engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense-making as well as activity* (Trowler, 2010:5).

underlined, which refers to the possible advantages for a society that stem from an active and healthy student engagement schema.

To begin with the functional perspective, which concerns the university, it can be rather wide, as HEIs themselves are multi-level organizations, including a plethora of people and services that can be influenced favorably by students. Excluding students from the equation, other actors that are affected are academic and administrative staff. Regarding the learning outcomes, students can be a great source of information in the institutions' quality of education and the effort taking place to enhance it (Bartley et al., 2010). Their immediate experiences within classrooms and university space can provide accurate feedback on educational practices, but also recommendations for future reference that exceed the classroom limits. Thus, involving student can be both a tool for achieving balance within an HEI, through students having a voice as “customers”, and a means to ensure a high-quality education in the long term (Little et al., 2009). The university as a whole can also benefit by integrating students in governance. In terms of reputation, successful student engagement indicates institutional excellence (Axelson & Flick, 2011). This assists towards the attraction of students and the establishment of agreements between the university and other institutions, which may provide better linkages to the labor market and financial advantages (Trowler, 2010). Moreover, the integration of students in governance supports the development of an environment of trust, through opening areas of discussion and prohibiting feelings of exclusion on the students' behalf which can have adverse results (Wood, 1993). Clarity on the objectives is crucial, as students and institutions perceive differently phenomena, like it has been reported in the case of HE internationalization (Dewey & Duff, 2009).

The developmental level fixates on illustrating the gains that the students themselves have through their participation in governance. Kuh (2009) classifies the benefits of the students in psychological, moral and ethical, and cognitive. Students have been reported to have developed several skills after undertaking a leadership post (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2001). This study identified increased *civic responsibility, leadership skills, multicultural awareness, understanding of leadership theories, and personal and societal values* (Cress et al., 2001:15). Students' interpersonal skills and networks can be enhanced through their constant interaction with other stakeholders in formal settings. Last but not least, students' engagement in curricula planning might have advantageous effects against study withdrawal (Trowler, 2010).

Both functional and developmental perspectives concern issues that are centered on specific individuals or HEIs, in contrast to the third category, the social dimension. This level elevates the benefits reaped by student engagement in a wider context, examining how such activities influence the society – or the social stance of individuals – and its inherent structures. The concept of democracy is often used, with scholars highlighting which democratic aspects are expected to be developed while engaging in HE governance. Through their participation in several governing bodies, students become active agents of academic democracy, which should be one of the main goals of university experience (Molander, 2002). He also argues that academic democracy engulfs the processes that aim on the *ethos of learning together* (Molander, 2002:361) and should be differentiated by and a prerequisite to political democracy. Furthermore, in relation to the impetus of consumerism in HE and the conception of students as consumers, integrating them into HEIs' governance supports their right to voice their opinion (Menon, 2005) and strengthen accountability on the universities' behalf (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

### 3.2 Student representation

Narrowing our focus down to the activities that relate to the communication of student voices in the HEI governance, this section summarizes some theoretical insights and struggles identified in the literature. Student representation in HEI governance has been a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s in Western industrialized countries, as USA, Western Europe and elsewhere (Altbach, 2006) and its demand was usually addressed through the extension of membership to students into the existing governing bodies (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Student representation is enjoying quite much uniformity in the literature, especially in comparison to the wider *participation* or *engagement* terms. The integration of students in decision-making committees comprises the *formal* route, which has a more collective essence of students' views, in contrast to the *informal* pathway, which is individual-oriented and is manifested through various evaluation processes (Bartley at al., 2010). Similarly, student representation has been defined as:

*the means whereby the collective views of students are represented at various levels of an institution's academic organisation, providing direct student input into decision-making and discussions about programme and institutional development* (Little & Williams, 2010:120),

While, *course representatives articulate the collective experience of their cohorts* (Carey, 2013b:73). It becomes apparent that the notion of *collectivity* is central when discussing about student representation and characterizes this mechanism of university democratization<sup>14</sup>. Students who engage in representatives roles ideally have skills that are connected to information-giving and management (Carey, 2013b). Student representatives are expected to collect their fellows' opinions and experiences and utilize them to proceed to well-informed and structured objectives while exercising governance. In this activity measures are being taken that safeguard the students' interests and aim to minimize the cultural interference on procedures, but often established hierarchies prioritize staff's input over the students' (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

What are the advantages, however, of pursuing the formation of student representation schemata in HE decision-making? Leaving the personal level aside, as the benefits for the students are generally similar to previously discussed gains on student engagement, Luescher-Mamashela (2013) looks in a wider context and provides an overview of the trends that are reported in academia regarding the argumentation on intensifying (or not) the implementation of formal student representation. His design is based on four cases of reasoning, which are demonstrated since the dawn of student participation in several bodies of HEIs. The *politically-realist* paradigm recognizes the *disruptive power of students as collective political actors* (2013:1446), which highlights the necessity of introducing a medium of interaction between young leaders and those in control in order to mollify student activism. This right, however, can be perceived in two ways; as a triumph of students' protests; or a tool to eliminate *engagement as a cause for political struggle* (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013:1447). The *consumerist* case focuses on the notion of students as clients of the HE. The interaction between the university and its students gained a more service-oriented manner, and therefore, the latter are directly affected by the institutional decisions. Both these cases fixate on student representation as a tool to secure students' well-being.

The other two standpoints that are pro-representation are based on wider conceptions of the roles and objectives that the students or the universities have and are not bound to one institution's borders. Hence, we find the *communitarian case*, the third case. This perspective supports students as members of a *collectivity* (2013:1449) and their integration in governing

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<sup>14</sup> University democratization is defined as a "reconstitution of internal decision-making in universities with reference to democratic principles, *inter alia*, by making decision-making processes in universities more representative of internal constituencies such as students" (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010:260, italics in original).

bodies is justified by their status of belonging to this specific – academic – community. This practice, despite being generally present in the literature, has been confronted with views that underline the ephemeral membership of the students and the distinctive conception of a university's structure and role. Last, the *democratic and consequentialist case* perceives student representation as a channel that universities have for developing the democratic values of their students, by promoting a sense of democratic citizenship<sup>15</sup>.

The inclusion of students in HE governance and the formation of formal routes of representation have not always been welcomed in the literature. Several scholars have developed critiques against it, which are based on theoretical or empirical considerations. On the theoretical edge, some concerns have been voiced regarding the learning dimension and who is entitled to formulate pedagogical goals. This task is connected traditionally to educators or academic staff, who have the necessary expertise and knowledge to determine what is essential to be taught (Menon, 2003; Wood, 1993). Furthermore, the whole concept of university has certain roles and goals that should be met, as an institution of *a fairly rigid professional guild hierarchy of academic expertise and seniority* (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013:1450). Power balances in HEI may be disrupted and this could lead to a form of *cultural resistance to change* (Cummings & Worley, 2008:167) on behalf of the academic staff. On the other hand, the students' input has also received critique with Wood (1993) highlighting the possibility that student representatives may not be able to grasp the interests of the students or promote specific groups' interests, resulting to conflicts between the different groups.

Concluding, student representation is rather complex range of activity, based on the shared conception of collectiveness and the need to channel students' voices in a higher level, while the role of a representative is *comprehensive, but also dynamic and fluid* (Carey, 2013b:86). The rationalization of integration of students in HE governance has not taken a uniform character, but this exact point illustrates the reason why HEIs should not adhere to one rationale over the other and utilize all this potential.

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<sup>15</sup> Mohanty (2003:176) interpreting Young (1990) and the link between higher education and democratic citizenship argues that the latter, besides the goal for *free scholarly inquiry*, would also include the provision of necessary circumstances for everyone to participate impartially and equally in "...all social groups in the institutions that affect their lives. This just and equal participation is necessary for everyone to develop their capacities and exercise their choices".

### 3.3 Student Unions

Talking about student activism and student engagement more specifically, this overview shall not overlook one of the main models that articulated this desire to elevate students' perceptions in the academic contexts. Student Unions are organizations within HEIs and have a rather versatile role in the processes of a university, which is the result of their constantly changing main focus. Historically, the whole concept of SUs is based on the premises for more involvement and leisure activities for students and the formulation of a sense of community, which progressively resulted in SUs being perceived as neutral places of *social and intellectual interactions* (Rouzer et al., 2014:3). This dimension has been questioned though, as the creation of facilities and services has overthrown the conventional meeting places as SUs (Rullman, Strong, Farley, Keegan & White, 2008). This fact implies a possible reason why SUs are experiencing high level of inactivity among its members. Rouzer et al. (2014) support that the two main objectives of SUs are the provision of services and devising optimal conditions for learning.

Given that these organizations have a decree of establishment, usually through national legislation or university statutes, SUs are very connected to their parent institutions, faculty or department. They do not follow a universal procedure of filling the relevant posts, so their manning can include either trained professionals or students, and often nation-wide norms exist on how this process takes place. However, their general mandate of affairs has been much more consistent. Over time the sequence of paradigms concerning student affairs has been student services, student development, student learning and student engagement, each one of which has brought something more on the round tables (Pomerantz, 2006). In meeting this need, SUs have different ways of mobilizing students into their activities including leadership roles, employment and voluntary work (Lane & Perozzi, 2014). Their services also vary, ranging from academic counseling to social activities, with differences being apparent among universities and countries. Generally, certain disputes have risen though, between SUs and their parent institutions regarding assets' handling and division of services and responsibilities (Rodgers, Freeman, Williams & Kane, 2011). SUs can be a great reputational feature for a HEI, but simultaneously their independent-minded presence poses a potential threat to the marketability<sup>16</sup> of the university (Rochford, 2014).

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly it is also noted that: “Where a university is subjected to the pressure to create and maintain a marketable presence, maverick or unmanageable elements associated with the university become a reputational risk” (Rochford, 2014:490-491). This can raise some concerns on how much space can the SUs be given in order to be independent and pursue their goals.

The changing demographics of students has posed an extra burden to the work of SUs, as they constantly need to recalibrate their initiatives and actions in relation to the growing body of people, and this process will intensify with the progressive internationalization within HE (Rouzer et al. 2014). As SUs are seeking to safeguard these interests, they have to track down the different backgrounds and social trends, which will pose as the polestar for achieving a balance between providing services and ensuring a healthy environment for student learning (Rouzer et al., 2014). Unfortunately, SUs' work has been greatly affected by the dominant policy discourse, which conceptualizes students as consumers, and resisting to this mentality is troublesome even if there is intention to do so (Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2015).

### 3.4 Consumerism in Higher Education

This section tries to depict the rise of the consumerist discourse within HE, showing its connection to how students are perceived and how multi-leveled its effects are, as a great amount of the literature mentions this concept and its influence on student representation, the SUs and HE as a whole.

The introduction of the consumerist paradigm in HE has been connected to a shift of universities towards a neoliberal agenda (Brooks et al., 2015). This change has materialized through the integration of business practices and managerialism in the university life, as universities are expected to be more accountable and transparent in their practices and the education provided (Little & Williams, 2010). Some scholars have tried to explain this turn through commenting on the changing landscape of education towards goals that are not purely educational, namely social and economic mobility, resulting in a perception that HE is a right of citizenship and not an earned privilege (Williams, 2012). Such notions have been much earlier noticed, as the introduction of managerialism led to an outcomes-related archetype of HE, where *education is seen primarily as a contribution to productivity, not as apart of the general personal growth of the individual nor the general progress of humankind* (Bessant, 1991:216).

Building on this, the consumer identity has signified a series of changes in the relationship between students, HEIs, and the internal processes they have. Students have altered their learning demands, becoming more aligned with the needs of the labor market, and resulting in a transition from students as members of a community to clients of their institution (Rochford, 2008). Students then promote an economic mentality in learning which also affects their contribution in the general outcomes of educational practices (Rochford, 2014). Adopting a consumer's standpoint might result in more criticism coming from the students towards the

HEIs and the provided education, accusing the institution for their personal inadequacies and misfortunes (Bartley et al., 2010). A market-based HE brings a more passive understanding of *learning*, slowly transforming *pedagogic practice from being to having*, where learning is a set of *skills to acquire* (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009:285). Thus, one can argue that the changes that have been happening lately towards a consumerist agenda are not necessarily led by the universities, but are also desired by the student population itself.

On the level of SUs and student representation, the induction of the consumerist discourse has also indicated modifications on how they function and what their objectives are. The relationship between the SUs and consumerism has a contradicting nature, as it is unclear what the orientation of the former is. However, this also implies that, as SUs are directly connected to the student body, they would not proceed to actions that may undermine the institution's reputation and, consequently, lower the value of their members' qualifications (Rochford, 2014). Last, in a long-term angle and in connection to students' inclusion in HE governance, Leathwood and Read (2009) support that student "voices" are linked to a consumerist understanding and normative assumptions that emerge from this are shifting the overall perception of democracy from political to economic terms.

However, this skepticism is not universally shared and the recognition of students as consumers or clients has been welcomed as a positive development in safeguarding students and society's interests. Skegg (2014) supports that living with a capitalist logic does not necessarily mean that we internalize the values that it promotes. In a similar sense, accepting the student as a consumer or client of the university does not exclusively carry the negative connotations that have been identified by scholarship. Other studies have underlined that students preserve a contributing role in knowledge and provide *inputs in the production process* (Dodds, 2011:321). Students' behavior is difficult to be predicted just upon economic rationality, which suggests that assuming students will act as consumers is a fallacious standpoint (Brooks et al., 2015). It is important, thus, to keep in mind the ongoing debate on consumerism and not rush into conclusions without getting a complete grasp of the contextual conditions that exist and the perceptions of the stakeholders themselves.

### 3.5 Empirical evidence

Up to this point the literature review has focused on describing fundamental struggles which surround the concepts that concern and arise in the subsequent sections. However, it is imperative to present some noteworthy empirical studies related to student engagement in governance and the related stakeholders' perceptions. Generally, data from such studies have



identified a positive disposition towards students' integration in governance process, but without this being translated necessarily into democratic appliances (Menon 2003).

Lizzio and Wilson (2009) examined a *single metropolitan Australian university* and conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty student representatives from different institutional levels. Their objective was to acquire a holistic comprehension of student representation in HE governance, through focusing on various aspects of the representation act. The identified motivations behind becoming a representative were personal development goals, student support, networking and agreement to undertake such a position due to lack of volunteers or supervisor encouragement. Regarding the purpose of their role, a diptych of functions was noted; advocating for student-born issues; or giving feedback in proposals. The representatives' interaction with the academic staff and how the latter perceived the students yielded that students felt sometimes that their legitimacy was questioned by professors and this affects how the representatives understand their role and raises questions on how they are regarded by the system. In terms of priorities, the quality of student experience came first while staff attitudes and equity-related issues were second. Generally, the main challenge discerned for the representatives was to achieve a balance between standing for their peers' interests and negotiate with staff to find realistic solutions.

Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) focused on University of Alberta and their aim was to examine the student participation in university governance. Their sample was wider having included administrators, academic staff and student representatives and semi-structured interviews were also used. Their findings were similar to those of Lizzio and Wilson (2009) in terms of student motivation, while there were again contrasting perceptions about participation, with some administrators and academic staff reporting that students should focus more on studying, instead of politics. Students also were excluded in specific decision-making areas, such as faculty salaries or faculty members' selections and promotions, as they were considered as sensitive issues and staff rejected their inclusion in such decisions. Hindering factors are categorized in three groups; personal, which concern individual perceptions and capabilities, as personality and experience; environmental, which stemmed from political and economic conditions of the wider communal context; organizational, which related to structural obstacles, as schedules and rules. Last, measures towards student participation effectiveness included representatives' training and enhancement of formal and informal communication channels between the different stakeholders.

Menon (2005) preferred to conduct a survey at University of Cyprus, having 135 responders, and examined how students felt about their current involvement in university governance, in order to investigate their “*willingness ... to actively contribute to the management*” (p.168), and the students had to assess their level of participation. The findings revealed that students had limited to none participation in the HEI’s governance and were favorable towards a more inclusive leadership schema, as they believed that their input was essential and the decisions affect them heavily. Once more it is suggested that the act of representation should be supported through the provision of information on key issues and strategies, which will facilitate student representatives to become more effective in their roles.

Moving to Carey (2013a, 2013b), these two articles comprise one study which took place in a UK institution and its aim was to illuminate the role of student representatives in university governance. The former article (2013a) presents stakeholders perspectives, while the latter (2013b) focuses on the student representatives’ views, with both using loosely structured interviews. From the stakeholders’ standpoint, it was reported that there has been a positive change in terms of culture, with staff being more *responsive to student opinion* (2013a:1296). However, structural obstacles were also reported with the agenda usually being programme quality-oriented. The consumerist discourse was also identified, but collaboration was central. Students, on the other hand, recognized the existence of power relations among them and the academic staff, used seldom though. Furthermore, prospective changes were usually tutor- and not student-driven and it was suggested that the whole representation system might be unable to grasp the full potential of students’ contribution.

The spotlight was put on pinpointing obstacles for student representation in the study by Planas and her colleagues (2013). Investigating the University of Girona, the reasons reported for low participation in governance included students’ ignorance of the relevant structures, limited time of student due to their academic workload and jobs, and the transient viewpoint some students embraced. The academic staff might not be capable to efficiently communicate with these student/workers. It was further highlighted that a *greater distribution of power* can provide assurances for increased student input, which can be also facilitated by enhancing formal participation of students and reviewing student electoral procedures.

Last, Little and Williams (2010) examined the engagement of students in quality evaluations in the UK. Staff members valued student engagement as key to experience enhancement, with varying underlying justifications, such as consumerism and an effective responsiveness rationale. On behalf of student representatives, the focus was more towards *students as*

*members of a learning community*, while a possible indifference of the general student population was acknowledged, but reasoning behind was ambiguous. However, the prevalence of the consumerist discourse was underlined, which can conceivably bolster among the students, impeding their holistic involvement in the university's community.

This section is important to comprehend in depth the notions that this study deals with. Additionally, this overview provides some insights on how the methodological dimension could be enhanced, in order to avoid conceptual nuances during the data collection phase. Correlations to these studies are made in the discussion part, identifying convergent and divergent instances, which further helps positioning the contribution of this research to the literature.

## 4. Theoretical framework

The subsequent section aims to illustrate in detail the theoretical structure that will provide a path to examine how student representation is being manifested through the views of active, current representatives in a specific HEI and what is the theoretical base of the whole study. After reviewing the relevant literature and, as the focus here is to investigate a participatory approach regarding governance in HE, the Ladder of Citizen Participation by Arnstein (1969) was picked as the starting point. However, recognizing the need for a more education-centered model, a relevant pathway was sought. Therefore, an adaptation of Arnstein's Ladder by Bartley et al. (2010) is utilized, which focuses specifically on student participation in university governance. This adaptation is complemented though, as the objectives of this study include the unveiling of factors that affect student representation, by three interrelating concepts that Carey (2013a) introduces.

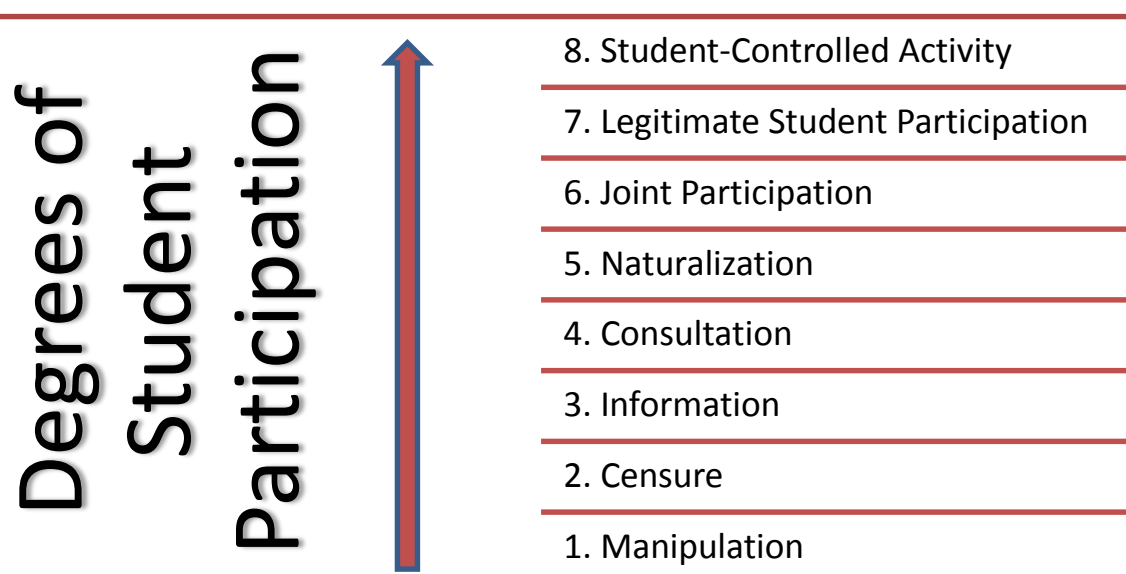
### 4.1 Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

A look into Arnstein's contribution is considered necessary and how her Ladder tried to give some guidance in issues related to power relations and participation. Commencing from the belief that *participation of the governed in the government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy* (1969:216), she opts for a *redistribution of power* in order ensure that marginalized groups will be included in various societal processes that concern them. In this direction, citizen participation is a *categorical term for citizen power* (1969:216), thus being able to be understood in a hierarchical order. As a result, by using a ladder as a metaphor, she develops a model that includes eight levels of citizen participation, each of which constitutes a certain amount of "freedoms" or restrictions that a group of people share.

The Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) is organized in three distinct modules; non-participation, degrees of tokenism, and degrees of citizen power. More explicitly, the first grouping contains two levels, manipulation (rung 1) and therapy (rung 2), in which certain individuals retain power aiming to *educate or cure* (p.217) the marginalized ones. Regarding the degrees of tokenism, the three *rungs*, as Arnstein refers to them, concern the information (rung 3) and consultation (rung 4), which consent all citizens to *hear and have a voice*, and placation (rung 5) where advice by everyone are possible but without decision-making rights. Last, the degrees of citizen power include partnership (rung 6), delegated power (rung 7) and citizen control (rung 8). In the former negotiation between different stakeholders is enabled, while in the latter two marginalized citizens are given substantial or full power in governance. Hence, the range of this Ladder spans from the lowest possible end of no power entrusted to groups of people to an ideal where citizens are directly controlling decision-making.

## 4.2 Degrees of Student Participation

Having a basic understanding on the Ladder of Citizen Participation, a more detailed presentation of the adapted model by Bartley et al. (2010) follows that is going to be the main analytical instrument of this study. Starting from a Foucauldian perception on power, their contribution is the result of observations that student participation cannot be separated by other stakeholders that are involved in the processes of a HEI, but also the institution's mentality as a whole itself. So their "Ladder" is taking into consideration the relationship between the students, the teachers and the institution, thus integrating the influence stemming from the regulatory conditions which shape student participation in its wider sense – learning, evaluation and governance.



Bartley et al. (2010) refer to their model as *Degrees of Student Participation* which includes eight Degrees of progressive student inclusion in governance processes. Their grouping modules are not as clearly distinct as Arnstein's, but they follow a similar logic. In the first group we have the two Degrees where students input in decision-making is absent, and conclusively cannot be considered to capture a sense of student participation. *Manipulation*, the first Degree, exists when students are lacking the *legitimate power* to influence decisions, undertaking a plain role. These restrictions can originate from statutes and steering documents, but also from the way that courses are organized, which hinder students to support directly their own context<sup>17</sup>. The second Degree, *censure*, differentiates in the following sense; students are included in meetings not to exercise participation, but to be admonished instead. These practices do not encourage involvement, but also deprive the students of being more active in the future, impairing the relations between the different actor groups.

The middle cluster of Bartley's et al. framework depicts instances where a certain degree of student participation takes place. Beginning with *Information*, students are informed about the decisions being put forward, but they are not given the ability to comment on this one-way communication. *Consultation* encompasses the occasions in which students clearly participate in governing bodies and committees, but their input is overlooked in decision-making, due to a dearth of awareness on which subjects are the students able to influence. Correct timing and feedback on students' contribution is a significant component if student participation is expected to materialize. The sixth Degree is *Neutralization*. In this stage, evaluations made by students might be given a positive notch in official public documents, if professors fail to receive criticism constructively and be honest with the critique. Moreover, in the cases where student representatives are chosen by academic staff, their engagement in governance can be considered impeachable. Selected students might have a favorable inclination towards the issue at hand, being unsuccessful to represent the group and deeming participation to be *symbolic* (Bartley, 2010:160).

The upper batch focuses in occurrences where student participation is successfully demonstrated. However, small differences exist among the three *Degrees of student participation* and it is important *if students perceive their participation as meaningful* (Bartley et al. 2010:160). *Joint participation*'s main component is the collaboration exercised between the different student representatives and the people in power. The latter can include academic

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the inclusion of students in predetermined curricula and course material could also be perceived as a certain level of manipulation (Bartley et al., 2010).

staff and university administrators but also wider societal actors, as companies and politicians. The cases where there is a delegation of duties and governing power to different actors, *legitimate student participation* is manifested. Such examples are representation procedures and formal channels of participation in governance, with cooperation of the different stakeholders again being important. The final student participation stage is *student-controlled activity or task*. In this Degree, students or SUs are given the authority to produce and control the components of their learning and take place in formal or informal settings.

#### 4.2.1 Strengths and limits

Reflecting the usage of this design, there are certain advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, substantial criticism has been directed towards Arnstein's framework on citizen participation (see Bishop & Davis, 2002; Collins & Ison, 2006; Tritter & McCallum, 2006) and some points are also relevant in the adapted model that is used in this study. Arnstein (1969) herself provided some limitations concerning her Ladder framework. Firstly, such a structure implies that the hierarchy of power exists among groups with homogeneous substance and such an assumption is inaccurate. Individuals carry various beliefs, skills and experience that differentiate them from other members of the same group. Furthermore, power imbalances exist also among the members of these groups, which affect their coherence and consequently the generalizability of this framework. Another point made by Arnstein (1969) is that the distinctions among the different "rungs" are quite subtle and might be difficult to categorize real-life situations. Besides these objections, the Ladder suggests that citizen control is the ultimate goal, but such justification does not always correspond to individuals' involvement in governance (Collins & Ison, 2006). Collins and Ison further comment on the complexity of role attribution, thus rejecting authorities relinquishing their power to citizens as the sole possible remedy to empowerment.

Taking these disadvantages into consideration and applying them into Bartley's et al. (2010) adaptation, this model implies that the ultimate state is students having complete control over their activities, which undoubtedly interferes with the role of HE, necessitating a reconfiguration of power relations within it, possibly causing further unease. An interesting spin-off question would be if HE could even exist without the existence of some sort of power. However, such an investigation surpasses the scope of this study. Last, looking into the different degrees of the chosen framework, one would argue that *legitimate student participation* (Degree 7) could be swapped with *student-controlled activity or task* (Degree 8),

as the latter disregards other actors involved in HE, as academic staff, and the former being wholly inclusive.

On the other hand, Bartley's et al. scheme's advantages outweigh the aforementioned limitations for the needs of this study. More specifically, this design allows various interpretations, evaluations and predictions to take place in relation to how student representation is demonstrated and its stance in the proceedings of a HEI. Having this framework, it is possible to assess the current practices within a specific academic context and discern the level of participation that students are able to show in HEI governance. Furthermore, the identification of pros and cons of participatory applications will be feasible, which can be then cross-examined with the upper cluster of *degrees of student participation*, thus showcasing which aspects should be enhanced, making suggestions for increased and effective student engagement.

### 4.3 Culture – Structure – Biography

Another useful tool that will facilitate the analysis of our data is a conceptual trio suggested by Carey (2013a). As the focus of this study lies upon student representation, the discussion will include hindrances that exist in this activity on the representatives' behalf. Carey identified various such incidents in his corpus and proceeds with the usage of three concepts to categorize the essence of these occurrences. *Culture* refers to the *ethos of the institution* and includes ways that the institution as a whole devises its internal process and possible changes. This culture can refer to the wider societal context (macro), the institutional level (meso) or the faculty/departmental level (micro), signifying the influence originating from withstanding notions in HE. *Structure* entails the processes and conditions that are applied in an institution and how these instances shape and affect student representation. Such examples are membership rights, scheduling of meetings or just the necessary additional workload. Last, *Biography* focus on the personal characteristics that are brought in student representation activities, both from students or the academic staff, and how these actors interact with each other.

The interdependence of these categories and the standpoint that student representation *sits at the centre of these three forces* (Carey, 2013a:1300), allow the scrutiny of the barriers that are probable in representation activities, managing to direct our attention to the core of the hindrances reported. Thus, these concepts are used supplementarily in this study, as they enable us determine the factors that would enhance students' engagement in governance and provide concrete suggestions towards this direction.

## 5. Methodology

Up to this point, a meticulous overview of the literature on concepts that are central in our research has been provided, supplemented with essential background information that help us contextualize effectively the study in the limits of LU. Furthermore, our theoretical framework has been also presented, serving as an initial analytical gateway for the data corpus. In the following section there is a full description of the methodological considerations that support this study, explaining the development of our thinking and substantiating our choices along the way of this thesis.

Considering the research questions, the implementation of semi-structured interviews was decided, as it provides the best conditions for data collection, while taking into account practical obstacles and time limitations that ought to be avoided. After all, many of the empirical qualitative studies that are relevant to the field utilized this technique for this purpose, which also constitutes a way of determining the scope of a study and choosing proper concepts and methodology (Alvesson, 2011). Interviews, as a methodological path, are the most popular approach in qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2005). The goal was to obtain the maximum information from our interviewees<sup>18</sup> and semi-structured interviews served this objective, as they have been reported to *engage subjects directly in a conversation with the researcher so as to get a first-person account of the participant's social reality* (Schultze & Avital, 2011:3).

Semi-structured interviews are based on a predetermined interview guide, which contains the basic areas of interest for the researcher, while giving the space to add further clarifying questions during the process and facilitating the homogeneity of the data across all participants (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Therefore, the interview guide that was developed for this study<sup>19</sup> took into consideration the concepts that it was expected to arise in this context. The organization of the guide was orchestrated to accommodate the development of trust between the researcher and the participants, so that the latter could freely discuss the topics that were put forward. In this direction, the guide included some introductory questions, which is often an advised route, commencing with easier to answer questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013). At first glance, one could argue that this interview guide includes many questions that are not directly connected to the main goal of the study. However, this action

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that the terms *participant*, *interviewee* and *informant*, whenever used henceforth in this thesis, are used interchangeably with no intention to depreciate the views of the people interviewed and their active role in this research.

<sup>19</sup> The interview guide can be found in Appendix.



was purposeful, as the interviewees could give interesting hints for issues related to student representation. Then, these instances would be further discussed through the usage of proper follow-up questions and prompts, which encourage the speaker to elaborate without diverging from the topic (Olsen, 2012). As a result, the final content of each interview, while circulating around certain, common aspects, took slightly different course.

### 5.1 Participants: selection and characteristics

Having determined the concepts that would be touched upon, the next was to determine which people would qualify for providing relevant and adequate insight for student representation. From the beginning of this study, the orientation was highly qualitative<sup>20</sup>, which implies that its purpose is to *enrich the understanding of an experience*, which requires purposive selection of participants (Polkinghorne, 2005:140). Thus, the first decision made was to address people that acted as representatives and exercised governance inside LU.

As the primary concept is student representation, this group was narrowed down to active student representatives, excluding non-student members of LU from the process. At this stage, a careful examination of the LU's governing and representation structure took place, in order to comprehend the body of prospective participants and enable more targeted selection of people. Another decision was made to seek for student representatives from all governance levels, in order to grasp a more holistic understanding of how interaction between student representatives and others is materialized. It was further preferred to focus in one faculty for two reasons. First and foremost, students coming from the same academic area would probably have a shared understanding on the main concepts of the study and, thus provide more comprehensive and manageable data. Second, as certain differences in structure and organization exist among the different faculties, limiting our scope to one faculty would eliminate misinterpretations on roles, duties and titles. Hence, the Faculty of Social Sciences at LU was picked as the pool for participants' selection.

In collaboration with the faculty's SU, twelve individuals (four from each level) were contacted via e-mail<sup>21</sup> and invited to participate in the study. Eventually, nine of them agreed to be interviewed, having three student representatives from each level. These nine individuals were either full-time students or students taking a year off their studies at LU, in

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<sup>20</sup> Agreeing with Polkinghorne (2005) regarding the connotation and usage of the term *sampling*, it needs to be clarified that adequate selection of participants was pursued by examining the potential variability of the answers provided, rather than attempting to grasp a representative group of people. Hence, the focus was given on *quality* rather than *representativeness* of the selected persons (Alvesson, 2011:49-50).

<sup>21</sup> This e-mail provided some personal details of the researcher, a possible timeframe for conducting the interviews and a short description of the study.

order to fulfill their representational duties. The group was comprised by six female and three male participants<sup>22</sup>, whose age ranged from 20 to 28 years and were all Swedish nationals. It also needs to be noted that the researcher had some familiarity with few of the participants, through common representation-related activities.

## 5.2 Pilot interview

It is encouraged that the researchers test beforehand the tools they utilize, especially regarding the interview guide (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Therefore, a pilot interview was conducted with a postgraduate level student, who had some experience in representation activities in the past, but in a setting outside LU. The aims of this activity, besides evaluating the suitability of the questions posed, were to check if certain misconceptions or flaws arose in the way the questions were formulated, to determine if the interview was exhausting for the interviewee, and to get an estimate for the interviews' length.

## 5.3 Interview process

Individual appointments were scheduled, lasting around 90 minutes, in order to have enough time for the interview and some discussion before and after it. The interviews were conducted during April 2016, in group rooms around the University campus in Lund. Time and place have been identified as influencing factors for the success of an interview (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Thus, the locations were neutral settings, without, however, restraining the interviewees from picking a different location. In each meeting, before recording, a small discussion preceded, especially with people who had no previous affiliations with the researcher. This conversation started with general information about the researcher and some ice-breaking questions to the participants. When the conditions seemed satisfactory enough, some additional information about the study were provided, supplemented by assurances for anonymity of participation, as the interviews were recorded. After the completion of the interview, there was a short discussion about its content, trying to acquire some feedback about the interview guide or commenting on interesting answers that were provided.

## 5.4 Ethical considerations

The ethical dimension was continuously highlighted during each phase of the study. In relation to the preparation of the interview and participants' facilitation, there are several measures taken in advance. In the first contact made with the participants via e-mail, information and possibility for questions about this project were provided, which was also

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<sup>22</sup> The participants' gender is based on their own answers, as they were asked to state their gender in the beginning of their interviews.

performed just before the interview. In this manner, they were explicitly asked for permission of recording the interview, and as soon as a positive answer was provided, the researcher assured that the recorded files are confidential and shall not be distributed to third parties. The recordings were shared with the participants. Regarding securing the anonymity of the participants, any information<sup>23</sup> that might link them to specific representative positions, and background is excluded or altered, if omission is inevitable. Regarding the interview guide, its development was centered on being neutral and trying to grasp participants' standpoint. Furthermore, before the interview, participants were informed that they had the opportunity to avoid answering questions, if they desired, and that they could withdraw from participating in the study, even after the interview was concluded. By providing all this space, the goal was to gain trust of the participants and respect their right to privacy.

The second aspect of the ethics concerns the analysis of the data. As the researcher's role in qualitative interviews is central, having substantial weight in handling the data (Polkinghorne, 2005), certain actions against it were taken. The researcher contacted the participants for clarifications in cases where audio was indiscernible and in one case, at the request of the interviewee, the transcription was sent to him/her for cross-checking. Last, the process behind each step of the study is thoroughly presented, illuminating its logic and choices.

## 6. Results and analysis

Having acquired a holistic understanding of the academic and methodological orientation of this study, we are ready to deepen in the collected data. This chapter includes a complete presentation of the findings, organized in a comprehensible manner that showcases the variability of the responses received and highlights the complexity of the student representation in the context of Lund University. In brief, the structure of this section follows the three main research questions of this study, presenting the instances of power relations among student representatives and other members in the different governing bodies, then moving to how these examples influence the contribution of student representation and finally displaying the main advantages and disadvantages reported by our participants. In order to optimally clarify the characteristics of each category and the line of work, this presentation will be complemented by quotes from the interviews wherever considered useful. Furthermore, in each part an effort to determine the degree of student participation in

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<sup>23</sup> Such information can be names, level of education, scientific area etc.

governance will be made, connecting to the model introduced by Bartley et al. (2015). As a reminder, the Degrees are:

- Manipulation
  - Censure
  - Information
  - Consultation
  - Neutralization
  - Joint Participation
  - Legitimate Student Participation
  - Student-controlled Activity
- 
- No student participation*
- Limited student participation*
- Student participation*

The analysis is generally inductive, as the themes are derived by closely examining the collected material, but then the three research questions of the study were utilized to group them and eventually present them in the subsequent pages. Last, as this is an effort to illuminate power imbalances, it should be noted that a more despondent environment than reality might be presented<sup>24</sup>.

## 6.1 Examples of power expression

In this group of data, the focus is put on attributes or incidents that shape the relationship between the student representatives and the other members of the boards or committees they participate in. The relationship between the two parties (students and others) is perceived to be crucial for the success of student input and influences greatly the way this activity is molded (Carey, 2013a). In this case, the majority of the other members is teaching staff, but the examples noted next may not necessarily concern comments received from or addressed to professors. It should be mentioned that, as interplay of different groups, this process is two-way, with both groups utilizing the means at their disposal to motivate their standpoints.

### 6.1.1 Instances regarding interaction in LU's boards

This sub-group encompasses incidents that characterize the interaction between the student representatives and the rest of the members of the respective boards. In general, all student representatives gave very positive feedback for the working environment inside the different boards they participate. This was usually attributed to the precise processes and formalities of these boards, which facilitated discussions and decisions to be made whenever possible.

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<sup>24</sup> This is not purposively done, but the general orientation of this thesis requires the concentration on aspects that show how power is still in place in this decision-making context.

Student representatives felt that they are equally responsible for this, following the procedure and being as expeditious as possible. Such actions entailed the punctual notification for agenda additions and the distribution of relevant material. However, it was also stressed that their primary objective is to prioritize the students' welfare, making possible to even "sacrifice" a good working environment if they consider it necessary. Furthermore, interaction in such boards, as it was noted by some of the participants, is affected by the personal style and character of individuals, which confirms the importance of *biography* in HE governance as Carey (2013a) has highlighted.

#### *6.1.1.i The role of discussions' topics*

Students' role is widely – and almost solely – linked to the educational dimension of HE, as they are expected to commit their time and resources in familiarizing and deepening their understanding on their selected disciplines. Such an approach seems to influence students' contribution in decision-making in LU's context. Looking into the student representatives' perspectives on the interaction among them and others, it becomes evident in our data that students' participation in LU's governance is highly determined by the discussed topics. It should not be forgotten that the scope, purpose and decision-making power of some boards and committees are rather limited and the themes are usually preset, hindering major divergences. Therefore, the responses received might be restricted by this fact too, as the interviewees were asked to provide information based on their personal experiences.

As the variety of topics and decisions made is rather broad, ranging from syllabi and literature lists to promotion of teaching staff and strategic budget planning, students find themselves facing a plethora of matters that supersede their existing knowledge and academic interest. However, as the traditional student role kicks in, student representatives seem to be listened more often when it comes to educational matters, in which they are supposed to be directly involved, be the immediate recipients of relevant changes and have the moral and legal right to be heard. All the responders, reacting to interview questions regarding the areas where they feel that their opinions have more weight, reported that they are mostly capable of influencing education-related outcomes. On the one hand, the student representatives are expected to supply the boards with feedback and comments on matters regarding education, illustrating the students' perceptions and reactions. As a result, such information is welcomed, commencing discussions while taking such remarks into consideration. On the other hand, the students themselves appear to have more interest in educational questions, often connecting it to their personal understanding of what student representation entails. For example:

*Rep7: (...)all things aren't important for the students. And we are usually not that active during those topics. Because then we are not representing the students. If the topic doesn't concern the students, then it's kind of weird if we try to give student representation in a topic that is not needed. But I would say that our opinions always are heard.*

The student representatives tended to separate the discussed topics in education- and research-related<sup>25</sup> in the university level or administrative versus student matters in faculty and department level. The students mentioned that financial issues are receiving much attention:

*Rep3: I would say economy gets a lot of attention and equality matters, someone actually pointed that out, that they often end up in the end of the meeting and that is quite rushed through. (...)like equality matters end up at the end of the agenda and then there is no much time...*

This in turn might have a demotivating effect on student representatives:

*Rep1: It's like, for example we discuss economy, we discuss how we should do, because they want to minimize the costs of courses, so then there is a system for the teachers, how they get paid, so they discuss that system. And I feel as a student representative I don't really have much to say in that issue, in that matter, because I don't know how it works and it doesn't really influence me if they get less paid. But at the same time it's part of a bigger thing, that's affecting me, because if they do choose to pay the teachers less, perhaps they get worse and then it affects us. So I mean there are some things that aren't directly connected to the students, but most of the things are, I would say, in some way.*

As we see this representative supports that most matters can be of interest to the students and similar opinions were raised in our data. Still it was further supported that students prefer to focus on specific aspects, which correspond to the wishes of the general student body.

Last, this division between education and research could be understood as a manifestation of the consumerist discourse, as it shapes both student area of interest and the non-students representatives' focus in the discussions. However, in one occasion a responder seemed to

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<sup>25</sup> This division resembles the schema that the State follows to fund HEIs in Sweden, which also regulates the teaching staff's salaries.

have a rather passionate and wide understanding of students' scope of activity, but this was justified in close relation to funding:

*Rep2: ...[students] need to be much more involved in all the areas. They need to be involved when we build new houses, when we renovate, when we do the syllabuses, what kind of literature would be in the education, where should the money go. Because that is all the areas where I have sort of input. Those kind of small things, but also the bigger things(...) I mean whatever, we need to be much more involved, because we pay, the university gets money from us or for us actually, the government gives the university money because we are here. And then I think that we should be able to affect how we spend that money.*

#### *6.1.1.ii Freedom of speech, interruptions and conflicts*

One of the main dimensions regarding interaction in any social background is the capability of openly expressing one's view and the number of interruptions and conflicts that happen in such incidents. The interview guide included questions that requested relevant experiences and the impact that possible occurrences had on the input provided by the student representatives. The data is very promising in this manner, as the majority of the responders felt that they have the ability to express their viewpoints, without restrictions. This aspect enables the students to act pro-actively and not reactively, which signifies that they hold a certain level of power in these processes and that there is space for engagement in decision-making.

In relation to interruptions, most of the students could not recall such incidents and this was primarily linked to solid meetings rules, which prohibits such phenomena, and generally this was not considered as a problem. In the higher levels (university and faculty) this mentality was even stronger, as the meetings uphold a certain formal level and a list of order for speakers is most often used. In the few occasions where interruptions actually happened, this was attributed to personal relationships and not as cases of power differences. Similarly, conflicts among students and others were not reported by the interviewees, but the possibility of some friction still exists, *because we [students] do take a hot stance in some issues* (Rep8).

#### *6.1.1.iii Encouragement and appreciation*

The third subcategory of *Interaction* focuses in another feature that is demonstrated in the communication between student representatives and non-student members of boards and has

been identified in the data corpus. Encouragement and appreciation, despite being different in essence, it is preferred to be presented in combination as they have a similar psychological impact on student representatives.

Starting with encouragement, this concept refers to the examples where student representatives were asked or heartened by other representatives to express their opinions or make contributions to the discussion. Encouragement, however, according to the students, is not taking place spontaneously, but is very dependent on different aspects. First, the opinions of students were asked in topics that are directly connected to education, as it was described earlier. However, this applies mostly at the department level, because at the higher levels the representatives seemed more confident to voice their views.

*Rep5: (...)Yeah, and I voice my opinion. (...)But I think a lot of student reps (...)get that question a lot. Because they don't voice their opinion, I have heard at least, a lot of discussion goes on and then in the end they ask oh so what do the students think? And you sit there like I don't know.*

But some representatives give another perspective, which implies that personality can determine the level of encouragement too.

*Rep2: I am not the silent type, so I am not sure if I have given them the possibility to do that. But yeah, I think there was actually one occasion where the prefect turned to us and was like what does the student think about this? But usually I am ahead of them.*

Besides these, the purpose of the committee may also influence, as the different perspectives for certain matters are beneficial to be heard. Such an example can be a preparatory committee for the agenda of a board meeting.

Appreciation, in contrast to encouragement, was not expected to be reported in the findings, but the fact that some students referred to such incidents necessitated a mention in this section. It entails actions which show that the students' work is acknowledged and valued by other members. For example, some student representatives received compliments for their work in the boards and in one case the student was provided with a reference letter, as a token of appreciation. However, this appreciation may not happen during the meetings, but take place in a context outside of them. Alternatively appreciation for students' work can be lost, if they start increasing their demands:



*Rep5: I think in the beginning I said oh they appreciate what I do. Then I started to put my foot down and say no and then they stopped appreciating everything I did. So then, I kind of lost that appreciation.*

### 6.1.2 Knowledge (gap)<sup>26</sup>

“... the more you learn, the more you can do with that knowledge and the more fun it is” (Rep8). This is the response of a student representative when asked about the motivation for undertaking such posts for several years. This quote introduces us to a rather central concept that is related to power; knowledge. In our data it becomes evident that this factor steers greatly the discussions in the various boards and committees. According to our participants, both student and non-student representatives seem to utilize their knowledge and experience in different backgrounds, with the ultimate goal to elaborate their arguments and put effectively their opinions forward. However, the breadth of the term knowledge results in diversified examples that are grouped together.

Throughout the interviews it was constantly reported that holding a post as student representative requires them to demonstrate holistic knowledge of the processes and mentality of different stakeholders at LU. Certain differences exist in the three governance levels, as university level representatives are entrusted by the entire student population, while in the other levels focus is put more on the faculties’ or departments’ internal procedures. Generally, knowledge is connected to experience and, as result, student representatives that sit in higher levels have usually engaged in such matters for a considerable amount of time, which gives them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with all the different perspectives that are necessary in governance. Students are well aware that they cannot match other members’ scientific knowledge and experience and, thus, need to find other ways to balance this deficiency.

The following example showcases how student representatives feel the need to prove their competence to others, in order to establish their status in the respective board.

*Rep5: But everything is so academic and so much academic words, and it feels sometimes that I am in a seminar, discussing the higher education pedagogics or like seminar about how the university should be covered. (...).And it feels like I am just put in there. And they have so much more*

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<sup>26</sup> As this study examines the interaction between the two groups as being two-way, it is preferred not to present this point solely as a “gap”, with one group lacking certain information or insights, but rather as a phenomenon that certain individuals have more expertise in certain domains, shifting its connotation from negative to positive.

*knowledge and so much more experience than me and I have just to fake it. (...)And also those times I know more than them I really try to show that (...)try always to show that I know things. But it's hard. And I think that it's a game that you learn. If I would sit one more year or two more years, I would know the rules better, try to figure them out.*

Yet, this does not imply that in some cases, students are afraid to put unwise questions, too. Another representative supported that experience in handling and communicating such issues is more important than having a high status, which further underlines the importance of knowledge know-how in such contexts.

The range of the necessary knowledge varies in the different governance levels. On department level, representatives are not expected to have extensive knowledge on issues discussed, but a need was expressed for further knowledge:

*Rep2: So the syllabuses I feel that I don't really get the input that I sort of deserve as a student rep, partially because I don't really have that much knowledge about how syllabuses should work. But also that sort of the teachers come there and they say "oh this is syllabus and this is how we should do it" and then when we maybe raise a question it's like WOW no, we are not going to do that, you sort of get pushed over.*

Therefore, it is supported that the teaching staff employ their academic status and knowledge in order to strengthen or even impose their opinions. Stepping into a higher decision-making, one should also take into consideration wider perspectives and be generally vigilant on what happens in the University as a whole, but also in the society too:

*Rep5: ...you have to have a lot of knowledge about how meeting formalities work. But also how the university works, to be able to see the perspective of everything. Because a department is never affected only by what's happening on the department, it's lots of things that come from above. For example from the faculty, from the university, even from a national level, or even from the EU.*

On the other hand, students seem to be generally quite knowledgeable in terms of meeting procedures, due to the SU's assistance in this matter, despite the fact that the meetings they attend are not always so formal, especially in a department level.

Last, as expected, it is highlighted that the student representatives ought to know students' opinions, which are to be brought forward. There have been some incidents where some friction existed between student representatives and teaching staff in department level, as the latter depended their knowledge in student opinions on course evaluations that are handed out in the end. It is possible when there is a difference between these evaluations and the opinions brought by the student representative, that professors utilize it as a means of questioning student views:

*Rep4: But if we then come along and say no this is the view of the students, then they said to us, yeah but if more answer the course evaluations we would actually believe you more. Not that they didn't believe us, but it's like your arguments would have more weight if people actually answered the course evaluations.*

However, as the interest of the general student body in such issues is relatively limited, a couple of representatives expressed their concerns about directly asking students for their views, partly because of their limited knowledge:

*Rep8: ...that's the two parts [of representation], to represent what is the best for the students and also to represent the views of the students. Where the second one, at least in my opinion, comes first. Because they are not always compatible. Sometimes the students want what's not best for them.*

Thus, still student representatives stand by the general student view, living up to the expectations of their role.

### 6.1.3 Representativeness of student representatives

As it was described earlier, student representatives are appointed by following a rather structured way, which ensures transparency and the opportunity for all the students<sup>27</sup> to be included in the elections. Despite such procedures being established by students themselves and acquiring a legal status, student representatives are often questioned on their representativeness status. In this subcategory, however, the focus is not put on knowledge, which it was presented in the previous section, but comments that target the low participation in student election and the way of anchoring students' viewpoint. Student representatives are

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<sup>27</sup> Only those who are members of the Student Unions and Nations, through the Studentlund alliance.

well aware that low participation can hinder their credibility and there is a healthy critique on this issue.

However, as student representatives are entrusted with safeguarding specific population's rights, they seek for techniques to bypass this criticism, redirecting it to the teachers:

*Rep5: Depending on who it is, you know who is going to have that argument. But then it's quite easy to just reply, (...)if you face that argument from a teacher representative, then OK, how many teachers have you talked to before this meeting? How did you anchor these questions?*

*Rep8: ...questioning the representativeness of student representatives. It's done a bit everywhere at the [Social Sciences] Faculty. (...)We are elected representatives and that's the way the process goes. If they want to change that, they could appeal to the Swedish government. But, in my experience, it's more a question of the teachers' representatives not knowing what they actually represent. The teachers, not their departments, not anything else. But it is an argument that is quite often used. And it is something that I continuously bring up with new student representatives, that I think that you are going to encounter that argument...*

It is also interesting that the more experienced representatives mentor the newer ones in their role, through providing personal insights on representativeness and ways to tackle this issue.

In contrast to this practice which is evident in faculty and department level, university level representatives seem to have surpassed this danger. Meetings in this level are rather formal, but some comments may still be discerned in informal settings, which refer to their representativeness and show an existing clandestine notion:

*Rep6: I don't know if it has been in the [board's name]. Maybe not formally in the meeting setting. But like when you talk during lunch or stuff like that, someone might sometimes slip out. (...)But not in the formal setting. But that's, I guess, if they question us, they are questioning the Student Unions, because we represent the SUs in a way.*

#### 6.1.4 (Dis)continuity of student representatives

Student representatives are appointed for the duration of one fiscal year, which highly affects their work. Besides preparedness and well-grounded argumentation, decision-making requires the development of some interpersonal understanding and – possibly – relationships. As it already pointed, students feel that they have to prove their value. But as each academic year the students' input comes from different individuals, these relationships restart from square one. This was highlighted by the responders, as teacher and external representatives in most cases sit for three years.

*Rep2: [administrative stuff] gets a lot more attention than the student stuff. For sure. (...)partially because the student rep isn't always present, like from year to year. So it's very hard for the Board to say we are consistently going to work with these questions if there is no one there to have that perspective. As I said earlier, I don't think that we can put it on them to always think from the student perspectives.*

Thus, when new student representatives get elected, they usually face rather formulated group dynamics and combined experience. Students in some occasions do get reelected for the next year, which might preserve some of the relationships in a certain board, but the internal group dynamics among the student representatives have been subject to change too. This concerns mostly student representatives in higher governance levels, who are highly dependent on the work of SUs and lower level representatives.

This discontinuity of representatives of course can be perceived as a knowledge gap, as the new group of representatives may not focus on the same issues that the previous group did.

*Rep8: ...it's problems that you discover during your year and that we would like to raise, that always end up at the end of the year. So it's probably issues that are going to be handed over to the people that come after us. And they will have to take a decision on whether to raise them or not.*

Students in Social Sciences Student Union have come up with a solution to this issue, the Opinion Program<sup>28</sup>:

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<sup>28</sup> Its role is to function as a guide for the union's representatives within the different bodies of the University and also serves as a way of answering questions about what the union thinks in different student political issues (Samvetet, 2015)

*Rep5: Because the Opinion Program gives everything a continuity. If a student rep comes one year and say this and that and the next year says the complete opposite, we won't get any respect. And also you are chosen because you are to represent the voice of the students. And that's the Opinion Program.*

However, as this matter relies both on knowledge in the broad sense and the human relations and dynamics, it is preferred to be separated by the rest of the instances that demonstrate some type of power imbalance in LU's governance.

### 6.1.5 Belief in student influence

The integration of students in a HEI's decision-making structures is usually acknowledged as an expression of wider human rights, giving a social group the opportunity to comment and determine a major part of their daily lives, complementing the notion of students being valuable sources of information in the development of an educational institution. Generally, the student representatives made quite positive remarks in this area, as they felt to be trusted by other representatives and that their contribution mattered for the work of the respective boards. Such beliefs were deduced from actions of different people:

*Rep4: It's a very easy board to work with, they have all been cooperative and they've shared many of the same views as we do. And they've also tried to see it from our perspective. And also help us when we might not have the insight that they have...*

*Rep7: And our meeting president is very good in keeping up the meeting rules, that everyone respect them. And he is very interested in making students feel comfortable and feeling that we are part of the meeting.*

Such examples show that students' opinions are welcomed by the majority, but this viewpoint is not necessarily shared by all non-student representatives in LU's governance, affecting the acceptability of and communication with student representatives. It was evident that students hold strong opinions in favor of their inclusion in governance, which often was the cornerstone of their motivation behind becoming representatives, which does not necessarily apply for non-student members though:

*Rep3: ...it's easy to say who are interested in student opinions and who are not. And the ones that are, I think we have a good relationship and that they*

*value our opinions. And those that don't like students, they don't talk to us. And that during meetings, when we say something or ask something, those people are in different ways making some kind of remark that they don't think that's important or they think it's bullshit or childish. But it's like in a nice manner (...)I don't think that anyone sees it, but we can tell, me and [other representative's name], yeah like that person is always making that kind of comment. (...)And others are like oh that is a good question, we should look into that.*

*Rep6: ...there is probably one or two people in the [board's name] that don't understand why do they have to be students in the [board's name], probably. But I think the overall perception is that the [board's name] can only benefit from having us there, I guess. But one thing is for example, other people on the board don't really know how much we know sometimes. (...)The common [external] representatives can just like say something and that's not accurate. And then we know that that's not accurate, I think that sometimes they think less of us.*

As it is visible, the cases are not clear-cut and different perspectives co-exist in the same board, preventing the identification of certain norms. Last, a noteworthy relevant example from the collected data reveals that student and teacher representatives share a certain belief or duty towards the university itself:

*Rep9: ...the teachers and the students have a different responsibility for the university, it feels more like it is OUR university, and external are more advisory. So we try to keep them for not making any bad decision for our university.*

Therefore, a common conviction led to an unofficial cooperation between students and teachers, which conclusively shows the value of student influence in governance.

### **6.1.6 Connection to Degrees of participation**

Power expression among two groups can take various forms, as it was depicted in the examples above. With the information provided, an initial evaluation of the governance at LU can be made, in regards to the Degrees of participation by Bartley et al. (2015). Students have the legal right to participate in equal terms to non-student governing members, a right which

is complemented by a student-friendly institutional culture. Therefore, student participation at LU's decision-making successfully fulfills the requirements of the first two Degrees (Manipulation and Censure). From that point on the determination of a specific Degree becomes more complicated and slight diversions might be identified in the three levels of governance. Yet, a shared characteristic is the fact that student representatives are elected either directly or indirectly by the general student population, which prevents the appointment of specific individuals by the academic staff in these positions of trust (avoiding the Degree of Neutralization).

Looking into the differences, university-level student representatives generally enjoy the respect of their non-student colleagues, given substantial space for making contributions in various topics and their representativeness is not questioned. In contrast to them, faculty and department level representatives are likely to receive comments on their work, which is also somehow constrained by the students' interests, knowledge, beliefs and electoral processes. However, they are still participating in governance with their opinions taken highly into consideration, especially in education-related subjects. Conclusively, one can argue that student participation is generally manifested with the same Degree, that of Joint Participation, where negotiations between the students and those in power take place. Nonetheless, it should be again highlighted that the topic at hand is crucial for the determination of the Degree of participation. Joint participation is accurate mostly in the cases that concern education matters, while in other issues students acquire a more advisory role, leaning towards the Consultation Degree. Nonetheless, achieving this level of student participation in governance is rather promising and showcases how much positive appreciation students' influence receives at the context of LU.

## **6.2 The impact on student representatives' input**

The second overarching group includes the outcomes of the instances of power relations that were described earlier. Coming as a natural continuation to the findings from the data corpus, the interest here is put on how the aspects, that showcase certain tendencies of different stakeholders, have shaped the ways that student representatives orchestrate their actions while participating in decision-making in the LU context. In this section the focus lies exclusively on how students manage to overcome the obstacles that accompany them in the meetings of the various boards. In this effort, a variety of techniques are employed in order to harmonize their effectiveness and optimally neutralize personal or structural shortfalls.



### 6.2.1 Negotiation and diplomacy

The most noticeable dimension on how student representation is configured taking into consideration the different actors and other contextual clues concerns the adoption of certain strategies and standpoints, in order to mediate more effectively the students' opinions. The majority of participants supported that an intermediate stance is essential for being efficient. Such cases were described as “diplomacy” and “humility”, describing how students should know when to push and when to hold back. One responder portrayed the environment of board meetings as a game of politics:

*Rep5: They are really polite, like they wouldn't be like that's nothing, or they would always, if I say something, everyone would nod. But then they are also rhetorical so I don't know how much it is. Sometimes I feel like they don't reply to what I say, or something like that. It's a bit like you know, like political, it's like sitting in a room full of politicians. So you have to play the game in a sense. And sometimes I don't know if it's me not playing the game or it's me playing the game, like what's happening. It's hard to kind of read the room.*

Thus, students might experience difficulties familiarizing with such contexts, which hinders greatly the students' input, combined with the annual change of representatives. However, student representatives have been rather positive in negotiating with other representatives the issues that arise in meetings, understanding that middle solutions can and should be met. Therefore negotiation is welcomed:

*Rep8: So I'd say in all of the questions where we have opinions, we are generally listened to. And mostly we do get our way in some manner. Sometimes we don't get our will through fully, but we still get changes towards our direction. I mean it is always an ongoing negotiation. And that is basically the way of the Student Unions in Lund. We are very prone to negotiate certain issues, but that also makes it all the more “impacty”, when we actually say no...*

In this direction, students try to utilize the means at their disposal, by planning certain strategies during the meetings, so they are prepared for expressing their view. Such strategies involve identifying potential allies in the room before talking, and mingling with other members outside the meeting contexts:

*Rep3: I would say that often our strategy is like sit back and see what happens and then, me and [other representative], we always have pre-meetings, so we know what we are aiming at. And then I would say it's a strategy not to speak first and see what people are thinking.*

*Rep9: ...we try to coordinate so we don't talk after each other. So we like spread the student voice out, because it's effective. And during lunch try to sit with other people, so you can talk about, so there are more informal things as well that we do to try to be as effective and to make people listen to us. (...)Yeah, some people are different. Because someone could ask more questions and then the other one comes after two or three speakers and say what we think and why.*

Students could also take advantage of the formalities of the meetings, especially regarding rules of notification, in order to prepare sufficiently by postponing decisions or influence the discussions by through proactivity in agenda preparation. Last, students can impede decision-making as a reaction of disapproval, if necessary:

*Rep8: And we could just formally decide not to sign anything, that would force them [the teachers] to bring it up to a meeting every time, they would have to revise a smaller thing that wouldn't require the attention of the meeting so to say. And also just be annoying. And they are well aware of that.*

### 6.2.2 Equality and Respect

Having already presented different aspects that imply the existence of power imbalances between the different actors in decision-making at LU, it is time to examine how the student representatives apprehend the overall sentiment towards them. As it is supported elsewhere in this analysis, students do usually experience a positive working relationship with non-student representatives, in terms of expressing their views, interacting and being a worthy lever in steering governance at LU. Therefore, student representatives generally feel respected while fulfilling their duties, enjoying almost equal status to other people present. This applies especially in higher levels of representation:

*Rep9: I think lower down, in the university structure, the student representatives have a bit harder to be listened to. **Researcher:** More in*

department level you mean. **Rep9:** Yeah, because they are only students and they only speak for their own interests, in like course. And are not listened to that much. I think the higher up you get in the university structure, the more student representatives are listened to. Because we have a good reputation to always be prepared and have read the agenda and have good opinions and try to take responsibility for the whole university...

Interestingly, it was reported that people present in meetings that lack legal membership and are co-opted to participate, still influence greatly the discussions, either students or not. This seems to be favoring the students as, in the few instances that such cases are discussed in our data<sup>29</sup>, the responders were rather positive for the contribution of co-opted individuals, who often adopted student-friendly views. Furthermore, it was also noted that the topic plays an important role respect-wise, with students spearheading education discussions:

*Rep9: But they [the teachers] can say like oh but we are the ones in charge of the education. You are the receivers, but we are in charge of it, we have more competence. And it's probably correct in some ways, they have been here longer and have a longer perspective. But I think they are the ones that have most respect. And then there are the student representatives and then they are external. Depending on which topic. (...)If we talk about education, I think we would have the top. Because they don't take any decision if we would be against it, if it's education policy. That would be not appreciated. And they respect that.*

However, the minority of the students issue was constantly present in the interviews, with the students providing two different dimensions for this. Besides the minority aspect being perceived again as a knowledge and experience deficit that the students have to overcome, it was mostly reflected in relation to the number of people present at the boards, where students are maximum three, according to the law. As a result, students felt that the dismissal of their opinions and suggestions is much easier and possible to happen<sup>30</sup>:

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<sup>29</sup> It is preferred not to include an example, as none of them can be quoted without changing their content by omitting information that can link specific students, jeopardizing the anonymity that was guaranteed.

<sup>30</sup> An example was brought up by a student regarding a decision that was passed with the clear disapproval of the student representatives, who filled an opinion of dissent. However, it cannot be included, without ensuring the anonymity of the student.

*Rep6: I think that sometimes I feel we are a bit more easy to dismiss in some way. Because people know we are going to have different opinion in specific matters. (...)since we can never be the majority, so it's easy to dismiss something that just the students think, I guess. So you have to make everyone else see the same perspective of the matter, for something to actually go through I guess. I mean we do get a lot of stuff through, but that's just, you have to team up.*

Last, the gender dimension was brought up by a couple female responders, as a feature that may undermine their acceptability by some of their colleagues in the boards. One commented that gender imbalances are evident in the governance at LU:

*Rep5: And also, for me it's a lot about I am a woman and I am young, and they know I am a woman and they know that I am young. So I have to, I feel I have to really show that this doesn't matter. **Researcher:** That's very interesting. Have you felt that the gender is also part of ...? **Rep5:** Yeah, because it's mostly men. And not like, the vice-dean is a woman, but a lot of men, and those times when I feel like they are really looking down on me. I feel it's men. (...)So for me I have to really know, I can't seek their approval. I have to show them that ok I know things and I can do this and they have to back like, I feel like always I have to show more.*

Another responder, when asked if being a woman influences how other perceive her, said that she has been accustomed to such a role, without being surprised for its existence at LU governance:

*Rep6: The harsh truth is that I am so used to it. Because I have never been something other than a young woman, when I've been in any student representative... So I think it's hard for me. Of course I think I go through everything I want to say, like maybe two times or ten times more than [an old male representative]. Because I want to be certain that, because one I am a student, two I am a young woman, and I guess they don't really expect that much from me. So I think that I have to prove myself every time I raise my hand. But I think it's hard for me, (...)I mean I don't know if it's mostly a gender issue or if it's mostly a student versus real adults. (...)But of course I think there is a gender aspect of it.*

These examples show how the wider societal values and norms are also infused in the decision-making processes in HEIs, and more specifically how gender-related obstacles may still be in place, affecting equality among the representatives.

### 6.2.3 Teamwork and collective opinions

It has been clear up to now that student representatives enrich the plurality of the opinions voiced in the decision-making bodies and their effectiveness on passing the students' standpoint is dependent on many factors. Due to the complications that students face, from grassroots to the highest governing body, the importance of collaboration between the different levels of student representatives is considered crucial. Therefore in this section the ways of this inter-level cooperation are being discussed, along with pinpointing the central role that SUs play in this process.

Student representatives generally highlighted the importance of preparedness for their board meetings. Especially those in faculty and university level reported that pre-meetings among them determine greatly their work, where they take decisions on which topics to pursue and most importantly capture the student opinion on the agendas' topics. The university level representatives are rather bound by the SUs' work, as the latter, besides being involved in their election, carry the responsibility to gather student views and grasp the collective standpoint, which is then communicated to the representatives. Similar line of work is followed on a faculty level. On a department level, where students usually have less experience, the students' opinions are reported to the SUs, but the representatives themselves seek guidance and clarifications from full-timers in SUs, in order to prepare to deal with the issues on their meetings. All the students referred to SUs when discussing the content of student representation, having different levels of connection to them though. Conclusively, it can be suggested that the SUs function as the hub of communication between the different governance levels, channeling opinions and problems.

However, the role of the SUs is not limited to conveying facts, but also acts as a type of organizational memory of student influence. In our data, this memory is stored through the full-timers and the Opinion Program. The former, even though relatively young, have substantial knowledge on a historical manner, which is passed on each year to the new entrusted students, thus being able to incorporate such a dimension in their processes and way of thinking. The Opinion Program, representing the collective opinions of students throughout the years, is followed by the majority of representatives, which facilitates their work, ensuring

a level of continuity and convergence among the different individuals. However, without disregarding its value, certain concerns on its bureaucratic essence have been also voiced:

*Rep4: And how I thought I would describe it [student representation] was that I would just represent, as a form of direct democracy, like this is what my class thinks and that's what I am supposed to say. But it has been more of representing the Opinion Program of the Union, which I feel sometimes is a bit bureaucratic, but it's also something that is necessary to keep.*

In regards to inter-level collaboration, it is significant to add that these actions may prevent issues that have been dealt in upper levels to occur on lower ones. Furthermore, this transfer of knowledge between the levels results in the student representatives being more prepared and well-grounded in their opinions and to direct discussions:

*Rep8: [In contrast to teachers] we have a direction for the whole organization that we go towards. So a lot of the cases that concern [specific issue] is prepared in the [board's name], where my colleague sits, she will have then part of discussions and all of that. So I get all of that as a basis for my opinions and continuing the work so to say. But I do think we are quite effective. When we do oppose stuff, it's changed. We do steer stuff to the direction we want it to go.*

#### 6.2.4 Connection to Degrees of Participation

It becomes apparent that student representatives have developed a series of strategies in order to counter the drawbacks that stem from their year-long appointment in these positions. Taking these examples as a base, a second attempt to draw some connections to the Degrees of student participation in governance can be made. The necessity of students to cooperate in different levels can imply that, despite their legitimacy to participate in equal terms in the various boards, there is still a possibility that their opinions may not receive proper consideration. Being a numerical minority also adds to this uncertainty, but, as it supported earlier, efforts are often made for the students to feel included in the process. Certain characteristics suggest that a sense of co-creation exists, as a responsibility shared between student and non-student representatives. This trend though seems to be strong mostly in the university level, where most student experience is accumulated and representatives are respected most, due to their preparedness and years of strong student politics. However, with the majority of student representatives being involved in faculty or department level

governance, where students are not taking leading roles, the structure seems to diminish or slightly overlook the importance and capabilities of students.

Therefore, the reasons behind such a phenomenon are to be traced back to the different players that come into play and the way the whole structure is organized – or Biography and Structure respectively, according to Carey (2013a). Generally the structure is quite favorable for students to voice their opinions, which is related to a strong societal (macro) and institutional (meso) culture, which are supplemented by individuals (biography) being interested in developing and sustaining a democratic, all-encompassing agenda. It is under this notion that students are given the opportunity to self-management through the SUs. However, when it comes to decisions students are not delegated any specific responsibilities that surpass the limits of the unions. This system depends on personal attributes for facilitating student influence, underlining the role of biography. Students are required in most cases to prove their competence and, as everyone, establish interpersonal relations that will enable them to discuss issues in an equal manner.

Therefore, it would be deceptive to suggest that only one Degree of participation is evident at LU, as the data corpus in this section provided mixed examples. Hence, for the cases reported in this study, it can be suggested that there exists Joint Participation in university and faculty level of representation, while in department level representation takes more the form of Consultation. According to the model, a basic element that is required for making the case of active student participation in governance is that the students perceive their role as meaningful, which was not clearly identified in a department level by the representatives, who assumed a *supervisory* and *opinion-conveying* role.

### 6.3 Ups and downs of governance at LU

In relation to the final research question of this study, this section will try to depict and review the main advantages and drawbacks that were identified in the data corpus. The student representatives were specifically requested to share their opinions in the interviews, providing different perspectives in this issue. Some of the representatives were rather positive towards the existing structure of representation, while others preferred to take a more critical stance. As this question is not the main focus of the study but more of an additional remark, the responses will be presented swiftly, without the provision of specific examples. Nonetheless, it is considered important to present them here, because the governing structure as a whole influences the motivation level of student representatives.

Starting with the benefits of how student representation is exercised at LU, the data was focused in four points. The most noticeable and encompassing angle concerned the democratic dimension of governance. The students praised the way that they are incorporated in decision-making, realizing its importance for their education and welfare in general. It was considered a privilege for some individuals to be able to shape their education and comment on forthcoming changes. Thus, students are transformed from passive recipients to active co-organizers of the provided services. The existence of a governance structure was also perceived as a motivating factor for students to engage in such activities, broadening their knowledge and interests. This feeling of inclusion seems to play an important role.

They further pointed out how this schema takes into consideration opinions coming from all different groups in LU, students, teaching and administrative staff, a plurality that ensures an overall prosperity for the institution. As a group that is usually overlooked, students understand that all stakeholders should be entitled to voice their views and that all parties can make valuable contributions to the discussions. Closely linked to this are the good interpersonal relations that exist between the different groups at LU and further assist in the communication and expression of views. The structured meeting procedures that are followed help in the expression of views, as students utilize to their fullest these aspects to deliver versed points. A student also supported that LU has a strong student influence culture which is due to actions that are made which surpass law requirements. However, this was not elaborated more.

The disadvantages of the whole system were also motivated. There was a clear distinction between the effectiveness of higher and lower levels of governance. Despite the upper ones being regarded as the most important, it is the department level boards that can directly affect education and deliver immediate results. It is understandable that wider contexts are concerned more with policy matters, but the structure was criticized of being rather slow. This was pointed as a weakness and a demotivating factor for student representatives themselves, but also as a hindrance to recruitment of new representatives, as the results of their effort materialize with some significant delay. In addition, the research-oriented mentality that LU has was underlined as a factor that allows education-related topics, which are the main interest of students, to be relatively neglected. This poses additional barriers in students' involvement in governance, being required to delve into fields where their knowledge is minimal.

Another dimension that was brought into this discussion was the detachment by the student body that student representatives have. Many of the responders highlighted that there is



distance between them and the general student population and have experienced difficulties approaching big audiences in order to discuss relevant issues. This is further deteriorated by the lack of visibility of the work taking place in the various boards and committees, as many of the students are unaware of their existence or their importance in molding their education and many aspects are taken for granted, as presented by teaching staff. Last, certain personal struggles were mentioned, mostly related to the workload of combining full-time studies and representatives duties, as meetings can overlap with classes.

Examining the collected data, a grey zone surfaced, being unclear to categorize it as an advantage or a drawback. The governance structure at LU highly depends on the delegation of responsibilities into the different boards and committees. This is benefiting in certain aspects the decision-making processes. By distributing responsibilities the members of the respective committee get the opportunity to specifically deepen their knowledge and focus on issues that are under the same umbrella (i.e. educational research) or target specific group (specific programmes). The decisions then are more accurate and are expedited, avoiding stalemates over limited insights. From the students' perspective this also strengthens her position, as ideally the student representative would have to deal with a certain domain. However, there is an evident difference between theory and practice. Students and especially the SUs, which are tasked to mobilize new individuals in representation and gather collective opinions, are undergoing a state of stretch. Thus, the capabilities of SUs are becoming thinner, as more effort is necessary in preparation and attending meetings, which are worsened by the limited numbers of students in representation. In addition, an interviewee highlighted that this segmented authorization might be unable to grasp a more holistic view that is essential in HEI governance, due to the interconnectedness of the various areas. Therefore, this characteristic of the structure justifiably received mixed criticism and requires further attention.

#### **6.4 Answering the research questions**

A reflection based on the research questions that overarch this study follows next, showing how these are answered by the findings.

The first research question aimed to investigate what expressions of power relations are developed according to student representatives, among them and non-student representatives while participating in LU's governance. As expected, power relations exist among the two groups. The traditional role of HEIs and students, with the latter being concerned primarily for the educational dimension, shapes greatly the interaction among students and other representatives. While the cases of students being constrained or getting interrupted to voice

their opinion are missing, students are expected to be active in discussions on education-related issues and the encouragement that they may receive concerns predominantly this aspect. However, if students become surpass this anticipated level, they might even lose appreciation in their work. The gap in knowledge and experience is also evident in specific occasions, with student responders underlining its importance in the whole process. The social statuses become also apparent in comments that student representatives receive regarding their representativeness, the low participation in student elections, and their significance in being members of governing boards. These differences are used to question students' input in the process, which imply that certain power relations are in place too.

On the one hand, students' opinion are generally valued and listened in the boards, contributing in the discussion. On the other hand, students lack a specific way to examine if they have influenced decision-making. It was further reported that certain issues passed without the students' approval, which implies that students indeed miss the power to actively change – or even stop – decisions. This is also linked to the fact that student are usually the minority in the boards, being likely to exclusion, and therefore need to strengthen their cases in order for them to pass through. It should be pointed out that this uncertainty in making an impact was mostly mentioned by department level representatives, while higher representatives who are generally more experienced and take a more holistic view of the situation were convinced that they are important wheels of change. Last, the workload for student representatives is considerable, being added to their studies and, despite given official permission to miss classes, the meetings may be scheduled on inconvenient timeslots for them. However, this is not necessarily the case for non-student representatives, whose responsibilities often include participating in such activities, especially in the lower levels of governance.

Passing to the second research question and the ways that these power relations affect student representatives in their roles, the data provides many interesting examples. The main finding is that student representatives choose a diplomatic stance when putting forward their opinions. This practically means that, besides students being open to negotiation, they are also utilizing different strategies in this direction. Some reported that they prefer to rest their case in the beginning, in order to grasp the room's temperature and identify individuals with similar standpoints to their agenda. As students are required to team up with other representatives in order to pass their opinion, they have developed ways that aim to diffuse the student perspective among the non-student members. Such actions include mingling with other

members during breaks and taking turns in talking while in meetings, so that their work is complemented along the way. Furthermore, students depend highly on the meeting procedures in order to assure that their opinions are voiced and their rights and interests are safeguarded, according to the laws. Student representatives generally develop respectful relationships with others, but some concerns regarding gender imbalances were also voiced by some female respondents.

Students have realized that their power stems from their cooperation and thus focus on building strong connections between the different levels of governance. The structure itself serves towards this direction, as representatives on higher levels require the input and the work done by the lower levels, in order to steer change. This is mostly pursued by developing a strong communication schema among the different levels, with regular meetings and the creation of steering documents (as the Opinion Program) that ensure the whole orientation of the student population towards the same goals. SUs are the main bearers of this activity, having the responsibility to coordinate the actions in all levels, but also guaranteeing that all necessary information is passed not only from one level to another, but also from year to year, comprising the center of students' institutional memory. This multilevel collaboration facilitates greatly the student representatives' work, who overcome the hurdles set by their annual appointment span.

Last, the interviewees provided interesting thoughts on what they consider as advantages and drawbacks of the current governance structure of LU, which comprises the third and final research question of this study. In the positive sphere, students supported that the presence of an inclusive representation structure is a sign of democratic development and preservation of rights that students have. Many were motivated to be more active in such roles due to this system set in place and also its plurality was complimented, bringing voices from all the relevant stakeholders inside or outside the university, valuing the social dimension of this HEI. Interpersonal relationships are also generally good, and combined with meeting formalities ensure that students are encouraged and well-versed in the meetings. On the negative note, however, the whole structure was characterized as slow, as decisions need considerable time to be implanted, passing from higher to lower levels of governance. Additionally, a research-oriented mentality of the institution and the detachment of student representatives from the general student population was underlined, which demotivates and hinders students of becoming engaged in such matters. The lack of visibility of the work done by and personal struggles of student representatives further impose barriers in a healthy

representation activity. Last, a “grey” zone emerged, as the delegation of responsibilities into different boards, does facilitate more in-depth investigation on issues, but stretch the capabilities of SUs in terms of manpower and time.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Connection to empirical literature

Student representation as a phenomenon has been investigated in different contexts, trying to determine various aspects that are linked with it. A small overview of theoretical and empirical literature was presented in the beginning of this work and now an attempt to position this thesis among other similar studies will be made. As this study is an empirical piece too, this connection to other literature will concern similar evidence reported.

This study comes to align with other empirical data that signify the importance of student engagement in HEI governance as a necessity for institutional and personal development. Agreeing with Carey (2013b), power relations were reported by students in regards to governance in HEI environment. Student representatives do face the risk of being questioned about their legitimacy on their roles, as Lizzio and Wilson (2009) supported. In our case this was expressed with comments on electoral procedures and the knowledge that student representatives bring into the discussion. Common difficulties that surround student participation were reported, as the limited knowledge that students have (Menon, 2005) and the additional workload that hinder them to achieve more substantial contribution. In this study though, knowledge was not restricted to what individuals know on specific issues, but also encompassed the experiential dimension and the utilization of meeting formalities, as a tools to strengthen one’s case while in decision-making discussions. Conclusively, these findings were expected, as the relevant literature was strong in these cases.

However, certain differences were also noticed. LU’s structure achieves a rather high level of inclusion of students in the institution’s governance, taking into consideration the Degrees of student participation by Bartley et al. (2010). Generally, LU has more mechanisms in place to ensure that students are cleared to express their opinions and concerns, in contrast to the institutions that were examined in similar studies (Menon, 2005; Planas et al., 2013; Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999). These mechanisms may concern the existence of laws and internal rules that enable students to participate, but also depend on the general mentality of the institution to promote and integrate students in governance than just keeping it in a symbolic level. Last, the consumerist discourse was not so generally evident in this study’s data, as in the case of

Little and Williams (2010), but still such thinking persisted. Some students held a rather consumerist logic behind their opinions, linking their right to engage as a means of compensation for enrolling in this specific, publicly-funded institution.

## 7.2 Reflection on the study and further research

The study proceeds to an end, but before some concluding remarks, it is interesting to take a step back and evaluate the results of this study as a whole, pinpointing some key aspects, illuminate the limitations of the study, and provide some insights for further research, based on this experience.

There are two main things that have not attracted enough attention in the sections that have preceded. The first concerns the stratification of the governance structure in three pillars; university, faculty, and department level. The cruciality of this dimension was not signified in the literature, but it seemed to play an integral role on the representation processes taking place at LU. These levels are so central to the work done that in many cases differences were identified among examples coming from different representatives regarding interaction, beliefs and strategies utilized. Students themselves, realizing the importance of the university level, focused on electing experienced individuals in these posts, ensuring that optimal outcomes for students on a greater scale, depending on passing student-friendly policies and regulations. This trend, however, comes with a cost, as especially the department level where immediate problem-solving actions can be implemented, student representation is weaker and receives less consideration from non-student members. This also affects the recruitment of new students in these positions, as their efforts are not acknowledged by the student body.

The second issue that requires some attention is a contradictive standpoint that some representatives expressed. Recognizing their roles, student representatives followed the general student population's demands, even in the cases where they considered that these claims do not serve the students' interests. It was supported that sometimes students are unable to grasp the whole picture due to their limited knowledge in specific issues, making them precarious consultants. However, such logic may also characterize non-student members that question the contribution of students in the governance of LU. In a same manner, academic staff, who have much more knowledge on certain issues than students, may overlook their students, determined they know best. Indeed, such comments are still probable in meetings, according to the data. However, both groups, student and non-students alike, seem to be conscious about their roles and adhere to the democratic values that such activities support, by respecting each other's views and fulfilling their duties as appointed.

Some thoughts should be shared in regards to some limitations of this study. The first point concerns the choice of Degrees of student participation as the analytical base for this study. As it was highlighted earlier, this model overlooks the plurality of individuals that comprise each Degree and the determination of each one has rather unclear limits. Therefore, the outcome of this study might be quite different with the use of another model. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that this Master thesis captured solely the student perspective, providing a single view on this issue. Further examination, which encompasses non-student representatives, would provide more accurate results on the effectiveness of LU's governance and the inclusion of students in it. On the methodological end, the semi-structured interviews could have taken place more times with each participant, focusing on a different aspect and making sure that the respondents familiarized themselves with the researcher. Alternatively, it would be interesting to complement this procedure with notes from direct observation of decision-making meetings. Last, the language barrier may still have slightly hindered the whole process, as the representatives interviewed participate in governing boards using the Swedish language, while the interviews were held in English.

## 8. Conclusion

This study showed that student representation has several aspects that need to be into consideration in order to determine the level of students' integration in LU's governance. More specifically, the power imbalances might be overlooked in plain sight, but with a closer examination on the collected data, it can be suggested that certain dimensions still persist that condemn students to take a secondary role. Indicators of existing power relations included how interaction is manifested depending on different areas of interest and ways of encouraging students' expression of views. Furthermore, as it was expected, a certain knowledge gap or experiential deficit regulated greatly the input of the different actors in decision-making, with both students and non-students utilizing their advantage wherever appropriate. Students were also recipients of comments and actions that questioned their legitimacy and value in student influence, which stemmed from low participation in student elections and personal beliefs regarding the role of students.

These power expressions, as it was preferred to be called, subsequently form certain techniques of coping, which are developed by the students. As governance at LU was characterized to be rather diplomatic or political, students resorted to being more negotiation-friendly, mostly due to recognizing that the current structure, with them being the minority,

requires them to collaborate with other members, in order to achieve results. Students rely heavily in the solid communication schema that their representatives have among the three governance levels. By utilizing this exchange of information, they have the ability to hold a common stance to steer to a certain direction the discussions and enhance their meeting preparedness. In this effort the centrality of SUs was underlined, as a means of gathering and organizing students' opinions and channeling them to the different stakeholders.

It becomes apparent that further investigation is necessary to illuminate and comprehend the full potential of student representation in HE. Positive steps have already taken place towards this direction, but still certain delimiting factors are in place, that are not necessarily connected to the HE institution, but stem from wider educational and societal perceptions. These links are strong and greater effort is needed to enable students to contribute to their fullest, recognizing their rights and capabilities as young adults.

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## Appendix

### *Interview guide*

- 1) Personal information
  - a. Demographics
    - i. Name, age, gender
  - b. Position
    - i. Title of the committee
    - ii. What is the committee's purpose?
    - iii. Does it have decision-making power or is it advisory/preparatory?
    - iv. Full-time or not?
- 2) Role information
  - a. How did you get elected/appointed to your position?
  - b. How long have you been a representative? What is your previous experience?
  - c. How many other people are included in the committee that you participate? What are their statuses?
- 3) Role conception
  - a. Motivation
    - i. Why have you volunteered to undertake a representative role?
    - ii. How are you personally interested in the work of the specific level/body that you participate?
  - b. Definition
    - i. How would you define/describe student representation/your role?
    - ii. What are the most important concepts that surround SR in your opinion?
    - iii. What skills do you think a student representative requires to be effective?
    - iv. In which topics you believe that student input is most influential, according to your experience? Are least influential?
  - c. Personal development
    - i. How can one benefit from being a representative?
    - ii. How have you benefited in your opinion?
- 4) Meetings information
  - a. Agenda
    - i. Who sets the agenda of a meeting? Can the SR/SU suggest topic?
    - ii. What topics are you working on?
    - iii. How are they prioritized? Is there a preparatory committee?
    - iv. Do you feel that there are certain topics that receive more or less attention? Which and why?
    - v. Are there topics that outside the students' reach?
  - b. How are the meetings scheduled?
    - i. Is there a fixed time for it?

- c. How are decisions taken? (Majority etc....)
  - i. What happens in the case of low attendance?
  - ii. How are confrontations resolved, if they happen?
- 5) Effectiveness level
  - a. Effectiveness
    - i. Have you reflected your own effectiveness in the role?
    - ii. How effective you believe you are in your role?
    - iii. How do you determine this?
    - iv. Do you feel limited in your role by the fact that you have to confront academic staff and people with a higher social status than you? Why?
    - v. How do you believe others perceive you?
    - vi. Do you feel that there is a difference in perceptions/suggestions coming from academic staff and students (you)?
    - vii. Have you been interrupted by academic staff while expressing your view? How often? How do others in the room react in such occasions?
    - viii. Have your motives and purpose as a student representative been questioned in this process by academic staff? Have you been accused that you follow personal goals or are incapable of representing effectively your student body?
    - ix. Have you been encouraged to speak in the Board? How often? Are there topics that you believe that you are encouraged more?
    - x. Is the discussion dominated by specific individuals? Why do you think that this happens? Do you get the opportunity to commence the discussion on a topic of the Agenda or others' put their opinions before you contribute?
  - b. Personal satisfaction
    - i. Has SR been a satisfactory experience? How?
- 6) Cooperation/relationship with stakeholders
 

How often and under what circumstances do you cooperate with

  - i. student reps in the same or other governing body/ies
  - ii. SUs and students
  - iii. academic staff
  - iv. external/other stakeholders
- 7) Advantages of the current structure
  - i. What are the advantages of the representation structure currently in place in LU, from your experience and opinion?
- 8) Problems during representation
- 9) Possible measures for enhancement
  - i. What would you want to change in student representation in LU?
  - ii. In which ways you believe that you can be assisted in your role/duties?
  - iii. What topics would you want to influence more/less?