

Students' Participation in the Life and Decision-making of Seven Hungarian Higher Education Institutions

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In the past five decades, the participation of students has drawn broader attention towards the governance of higher education; thus, the focus hasn't been only centred on the student life on campus but has shifted to the decision-making processes of higher education. Respectively, due to the increasing number of international students on mobility with the increase of scholarships worldwide, a better understanding of the students' engagement is needed to comprehend how local and foreign students participate in university life, whether within the social aspect or within the decision-making processes, and what opportunities they get. Thus, this study explores the participation of students in Hungarian higher education institutions and compares the opportunities given to students. To explore and reveal the existing differences in the participation between Hungarian and International students, a survey was created and distributed among students of seven universities, through personal email letters sent to the relevant student unions. The data were descriptively analysed using the SPSS software comparing the seven universities, and the results showed that international and Hungarian students have similar perceptions regarding the students' participation in the life and governance of higher education institutions, such as the language barrier, the dissemination of information, and time constraints. However, in some other cases, they have contradicting perceptions of the given opportunities. These aspects imply more research on the topic within every university and the practical strategies implemented to secure the available opportunities, reduce the lack of information and find the correct ways to communicate them.

Keywords: internationalisation, international students, engagement, decision-making, Hungarian universities

Introduction

Human growth unfolds at every stage of life; a child engaged in school life enters university with broader horizons and richer opportunities, enhancing both personal and professional development (Willms, 2003).

This participation in the life of Higher Education Institutions is a practice that not only widens the social circles of every member existing in the institution, but it also develops their skills to reach new capabilities and explore their interests. Thus, this engagement deepens the sense of belonging to this community (Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022; Khojanashvili et al., 2024).

Around the 1960s and the 1970s, the participation of students got broader attention after highlighting the focus of higher education institutions on students' voices (Klemenčič, 2011a; 2011b; Trowler, 2010). This shift in focus went beyond just social participation in university life; it emphasised the importance of involving students

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as partners in decision-making processes (Carey, 2013; TTong et al., 2018). In fact, many interventions within the higher education institutions were set up to the co-decision-making such the student's body known as 'self-government, whereby educational institutions can become more democratic and dynamic' (Reddy, 2002, p. 37), multiple committees giving the students more opportunities to take responsibilities and participate in the 'institutional decision making' (Bergan, 2003, p. 1), then develop leadership qualities (Haniff & Daya, 2023).

As globalisation is serving as a driving force behind the internationalisation of higher education institutions, it is becoming a facility not only for access to different institutions (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009), but also as an innovation and a growth for the host universities (Hilal, 2013). With globalisation touching so many levels, as reflected by several scholars since the beginning of the 21st century, such as Rikowski (2002), Yamada (2021), and Zajda (2022), affecting higher education seems evident. Higher education has become more accessible to whole world with an increasing involvement in global affairs (Van der Wende, 2017), thus, with more mobility of academic personnel and students (Sarpong & Adelekan, 2023), being part of an international community may serve as a bigger exposure to self-development as well (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Shiveley & Misco, 2015). The Topics of internationalisation and the engagement of students in the university are broad fields tackled by several researchers across the globe, however, choosing the Hungarian context as a field for this study is associated to the increasing numbers of international students coming from all over the world to Hungary after the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship program was founded in 2009 by the Hungarian government as a way of 'Opening to the East and the South' (Stipendium Hungaricum Programme: Operational regulations, 2020; Study in Hungary, n.d.; Statista, 2022).

However, the engagement of neither the given higher education system nor an individual institution does not definitely mean that the international students' opportunities will broaden. To obtain evidence-based knowledge, we selected seven different universities with a history in internationalisation as they serve a wide variety of educational programs in English and other foreign languages.

A better understanding of the students' engagement can help us comprehend how students are participating in university life and what opportunities they get, to find the good practices and the possible implementations hindering the participation of international students equally in the co-decision-making process of the institution. In fact, university decision-making is an interesting field of research in Hungary, not only because of the recent internationalisation but also because relatively little has been written and researched about this topic.

The study aims to analyse the participation of students in seven Hungarian universities by exploring the opportunities that the students get to participate in the life of the institution. Thus, it addresses the following research question:

- How do Hungarian and international students perceive opportunities to engage in university life, particularly in university decision-making, across the seven selected universities?
- What differences, if any, emerge between these groups in terms of opportunities available to them for such engagement?

Literature review

To understand the topics of internationalisation and students' participation in university life and decision-making processes, a theoretical background is required. Thus, in this literature review, many key concepts are taken into consideration, such as higher education, decision-making, student engagement, internationalisation, international students, Hungarian universities, as they focus on the study of students' participation in the life of higher education. The selected works were filtered and examined through a narrative review to provide a

broad overview of different authors' findings on the topic (Green et al., 2006), allowing us to categorise the literature into three parts, and to have a clear understanding of how the previous research support, contradict or extends our study's findings.

Student engagement in higher education

Bringing people together creates a community and a society, and adding the educational aspect to it, it becomes more than just teaching and learning; it becomes a way of life in which every member plays a role. Hence, with communication and sharing practices, the community thrives, leading to improvements and growth (Fott, 2009). In a higher education environment, the community starts from classrooms, in other words, in the academic life, but it gets spread throughout the existing societies such as clubs, unions, organisations, existing in the higher education institutions, either to join them as an official member (Ahren, 2009; Banta & Kuh, 1998) or to just attend their organised events such as career fairs, community service, cultural activities (Astin, 1999).

Student engagement is a multifaceted construct that encompasses academic, social and institutional dimensions, each playing a crucial role in shaping a holistic educational experience. Thus, in classrooms, the engagement refers to students' active participation in learning activities linked to the academic achievement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Kuh, 2009). While beyond the classroom, social engagement involves the development of meaningful relationships with peers and colleagues on campus (DeAngelo, 2014), participation in campus activities (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1999; Inside Higher Ed, 2024), and a sense of belonging within the institution (Means & Pyne, 2017; Kassab et al., 2024). On a different level, a less frequently studied but increasingly vital aspect, the engagement in higher education governance includes the student involvement in decision-making processes, in representative bodies and institutional committees, which empowers students (Purkarthofer & Mäntysalo, 2022) to influence policies and practices that affect their academic, social and institutional environments (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Thus, outside of study rooms, students participate either in the life of higher education institutions from a wide social perspective through informal groups, or in the governance and decision-making aspects through structured and legalised student unions. Looking at the history of student engagement in the governance of higher education, it is seen that at the beginning of the 1980s, viewpoints in education management started to be reshuffled, and students became part of the co-decision-making processes with teachers (Astin, 1984). This partnership keeps thriving till the twenty-first century with more engagement of students in the university governance, where their voices are heard (Popović, 2011) and are shaping institutional change (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

Advocates of shared decision-making in higher education argue that it is essential to include students in academic and institutional decision-making (Menon, 2003; Seale et al., 2015; Lewis, 2011; Almeyda & Georges, 2018; Zhuang et al., 2022). In fact, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Council of Europe has started reviewing the role of higher education institutions not only as a teaching and learning institution but also as a place where the dedication to different ideologies, such as human rights, skills, knowledge, and values, is crucial. This discussion grows for the purpose of improving higher education in Europe with more emphasis on the engagement of students in university life in general and in its governance through student government organisations or student unions (Bergan, 2004).

With more focus on the engagement of students in university life and their crucial participation in the university governance, the students became recognised as stakeholders, bringing experience and improving the excellence of the outcomes as well as the effectiveness of their institutions. Thus, acknowledging this role, higher education institutions – and in some cases on a national level – created guidelines for such stakehold-

ers to help with the implementation and regulate the practices (Shahabul et al., 2021). Research by Klemenčič (2011a) highlighted the training and support as good practices from higher education institutions, staff, and former students. In fact, under the framework of the Council of Europe, the European student union has created an overview handbook of how students could lead and represent their fellow students in university governance (Pall et al., 2011).

Robinson (2012) highlighted the relationship between the students and the management level as an unequal and sometimes challenging relationship, which highlights another aspect, the internationalisation perspective and the state of equity and equality in such. Thus, in the presence of cultural and national diversity (Shahabul et al., 2021), an important aspect is questioned about the role of international students at such an organisational level. Regarding this aspect, Menon (2005) highlighted the importance of creating a safe environment and being open for transparency and openness to leadership; otherwise, if there is a lack in such an environment, a lack of trust will be found. The aspects of transparency and trust are crucial, highlighted by scholars since the 1990s and towards the 2020s, with scholars such as Wood (1993), Klemenčič (2014), Tinapay and colleagues (2024), to create a favourable environment free from any type of conflicts.

Internationalisation of higher education

The internationalisation of higher education is getting scholars' attention with its growth worldwide for centuries (Tight, 2022), especially after higher education institutions started focusing on developing strategies that enable active participation in both the global and the regional education systems. Hence, this shift includes building collaborative relationships with institutions abroad, attracting international students through mobility initiatives, and designing academic programs with a global perspective (McBurnie, 2001). Knight (2004) differentiated various aspects in relation to the internationalisation of higher education. She identified three aspects of this phenomenon 3 aspects: internationalisation abroad by sending students across borders, internationalisation at home by hosting international students, and internationalisation at distance by offering online courses with institutions abroad.

Thus, with more students being mobilised for studies as a result of the internationalisation of higher education in the past decade (De Wit, 2020), institutions create an educational environment suitable for students through more international curricula and more exchange programs (Montgomery, 2010). In fact, internationalisation became highlighted as a process for integration on different dimensions, such as international, intercultural or global (Knight, 2008) into education. This phenomenon is relatively new; it started to grow in Europe in the last 30 years, not only with the ERASMUS program but also with the different scholarships and funding.

Relatively, with more mobility and more diversity, students started bringing different perspectives to their classrooms and their environment (Leask, 2015), thus developing and enabling meaningful interactions and intercultural dialogue (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019; Celis, 2024). Hence, student participation became not only tied to the academic engagement but also to the social responsibility (Morais & Ogden, 2011). This cross-cultural exchange ensures an educational experience that equips students with knowledge, skills, and values (Krautloher & Jha, 2025), leading to civic engagement and global citizenship as described by Leask and Bridge (2013).

However, from the other side of the coin, challenges are encountered on a social perspective, being culturally different and feeling separate (Grayson, 2008), which leads to less engagement in diverse life. In fact, students tend to feel part of their society if they are willing to participate in the university life, and this is tied to how they feel they belong to this society or not (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Thus, international students facing

some new cultural challenges and feeling like foreigners (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010; Philips, 2021) lose their sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Preuß et al., 2025).

Several researchers showcased their positive findings in different countries where both levels of participation – social engagement and governance engagement – were highlighted. In Ireland, for example, Darmody, Groarke & Mihut (2022) found that the participation level of international students is higher than that of local students academically speaking, while in the United States, Wang and Brcka Lorenz (2018) had similar findings to Ireland and added the governance aspect where international students get equal opportunities as locals.

However, some researchers found gaps in other places such in South Africa (Aloyo & Wentzel, 2011), in Germany, specifically in the German Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein (Asarite & Wulk, 2015), and in South Korea at the Underwood International College (Ha-yun, 2017) where in both cases international students aren't participating in the governance of their host university, because of language barrier and/or lack of information.

Hungarian context

Looking at the Hungarian context, in 1367, the first higher education institution was founded, and later in the 20th century, higher education in Hungary started gaining international recognition and attracting foreign students (Heckenast, 1957). From 1989 onwards, Hungary's new regime started following Western examples to equalise access to higher education (Rónay & Kováts, 2021), and more modifications took place due to the economic and social influence (Pusztai & Szabó, 2008). Although Hungary has a relatively low overall mobility population compared to Western European universities (Juhász, 2003; Hárs & Sik, 2008), its higher education sector experienced rapid growth following the introduction of the Act LXXX of 1993 on National Higher Education. This expansion was reflected in the increasing number of institutions, student enrolments, and academic disciplines.

After joining the European Union in 2004, cooperation with European countries started to grow (Wang & Wang, 2022), and since 2013, the country has been attracting international students under the Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) scholarship program and promoting the internationalisation of higher education (Dobos, 2017; Tompos, 2019). This scholarship is a government-based program providing financial support for international students and free tuition fees (Tong, 2021). In fact, the SH scholarship program brings thousands of students annually to study for free at the Hungarian higher education institutions, and its goal in 2017 was to increase the newcomers to forty thousand in 2021 (Higher education, 2017).

Researchers in Hungary looked at the aspect of student engagement on different levels, scholars such Bartley and colleagues (2010), Kéri (2020), Gunarto and Hurriyati (2020) highlighted the co-creation in education and collaborative approaches in academic activities, while others like Bocsi and colleagues (2020), and Pusztai and colleagues (2019) looked at the aspect of civic engagement in higher education through organisations and associations as a way of integration. In fact, being part of the higher education community, whether through religious organisations or sport communities (Pusztai, 2015; Magyar Ifjúság, 2016), influences the students' persistence and thus their sense of belonging. With more international students coming to Hungary with the SH program, the country's economy started to reach positive impacts with time due to the inbound higher education mobility (Tempus Public Foundation, 2020). However, while the national economy has caught the attention of national researchers, very little has been researched about student engagement in university decision-making, specifically international students.

On a legal perspective, the Hungarian law throughout the years stated that, legally, any student with an active status is allowed to participate in students' union and student government organisations, nevertheless,

the students have a right to participate and to propose ideas related to the institutional life (Act LXXX of 1993 on National Higher Education, Act CXXXIX of 2005 on National Higher Education, Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education). However, no specified statements regarding the participation of international students in the university governance were represented.

With this existing literature on students' participation and engagement in university life and governance, adding the examples from different countries, including Hungary, a deeper look at the Hungarian context is crucial. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the multiple ways of engaging students in the life of seven Hungarian universities and explore the opportunities the students get, whether they are Hungarian or international students, to find out if any differences emerge between these groups, such as the language barrier similarly to the cases of Aloyo and Wentzel (2011) and Asarite and Wulk (2015).

Methodology

Research design

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine student participation in the life of higher education institutions across seven Hungarian institutions. It specifically investigates how both Hungarian and international students perceive the opportunities available to them for engagement, particularly in decision-making processes. The quantitative approach enables the systematic collection (Punch, 2014) and analysis of numerical data (Neuman, 2014) to identify patterns and differences in perceptions between the two groups. The cross-sectional nature of the study captures these perceptions at a single "point in time" (Creswell, 2014, p. 157; Bryman, 2016, p. 58) while providing a snapshot of the current state of student engagement opportunities across the selected universities.

Population and sample

Although one of the flagships of the internationalisation of Hungarian higher education is the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), it was excluded for reasons of self-integrity since the authors belong to this institution. We chose a complex selection method, considering the geographical and disciplinary balance of the sample and the number of all students (Hungarian and international together). Also, we considered the number of international students and the institutions' role and endeavours in internationalisation. Finally, we concluded to examine seven universities with vivid activities for internationalisation offering a broad variety of English language programs to almost twenty thousand international students in total, with between two thousand and seven thousand international students in each (BME, 2023; University of Pécs, n.d.; Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, 2024; Semmelweis University, n.d.; University of Debrecen, n.d.; Szegedi Tudományegyetem, 2016; Hungarian University of Sports Science, n.d.).

The designated seven Hungarian higher education institutions are the following:

Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem

Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem

Semmelweis Egyetem

Magyar Testnevelési és Sporttudományi Egyetem

Szegedi Tudományegyetem

Debreceni Tudományegyetem

Pécsi Tudományegyetem

Sample & Population

Foundation Universities

State Universities



Figure 1. Selected Hungarian higher education institutions.¹ Figure developed by the authors

A total of 17 students from seven Hungarian universities were contacted and invited to share the survey among their students to participate in the survey. 170 accessed the questionnaire, and after data cleaning due to non-completion of the questionnaire, 73 valid responses were included in the analysis, which yields a response rate of 42.9%. The final sample (the participants who have accepted the ethical consideration and have completed the survey successfully) included 35 Hungarian students, 1 Romanian Hungarian (identified as international), and 24 identified international students (while 13 students were left non-identified by leaving the field of nationality blank). Figure 2 below shows the division between international students.

- [https://www.edu.unideb.hu/;](https://www.edu.unideb.hu/)
<https://www.bme.hu/en/rectorsgreeting;>
[https://semmelweis.hu/admission/about/facts-figures/;](https://semmelweis.hu/admission/about/facts-figures/)
<https://www.uni-corvinus.hu/post/landing-page/about-corvinus-university-of-budapest/?lang=en;>
<https://tf.hu/en/about-us/facts-and-figures;>
<https://international.pte.hu/university/about-university-pecs;>
<https://u-szeged.hu/english/facts;>

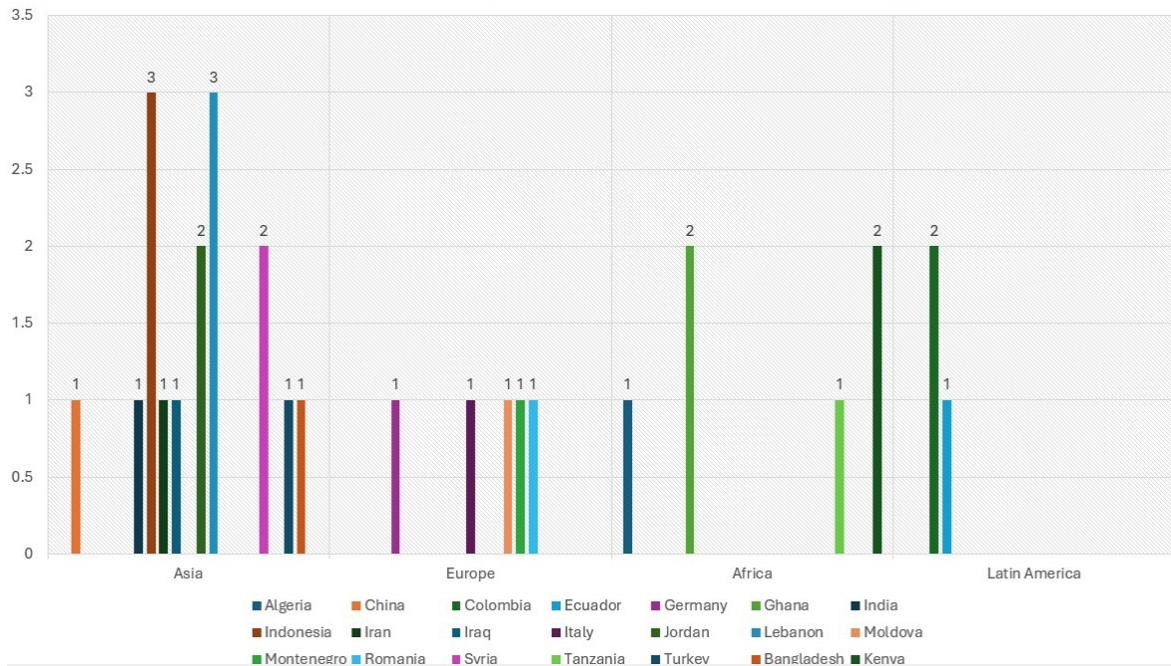


Figure 2. Country of origin of international students. Figure developed by the authors

All the participants indicated in the demographics and background section their age, years of studies, level of studies, current student status and current higher education institution.

The seventy-three participants are represented in the levels of study as nine Bachelor students, sixteen Master students and forty-eight PhD students from different faculties such as Humanities, Business Management, Sciences, Education, Medicine, Economics and more. Table 1 below contains the demographic data of the sample.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
<21	<21	<21
21< <25	21< <25	21< <25
26< <35	26< <35	26< <35
36< <45	36< <45	36< <45
>45	>45	>45
Years of studies in current Hungarian higher education institution		
<3	<3	<3
3< <5	3< <5	3< <5
6< <8	6< <8	6< <8
>8	>8	>8
Current student status		
Full-time	57	78.1%
Part-time	14	19.2%
Others	2	2.7%
Current higher education institution		

Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem	15	20.5%
Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem	2	2.7%
Semmelweis Egyetem	4	5.5%
Magyar Testnevelési és Sporttudományi Egyetem	6	8.2%
Szegedi Tudományegyetem	33	45.2%
Debreceni Tudományegyetem	10	13.7%
Pécsi Tudományegyetem	3	4.1%

Table 1. Demographic data

Although the sample size was small (considerations related to this are discussed in the limitations section), it offered a variety of nationalities, ages, education levels, and locations, which made the analysis worthwhile.

Instrument

In this study, quantitative methods were used to analyse the multiple ways of engaging students in the life of seven Hungarian universities. The ethical permission to conduct the research was approved by the ethical committee of the authors' institute on November 09, 2023, with the license number 2023/499.

The survey design provided a quantitative aspect of the opportunities that the students, whether they are International or Hungarian, get to participate in the life and the decision-making of these higher education institutions. The data sourced on the 20th of April was statistically analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 29.0.0.0 (241).

The survey "International students in decision-making: study in 7 different Hungarian Universities" was developed based on the literature review that showed differences in the practices in different countries and how the language barrier plays a role in it.

The survey design was built around the study's core research question, which focuses on the factors influencing student participation, differences between Hungarian and international students, and perceptions of inclusion in university life and governance. Through literature, the survey items were chosen following established frameworks of student engagement such as Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement, and scholars such Aloyo and Wentzel (2011), Wulk and Asarite (2015), Alhazmi and Nyland (2010) and Philips (2017), both perspectives of which emphasise the importance of active participation in university life and the difficulties that may arise when in a foreign environment.

The questionnaire was composed of thirty-five items divided into questions and sub-questions depending on their answers and choices, and it was developed in four groups of questions:

- The first section (demographics and background) investigated different demographic aspects of the participants. This section was developed based on the demographic items highlighted by Czaja and Blair (2005).
- The following section, "student engagement in extra-activities and student government organisations", explored different aspects of students' engagement: the involvement in extra-activities on one side, and the involvement in student government organisations on the other side.
- The third section of the survey, "student engagement in decision-making", includes questions on the participation of international students in the decision-making of their current university, and the perspectives of this participation, its extent, barriers and opportunities.

- The fourth and last section includes elements on how students see the future of their university and their aspirations for ways of improvement to create more inclusive opportunities for students in student government organisations.

The items in the above-mentioned sections address the research questions by measuring the frequency of involvement in extracurricular activities, student organisations, university events, and decision-making, the structural and personal influences on engagement, and lastly, the perceived ability to influence decisions and access governance structures.

The survey was tested by three colleagues to ensure its clarity, comprehensibility, relevance and conceptual alignment with the original (PhD) research objectives.

The questionnaires were produced in English and Hungarian, as the purpose is to detect the differences seen by students, whether they are internationals or locals. To ensure that only students from the designated universities fill the questionnaire, the first block of questions included the choice of the relevant university, faculty and degree. The translation has been made using an AI tool (DeepL), proofread with the help of a Hungarian English language teacher, and audited by the second author, ensuring the linguistic equivalence and the reliability between the English version and the Hungarian one.

Data collection (timeline and method of distribution)

The survey was formed on Qualtrics and distributed to students who are studying at the seven designated Hungarian higher education institutions.

The distribution was carried out first through official emails sent to the national-level student government organisations asking them to distribute the questionnaire to their peers, colleagues, students, etc., in the designated seven universities. Later, official emails were sent to colleagues and professors either studying or teaching in those universities, and after a while, due to the lack of enough responses, the awareness of the survey proceeded using one social media platform (Facebook), either through personal messages or through posts on different groups designated to share research and support fellow researchers. Students were asked to fill out and share the survey with their classmates and colleagues from the designated seven universities.

Data analysis

To gain an initial understanding of student participation across the seven selected Hungarian universities, descriptive statistical methods were first employed. These analyses provided an overview of the demographic composition of the sample, including distinctions between Hungarian and international students, as well as the distribution of reported opportunities for engagement in university life.

Cross-tabulation was used to explore the variations in responses across key areas. This initial analysis helps to identify potential disparities in engagement opportunities and informs us in the selection of variables for further testing.

Means and standard deviations were calculated to assess the level of agreement with a set of statements related to student participation in university decision-making processes. These Likert-scale items provided insight into how students perceive their influence and opportunities within institutional structures.

Results

The results of the survey have shown that ten students out of seventy-three emphasised their perceived dissatisfaction regarding the institution's communication in terms of student engagement, and twenty-eight students have highlighted their experiences with different notable opportunities between Hungarian and international students. The differences are not only experienced by international students, but also noticed by Hungarian students as well, and, as indicated by seven Hungarian students, the language barrier plays a role in the communication aspects.

Figure 3 reflects the different aspects of the students' participation in the life of their higher education institution. After comparing the responses, the data were interpreted and compiled into six groups, and within bullet points, we added the matching perspectives highlighted by students in open-ended questions, while the bullet points in bold highlight the perspectives that differed between Hungarians and internationals.

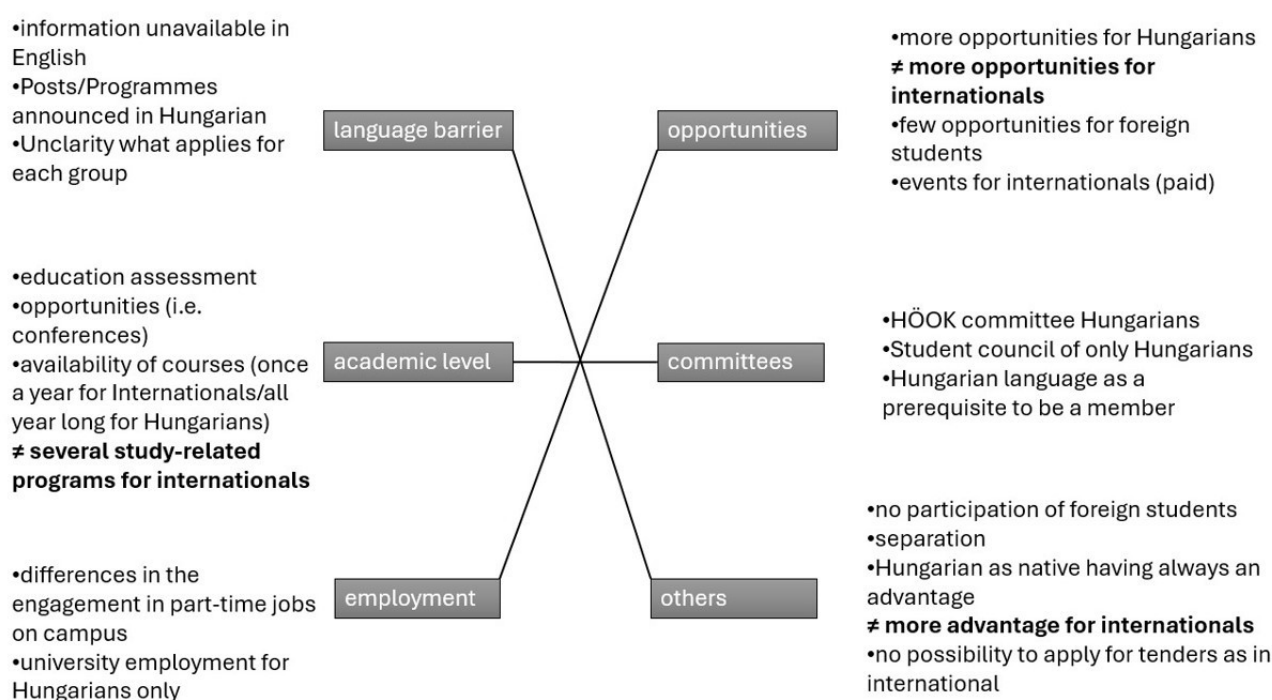


Figure 3. Different aspects of participation in student life. Figure developed by authors

Seventeen students out of the international students' population highlighted the language barrier as well, stating that they feel different at their host university since either the information is mostly spread in the Hungarian language and never reaches them, or the activities and programs are not equally planned.

Only twenty-nine students out of the survey participants participate in extra-activities at their current university such as volunteering (11), research (11), sports (6), arts (2), community services (1), mentoring (8), while seventeen students out of twenty-nine are in student clubs, student councils, student government organisations, and/or student ambassadorship programs.

In parallel, twenty-two participants highlighted that they have participated in programs and activities promoted by international student representatives, mostly cultural programs. On the other side, thirteen students highlighted that they haven't been in such programs due to time constraints, but mostly among Hungarian students (8), they perceive a lack of such activities, or a non-interest. What was recognisable in the answers is

that four international students still see that the language barrier plays a role in choosing not to participate in such activities.

Getting deeper into the decision-making aspect of the universities, thirteen students reported experiencing unequal access to decision-making within their current university. This perception aligns with broader patterns observed in students' familiarity and engagement with formal representation structures.

In fact, while fifty-four participants are familiar with the official student government organisations as a decision-making actor, only twenty-four know a representative of the student government organisations in their faculty, and only thirteen students refer to them if they need help or advice at the university. On the same note, eight students have thought of joining such an organisation, and ten students have been part of such collaborative initiatives between Hungarians and internationals. This disconnect suggests that unequal access may be experienced not only structurally, but also socially, through limited representation and low perceived approachability of student-led decision-making bodies.

When asked about barriers to participation, nineteen students consider that the reasons behind their lack of participation in the university decision-making process are the lack of awareness about such opportunities, but also their lack of interest (7), while twenty-three students indicate the time constraints.

A set of statements was given to students to rate their level of agreement regarding the participation of students in decision-making processes. In most cases, almost one third of the students either do not have an acknowledged answer or neither of the two-sided agreements is applicable. While uncertainty exists, the patterns show that the level of agreement on students' cases in general is closer to being agreed on than international students' cases.

Table 2 below contains the different statements and the frequency of respondents. The level of agreement is rated using 1 to indicate strong disagreement, 5 to indicate strong agreement, and 0 to indicate a non-acknowledged answer. After calculating the means and standard deviations, the results show that the first statement, with a mean score of 2.68 and a standard deviation of 1.74, suggests mild disagreement and a wide spread of opinions. Similarly, the perception of student representation in governance structures was slightly lower, with a mean of 2.53 and a standard deviation of 1.74, which indicates an uncertainty or a perceived inadequacy in representation. On another level, the perception of the students on the university's consideration of their input reflected moderate ambivalence, while the perception of equal decision-making opportunities for international students compared to Hungarians was notably low, highlighting a potential equity gap. In terms of valuing international student perspectives, the results again indicated a limited perceived inclusion; the statement regarding whether international students face barriers in decision-making scored the lowest, suggesting that students tend to acknowledge existing barriers, though the high standard deviation implies significant variation in experiences.

Statements	0	1	2	3	4	5	M.	S.D.
Students have a meaningful role in decision-making processes within your current university.	14	7	7	18	14	13	2.68	1.74
Students are adequately represented in your current university governance structures.	17	6	5	21	14	10	2.53	1.74
Your current university values and considers student input in decision-making.	14	10	4	15	21	9	2.63	1.72
International students have equal opportunities for participation in decision-making as Hungarian students in your current university.	22	10	7	14	11	9	2.12	1.80
International students' perspectives and experiences are valued in decision-making processes at your current university.	20	8	8	13	13	11	2.33	1.83
International students face barriers or challenges in actively participating in decision-making at your current university.	25	7	7	19	7	8	2.00	1.76

Table 2. Statements' agreement. Source: table developed by the authors

In the same context of engagement in general, the results show that thirty-one students find their current institution's mechanisms for supporting students in their engagement activities as effective, while thirty-three students gave a neutral answer to the effectiveness of their institution's mechanisms.

In parallel, for the engagement of specifically international students, thirty-nine students perceive the range of opportunities for international students as poor, while thirty-four perceive it as good.

Going back to support mechanisms, and this time specifically with the student engagement in student government organisations, the number of responses changes again, and the pattern changes to having more students (44) agreeing that there are not sufficient support mechanisms for international students engaging in student government organisations.

Focusing on the collaboration between international and Hungarian students, eleven students perceive their institution as non-supportive of such, while twenty-six students have a neutral answer. Almost the same number of students (12) also see that the collaboration between both Hungarian and international students is more likely not to be applicable in the contribution to the students' government's effectiveness.

While students perceive a lack of support and collaboration, more than one-third of the respondents (40) agree that there is room for improvement in how international students are integrated into student government activities at their institution, and twenty-eight consider that neither of the two-sided agreements is applicable.

What most of the students highlighted is that, in their opinion, awareness is mostly needed for effective participation in the institution and in the student government organisations by enhancing cross-cultural collaboration (53 students), by promoting understanding and tolerance (63), reflecting the diverse student body (50), and improving representation and decision-making (44). This awareness is highlighted as well through languages, cooperation, conflict resolution, feedback, leadership, networking, interaction, and social harmony.

Eight students out of seventy-three highlighted that they know another Hungarian higher education institution's practices in terms of international student participation in decision-making.

Three students indicated the University of Debrecen, and one student named Corvinus University, both of which are among our seven designated universities. Two students highlighted Eötvös Loránd University, one

student highlighted Óbuda University, and one student highlighted both Semmelweis University and University of Pécs, which are also part of the seven designated universities.

Those eight students highlighted the practices and strategies that could enhance student engagement in their current institution, such as improved communication, diverse student committees, collaborative projects, and clearer guidelines.

Another way of improvement, indicated by many respondents to bridge the participation gap between Hungarian and international students in decision-making, is joint decision-making, language support, cultural awareness programs, and mentorship programs.

While on the other hand, almost two third of the respondents considers regular email updates (41 students), in-person meetings (38), multilingual informational sessions and brochures (46), social media campaigns (40), ambassadorship programs (35), and online platforms (51) are different ways for the institution to better communicate the various opportunities for student engagement in decision-making to both Hungarian and international students.

Discussion

Speaking of the student participation in the social life of these seven Hungarian higher education institutions, a notable differentiation is underlined between the different levels of participation. On one hand, the interest and the awareness of such opportunities are highlighted, while on the other hand, the institution's mechanisms seem not to be as effective as needed by students. Similarly to what Robinson (2012) has found, the need for more transparency and more support for student engagement initiatives is very crucial, especially to build trust (Menon, 2005) with international students.

On the level of decision-making, even though many of the students highlighted being familiar with the official student government organisations in their institutions, few students recognise a representative at their faculty to whom they can approach for help or advice. In line with Resch (2023), decision-making bodies may exist, but when students feel disconnected from them, participation becomes symbolic rather than effective. The findings show that this issue is compounded by what Palma and colleagues (2023) and Klemenčič (2024) indicate as representational invisibility, where formal student representation exists, but without mechanisms for everyday accessibility or accountability.

Although the students raised attention to the different levels of engagement, the majority find the time constraints to be a limiting factor to their participation in university life and governance. This aspect reflects a structural rather than an individual issue; similarly to the research of the scholars Shah and Dunne (2022), many students often have to work to support themselves and/or their families, which leads them to have less time to participate in university life. On the other hand, forms of other hand participation are only accessible to students with lots of free time, which risks creating a privileged group of participants, and a system reproducing inequalities (Resch, 2023).

With the students raising their concerns regarding the information being predominantly available in Hungarian language, a hindrance to the effective communication is highlighted similarly to what Aloyo and Wentzel (2011) have experienced in South Africa and to what Asarite & Wulk (2015) have researched in the German Federal State of Schleswig-Holstein, and would create a place that lacks transparency and trust as mentioned by Wood (1993) and Menon (2005). In such a case, students emphasised the importance of language support initiatives, and better integration of international students is crucial. This international finding

aligns with recent Hungarian studies conducted by scholars such as Hegedűs (2022), Khelifa and Batyi (2024), and Karácsony and colleagues (2024).

As seen in the results, there is an uncertainty residing among the participants, with a significant portion either not providing a clear answer or finding the implementations inapplicable. The pattern found is with the tendency to agree more on general student cases rather than specific cases concerning international students. However, from a different perspective, the majority of the students consider it important to join forces and contribute together to the decision-making, especially with the presence of diversity-embracing engagement (Shahabul et al., 2021; Leask, 2015), while getting language support and improving the ways of communication. As supported by the recent European Student Union Forum (2024), students want co-agency in university governance, and, similarly to what was argued by Kéri (2020), co-creation plays a crucial role.

The findings provide valuable insights into how both Hungarian and international students perceive their opportunities to engage in university life, particularly in decision-making processes. The overall pattern of moderate agreement coupled with high variability suggests that opportunities for meaningful participation are neither consistent nor uniformly experienced across respondents. This aligns with the first research question by revealing a general sense of limited engagement, with perceptions ranging from moderate inclusion to clear exclusion. The disparities in the mean scores (specifically the statements related to international students) support the second research question, indicating that international students often perceive fewer opportunities or face greater barriers compared to their Hungarian peers. These results suggest that institutional efforts to promote student engagement may not be equally accessible or effective for all student groups, highlighting the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to student governance and participation.

Limitations

The study encountered some limitations, such as the low number of participants; this limited number of responses might not generalise the context, but we engaged with continuing the research with a further phase focusing on every institution and conducting qualitative research through interviews with different members of the management level to assess each context.

Another limitation of this study is the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative research, which captures the data at a single point in time. As a result, it does not allow for the examination of changes in students' perceptions and experiences over time or over their years of study. Additionally, although some survey items were open-ended questions providing insights into potential reasons for differences in participation, these subjective perspectives may not allow the definitive establishment of causality or generalisable causal conclusions.

Conclusion

According to our findings, international and Hungarian students have some similar perceptions regarding the students' participation in the life and governance of higher education institutions, such as the time constraints limiting the participation, the lack of awareness and the poor range of opportunities given to international students, while in terms of international students' participation, they had either uncertain or contradicting perceptions.

As mentioned in the results, and as perceived by students, the range of opportunities for international students seems to be seen differently, and taking a look at the students' demographics, it is seen that this perception is mostly based on the nationality of students, whether they are Hungarian students or foreigners. For in-

stance, international students have experienced more opportunities for Hungarians, while the latter have observed more advantages for foreign students.

Therefore, for further research, looking at the patterns of each university combined with the nationalities of the students is recommended to select the good practices and understand more about the unregulated implementations.

In fact, as it is a growing interest nowadays in the internationalisation of higher education and in the students' integration in university governance, it is important for the universities to foster this inclusion (Tienda, 2013) and to create an environment that is transparent and open to students to feel the sense of belonging in this society (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco & Swanson, 2016; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010; Philips, 2021).

Therefore, speaking of international students in the Hungarian context raises attention to more research about the topic to better understand the situation at every higher education institution, not only to explore the good practices or the unregulated implementations, but also to create a better space for the students to co-shape together the society within the higher education institution.

This aspect emphasises the need to recognise and address the international students' challenges studying abroad; thus, these findings and further research on the topic call attention to the importance of fostering inclusive practices for university engagement, regardless of the students' nationalities.

Ultimately, as countries, including Hungary, are striving to enhance inclusion and integration (Cerna, 2021), understanding the dynamics of this research offers insights to reform strategies and policies globally, to enhance not only the academic experience of students but also their engagement in higher education institutions.

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A hallgatók részvétele hét magyar felsőoktatási intézmény életében és döntéshozatalában

Az elmúlt öt évtized során egyre szélesedő hallgatói részvétel miatt a kutatói figyelem már nemcsak a campuson zajló hallgatói életre összpontosul, hanem a felsőoktatás döntéshozatali folyamataira is áttérte. A világszerte növekvő számú ösztöndíjaknak köszönhetően egyre több nemzetközi hallgató vesz részt mobilitási programokban, ezért érdemes jobban megismernünk a hallgatók elkötelezettségét, hogy megértsük, hogyan vesznek részt az egyetemi életben, akár társadalmi vonatkozásban, akár a döntéshozatali folyamatokban, és milyen lehetőségeket kapnak mindehhez. Tanulmányunkban a fent jelzett kérdéskört vizsgáljuk. A magyar és a nemzetközi hallgatók részvételében meglévő különbségek feltárása és bemutatása érdekében kérdőívet készítettünk, amelyet hét egyetem hallgatói között terjesztettünk a hallgatói önkormányzatokon keresztül. Az adatokat leíró módon elemeztük az SPSS szoftver segítségével, összehasonlítva a hét egyetemet, és az eredmények azt mutatták, hogy a nemzetközi és a magyar hallgatók hasonlóan vélekednek a hallgatói részvételről a felsőoktatási intézmények életében és irányításában, például a nyelvi akadályok, az információterjesztés és az időkorlátok tekintetében. Egyes esetekben azonban ellentmondásosak a vélemények a rendelkezésre álló lehetőségekről. Ezek a szempontok további kutatásokat igényelnek az egyes egyetemeken belül, gyakorlati stratégiák kidolgozását a rendelkezésre álló lehetőségek kiaknázása terén, valamint az információhiány csökkentése és a megfelelő kommunikációs csatornák megtalálása érdekében.

Kulcsszavak: nemzetköziesedés, nemzetközi hallgatók, elkötelezettség, döntéshozatal, magyar egyetemek