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The participation of university students in local governments' decision-making processes

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Sommario

1. Introduction – 2. Public participation in local governments – 3. Participation of university students through “student offices” – 4. Case study: The contribution of “student offices” to the integration among students and local communities – 5. Conclusions.

Abstract

In accordance with the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, some municipalities have chosen to establish offices aimed at protecting the interests, needs and living conditions of university students within the city community. From a structural point of view, these offices have a collegiate form. They are mostly composed of university students, which are elected by vote by the students enrolled in the universities in the territory of the municipality. From a functional point of view, all these offices carry out an advisory activity to local authorities, while some of them have the power to propose resolutions in local city councils. This article aims at describing some of these “student offices” – the Consulta degli studenti universitari of Pisa, of Trento and of Bari; the Conseil de la vie étudiante of Grand Nancy and of Metz; the Aix conseil étudiants of Aix-en-Provence – identifying, in a comparative perspective, the structural and functional elements they have in common. Moreover, this article will highlight the effects that some of these offices have brought in terms of integration between university students and local communities. Finally, this article will argue for the need of the establishment of similar offices in the “student cities” and for the extension of the power of such offices.

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1. Introduction.

In a recent article on youth participation in public decision-making at regional and local level, Kuligowski stated that «Insufficient participation of young people is a major problem occurring in the field of administrative law»¹. This statement is totally acceptable, for at least two reasons. First, because it connects to the widespread lack of appropriate structures or mechanisms for the participation of young people in the decisions and debates in the field of youth policy. Second, because it can be used to suggest the need for an increase of the institutionalization of activities of young people in local and regional life, in compliance with the provisions contained in the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. The “student offices” analysed in this article are one of the outcomes of this institutionalization, being both administrative offices, specifically municipal offices, and representative bodies of the university students within the public administration.

This article is the result of theoretical and empirical research, and it is structured as follows. Section two examines the concept of public participation (or citizens’ participation or public engagement) in local governments, dedicating few words to the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. Section three explores the structural and functional characteristics of some of the most popular “student offices” in Italy and in France: The *Consulta degli studenti universitari* of Pisa; the *Consulta degli studenti universitari* of Trento; the *Consulta degli studenti universitari* of Bari; the *Conseil de la vie étudiante* of Grand Nancy; the *Conseil de la vie étudiante* of Metz; the *Aix conseil étudiants* of Aix-en-Provence. Section four analyses the *performances* of the “student offices”, delving into their contribution to students’ integration with local communities. Section five draws some conclusions. This article classifies the “student offices” as one of the participating institutions provided for in the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. Furthermore, it argues that in some of the local governments that have set them up, “student offices” have contributed to the improvement of youth policies, with specific reference to integration between university students and local communities. Therefore, it argues that similar offices should be established in the “student cities”. Last, it asserts these offices should always have the power to make proposals to those local authority offices which are competent in making decisions on matters affecting students’ lives. It also states that, in these cases, their advice must be compulsory and not optional.

*This article is based on a report presented by the author at the 2022 conference of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences, held in Rome (Italy), from 27 to 30 June 2022.

¹ R. KULIGOWSKI, *Youth participation in public decision-making at regional and local level*, in *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, 2016, no. 1, pp. 5-16.



2. *Public participation in local governments.*

Langton lists four types of citizen participation, all of them with a different purpose². The first type is electoral participation, which provides a stable system of representative leadership and can be exercised through the right to vote and stand for election. The second type of participation is citizens' action, which provides changes in the society stimulating government reactivity and can be exercised through grassroots efforts of citizen groups. The third type is citizens' involvement, which provides an increased understanding of issues at the government level, through advice in matters of administrative policy and practice. The fourth type is citizens' obligatory participation, which ensures mobilization in times of special need, such as war, and consists in activities in which people must take part mandatorily. This article focusses on the third type of participation, delving into the involvement of citizens in making service delivery and management decisions³.

Citizens' participation is possible only if citizens and public officials acknowledge participation as necessary and if the legal system provides participatory mechanisms⁴. These mechanisms may allow two levels of participation⁵. At a first level, there is "pseudo participation", which consists in informing citizens about decisions, placate their complaints, and influence their opinion. At a deeper stage is "genuine participation", which occurs only when the citizenship is actively involved in administrative decision-making. "Genuine participation" can be hindered by material, structural or institutional obstacles⁶. Since not all citizens have the time and the skills for a meaningful participation, it happens that those who regularly participate do so in their own self-interest and not in the interest of the community. On the other side, not all public administrations are willing to share their power and even if they were, they may lack the time or the financial resources necessary for meaningful public participation. The success of citizen participation depends on the proper development of citizen participation strategies⁷. To be fully effective, decision-makers need to establish an appropriate link between the chosen strategy and the purpose of the involvement and the nature of the issue under consideration.

² S. LANGTON, *The value of citizen participation*, in W. T. CALLAHAN Jr., R. A. BANASZAK, *Citizenship for the 21st Century*, Bloomington, IN: ERIC, 1988, pp. 297-310.

³ S. LANGTON, *What is citizen participation?*, in S. LANGTON (Ed.), *Citizen participation in America*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1978, pp. 13-24.

⁴ C. S. KING, K. M. FELTEY, B. O. SUSEL, *The question of participation toward authentic public participation in public administration*, in *Public Administration Review*, 1998, vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 317-326.

⁵ H. SANOFF, *Community participation methods in design and planning*, New York: Wiley, 2000, *passim*.

⁶ K. YANG, K. CALLAHAN, *Citizen involvement efforts and bureaucratic responsiveness: Participatory values, stakeholder pressures, and administrative practicality*, in *Public administration review*, 2007, vol. 67, no. 2, pp. 249-264.

⁷ L. C. WALTERS, J. AYDELOTTE, J. MILLER, *Putting more public in policy analysis*, in *Public Administration Review*, 2000, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 349-359.



It is now time to focus on citizens' participation in local governments. Nabatchi and Blomgren Amsler define the concept of "direct public engagement in local government" as an «in-person and online processes that allow members of the public (i.e., those not holding office or administrative positions in government) in a county, city, town, village, or municipal authority to personally and actively exercise voice such that their ideas, concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into governmental decision making»⁸. These authors also specify that «The word *direct* refers to situations where individuals are personally and actively engaged in a process, as opposed to situations where individuals are "indirectly" engaged through representatives, agents, or other intermediaries».

Local governments may engage the public in different activities concerning a variety of issues. These activities include policy making, decision-making, goal setting, capacity determination, and implementation evaluation. The public can be involved in the evaluation, the development, the organization, and the delivery of public services, such as education, healthcare⁹, transports, or public safety¹⁰. It also can be involved in the conception and/or allocation of public finances, through a process known as participatory budgeting¹¹, or in spatial e-planning, via some participatory approaches involving the use of geographic information and falling within the concept of geo-participation¹².

The reasons that trigger local governments in the establishment of participatory mechanisms may vary from political pressure from clearly defined categories of people, such as clinical patients or young people, to internal demands from decision-makers. Concerning the first reason, it is apparent that the elections rarely reveal the preferences of the voters on specific issues, which are infrequently contained in party programs. Therefore, the decision-making power on these issues is normally delegated in full to the elected representatives, determining a gap in the mechanism of representative democracy. This gap can be filled by public participation. About the second reason to establish participation mechanisms, decision makers are well aware that participation helps build consensus on complicated issues, such as fiscal commitment. For such reasons, these mechanisms are often set up as an antidote to

⁸ T. NABATCHI, L. BLOMGREN AMSLER, *Direct Public Engagement in Local Government*, in *American Review of Public Administration*, 2014, vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 63-88.

⁹ J. Q. TRITTER, *Revolution or evolution: the challenges of conceptualizing patient and public involvement in a consumerist world*, in *Health Expectations*, 2009, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 275-287.

¹⁰ G. A. ARYANI, T.D. GARRETT, C. L. ALSABROOK, *The citizen police academy: Success through community partnership*, in *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 2000, vol. 69, no. 5, pp. 16-21.

¹¹ Y. SINTOMER, C. HERZBERG, A. RÖCKE, *Participatory Budgeting in Europe: Potentials and Challenges*, in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2008, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 164-178.

¹² S. ZHANG, *Public participation in the Geoweb era: Defining a typology for geoparticipation in local governments*, in *Cities*, 2019, vol. 85, pp. 38-50.



the decline of trust in local governments and to the cynicism among the electorate that may come with it¹³.

Public participation in local government decision-making process has positive implications. Citizens who are involved in participatory mechanisms are generally more competent, more cautious, feeling more responsible personally for public decisions, and more inclined to accept rules that are not acceptable to all¹⁴. Public administrations that allow participatory mechanism benefit from a more effective bureaucratic production, a more balanced and transparent policy making process, and, last but not least, a higher level of consensus¹⁵.

The revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life was adopted in May 2003 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and provides guidelines for local and regional governments on how to pursue youth policies, and to provide the tools for the involvement of the young people themselves. This Charter is made up of three parts, concerning, respectively, sectoral policies, instruments for youth participation and institutional participation by young people in local and regional affairs. The latter part contains Articles 57 and 58. Article 57 encourages local and regional authorities to put in place the appropriate structures or arrangements enabling the participation of young people in the decisions and debates affecting them. Article 58 regulates the characteristics of these structures, establishing that they must be elective and permanent, and allows the creation of additional *ad hoc* structures in relation to specific issues. On the basis of these two articles, "student offices" have been set up, resulting in *ad hoc* structures by which young people with university student *status* participate in the development of policies affecting their life in the local community.

3. *Participation of university students through "student offices"*.

Participation of university students in local governments can be defined as a set of actions by which university students, as stakeholders with specific needs, participate in the decision-making process initiated by the public administration, thus becoming part of a public activity. Although it can be argued that the interests manifested by university students do not belong exclusively to them, such as right to housing or to safety, most of their objectives, in terms of policy and politics, reflect their condition and aspirations. In the last decades some Italian and French municipalities have chosen to introduce offices aimed at protecting the interests, needs and living

¹³ X. WANG, M. WAN WART, *When Public Participation in Administration Leads to Trust: An Empirical Assessment of Managers' Perceptions*, in *Public Administration Review*, 2007, vol. 67, no. 2, pp. 265-278.

¹⁴ A. MICHELS, L. DE GRAAF, *Examining Citizen Participation: Local Participatory Policy Making and Democracy*, in *Local Government Studies*, 2010, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 477-491.

¹⁵ X. WANG, *Assessing Public Participation in U.S. Cities*, in *Public Performance & Management Review*, 2001, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 322-336.



conditions of university students within the city community. These offices have different names: *Consulta degli studenti universitari* (acr. CSU), in Bari, Pisa and Trento; *Conseil de la vie étudiante* (acr. CVE), in Grand Nancy and Metz; *Aix conseil étudiants* in Aix-en-Provence. These offices can be grouped together as "student offices" and provide indirect participation by students in the decision-making procedures of the local authority in matters affecting student life.

The possibility for local administrations to establish a "student office" is granted by national law. In Italy, according to art. 8 of legislative decree no. 267/2000, the municipalities foster the organization of popular participation in local governments through structures of participation. The same article states that the statutes of the municipalities shall regulate the relationships between the municipalities and these structures. In France, according to art. L2143-2 of Act no. 96-142/1996, the city council may set up advisory committees on any problem of municipal interest concerning all or part of the municipality's territory. This article specifies that these committees include individuals who may not belong to the council, including representatives of local associations and that each committee is chaired by a member of the city council, designated by the mayor. Also, this article provides that these committees may be consulted by the mayor on any matter or project of interest to the public services and local facilities and falling within the field of activity of the associations' members of the committee. Finally, it clarifies that these committees may also forward to the mayor proposals concerning any problem of municipal interest in matters that fall within their competence.

In compliance with national law, Italian local governments indicate in their statutes the presence of a "student office", subsequently established by a resolution of the city council, which also approves the internal regulation of the office¹⁶. French local governments directly establish "student offices" and approve their internal regulation through a resolution of the city council¹⁷.

All "student offices" have some features in common. They are all permanent municipal offices. Except for Bari's "student office", which is based in the municipal youth policy department, they are based in the town hall. They are composed by

¹⁶ With reference to Pisa, the establishment of a "student office", called *Consulta degli student universitari*, is provided for in art. 51, par. 4, of the city statute and this "student office" has been established through the resolution of the city council no. 76/1999. With reference to Trento, the establishment of a "student office", called *Consulta degli student universitari*, is provided for in art. 15 of the city statute and this "student office" has been established through the resolutions of the city council no. 93/2014 and 4/2020. With reference to Bari, the establishment of a "student office", called *Consulta degli student universitari*, is provided for in art. 40 of the city statute and this "student office" has been established through the resolution of the city council no. 15/2012.

¹⁷ With reference to Grand Nancy, the establishment of a "student office", called *Conseil de la vie étudiante*, is provided for in the resolution of the city council of 24 April 2009. With reference to Metz, the establishment of a "student office", called *Conseil de la vie étudiante*, is provided for in the resolution of the city council of 23 February 2022. With reference to Aix-en-Provence, the establishment of a "student office", called *Aix conseil étudiants*, is provided for in the resolution of the city council of 2 July 2015.



multiple employees and organized in a collegiate structure. Italian "student offices" employees are students' representatives appointed by the student representative bodies of universities and conservatories located in the city. Bari's "student office" also enlists representatives of Ph.D. students and of graduate school students. Trento's "student office" is also composed by a small number of institutional members. The great majority of French "student offices" employees are students' representatives appointed by student associations related to universities and vocational schools located in the city. These members are joined by representatives of the staff of universities and vocational schools and other institutional representatives. The number of representatives electable for each category is indicated in the statute of the single "student office".

The purpose pursued by all "student offices" is to enable students to optimize, through indirect participation, the city's decisions in areas that affect their life in the local community. All "student offices" carry out an advisory activity to local governments. Municipal bodies – such as the city council (in Trento and in Pisa), the municipal youth policy department (in Bari) or the Mayor (in the French cities) – ask the "student office" for an opinion if called upon to decide on topics that have an impact on students' life. For some local governments, such as Trento or Pisa, asking for this opinion is a procedural obligation; for others, such as Bari, Grand Nancy and Aix-en-Provence, is an option and not an obligation. As stated in article 9 of its statute, Aix-en-Provence "student office" has an advisory function even in matters unrelated to student life. Italian "student offices" perform also a propositional function with reference to the deliberations of the city council (in Trento and in Pisa) or of the municipal youth policy department (in Bari). The administrative measures adopted on the basis of a proposal or taking into account the advice of the student offices are numerous and affect, from various points of view, the lives of students. This article will only focus on how the work of some of these offices has helped integrate students and local communities.

4. Case study: The contribution of "student offices" to the integration among students and local communities.

In these last years, "student offices" of Grand Nancy and Trento have participated to the *iter* of approval of numerous local initiatives. Some of them have contributed to the integration between the student population and the local community.

Since 2009, The *Conseil de la vie étudiante* of Grand Nancy has never stopped working on issues about university students' life, such as mobility, health, cultural initiatives, digitalisation, healthy environment etc. A report of its activity from 2013 to 2020 was submitted to the French Ministry of the Interior on 21 January 2021. The report describes how the student office addressed the issue of integration between



university students and the local community from several points of view. Among those, there were initiatives aimed at cultural integration. For example, during the 2018-2019 session, Grand Nancy's CVE worked with the tourism office on a local initiative aimed at making new students discover the artistic and cultural heritage of the metropolis of Grand Nancy. There were initiatives aimed at social integration: in the 2017-2018 session, the Grand Nancy's CVE worked on the creation of a web space dedicated to student information. There were initiatives aimed at job integration: in the 2017-2018 session, Grand Nancy's CVE worked on the job integration of students and their inclusion in the economic tissue of society. In light of this, the *Conseil de la vie étudiante* of Grand Nancy is an example of virtuous "student office" and has been taken as a reference point by the *Conseil de la vie étudiante* of Metz, which has been established recently¹⁸.

The activities carried out by the *Consulta degli studenti universitari* of Trento is contained in the report that, every year, the President of this "student office" must submit to the mayor and to the city council of Trento. The report dated 31 January 2022 contains numerous initiatives, including initiatives to promote integration between students and the local community. During the first months of 2020, the CSU of Trento decided to focus its energies on the theme of the students' nightlife in Trento. It proposed a change to the "municipal regulation on the coexistence of residential functions and economic activities", which was subsequently approved. It proposed to give more importance to the users of the services offered by the nightlife of Trento, namely the students and the local community. In addition, it proposed to transform a square, which was regarded as dangerous (Piazza Dante), into a meeting point between students and the local community. Subsequently, Trento's CSU proposed to carry out the most attractive university lessons of the different degree courses in the streets and squares of Trento, so that citizens who are not enrolled in the university could also benefit. Finally, this "student office" has made some proposals within an act of planning youth policies, called "*Piano giovani di zona Trento*". Among these, the most relevant is called "*Trento si popola*" and consists in offering musical, creative and artistic performances in the streets and squares of the city, in the evening hours to students and the local community.

5. Conclusions.

"Student offices" are an excellent means of indirect institutionalized participation of the young people with the *status* of university students in the decision-making process of local governments. In accordance with Articles 57 and 58 of the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, such offices are part of the internal structure of the deciding public administration

¹⁸ This "student office" has taken office on 7 June 2022.



and hold competences directly attributed to them by law and municipal statutes. Any decision of the local government affecting the life of university students passes through the screening of student offices or is proposed by the same offices. In this way, the quality of these decisions is superior as well as the consensus amongst their beneficiaries. The contribution made by the student offices of the cities of Grand Nancy and Trento to the integration of the student population and the local community is proof of this. In light of this, the establishment of a "student office" in the "student cities" is not only desirable, but also recommended.

In addition, this article has shown that "student offices" have a consultative power and a propositional power in decisions made by the local government affecting the lives of students. However, the advice given by the "student offices" should not necessarily be required and some of these offices do not have the power to propose administrative decisions within the governing bodies of the local governments. Local authorities are therefore free to disregard the opinions of "student offices". In light of this, local authorities should be obliged to seek the advice of "student offices" when making a decision affecting the lives of students, as well as establishing a decision-making procedure in the presence of an initiative lodged by them with the governing bodies.