

Student engagement and quality assurance in Swedish higher education

— Focusing on students' experiences in student unions

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This research seeks to depict student engagement through the lens of students themselves by focusing on their personal narratives derived from their experiences as student representatives in student unions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants from two universities in Sweden and the data were collected and analyzed based on the thematic analysis of Riesman's narrative analysis. The analysis shows a variety of participants' narratives and yet they also have a common which is based on the democratic values that Swedish society has. The research methodology that empowers participants to autonomously share their own narratives allows this study to portray the diverse and multifaceted experiences that students encounter when serving as student representatives.

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- 1 Introduction

There have been increasing discussions about quality assurance in higher education based on students' perspectives mainly in European countries. According to the European University Association, quality assurance processes in higher education are rapidly evolving, and students are increasingly playing a significant role in these processes.¹⁾ Especially in northern Europe, the idea of considering students as partners was established quite early while there are the ideas of considering them as disciples and customers.²⁾ When students are seen as partners with instructors, they gain the right to engage in university decision-making while also shouldering a duty to collaboratively support, evaluate, enhance education, and take collective responsibility for its outcomes.³⁾

The previous research revealed that the student

representative role that is led by the student unions can create a positive effect that lets students be involved in learning and teaching decisions since the unions are managed and controlled by students themselves and hence, they are the initiators of co-creation between students and universities.⁴⁾ Moreover, it has been suggested that present policy and research literature often oversimplify and downplay the intricacies and disagreements surrounding assertions made about student voice and engagement.⁵⁾ For example, the previous research about quality assurance and student engagement in higher education is about the contents of systems and laws and their discussion^{6) 7) 8) 9)} and the students' feedback based on questionnaires¹⁰⁾. They do not focus on student unions, but they usually investigate university students in general. Research in the realm of participation has generally prioritized a focus on outcomes, assessing success based on factors such as productivity or perceived improvements in quality.¹¹⁾ It may stem from the need to increase the number of members in student unions, as membership in the union has not been obligatory for students since 2010. The number of students has decreased, and nowadays, the participation rate is below 50%.¹²⁾ However, prior research also suggests the need for further investigation in higher education to explore student participation from the perspective of students' experiences.¹³⁾ There is related research conducted by Lizzio & Wilson (2009)¹⁴⁾ in Australia which asked students in student unions questions based on specific prepared themes and evaluated their roles numerically, but it does not let students describe their experiences and rather asks questions based on the researcher's perspective.

Therefore, this research aims to describe student engagement from students' perspective by focusing on their narratives based on their experiences as student representatives. This research conducts interviews with the students in the student unions of two universities in Sweden. In Sweden, the law ensures student engagement. The Swedish Higher Education Act enacted that students have the right to exercise influence over the courses and study programs of higher education institutions.¹⁵⁾ The same law also stipulates higher education institutions to allow the establishment of democratic student unions for monitoring and participating in the development of courses and programs.

In this paper, the term "student engagement" will be used as an inclusive expression to encompass all aspects of

proactive student involvement even though there are some terms that refer to similar topics such as student influence, student participation, student empowerment, and so on.

2 Methodology

The framework of this paper's data collection and analysis is a thematic analysis of Riesman's narrative analysis.¹⁶⁾ The thematic analysis emphasizes the "what" that is being conveyed, rather than the "how," "to whom," or "for what purposes" and thus disregards aspects such as delivery, language structure, and interview dynamics. The analysis removes unnecessary elements to transform spoken words into readable form, treating language as a tool rather than a primary subject of study. The researcher develops a set of themes, influenced by their prior and emergent theories, the concrete objective of their investigation, the data they have collected, political affiliations, and other relevant factors, which are then used to interpret the data. The thematic analysis is suitable for this research since the main focus is to analyze the contents of participants' narratives as student representatives to discuss student engagement in higher education as a main theme.

Moreover, the narratives reveal broader impacts beyond individual significance, fostering social identities, group affiliation, and collective efforts. Thus, this approach connects narratives to larger contexts such as social structures, power dynamics, and hidden inequalities. This paper relates to the power relationship between students and the university and the contexts surrounding them. Since narrative interviewing aims to uncover the significance of multiple stories in a participant's life, extracting valuable insights about their experiences, this approach is supposed to rely on following the participant's guidance to foster their self-expression.

In this paper, four people who have experience in the student union as student representatives at Uppsala University and Stockholm University are participants in the interviews. Stockholm University was founded in 1878 as a college and granted the authority to confer degrees in 1904 by being funded by the town council¹⁷⁾. In 1960, the college achieved university status and became a public institution. Currently, the university enrolls over 27,000 students. Uppsala University is the oldest university in Sweden which was founded in 1477 with a close relationship with

the church¹⁸⁾¹⁹⁾. The university has 50,000 students²⁰⁾.

The form of sampling is snowball sampling so that participants can feel closer to the interviewer since they are expected to talk about personal experiences. The type of interview was a semi-structured interview, and it was conducted from April to August 2023. Each interview was around 90 minutes and done at a place with participants' preferences so that they feel comfortable sharing their narratives. This research includes having participants read the stories and make any necessary revisions after the analysis process. This process enhances the validity of the research since transcriptions exclude the interviewer's existence, but sometimes it makes analysis incomplete in thematic analysis.

In order to fit the objective of this research, the main theme of the research is student engagement in higher education, and it is analyzed based on three sub-themes: the relationship between students and the university, motivations of students, importance of student engagement.

The procedure was approved by the University of Tokyo's ethics review committee, and participants signed consent forms with detailed explanations before interviews. Participant names are anonymized as A to D based on interview dates.

3 Narratives from four participants

A Participant A

Participant A was studying at Uppsala University in the teaching program in Swedish and social science. She used to be a member of the student union for teacher-students for a year until she graduated from the university in June 2023. She was the vice chair of the union. She has been studying in the Swedish education system for her entire life. She started her career as a teacher in Norway in August 2023.

1 The intertwined relationships between students and the university

Participant A positions the student unions as "the middle hand between students and the university", and they were "trying to... take their (students') opinions and just pass it along". She points out the intertwined relationship between students and the university. On one hand, she feels that the relationships are good. For example, she had an experience of doing delivering presentations "with things you are bad at... to all of the teachers" and she felt it "surprising that... they listened and so understanding".

On the other hand, students and the university can threaten each other. Her union is now facing a "big problem" with the faculty, and they are thinking of publishing about it in the "union for all teachers" in Sweden. She thinks the university "got scared" because of this. The issue involves placing students for their teaching practice in schools. She explained that "people have been getting their placements kind of like one day before or two days after the practice begins" even though the university has "guidelines that say... two weeks before your practice starts you will know which school". Moreover, she felt that "so you lied?" to the university because she asked "the dean and everyone" at the meeting about the placement and they said that they "have no problems at all", but the students "got the list one week later and was 26 students... who didn't have a placement yet". She problematizes this because "the thing is the teaching program is so theoretical" and "we feel like we are missing out on really big and important... teaching moments for us". Therefore, the student unions "took out the big guns" by collaborating with their parent organization called Uppsala Student Union and they "connected... the principal of all of Uppsala University". Currently, she wants to publish the problem, but the Uppsala Student Union prioritizes "discussion" more than "exposing them".

It is also scary for the student representatives to give critiques about the university because they are students, and they get grades from the professors. She says that "some of our board members felt they couldn't really say anything because they have those professors right now". Thus, she wants to keep apart their role as students and student representatives because otherwise "it's not clear that we are both students who just want to be a teacher someday, we aren't always in our (student unions') uniform". She does not want professors to think that "we'll just grab you (students) by the arm and talk to you whenever not just the meetings".

2 Her insights into society and Swedish democracy

She expresses herself that "I am a person who actually loves being involved and engaged" and she raised her experience involving the Red Cross as an example. She joined the student union because her friend asked her for help. She reflects that her interest in engaging in the student union grew in high school because she "went to a social science program". Through studying in the program, she "got the words and... understood a bit more about" how the problems in the world work such as poverty, racism, and

sexism. And she “started to think...why don’t we do this solution?”. Moreover, she also analyzes that “I have always had the chance to improve or affect my schooling and everything” in her childhood and she called it “a Swedish democratic thing” and explained that “it is in our curriculum I was raised in it”.

3 School as a small form of democracy and students as employees

She reflected that “what I’m doing here at the university, or I could do when I was younger, that is like, small forms of democracy... you are trying to voice what you think and change about those who are in charge”. As a teacher, she indicated that “when I get to hear their (students’) opinions, I can make it easier for them to reach their goals” and “I think it’s the same here” in the university.

Despite the similarities between higher education and the other lower levels of education, she also explained the aspects of students as employees. According to her, “In Sweden... we see that when you’re studying full time at university, is your job. That’s why you get... your student loans ... so we have the rights that any employee does... you get to voice your opinions... to improve the things that need to be improved”.

B Participant B

Participant B studied at Stockholm University until the Autumn semester of 2022 in the Department of Asian Studies, Middle East, and Turkish Studies. He has been a member of the student council of the department from September 2019 to December 2021. He was also a member of the Humanity Faculty Council in 2023 until he graduated in January. His family has international backgrounds in several countries including Sweden. He was born in Sweden but lived and studied in several countries. He studied in the Swedish school system for only two years in elementary school and at university.

1 Day-to-day conversations and the student’s sense of being heard

Participant B suggested about the student union and the university that “all in all, the collaboration or the relationship was positive”, and that “we were sometimes happy about the ... position and the amount of power that we were given, sometimes we were not over, like unhappy about the final result of whatever measure was taken”. When the students were unhappy about the result, he

analyzed that “it was given a lower priority than ... we were giving it”. For example, the student council in his department claimed that they want a “manga room” where students could just sit down, study, or read... manga books” but the university says that “that would not really be a priority for department... since it’s more of a leisure thing”. They also asked the university for accessible facilities for “wheelchair” and “blind people” at the campus, but the university responded that “the problem will be solved because it would be a new place” when we move to the new campus next year. He does not like their response because it sounds “like it was already planned” by the university.

In those cases, the university “has the final word”, because the students don’t have equal power to the university. He explained that “in the process of making a decision, students have one or two votes... let’s say for like an illustrative example, a total number of votes is eight or ten ... it’s not a fifty-fifty”. He doesn’t think that “the law regarding student representation asks for there to be a fifty-fifty... I guess it’s just like completely correct, according to the law”. Therefore, what makes him feel the student’s opinions are respected is a day-to-day conversation. He said that “I felt that in the day-to-day conversations, students were being heard or at least felt that they were being heard and that they did have an impact on making decisions”.

Moreover, he doesn’t think the opinions of the students are always better than the ones of the university. He remarked that neither “a student that is too much on the combative or fighting side” nor “a student that is not going to put forward the interests of students in general” would “be completely fit to represent students’ interests because we need to have a bit of a middle point”.

2 His background and view of Swedish democratic society

He likes “the more participative version of democracy that there is in... Swedish society” and it motivated him to work on the decision-making process in the university. He also reflected that “it feels like very good training for possible future jobs” because he wants to “work in some decision-making process at some level” in his future. He also enjoyed meeting people in “a little small community of politics nerds” who are interested in student representation. That’s why he feels “I’m working for a greater good” and “I’m doing something useful with my free time”.

His background is connected to his view of democracy.

He was originally from a country where “it’s common to scold kids by... hurting them a bit which in Sweden is very very illegal” and “that’s a good example of how... I want this to be different”. He reflected that “I’ve always been a very opinionated kid” and this is why he thought “I will change the world”.

3 Day-to-day democratic work prevents students from being harmed

He explained that “both respecting and ensuring the continued existence of such mechanism of citizenry representation... made by students... is valuable for the advancement of a democratic society”. He thinks the student representations are democratic because “students feel that they are part of... decision-making power... by being part of the continuous work and have them more boring or more just ... ground making work, so like the work that just keeps the fundamental parts of the system running”. Moreover, the student representation is a democratic way “of continuous communication between the university and the students, which... makes students feel like the university system is a more of a friend than an opponent,” because both students and the university have same goals. For him, “the most important thing is to avoid that decision that is made by university harms students” and “this kind of like participating in the day-to-day work and checking for possible negative consequences” and “avoids problems becoming big”.

C Participant C

Participant C is studying at the teacher training program and has been a member of the student union for teacher students for a year. She grew up in Germany and moved to Sweden when she was 10. Her parents are immigrants from different countries. In Sweden, she went to an international school for her compulsory education and high school. Since she was around 13, she has been “a part of the social democratic youth party” in Sweden.

1 The importance of maintaining good relationships between the students and the university

Participant C stresses the importance of keeping the university and the students “on good foot so that they can actually listen” to the students because “if we feel that our work doesn’t really give any payback, that makes people less and less interested in actually being a part of a student union”. She sometimes feels that the university “thinks we

are overdramatic... because we only complain about the things”. She also complains that “when we give... feedback, the university that usually isn’t too happy to hear about it most because they most of the people that we get to sit in these meetings at they’re also our teachers, and they feel it’s pretty personal”.

On the other hand, she also shows an understanding of the university’s perspectives. She suggests that “we also do know that what we want to be fixed costs money”. She also commented that “we have a much better relationship university that we maybe had during more turbulent years during the 80s and 90s” and “right now that I would say we have a pretty good relationship, but... it’s on its way to becoming worse” because the university now is facing financial difficulty. She says, “When you start arguing about... specific things, it is quite easy to forget that we want the same thing”. Therefore, “it’s very important to keep a good relationship with the university”.

Since she feels that “I can only do so much at the end of the day if they (the university) don’t want to listen”, she wants the university to understand students’ perspectives and the students to have stronger power. For example, she says “I almost want the teachers and professors that we have to try to be a teacher-student for a day” by following students’ schedules and attending lectures. She also thinks that the student union would be improved if “people at university come and visit us” regularly to “actually see how the student union works”. Moreover, she wants more students to be representatives because “it’s much scarier for student representatives to actually get their voices heard”. She also dreams of having a person at the university that works to “strengthen our bonds” by both the student unions and the university having people working for student’s interests.

2 Caring for others and being an active citizen

She had first contact with the student union when there was an incident in her program that made one student upset and quit the course. Because she didn’t think that the university handled the student’s situation very well, she talked to the student union. She explained that “most people want to have the best quality of their education possible” because they spend time and effort studying, and they also have a student loan to pay back in the future. In her case, she described herself as “I’m the first one in my family they get to do that (going to university)”. Because she “had to work for a long time to be able to afford to go to university”,

she wants to get a good quality education. Since she “realized that Uppsala University isn’t perfect”, she decided to be a representative.

Moreover, she wants to make the university better not only for herself but also for other students because she believes that “what makes a citizen an active citizen is to show care for the other fellow citizens”. She explained that “I’m a person that cares a lot about us people around me” because “it gives me a sense of safety”. She likes “the feeling of always having other people there for” her because she is “there for them”. For her, “it’s the same with the student union”, and “I didn’t want to be a free floater that just gets to ride on somebody else’s work”.

She also reflects that “without having this upbringing... I don’t think it really sparked so much emotion in me when things are unfair” and when “students are being treated in a way that... they deserve”. She explains that “I wasn’t heard very much” in her family because “my parents come from cultures where you show a lot of respect to older people”. She says “I have a really hard time understanding why my own parents couldn’t value my opinion” because “I became a part of a political party and got my voice heard and valued” in Sweden.

3 Politics and the Student Union

She believes that “it’s important for universities to listen to us mostly because otherwise they won’t have their classrooms filled simply” and “we need to make students want to go here, and a good education is probably the best way”. She describes the student union as “an organization with a very specific interest”, and it is like politics to her. She explained that “we have boards we have these big meetings where we decide things” and “we also base a lot of our opinions and different principles for we want teachers to have a good working place” and the same goes for students.

Moreover, she emphasized the importance of representing all students by suggesting that “whenever I’m in a room as a student representative... I’m not myself anymore... I shouldn’t care too much about my own personal relationships on behalf of myself but on behalf of the student union”. And this is also what she learned from politics as she reflects. Student representation is important since “as a student alone, it is quite difficult to come up with constructive feedback because you can feel that affects your relationship to the university and this could affect your

grade”. The student union can “go to the principal for the entire university” or report to the state if they “essentially would get a case with somebody discriminating students”.

D Participant D

Participant D has been working in one of the positions at the Uppsala Student Union since he was elected by students last year. This union represents four sections: humanities section, social science section, medical section, and section learning. He started to be a student representative in his history program organization two years ago. He has been politically active in the social democratic party since he was 16. He was born and raised in Sweden, but his parents are immigrants from different countries.

1 Dialogue creates collegiality and an honest playing ground

Participant D values the importance of dialogue between students and the university. He suggests that “most of the influence that students have on education is through dialogue” because they don’t have a powerful number of voting on the university board. He suggests that the “dialogue between the university at large or the professors and teachers and the students... create the feeling of collegiality”. He sees that the university “wants the students to be engaged not just because they have the law telling them that they need to listen to students but because they have realized that student participation creates better education”. However, the university and students have different priorities. He explains that “the university, in general, are more focused on the research and the Ph.D. programs” and “student unions are more oriented towards the education of bachelor’s and master’s degree”. Uppsala University are facing financial difficulty and students can sometimes have “customer need” such as “we want cheaper course literature or more digitally available course literature” and so on. Thus, it sometimes “becomes sort of a circle argument... we want to give you this, but we don’t have the money”. He points out “there is a strength in knowing that there is a conflict”. He explains that “we can agree that both have valid points” and “we agree to disagree sort of and that creates a strength because it creates honest playing field”.

The triangular relationships between the student unions, the university, and the students make the dialogue possible. Usually, the students and the university have “very

straightforward relationships” that “they tell me what to do” and “I do the assignments”. But then students have a relationship with the student unions that are responsible for students. When the student unions have regular meetings with the university, “it’s formal in the way... they have titles but not as private persons, but we are also very informal with each other, we talk and laugh a lot... it’s like speaking not with friends but with colleagues”. Especially, the Uppsala Student Union plays a crucial role in making the dialogue work. He explains that the Uppsala Student Union is “like a knowledge bank” because the smaller unions “come to us asking answers for questions and how to create an opinion for their point of view”. The voice will be stronger when there are more students in the unions, and it is more productive to work together when they have the same goal.

2 Experiences as being an “immigrant kid”

He became engaged in the student union mostly because he wanted “to create a better education and a better students’ university”. He has a personal belief that “people should have equal opportunities regardless of background”. Because he wanted to improve society, he got politically active, and in the same way, he became active in the student union. He analyzes that his belief comes from his background by suggesting that “being an immigrant kid creates this mixture of both having the Swedish values that were sort of on a dialog basement and more of the traditional worldly way of being”. He was raised with “more of a respect and more of honorific values” to seniorities while “we have a very flat society in Sweden”. He also felt he was excluded at the university because of his background.

Moreover, he also suggests that “you need to create... the possibility that students can engage in these sorts of committees because usually, these are committees or department boards that require a bit of reading”. For example, “the students are allowed to miss classes or examination events for being in these meetings”. They also receive 500 crowns per meeting as “compensation for the amount of time the student has to put on”. From these compensations, “the students feel that... they are listened to or respected, colleagues”.

3 University as a place to create a freer society

He suggests that the student’s voice is important because higher education is “a way to create a freer society”. This is

because “you can create a better career for yourself” and “take the chance to leave the background” by going to university. He believes that “by having the influence of people of different backgrounds to the university, you create a university that produces research that reflects the society at large” and it will be “strengthening our society”. Student voice “takes the university down from this ivory tower” and “creates a bigger public belief in science... which in turn creates better engagement in democracy”.

Moreover, he suggests that “I think the student perspective is very important because even though all professors or teachers have been students, there is sort of this effect to look back at the time with rose-tinted glasses”. The university also tends to focus not on the teaching part but on the research part. Furthermore, the university is teaching adults not kids. University students are “people with rights and opinions... and they have all the rights of adults”. Even though students’ opinion is respected as a kid, university students are supposed to have a relatively higher amount of respect. On the other hand, university students “are adults without experience”. Therefore, the student unions work as places where students can practice “learning by doing”.

4 Discussion

This paper has examined the narratives of four people who are and were working at the student unions based on three perspectives. All participants have different narratives based on their experiences, but they have similarities based on the analysis with three perspectives.

First, regarding relationships between the student unions and the university, all participants described the importance of understanding each other’s perspectives to reach the same goals based on dialogues even though there are difficulties since the university has usually stronger power. Participant A presents the student unions as “the middle hand between students and the university”. It sometimes works well, but sometimes the student unions and the university can threaten each other. Participant B stresses the importance of day-to-day conversations and the student union to be the intermediary between the students and the university because both the students and the university have different and reasonable perspectives. Participant C emphasizes the importance of keeping good relationships

between the student unions and the university to let the university listen to the students. She complains about the university but shows understanding towards their perspectives by pointing out that it is easy to forget both the students and the university have the same goal. Participant D suggests that the dialogue; created in triangular relationships between the students, the student unions, and the university, makes collegiality and honest playing ground even though they have different perspectives.

Second, regarding the motivations of participants, they have a variety of reasons why they work at the student union, but they all have their own perspectives towards society based on their backgrounds and believe the student unions can make a better university to create a better society. By studying social science, Participant A got an insight into problems in society that she wants to improve and realized she has been influenced by the Swedish democratic curriculum she was raised in. Participant B suggests that he likes Swedish democracy, and it stems from his background living both in Sweden and other countries. Participant C insists that showing care for others makes citizens become active citizens and she wants to do the same in the student union because she has experienced being disrespected in her childhood. Participant D has a belief that everyone should have equal opportunity regardless of their background due to his experience being an “immigrant kid”.

Third, all participants suggest that student representation is important because it makes a better education at the university and a better society in the end. Participant A insists that the school including higher education is a small form of democracy and it can be better by listening to the students’ opinions. Participant B believes “day-to-day conversation” and “boring grounded work” with the student union and the university is a way to prevent students from being harmed and advance democracy in society. Participant C explains that student representations have a mechanism like politics that creates good education to attract students to university. Participant D suggests that students’ opinions and collecting perspectives from different backgrounds are important because the university has to create a freer society. Moreover, Participant A and Participant D stress the importance of the students’ opinions as adults. Participant A says that university students have a right as employees because they get student loans to study. Participant D

suggests that the university requires a higher level of respect compared to other lower levels of education because the students are adults, but they are also adults without experience. Thus, the student unions work as an important place for students to practice how democracy works.

All in all, participants create narratives in relation to their views about democracy when they talk about three perspectives. What the students experience in the student unions has democratic values as a core idea.

5 Conclusion

The objective and main significance of this research is to elucidate student engagement through students’ narratives, which are derived from their experiences as student representatives. Individual and specific narratives from four participants allow this study to illustrate the rich and various experiences that students have as student representatives. Compared to the previous study conducted in Australia, this study revealed that the students have a deeper insight into larger contexts such as society and democracy, and they are motivated to be and value the student representation not only from their personal interests but also from based on this insight. Moreover, importance of playing the role as a middle hand between students and universities while maintaining positive relationships is narrated as the sequence of narrative so that they can create a better university and society. This stems from the research method that lets participants narrate their own stories by themselves not based on the category that the interviewer arbitrarily sets. It also must be noted that the previous research was conducted in Australia, not in Sweden and it can create differences in the research outcomes.

Moreover, the form of democracy that emerged from the narrative is similar to the deliberative democracy. Englund (2010) considers deliberative democracy as an educational journey where people contribute diverse viewpoints to an ongoing exchange of ideas.²¹⁾ It also entails questioning authoritative views to challenge traditions. He refers to Habermas (1996)²²⁾ suggesting that the legitimacy of deliberative politics comes from how citizens believe it will produce reasonable results through open discussion and decision-making. He also cites Gutmann and Participants suggested that student unions are a form of democracy because 1) they have continuous communication with

people who have different opinions and principles through grounded work and day-to-day conversations, 2) they have a feeling that their voices can affect things that matters to them, 3) they are not only representing themselves but also the all other students, and 4) they let the university that has stronger power reflect their perspective by voicing their opinions. Thompson (1996)²³⁾ points out that the educational system is crucial in making democracy more deliberative. The student unions in universities play an essential role in creating a country based on deliberative democracy in Sweden. Further research is needed based on this study to investigate a variety of narratives from different contexts by interviewing students in other student unions or universities.

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