

STUDENTS' AUTONOMY AT HEIS IN UKRAINE: CASE OF SUMY NATIONAL AGRARIAN UNIVERSITY

¹✉ Hynek Roubik, ²Jana Mazancova, ³Jan Beseda,
⁴Oksana Zamora

¹Department of Sustainable Technologies, Faculty of Tropical AgriSciences, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic, Kamýčká 961/129, Prague, 165 21, Czech Republic, +420 224 382 508, roubik@ftz.czu.cz

²Department of Sustainable Technologies, Faculty of Tropical AgriSciences, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic

³Centre for Higher Education Studies, Czech Republic

⁴Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine

ABSTRACT

The students' self-governments are important in terms of alerting priority issues, such as quality improvement, educational processes and adequate study environment. These days students' self-governments have already become a common part of higher education institutions in Ukraine. Despite the short history in Ukraine, the students' self-governments have already been formed in all Ukrainian higher education institutions. This study aimed at identifying university student's autonomy and its function in the academic sphere at the Sumy National Agrarian University. The study is based on combination of secondary sources study and primary data collection in forms of semi-structured personal interview with the students' rector, discussions with academic staff and university top management including rector and vice-rectors conducted in December 2015. Our case study showed presence of students' self-governments; however, it also revealed struggle with lack of academic issues while focusing more on social student activities.

KEYWORDS

Academic senate, Higher Education Institutions, students' autonomy, Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

The higher education system in Ukraine has been lately reformed. The reforms touched also students' self-governments as the essential parts of higher education institutions. In terms of democratization of education and its principles, decentralization of higher education institutions and the synergy of all key actors dealing with everyday issues as well as with the strategic decision is fundamental. The synergy and the balance must be found if successful transformation should happen (Ryan and Stiller, 1991; [Betoret and Artiga, 2011](#)). The students' self-governments are important in terms of alerting to the priority issues, such as quality improvement, educational processes, adequate study environment and preventing corruption in the ranks of educational institutions ([Aymoldanovna et al., 2015](#)). Students' self-governments are an active form of organization of life of students and provide an opportunity to develop leadership skills, as well as the factor of personal and professional formation of future specialists (Parafiyanovich, 2010).

These days, students' self-governments have already become a common part of higher education institutions in Ukraine. Students' self-governments in Ukraine have got rather a short history (in Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) since 2009) but they

have already been formed in all Ukrainian higher education institutions (however, their function and performance is various). According to the new Law of Higher Education Act from July 2014 the rectors are elected by all employees and students. The weight of students' voice is 15%. Strategic directions of higher education are determined by the Constitution of Ukraine, Education Law, Law of Higher Education Act, Higher Education National Doctrine, decrees of the President of Ukraine and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. An important task of this process is also to increase the role of students' self-governments to attract more students into the educational establishment.

The students' self-governments activity is currently guided by the laws and decisions of the specially authorized central executive authority in the field of education at the ministry level and the relevant central authority which the higher education subordinated by the statute of the university.

The objective of this study is to initially reveal and describe university student's autonomy and its function in the academic sphere in Ukraine, specifically in the case of Sumy National Agrarian University.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study includes the research based on combination of secondary sources study and primary data collection. Data collection was conducted through one-hour semi-structured personal interview with students' representative – the students' rector who was used as a key informant during December 2015. Main categories of the personal interview were i) current state of art within the students self-government ii) activities of the students self-government iii) plans of students self-government for future iv) pros and cons of the current state of art in the students self-government. Then focus group discussions were conducted with academic staff in the higher management structure (N=10) with a direct influence on the university governance. Major topics in the focus group discussion were as follows: i) students autonomy ii) students – academic staff relations from the students' activity perspective iii) working of self-government. Focus group discussion showed an insight into how a group thinks and the range of their opinions and ideas, as well as the inconsistencies and existing variations in terms of beliefs, experiences and practices. Furthermore, discussion with university top management (N=3) including a rector and vice-rectors was held for further insight into the students autonomy at SNAU. Results were analysed in opinion based methods. Information were collected into a manageable form and constructed into a narrative outcome.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sumy National Agrarian University (SNAU) was opened in April 1977 (receiving university status in 1997 and receiving national status in 2001) as a branch of Kharkov Agricultural Institute. SNAU established students' government in 2009 called "*Studentske samoradovanie- Студентське саморадованіє*". The students' self-government follows the university management structure. The current students' self-government has 20 members. The head of the self-government is a student rector followed by student deans from each faculty. All deans have vice-deans and heads for different topics (such as: sports, social activities, quality of education and others). SNAU students' self-government is also a member of the UASS - Ukrainian Association of Student Self-government (UASS, 2016). This is a Ukrainian (independent and democratic) national student union, established in 1999 and is a heritor of the Ukrainian Association for the Development of Students' Self-government. The UASS voluntarily brings together students unions,

community organizations, student clubs and scientific societies that operate in higher educational institutions in Ukraine, as well as some active students to protect the rights and representation interests of the Ukrainian student community at the national and international levels. On the voluntary basis the UASS unites 178 local students' unions that work in higher educational institutions, and other active students. Overall, the UASS represents around 1.6 million of students of Ukraine (in comparison with the Czech Republic where the Student Chamber of the Council of Higher Education Institutions represents around 320 thousands of students). According to the Law of Higher Education Act the UASS elects two members of National Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. This agency has got 25 members.

The students' self-government representatives in SNAU (students' rector and student deans) meet every week with the rector of the university to discuss their requests and worries. In 2015 the students' self-government of SNAU dealt mainly with activities such as: volunteering, activities with children (St. Nicolaus day), organizing discussion circles (scientific) and meeting with management and orphanage visits. However, students' self-government is struggling with lack of academic issues and preferably is aimed to the social student activities. If compared to some exposed cases of surrounding universities; two cases should be mentioned: (i) when students of Sumy State Pedagogical University demanded resignation of the rector of their university in 2005 and their requirements were as follows: "*cancelling the resolution of the Minister of education and science of Ukraine –Mr. Stanislav Nikolayenko- about appointing Mr. Pidbereszky as the rector of the Sumy State Pedagogical University; and resignation of the university's administration which promoted conducting the unfair rector election (UHHRO, 2016).*" The second case (ii) from the Sumy State University is about proclamation of the Students' Rector (Head of Student Self-government) and the Head of Student Trade Union of their concerns about the present situation in Ukraine (2015): "*We are against cleavage of Ukraine in any region and we demand from the Russian Federation not to use their military forces in the present situation (SSU, 2016)*". The case (i) refers to the expression of the voice of discontent, the case (ii) to the terms to the situation with social overlap.

According to the students' rector plans of the students' self-government of SNAU for year 2016 are mainly the following: to wider the structure of the students' self-government (such as empowerment of human resources through increase of number of heads of sectors by two people), to set-up new connections with relevant partners, and to look for new funds. The Students' self-government also cooperates with the Municipal Centre for Leisure Activities Sumy. According to Deci and Ryan (1985) autonomy occurs when people feel they are the cause of their behaviour. Autonomy is not independence or total freedom, but rather an internal acceptance of, and engagement with one's motivated behaviour (Betoret and Artiga, 2011). Supporting autonomy means taking the students perspective, providing choice and providing a meaningful rationale when choice is not possible (Filak and Sheldon, 2003). However, autonomy might turn to be a vague area. According to Timpau (2015) it can sometimes lead to the two extreme opinions; to the institution training robot to only "perform" but not develop them, or as the second extreme provides students too much of the autonomy leading lack of recognition of authorities.

The students' self-government is represented not only at the higher education level, but also at the state level. This is an essential part of every democratization process. In June 2005, the conference of Ukrainian Student Council in Kyiv hosted under the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine was held. Students from the self-government from all state regions of Ukraine (from more than 150 universities) approved the National Student

Council in this conference and elected first members of its board. The formation of the Ukrainian Student Council has become possible due to many factors, especially, the implementation of the principles of the Bologna process (which considers a student as a partner in education process). There was a need for coordinating body among the students' self-governments and student parliaments and councils that have been created in various universities and institutes throughout the Ukraine.

It should be stated that the dominant role of students' self-governments in the preparation of the action leaders can creatively and proactively responds not only to the changing demands of society, but also to the global trends of the human development (Vintin, 2006; Procházka et al., 2011; Aymoldanovna et al., 2015). Therefore, it is essential to have students self-determining system guarantees such as students' self-governments and any other legal and organizational principles of its establishment and functioning is stated in the law. There is urgency for problem resolution of the insufficient development in educational theory and practice of innovative approaches to the organization and development of the student government as a social phenomenon (allowing the development of leadership skills of university students) as mentioned in the study by Aymoldanovna et al. (2015). There is still lack of preparation of competitive specialists speaking about development of leadership qualities. In recent studies there can be found a significant number of interpretations of the concept of "students' self-government" (Aymoldovna et al., 2015). For example, by the definition of Rozhkov (1987), the student self-government is "*...a way of life of the collective organization, which involves active participation of students in decision making and implementation in order to achieve the objectives of public interest on the basis of interaction with the teachers*". According to Aymoldovna et al. (2015) the students' self-government should consist of activities ensuring development of students' autonomy decision making and consequent implementation. Further, it should also involve responsibility for the results; as an active form of organization of life of the students and promoting the development of their autonomy. But according to Parafiyanovich (2010) it is defined as a pedagogical category, which deals with justifying the organization activities ensuring the development of students' autonomy in decision making and implementation as well as responsibility for their results. This goes hand in hand with promoting the development of their autonomy in decision making and responsibility for the results obtained to achieve socially and personally meaningful goals.

The students' self-government involves active participation of students in the preparation, adoption and implementation of top university management decisions concerning livelihoods of higher education institution of individual students or groups of students. The students' self-government should be an active form of organization of life of students and can be seen as well as an opportunity to acquire further soft skills essential for leadership (managerial, leadership skills, innovative thinking, problem solving, independence, responsibility, mobility, competitiveness, representation and defend of the interests of young people as well as the development of the factors of personal and professional formation of the future specialists and experts). However, this should be also accompanied by the valuation of such extracurricular activities as involvement in self-government (Procházka et al., 2011). Another form of the students' self-government in Ukraine is the Students' Trade Union (existing at SNAU) which is a public student organization of the university. It serves for representation, implementation and protection of educational, social and economic rights and interests of its members.

An autonomous student is a student who is not afraid to express her/his point of view,

who argues logically and consistently, engages with passion in new situations arising, have initiative, have confidence in her/his own abilities and takes responsibility for her/his actions (Timpau, 2015). There is a lack of research done on university students and their attitude to the student's self-governments; however, there are existing studies about their attitude towards polity, such as the one by Hooghe (2004) who explains that youth are not involved because they do not perceive that they have a stake in politics. There are some such as the study by Putnam (2000) claiming that social capital declines among youth and therefore leads to the decline of participation. It is essential to realize, that university students and youth in general can be viewed as a preview of the future. As Gauthier (2003) sees the orientation of youth as a litmus test of how democracy will look like in the future. Therefore youth activism is very important. As with an apathetic and uninterested youth the democracy is more prone to suffer from problems of legitimacy and lack of people's involvement in the essential decision making in the future (Burean and Badescu, 2014).

TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As is the education system in Ukraine undergoing major reform and in July 2014 the new Higher Education Act become law, significant reforms were introduced. With the new law, institutional autonomy and self-government was provided. However, there are significant challenges here, especially accompanying responsibilities and accountabilities and the scale of the democratic structures. All of them need to be adequately implemented in the HEIs. Democratization of institutional management and governance envisages devolved and distributed leadership where rectors, staff as well as students have defined their roles and responsibilities. This is however remaining a challenge for fulfilling.

Under the law, student self-government is an intrinsic part of the democratic management process. Students participate in the rector election, they are members of academic councils, as well as working and advisory bodies. However, they still have little understanding of what it means to be part of an autonomous academic community.

Therefore, students' capacity needs to be supported in the terms of students' participation and understanding of the university governance, as well as further collaboration with other students and other students' self-governments in Ukraine. Furthermore, foreign experiences from students' self-government may serve as an adequate accelerator of proper students' involvement.

CONCLUSION

These days' students' self-governments have already become a common part of higher education institutions in Ukraine. It is essential to realize that the students' self-governments are important in terms of alerting to the priority issues (such as quality improvement, educational processes, adequate study environment and preventing corruption in the ranks of educational institutions). Involvement of students in the students' self-governments brings also development of student's personality and forming their leadership skills. Student's self-governments should improve also educational process and its quality through education satisfaction surveys. The case of SNAU showed presence of students' self-governments; however, it also revealed their struggle with lack of academic issues while focusing more on social student activities. Research done on university students and their attitude to the student's self-governments is still missing in Ukraine and other post-soviet states and should be more explored. Authors expect to continue with the research in following years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article was supported by the Czech Republic Development Cooperation under grant number 25/2015/25. Further support was by the Internal Grant Agency of Faculty of Tropical AgriSciences, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, grant number 20165006.

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