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Analysing Student Participation in the Life and Governance of Hungarian Higher Education Institutions: A Qualitative Case Study for University X (UX)

Laura Alzmeter

Doctoral School of Education, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary



<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3020-3561>

Abstract

This study paper explores the student participation in the life and governance of Hungarian higher education institutions with a focus on University X (an anonymised institution). It aims to answer two questions in regard to the key factors influencing the students' participation and the differences that emerge between the Hungarian and the international students at University X. As higher education becomes more diverse and internationalised, understanding how students from different backgrounds engage with institutional governance is crucial for promoting inclusive and integrative practices. Using a qualitative case study design, this paper involved semi-structured interviews with five participants from University X: two staff members from two different international offices, two student representatives (one representing the Bachelor and Master students' union, and another one representing the doctoral student union), and one international student representative. These interviews provided insights into both formal and informal mechanisms of student participation in the university life or the university governance, the opportunities offered, and the students' challenges in influencing policies and institutional practices. The analysis revealed that the key factors influencing the students' participation are connected to the effective communication, the inclusive environment, the support systems, the different available events, the collaboration between the administration and the student bodies, and the feedback mechanisms. Alternatively, differences arise between Hungarian and international students due to language, cultural and social integration, student representation and decision-making, and information access. This study concludes that fostering great student participation requires not only structural changes but also cultural adaptation and institutional efforts to ensure all students have equitable opportunities.

Keywords: higher education institution, student participation, university life, university governance, Hungary

1. Introduction

Student participation and integration in university life are critical components of a thriving academic environment. Higher education institutions must address the diverse needs of their student populations to foster a sense of belonging (Trowler & Trowler, 2011) and ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities (Cserny & Cardoso, 2021). Research indicates that student participation enhances the quality of governance and ensures that student needs and perspectives are considered in institutional policies (Haque & Sultana, 2021). Hence, student participation in university governance is essential for fostering a democratic and inclusive academic environment. It involves students taking part in decision-making processes at various levels, including academic and administrative committees (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999).

This study can be particularly relevant for policymakers, university staff and students interested in enhancing the student involvement in university life and university governance. The research this study reports is part of a larger research project conducted across seven Hungarian higher education institutions (hence the anonymity of the university). The research itself aims to explore the factors that influence student participation in the life of a higher education institution, including the differences in levels and forms of participation. Additionally, it seeks to investigate the nature and extent of student involvement and perceived effects of regulatory frameworks on student representation and influence. For this article, we focus on one of the investigated universities, because this one has a significant number of international students and a long history of internationalisation, making it an ideal subject for examining the dynamics behind both Hungarian and international students' participation. Following our research ethics protocol, we anonymised this institution and called it University X (or UX). Regarding the size limits of this paper, we focus only on the first two aspects mentioned above. The study utilised a content analysis technique to analyse the interviews with various student unions and international offices within University X; its purpose was to identify key themes affecting differences in participation.

2. Literature Review

The literature review presented in this study paper was developed through a targeted and exploratory approach; academic resources were identified through key terms, concepts, and ideologies related to student participation in university governance and then were selected based on their direct relevance to the research questions. This method involved identifying authors and papers that provide a foundational insight within the field of student participation in the university governance, and then tracing relevant citations within those papers or research works in order to build a concise and meaningful overview. Thus, this literature review plays a valuable role in guiding practice and decision-making for all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and university policymakers (Ahmad, 2025) as it presents in a broad perspective (Green et al., 2006) the most relevant factors influencing the participation of students in university life.

Student engagement is a multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions. Behavioural engagement involves participation in academic and extracurricular activities, whilst emotional engagement includes feelings of belonging and attachment to the institution, and cognitive engagement involves investment in learning and intellectual development (Wong & Liem, 2022). Student engagement has a dual component framework as it differentiates between learning engagement and institution engagement, highlighting the importance of both academic and social aspects of student life (O'Regan et al.,

2023). This engagement empowers students to contribute meaningfully to their learning process and their educational environment, fostering a sense of ownership and agency with their co-creation and their participation in decision-making (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2004).

This participatory role leading students to see that their inputs are acknowledged and acted upon makes their voice a mechanism through which engagement is not only expressed but actively constructed (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Thus, student voice arises to the inclusion of students' perspectives in decision-making processes within educational institutions, and it emphasises the importance of student representation and partnership in shaping educational practices and policies (Abla & Fraumeni, 2019). Effective student voice initiatives involve creating platforms for students to express their views and actively participate in governance and decision-making (Planas et al., 2011).

In an international environment, fostering meaningful student participation becomes more complex and more critical; indeed, higher education institutions strive to create a globally responsive place by attracting international students, developing international partnerships, and incorporating global perspectives into the curriculum (Yuxin, 2023). In fact, the internationalisation of higher education involves integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of universities. It aims to enhance the global competencies of students and staff, promote cross-cultural understanding, and improve the quality of education (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). In this context, the integration of student voice emerges as a key dynamic for ensuring relevance and inclusivity in institutional practices (Leask, 2009; Marginson & Sawir, 2012), and it enhances the quality of engagement, serving as a catalyst for intercultural understanding and co-creation (Cook-Sather, 2006) of internationalised institutions.

3. Study Objective and Questions

This study paper adopts a meso-level perspective by focusing on one higher education institution in Hungary that welcomes international students and implements the internationalisation of higher education over a long period of time. This offers an insight into a well-developed system, while generating conclusions based on decades-long student experiences. Thus, the main objective of this study is to investigate and interpret the qualitative variations in university students' participation and engagement in the university life and governance of University X. This individual case offers a perspective that may be transferred to other universities in Hungary with similar contexts such as a history of internationalisation, or the mobility of international students. Hence, by using a content analysis technique, this study seeks to identify commonalities within these variations and shed instructive light on the principal enquiry at hand.

Two research questions guide this study:

1. What are the key factors that influence student participation at University X?
2. How does the participation in university life differ between Hungarian and international students at University X?

4. Research Design

4.1. Qualitative Case Study

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) focused on University X, one of the seven Hungarian higher education institutions involved in larger research on student governance. This design allows an in-depth exploration of student participation in the life and governance by situating their experiences within a specific institutional context.

While the study adopts the qualitative case study design, it employs the content analysis technique as a way to identify recurring patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which helps structure and compile the data efficiently (Bardin, 2011; Krippendorff, 2018). As a matter of fact, content analysis facilitates the comprehension and validation of inferences derived from textual data (Krippendorff, 2018). According to Castro and colleagues (2013), content analysis goes beyond immediate comprehension to observe text meanings more deeply, requiring connections between analytic premises and textual elements. This leads to in-depth text interpretation and inferences about the research world, and as Lopes (1993) and Bardin (2011) describe it, creating categories leads to uncover implicit discourse elements.

Thus, this technique allowed for understanding, validating, and making inferences from texts and contexts in this case study as it assisted in processing information, describing, and organizing data from interviews with students and university staff.

4.2. Participants

The study was conducted with 5 key entities with University X, and the sample included students and staff members in presidential roles of the different student unions and international offices. Initial contact was made with University X's top leaders, administrative leaders and student leaders through email letters. This initial contact facilitated the connection with the individuals who either considered partaking in the study or identified potential interviewees relevant to the study's focus on student participation in university life and governance.

The selection of the participants was determined by staff members and students who agreed to participate in the study. This selection was thus a purposeful sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) based on the roles and responsibilities within student governance and international managerial structures at University X, the inclusion criteria required that participants hold a leadership position directly responsible for international students' affairs. These roles were essential for providing informed and elaborated perspectives on student participation, representation and student support.

The sample included one representative from the student union (that covers Bachelor and Master students, indicated in the following section as HÖK), one representative from the doctoral student union (that covers doctoral students, indicated in the following section as DÖK), one representative from the international student union (indicated in the following section as ISU), and two representatives from two offices that are responsible for international students from different aspects. In the following, we refer them as international office 1 and 2 (indicated as IO1 and IO2).

4.3. Data Collection

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews as part of a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. This study paper is part of a larger research project; the interview questions were developed following the completion of a quantitative phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This provided insights into student experiences and perceptions in participating in the university life and decision-making of seven different Hungarian higher education institutions. The results of the quantitative phase showed both Hungarian and international student population having similar perceptions regarding language barriers, information dissemination, and time constraints. However, when it comes to opportunities, perceptions were different. These findings helped to tailor interview questions that may identify themes either to support the students' perspectives or to identify new perspectives from the managerial and representative points of view.

All respondents were initially contacted via email, which provided detailed information about the study's objectives, scope, overview, the researcher's background, and ethical considerations such as confidentiality and procedures. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants and were conducted both in-person and online. Before starting the interviews, all interviewees stated their consent. Virtual interviews (via Microsoft Teams) were conducted similarly to in-person interviews for a one-hour meeting time, though, the semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All the 5 semi-structured interviews (audio recorded) were conducted in English.

The interviews of this study were conducted anonymously; therefore, each interview is recognised through the initial letter of what the person represents and a code number for how many people interviewed from the same place (doctoral student union indicated as DÖK, student union indicated as HÖK, international student union as ISU, two international officers indicated as IO1 and IO2).

The data collection received ethical permission from the Ethical Committee of Eötvös Loránd University—Faculty of Psychology and Education (no. of ethical permission with an extension deadline: 2024/318 and 2024/318-2). The language of the interviews was English.

4.4. Data Analysis

The technique used supported the study in its ability to aid with qualitative analysis, as it implies data organisation and compilation while ensuring maximum retention of the research information. Content analysis as a method to analyse the interviews transcripts involved coding and categorising the data to identify key themes and patterns. The following steps were taken:

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.
- The transcriptions and documents were coded to identify themes and categories.
- The coded data was categorised into key themes including roles and responsibilities, communication channels, inclusivity and representation, support systems, event organisation, collaboration between students and administration, feedback mechanisms, visibility and awareness, equal opportunities, integration efforts, and addressing concerns.
- The themes were compared across the five entities to identify similarities and differences in student participation.

Since the author as a researcher is not connected to the University X, objectivity was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis; the author avoided biases and ensured analytical rigour.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings after analysing the content of the interviews, highlighting the key factors influencing student participation and the differences between Hungarian and international students.

The findings of this study are structured as categories reflecting qualitative variations in the staff and students' views in the participation in university life and governance. The first category reflects the roles and responsibilities of the interviewees in the offices and student unions as presidents/heads or their vice presidents. Below we present the following categories:

- Communication channels

This category reflects the different channels of communication in light of information sharing, visibility and awareness (highlighted in the below table 1) between the student unions and the students from one side and between the international offices and the students from another side. Visibility and awareness are viewed as both a means to inform and to empower student participation with bilingual communication.

TABLE 1. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Key themes	DÖK	HÖK	ISU	IO1	IO2
Institutional messaging system	x			x	x
Website				x	
Facebook	x	x	x		x
Instagram		x	x		
WhatsApp		x	x		
Emails			x		
Surveys	x				
In-person events			x		

Source: own compilation based on the interviews

As mentioned by several interviewees (the students' representatives HÖK, DÖK and ISU), it is hard to reach all students, as with different nationalities, different platforms are used. Therefore, the institutional messaging system and the website are considered as the official information dissemination platforms as they reach all students whether they are Hungarian or international students. Yet, this is perceived as the formal channel, rarely used by students' organisations in general. Therefore, the university leadership (IO1/IO2) connects with the student leadership as a way of disseminating the information through their communication channels, mostly social media. While Facebook is the most used communication channel (as highlighted by all the students' representatives), particularly by students and partially by the university leadership, the usage of different channels (Instagram/ WhatsApp) gives the students a variety of ways and levels to reach the specific entities and get the information disseminated depending on their cultural familiarity. However, one barrier still emerges with the communication between the international student union and the Hungarian students. As a matter of fact, international students often encounter difficulties

initiating contact with their fellow Hungarians due to a lack of knowledge about the effective communication channel, as mentioned by the international student union (ISU).

- Feedback mechanisms

The feedback collection is a priority across all entities. Both official student unions (HÖK/DÖK) rely on surveys and questionnaires, while the international one (ISU) employs digital platforms like email and social media. The international office IO1 has redesigned its website based on student input, indicating a data-driven approach, and the second international office IO2 conducts targeted surveys among international students. These findings suggest that student voices are increasingly being incorporated into institutional decision-making, though through varied mechanisms.

- Support systems and the collaboration between entities

The next category represents the different support systems available to students in general whether they are Hungarian or international students as seen in table 2. While the results reveal differentiated support, the international student union (ISU) seems to be only acting as a bridge between students and administration. On this level, a collaboration exists between the students and the administration, and patterns of collaboration with administration reveal structural differences. Whilst both official student unions (HÖK/DÖK) report effective collaboration, particularly around logistics such as pensions, permissions, and exam schedules, the international student union (ISU) highlights ongoing challenges in administrative collaboration, yet it notes efforts to overcome them.

TABLE 2. SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Key themes	DÖK	HÖK	ISU	IO1	IO2
Academic issues	x			x	
Administrative issues	x	x		x	
Financial issues				x	
Residence issues		x		x	
Mentor systems		x			
Personal support				x	x
Career support					x
Health issues				x	

Source: own compilation based on the interviews

- Inclusivity and representation

On another level, all five interviewees recognise the importance of inclusivity and representation, though their approaches vary. Both official student unions (HÖK/DÖK) emphasise dedicated structures to address international students' needs, and the international one (ISU) provides a platform for international students to voice concerns but has limited involvement in decision-making. The international office IO1 supports student associations in creating inclusive events, while the international office IO2 highlights live translation in meetings and stresses equal participation and representation of international students. A cross-institutional emphasis on inclusive communication and visibility underscores efforts to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps.

- Event organisation

Reflecting on the event organisation, the doctoral student union (DÖK) focuses on academic events, while the student union (HÖK) organises bilingual and tailored events for international students. The international student union initiates diverse events aimed at building community such as educational, cultural, and social. On the other hand, the international office IO1 supports these efforts through institutional ceremonies, while the international office IO2 organises integration-oriented events.

- Equal opportunities

Last but not least, efforts to ensure equal opportunities were emphasised by the Hungarian students' representatives HÖK and DÖK, and the international office IO1. The student unions focus on inclusive representation and access to resources, and the international offices targets academic and financial support to both populations: Hungarians and Internationals. On another level, the international student union addresses issues of inequity after being removed from the faculty council.

- Addressing concerns

Despite the different focus areas and the different disparities, all interviewees recognise the systemic barriers faced by international students and demonstrate commitment to addressing them. In fact, the different student unions (HÖK/DÖK/ISU) and international offices (IO1/IO2) have highlighted some differences between local students and internationals (see table 3 below).

TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF DIFFERENCES IN THE PARTICIPATION

<u>Hungarian students</u>	<u>International students</u>
Language and communication barriers	
<i>No significant language barrier</i>	<i>Language barriers (challenges in understanding Hungarian communications)</i>
Representation and decision-making	
<i>More involved in decision-making processes</i>	<i>Limited involvement, often feel underrepresented</i>
Social integration and community building	
<i>Stronger sense of community and easier social integration</i>	<i>Challenges in social integration, though efforts made through specific events</i>
Access to information and resources	
<i>Better access to information and resources</i>	<i>Rely on specific support systems for access</i>
Participation in events and activities	
<i>More active participation in events organised by Hungarian Student Union</i>	<i>Lower participation, though efforts made to organise inclusive events</i>
Feedback and advocacy	
<i>More likely to provide feedback and advocate needs</i>	<i>Provide feedback but face challenges in being heard</i>

Source: own compilation based on the interviews

The content analysis reveals a shared commitment across student bodies and administrative units to support international students. However, there are notable disparities in institutional power, communication reach, and implementation capacity. While unions focus more on community-building and representation, the international offices play a facilitative and administrative role. These findings underscore the importance of continued cross-functional collaboration and institutional alignment to holistically support the international student experience.

6. Discussion

This study aimed at exploring two key questions:

1. What are the key factors that influence student participation at University X?
 2. How does the participation in university life differ between Hungarian and international students at the University X?
- *Key factors influencing student participation*

The findings of this study reveal several key factors influencing the student participation at University X such the communication, the inclusive representation including the visibility of student unions, the event organisation, the collaboration between the university leadership and the students including the support and the feedback mechanisms. We break down, below, these factors aligned with existing literature on student engagement and participation in university governance (Fredricks et al., 2004; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Trowler & Trowler, 2011).

Effective communication emerges as a foundation for engaging students. The use of social media platforms, emails and institutional systems ensures that students receive timely information about university events and opportunities. This aligns with the dual component framework of student engagement which emphasises the importance of both academic and social engagement (Appleton et al., 2008). However, the effectiveness of these communication channels varies, with some offices and unions reporting more success than others. In fact, university leadership uses formal networks, whereas international students often rely on different social media platforms. While these informal networks are more familiar or accessible to students, they can lead to fragmented information dissemination, as also observed in Kasza's (2020) research on Hungarian universities. Such inconsistencies can affect student participation and contribute to the isolation of international students (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Leask, 2009).

On another level, inclusivity and representation are vital for ensuring that all students including international students feel represented and included in university activities. The presence of bilingual communication and dedicated committees for international students highlights the efforts to promote inclusivity. This supports the concept of student voice which advocates for the inclusion of diverse student perspectives in decision-making (Fielding, 2001), going beyond simple representation to meaningful participation (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Mitra, 2004). However, the degree of inclusivity varies with some international students feeling underrepresented and facing barriers to integration, which is highlighted by Robson and Wihlborg (2019) as a central challenge in internationalised higher education institutions. This discrepancy underscores the need for any more unified approach to inclusivity across the university.

Promoting the visibility of student unions and their activities helps ensure that students are aware of the support and opportunities available to them. In fact, student unions are a crucial intermediary between students and leadership (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013), and this is achieved through various communication channels and active engagement with the student body. However, the visibility of these activities can be inconsistent, affecting student awareness and participation, and this aspect echoes the findings of Zuo and Ratsoy (1999), who argue that limited visibility reduces both legitimacy and engagement.

Event organisation is another critical factor. Organising events that cater to both Hungarian and international students fosters a sense of community and belonging. Events like PhD scientific days, freshmen camp, and cultural exchange programs help bridge the cultural gaps and promote social integration. This aligns with the goals of internationalisation which seeks to enhance cross-cultural understanding and global competencies (Knight, 2004). However, the level of engagement in these events varies, with international students often participating less than their Hungarian peers. This uneven participation of international students in these events aligns with Green et al. (2006), who observed that cultural and linguistic barriers frequently deter participation.

Collaboration with administration is crucial for addressing student needs and implementing initiatives. The study highlights successful collaborations on initiatives like pension payments, entry permissions, and infrastructural developments. This supports the literature on university governance, which emphasizes the role of student participation in enhancing institutional decision-making (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Menon, 2003). However, some interviewees express frustration with limited collaboration and support from the higher management, highlighting potential communication gaps, similarly to those identified by Wong and Liem (2022).

Support systems play a crucial role in a student's well-being; the availability of mentoring programs, psychological help, and career guidance help students navigate their academic journey and integrate into university life. This is consistent with the literature on student engagement, which underscores the importance of support services in fostering student success (Fredericks et al., 2004; Trowler & Trowler, 2011). However, the support provided can be inconsistent with some students receiving more comprehensive support than others. This inconsistency echoes Mitra's (2004) critique that inequitable support perpetuates exclusion, particularly among vulnerable groups such as international students.

Regular feedback from students is essential for continuous improvement of services and addressing emerging issues. The use of surveys, questionnaires, and direct communication channels ensures that student voices are heard and considered in university policies. This aligns with the principles of student voice and participatory governance (Mitra, 2004; Quaglia & Corso, 2014). However, the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms varies, with some students feeling that their concerns are not adequately addressed. These perceptions mirror Cook-Sather's (2006) findings on feedback mechanisms and responsiveness that may undermine trust and reduce students' willingness to participate.

- *Differences of participation in university life between Hungarian and international students*

Striving for equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background, is fundamental to creating an inclusive academic environment. The study highlights efforts to ensure equal access to

resources, representation in decision-making, and participation in university activities. However, the perception of unequal opportunities persists, particularly among international students.

The findings of this study reveal several differences between Hungarian and international students at University X in regard to the participation in the university life, such the involvement of students in decision-making, the cultural and social integration, the language accessibility, the student representation, and the access of information and services. These disparities resonate with broader literature on internationalisation in higher education, which highlights unequal access to decision-making and integration as common challenges (Lannert & Derényi, 2021; Marginson & Sawir, 2012).

Similarly to research conducted by the scholar Kasza (2020), the findings of this study highlighted cultural and social integration challenges as barriers for international students. In fact, Hungarians form a strong peer network through shared cultural and educational backgrounds, while internationals often remain within nationality-based groups. The present study shows a disconnection from the core of the student life and governance which may undermine the goals of the internationalisation of higher education (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Marginson, 2014) this outlines the importance of student integration in this learning environment (Lannert & Derényi, 2021).

The most immediate difference at University X stems from the language accessibility since Hungarian students operate in their native language which allows them full access to all the university communications, student unions announcements, governance documents, etc. While on the other hand, international students don't have access to the same communications, announcements, documents, unless they were translated and available in English language. We must add to these findings one of the most relevant components of the Bologna process that emphasises the commitments to inclusivity and student-centred environment across European higher education institutions and highlights the transparency for all students regardless of their background (European Higher Education Area, 2020). Krippendorff (2018) and Bardin (2011) further stress that language barriers are not just linguistic but also cultural, shaping how individuals access and interpret institutional information.

In terms of representation and decision-making, the findings reflect the student governance's dominance by Hungarian students, while international students are often formally allowed to participate but lack real influence because of the symbolic role without decision-making powers. In fact, while the doctoral student union emphasises active involvement in decision-making processes and having representatives in various committees, the student union (HÖK) and the international student union highlight a more limited involvement for international students in decision-making, indicating a distinction between the official student union and other student groups and associations, especially given that the international student union has been removed from the faculty council as highlighted by the interviewee. This aspect is particularly connected to the Hungarian Act on national higher education (Act CCIV, 2011), in which the right of all students to be represented in institutional governance is guaranteed. However, on a practical level, this right may not be accountable in a linguistically diverse environment, especially with processes and meetings held mostly in the Hungarian language, key governance documents not translated or adapted to the international population, and lastly given the unfamiliarity of internationals with the institutional culture. Similar dynamics of a

rather formal inclusion but limited influence have been documented by Planas et al. (2011) and Zuo & Ratsoy (1999).

On another level, access to information and student services at University X highlights a difference between Hungarian and international students especially with Hungarian students being embedded in the informal and language-specific networks that give them often a privileged access to academic and extracurricular opportunities. With the information being disseminated on different channels at University X, and as Leask (2009) and Marginson (2014) both argue, the participation is not only shaped by formal inclusion but also by access to informal practices and networks. However, the content may get lost with an incomplete, delayed or insufficiently translated information. In fact, in the Hungarian context, Kovács and Kasza (2018) show that such structural barriers may contribute to international students' peripheral position within the higher education institutions. In such a case, the international students' ability to make timely decisions and engage fully on campus becomes limited (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Leask, 2009).

7. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing student participation and integration at University X (UX). The findings highlight the importance of effective communication, inclusivity, support systems, event organization, collaboration with administration, feedback mechanisms, visibility, and equal opportunities in fostering student engagement. The study also reveals significant differences in participation between Hungarian and international students, underscoring the need for targeted initiatives to address language barriers, representation, social integration, access to resources, and feedback mechanisms.

The differing views on decision-making involvement suggest that international students may not have a consistent or unified representation in university governance, which may lead to an unequal influence and advocacy for international students' needs. Thus, some departments may prioritise international students' participation while others may not, leading to an uneven support across the institution. This different level of support can create disparities in the quality of services and resources available to international students.

On another level, the frustration expressed by some interviewees regarding the limited collaboration highlights potential communication gaps between the different student bodies and the offices. These gaps may hinder the effective implementation of initiatives and support systems for international students.

Lastly, the differing perspectives on inclusivity and representation suggest that international students may perceive inequities in how they are treated and represented within the university. This may affect the students' sense of belonging and willingness to engage. Addressing these perceptions and ensuring that all students have equal access to opportunities is crucial for fostering inclusivity.

Therefore, addressing the above implications is essential for creating a unified approach to supporting and integrating international students. Thus, developing a comprehensive strategy for international student engagement, improving collaboration and communication between these entities and ensuring that all students feel represented, supported and included are crucial for fostering a positive environment at the institution.

While the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the participation of students in the life and governance of University X in Hungary, there are limitations that warrant the implications of the study. In fact, the aspect of focusing on one single university with a relatively small sample of interviewees hinders the generalisation to all universities in Hungary or the student populations. Another limitation is noticed: the interviewees' selection method. Thus, the recruitment process relying on university leaders and student representatives may have introduced bias by including only participants engaged in the topic. While on another level, a possible extended limitation is the unique cultural and institutional context of the Hungarian university which may limit the applicability of findings to institutions in a different national or cultural setting.

The implications of this study extend beyond University X, offering valuable lessons for other higher education institutions in Hungary and potentially globally, as it provides comparative insights into the research area of student participation in Central Europe, contributing to global discussions on engagement. Examining both regulatory frameworks and lived practices sheds light on the challenges and opportunities that resonate in diverse contexts. Thus, by addressing the identified challenges and leveraging the opportunities, universities can ensure that both local and international students are meaningfully engaged in university life and governance, and they can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students taking into consideration the factors highlighted in this study.

Therefore, some recommendations may address overcoming the identified challenges. Thus, establishing a unified representation for international students in university governance could ensure consistent advocacy and influence, adding the implementation of strategic coordination across departments and offices to create a cohesive approach to supporting and integrating international students. On another level, it could be crucial to improve communication channels between student unions, international offices and university administration to address collaboration gaps and ensure effective implementation of initiatives and to ensure that events are inclusive and accessible to both Hungarian and international students, promoting cultural exchange and social integration.

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Conflict of Interest

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Laura Alzmeter who can be contacted by email via lauraalzmeter@gmail.com.