CONFERENCE ON EMPOWERMENT AND PARTNERSHIP IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Thank you very much for the invitation to speak at this conference on Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement. Like everyone else, I would much have preferred to be in Dublin, even in November, but I am thankful the technology makes it possible to meet online.

I am honored to be speaking immediately after my friend Gohar Hovhannisiyan, the current President of the European Students Union, and one week after the International Students Day. November 17 commemorates occasions on which students and the student movement have reminded broader society of the importance of democracy and citizen engagement.

That takes me to my first point: is there a difference between student *representation* and student *engagement*?

In Europe, we are doing fairly well on student representation, even if Gohar and other student leaders would rightly argue we could do better, and even if what is true for Europe in general is not true for every European country. Belarus is an obvious example.

Student *representation*, then, is about ensuring the student voice is heard when decisions are made. The 2018 Bologna Implementation report states simply that "almost all" higher education systems require student and staff representation. When we surveyed the situation quite some years ago, students generally had 15 – 25 per cent of representatives in university governing bodies in Europe and I do not think the situation has changed radically. The institution and faculty levels seem to be where student representation is most solidly anchored. It seems somewhat less solid in departments and also at the level of higher education systems. At European level, students are well represented by ESU in the Bologna Follow Up Group and in several working groups. ESU co-chaired the group that developed principles and guidelines for the social dimension of higher education, adopted by "Bologna Ministers" just a few days ago.

Student *representation* builds on student elections, and that is perhaps our entry into student *engagement*.

Elections require that voters engage at least enough to cast a vote. Turnout in election varies between countries, but it also varies between sectors, and turnout in student elections is often too low. So, the first challenge in student engagement is getting out the vote. To do so, students must feel that who represents them in university governance matters because the decisions they make matter. Student organizations have work to do, but so do policy makers.

Student *engagement* goes well beyond governance, as democracy goes beyond elections to include deliberation and participation. Engagement is about developing commitment to public space, whether that space is on campus or in society at large. It is about recognizing that studies are about more than ECTS credits and exams to pass. It is about making education more than just training.

Two years ago, the Council of Europe organized a conference on the local mission of higher education with Dublin City University. In 2014 we organized, with other partners from both

Europe and the US, a conference on the *democratic* mission of higher education at Queen's University Belfast.

Neither mission can be fulfilled without student engagement. The partnership with the US is important because while US universities are not very strong on student *representation*, student *engagement* is real and to some extent institutionalized.

From our partners in Dublin as well as in Belfast we have seen good examples of student engagement with broader society, from science shops to community centers motivating school students to aim for higher education even if they come from an area of town where they walk past campus every day but never dream of stepping on to it. To young people exploring their options, students are better role models than professors.

The student engagement we saw in Dublin and Belfast is a commitment to helping make our societies better. It can take many forms. Teaching slightly younger students and being role models to them is one. Offering practical help is another. Law students at my *alma mater*, the University of Oslo, have for decades been offering free legal advice to people who can ill afford to pay for it and may not even think of this as student engagement. Working on campus to help integrate new students or students who arrive from abroad is a third. These are students who may not easily find their footing in a new environment and for whom contacts with other students who already know their way around the university can make the difference between success and failure. Student engagement can be helping underrepresented groups organize – but not doing it *for* them – or it can be teaching language to refugees and migrants. It can be revealing the delights of museums to people who would otherwise do as people form one of its neighborhoods did with Queen's: walk past but not in.

As we see, there are many examples of good practice and probably even more possibilities. But how do we, as policy makers, help turn possibilities into realities?

On a very immediate level, we can encourage the use of the instruments we already have. In the European Higher Education Area, structural reforms are among the more important achievements. Structures are there to be used. The credit system and national qualifications frameworks, for which Ireland has been a pioneer, allow for greater flexibility devising study programs and individual learning paths. Nothing should prevent any institution from granting a reasonable number of ECTS credits for student engagements that fit into a learning path. And this does not apply only to students of social sciences. It applies equally well to students of astrophysics who motivate young people at a community center to reach for the stars. In assessing quality, we could look at the way institutions encourage student engagement as one of the elements.

For the possibilities to be used, higher education leaders – in public authorities as well as at institutions – must demonstrate that student engagement matters. There must be rewards so that students who engage and institutions that encourage them to do so make it clear that this is a part of what higher education is about, not just an optional extra.

Policy, practice, and rhetoric need to evolve. Policy makers must make it possible for higher education to fulfill its four major purposes in equal measure. These are preparation for the labor market, preparation for active citizenship in democratic societies, personal development, and the development of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

As an organization for democracy and human rights, the Council of Europe is of course particularly concerned with the role of education in developing democratic engagement. We have developed a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, with 20 competences organized around four clusters: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding. They apply to all levels of education, including higher education. They can be developed in schools and on campus but also in student engagement off campus. But they cannot be developed *without* engagement, without commitment, as something you learn about in theory for two hours a week and forget about the rest of the time. Engagement and democratic competences are like languages: you cannot learn them from books alone. And if you do not use them, you lose them.

Student engagement, then is part of what higher education should aim for and what universities should educate for. Countries like Ireland provide good examples.

We need to create opportunities for student engagement through policy, demonstrate its importance through actions, and encourage it through the way we refer to students.

Students are members of the academic community. They are not clients or customers. Clients shop around. If they do not find what they want they move on. Members of a community try to improve that community and move on only if all else fails.

The difference between students as clients and students as students, between passive students and engaged students, is crucial not only to the future of higher education. It is crucial to Europe.