Category
Social Values

What are the justifications for student participation and re-presentation?

There is no single reason why students should have a voice in how universities are run.

Across history, different traditions have offered varying justifications, emphasising whether participation is pursued for stability, as a right in itself, learning democracy, community-building or for improved outcomes.

Each case on these cards represents one way of thinking about student participation.



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Realist Case

Realist Case

Representation to maintain stability and manage dissent.

Student participation is viewed as a political necessity. Involving students in university governance helps to manage activism, prevent unrest and channel dissent into constructive dialogue.

A pragmatic approach aimed at formal representation of students.

Problem: risk of co-optation or tokenism — students included to avoid protest rather than to share power.



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Consumerist Case

Consumerist Case

Students as customers with a right to voice and quality.

Students are seen as clients who pay for and receive services from the university. Inclusion of students ensures responsiveness and accountability — like customer feedback in a market.

Representation helps improve performance indicators and overall satisfaction with the "student experience."

Problem: risks reducing education to a product, prioritising satisfaction metrics over equity.



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Communitarian Case

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Communitarian Case

Students as members of an academic community.

The university is a community of scholars and students. Students share responsibility for shaping the institution, co-producing knowledge and upholding common values.

Participation signifies belonging and mutual commitment.

Problem: achievement of real equality is limited by hierarchy and expertise differences between students and staff.

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Democratic Case

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Democratic Case

Universities as schools of democracy and civic spirit.

Student representation is a way of learning democracy by training in it in the higher education system.

Participation fosters civic responsibility, critical debate and collective decision-making. It creates democratic citizens for the benefit of society.

Problem: inclusion with no real power risks undermining the trust in democracy and its transformative power.



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Consequentialist Case

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Consequentialist Case

Participation because it produces better outcomes.

Inclusion of students leads to more effective and legitimate results. It enhances trust and communication, while students gain leadership and negotiation skills.

Participation is justified based on its production of better decisions.

Problem: participation and representation become conditional — valued only when they work efficiently.