

Interview with Professor Manja Klemenčič

Manja Klemenčič is a researcher in national and international education policies at Harvard University, where she also teaches a course in sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. She is Editor-in-Chief of European Journal of Higher Education. The interview is devoted to report Five Theoretical Propositions Concerning Research on Students, which Manja Klemenčič delivered at the 6th International Conference Rethinking Students: Ideas and New Research Approaches as a special guest of the Russian Association of Higher Education Researchers.

DOI: 10.17323/1814-9545-2016-1-10-17

In your presentation you were introducing the concept of student university citizenship and suggesting that students being active citizens of their universities is better for both students and their learning outcomes as well as universities. Students as citizens — how can it be achieved?

Manja Klemenčič: My discussion started with trying to present that in the research on students there is an inherent tension between how we conceive students — do we conceive them as subjects of higher education or as objects of higher education. Do we conceive them as people to whom things are done or as people who can do things for themselves and who are responsible for their own learning in some way. Are they subjects or masters of their own learning and self-formation?

So from that contemplation went on to discuss the concept of student agency. Student agency I defined as students' capacity to intervene in their higher education environment for the purposes of achieving self-formation and well-being which I see as two of the fundamental purposes of higher education. Studentship, being a student, is namely, a rite of passage to some new role, status or life condition. It is oriented towards becoming a projected future self. Being a student also includes other functions, such as learning to take care of oneself, know how to develop and maintain relationships, develop own styles and tastes, find a job.

And from here I come to the concept of student university citizenship where I argue that for most of the time in the literature the question is posed: what can institutions — universities — do to help their students, to satisfy their students, to meet their students' needs. And this discussion has gone even further in the research on student affairs into questions what kind of services we provide to the students in order to satisfy them and meet their needs, into the literature on marketing higher education provision as a service and how universities can pitch the message so that that will appear attractive and appeal-

ing to the students as customers, so that they would choose their university over another.

I argued at the beginning of my presentation, when I spoke about student agency, that we should also pose a question: what students can do for themselves in terms of their own learning and being responsible for their own learning trajectory? And I have introduced the concept of self-regulated learner which prompts students to think critically and meta-reflectively about their own learning trajectory — what they would like to get out of being in education, what kind of learning they expect — and make strategies on how they will achieve that.

But what I have also added is that we should probably push the discussion even further — it's not just what the universities can do for the students and what students can do for themselves in terms of their learning, but also the question what students as full members of the communities of their universities, in fact — citizens of universities in a sense of rights and responsibilities, — could do for their universities. And what I have argued is that we should try to see how we can in the time when individualism and consumerism as parts of cultural system are strengthening in our societies, how we can invoke in the students the sense of collective belonging to their institutions, the sense of collective belonging to their communities within higher education institutions and how we can invoke in them a concern not only for the personal self-interest — the instrumentalist logic of thinking: what can I get for myself and how can I promote myself and do my self-formation and achieve my own personal well-being, but also concern about what can a student do as a member or as a citizen of the academic community of his/her institution, for the community to which she/he essentially belong.

So this is how I come to the concept of university citizenship. I argued that students' university citizenship is not just important for the sake of achieving some kind of collective good and collective well-being. But it is also important — purely instrumentally — for the learning processes of the students. If the students enact their citizenship, their sense of belonging to that university will be much stronger. And with the strong sense of belonging their agency, their capacity to intervene within the institution will be stronger. In other words, students would feel empowered in that community. And if they feel empowered their sense of capacity, their judgment of their own capacity to change things within their institution, to learn more, would be stronger, their efficacy will be strengthened, they will engage more, they will be interested in voicing their concerns more, they will want to be involved more in the decisions that concern them, and ultimately they will be happier.

And I think that important aspect of being a student is actually that you are happy, you have fun time, you have memorable experiences of studentship. Some argue that you have to have some fun and you have to have memorable experience in order to claim a genuine student experience. Some people were skeptical to my advocating that

students should try to do more within university communities by volunteering their time. The counter proposition was: if they want to work for this university then it makes sense that students want to engage voluntarily because it will improve their chances of employability with this institution, but if they want to go elsewhere it probably does not make sense. Then they should seek engagements elsewhere. I disagree with that. I don't say that students should just be engaged within their academic community and not do anything else outside. They should of course nurture relationships and possibilities outside. But what I do argue is that if they live a split student life while being students, if their concerns and their mindfulness is more directed to the outside world rather to where they are actually located — in the university, they will be less happy, less integrated, they will have built fewer relationships with the people around them, with the teachers, with peers, they will learn less because learning is ultimately and essentially a social activity, and they will be less happy.

When I spoke about the agency which is difficult to translate to Russian what it means but I tried to explain it as a capacity to intervene in one's own environment for the purposes of self-formation and well-being. What I wanted to say is that students have both possibilities to influence their own learning trajectory and they have the motivation to do that. But it is much easier to discuss agency in a specific context — agency in the classroom, agency when it comes to extra-curricular activity, agency in quality assurance systems within institutions where students can actually give feedback on the quality of the processes in the institution. Agency as a theoretical concept is difficult to capture.

How is it related to the concept of students unions?

Student unions are proxy agencies for students. Students have their individual personal agency as their personal capacity — and will and power — to intervene in their environment. But students turn to their student unions — or student councils, or student parliaments, governments, whatever the name is — their representative body when they feel that they cannot solve issues themselves and they would need a representative to act on their behalf, or when they feel that the union can solve their problems better, can act more efficiently on their behalf, or when they are afraid to act on their own behalf because they fear negative repercussions for themselves as students. Example will make it easier to understand this — if I am a student and I have problem with my teacher because this teacher is not giving me feedback on my essays or has not been responding to any of my messages, or if feel she or he is wasting our time at the lectures and I am utterly dissatisfied because I actually want to learn from this course, there are several courses of actions I can take to respond to this situation: I can go myself to the head of the department or my tutor and say that this professor is not

doing much and ask whether something can be changed. This might be a risky action and I can fear negative consequences: maybe this head of the department is a close friend of this teacher and nothing will happen, in fact bad things may happen, maybe this chair of the department will confidentially tell this teacher about me complaining and I may have difficulties in passing the exams or something else. So this is one option. My other possible course of action is going to the student representative and say: I am dissatisfied with this professor and I feel I am not alone, is there a possibility that you in your capacity as student representative can discuss it with the head of the department and then report back to us as your constituency? Another option is that I write an anonymous letter and hope that something will happen or not. But let's come back to the citizenship. There is a profound difference between those two courses of action. In the first instance when I in my personal capacity go and complain I want something to be changed for myself, I want my message to receive response, I want my paper to receive feedback from this particular teacher so I am active out of self-interest. I want to improve quality of provision that I get. If, however, I go to the student representative or if I decide to become a spokesperson for my class I am trying to improve the situation not only for myself. I am trying to improve the situation for my cohort, for the classmates — I am acting out of communal interest. And in this course of action I am enacting more citizenship than when I am trying to improve my own personal well-being. I have tried to change the situation not only for myself, but for my fellow students, and hopefully for the future generations who would come after me and take this particular course with this particular teacher who is not doing the job properly.

And now I am coming to answer the question you asked me before — what can the universities do in order to help students to develop this sense of citizenship, to invoke citizenship in their students... meaning that students will actually behave as citizens of their universities and try to take part in the university life as citizens. It is difficult and complex questions but I think that there are probably two levels on which it can be tackled. One level is symbolic in terms of the messages the university is giving to students about how the university envisages the role the students play within this community. If the message to the students is that university expects discipline and that students diligently follow courses, pass their exams and graduate on time... that sort of message does not induce much citizenship. The university-student relationship is controlling, students are conceived as pupils who need to be disciplined and educated. Students' role is passive. The message does not call for student engagement; it does not strengthen their agency. If the message of the leadership is that they see students as equal members of the academic community, call for their engagement in various forms, ask for their feedback on the experience of this higher education, on what can be done and improved in order to serve the purpose of scholarship and the learning better — that's a

different kind of message and that is a very different university-student relationship. University leaders need to follow up with concrete spaces or mechanisms of how the students can actually participate as citizens in university life.. Possibilities: in some universities, such as at Harvard, University Town hall meetings are such an example. When university administration decided to introduce a new general education programme they held three Town hall meetings with students to discuss the proposals. That is one possibility. Student survey is another possibility of engaging students as citizens. If the institution is sending students a survey asking about their satisfaction and engagement and if students provide feedback, such feedback will hopefully translate into some policies that might lead to improvement. Within the classroom, when the professor is looking for volunteers for a research project that she or he is undertaking, such invitation also calls for enacting citizenship because students engage with something which is the core purpose of this university –research, and at the same time students are learning, developing the connection with the professor, with the research field, with the discipline, with the professional networks — that is another way of doing it.

I don't want to confine citizenship only to political engagement in the governance of universities. Citizenship is also part of the university core functions of teaching, learning and research. Citizenship happens when students are willing to act beyond their self-interests, even if personal and communal interests often overlap. Citizenship happens when students engage with peers and the teachers, in activities they don't get paid for or are not mandatory course requirements and when immediate personal benefits are not clear. Political engagement in university governance and student representation are more straightforward aspects of citizenship if driven by communal interests rather than personal interests which often student representation is. Students sometimes become student representatives to promote their own political career. As long as they act fully in interest of students, that's fine If you look at citizens of countries, it is not only that we vote that makes us citizens or we confer our voice to a particular person to represent us in the decision making, we also deal a lot with civic involvement, we take part in non-profit organizations etc. If you are active critical citizen you are trying to intervene in your environment to make a change, to make it better. And it does not have to happen on the large scale of politics, it can happen in the microcosm of your village, or even your school or your classroom.

I haven't developed the concept of university citizenship any further but in my mind it is very closely linked to the sense of belonging which is essential for the students' learning and wellbeing while being a student. It is closely connected to the students developing a sense of greater purpose, collective communal interest and goes against cultural system of individualism where individual interests and individual needs are put ahead of the interests of the wider community.

In his presentation John Douglass was talking about international student body and different ways of students' participation in the university environment giving examples of Chinese students. Would it be appropriate to talk about cultural differences within a university?

Chinese students bring with them value of collectivism because this is the part of their cultural system. The question, however, is whether they are able to diffuse these values into the academic community at university abroad and whether they consider only fellow Chinese students as the group to whom they hold allegiance or the entire student cohort John suggested in his presentation that Chinese students are very willing and interested in helping each other — that is other Chinese students, but they interact less with the entire student cohort. They tend to belong to the group of Chinese students which is a subgroup within the academic community. So it is a question what kind of belonging and loyalty they feel or are able to develop to the institution they have joined. It is also a question what approach does the university take to try to integrate all students and help them to develop sense of belonging. At universities we have communities within communities within a larger institution. And this situation poses the difficult question of how to nurture belonging to the mother university rather than only to specific communities and sub communities within it. The question is to whom does this sense of affinity go to and how far does it reach? Is it affinity to your cohort: “we are the MA students on a programme on higher education administration, this is my group and I belong to it”. Or can affinity be transcended to more distant parts of the institution: “I feel affinity to the faculty of social sciences or school of education”. What kind of sense of belonging that is? What kind of sense of affinity? What kind of loyalty do students feel to the entire institution like Higher School of Economics where we are sitting now? Those are the difficult questions. And we know that especially the private institutions are trying to nurture the sense of belonging because they are interested in students contributions back philanthropically once they leave the universities. They do sports events and they have t-shirt and pens and alumni clubs and events for alumni but that is not invoking citizenship in the sense I am proposing here. Those activities are too closely associated with education seen as a set of consumer choices. Those activities do not necessarily foster this sense that students and the university are building something together. The issues universities are dealing with are so complex that inevitably require teamwork of people to tackle them. They call for collective endeavors that include students.

Is it possible to see student citizenship as part of university culture?

Citizenship is not something you learn from books. Citizenship is something you learn by doing, by being engaged with people in your

community, by being invited into initiatives that have a larger purpose. We have not studied enough organizational culture of universities yet: how can we change it when it needs to be changed. We don't know yet how symbolic messages are diffused and transcended into what students are actually hear and understand that university is communicating to them. Why culture is important we know — because culture provides the toolkit, the repertoire of possible choices of action that students and other members of the institution will take. It helps students establish what is possible, acceptable and valued in a specific institution and such understanding inevitably shapes their preferences and behavior.

E. Bagdasarova
Editorial Manager
Voprosy obrazovaniya/Educational Studies. Moscow