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STUDENTS' VOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ITALY AND LATVIA

ABSTRACT

The participation of students in the educational process is a key to success for higher education. The implementation of activities in which students' voice is heard via different practices and actors on mega, macro, meso and micro levels brings unexpectedly impressive results in learning. The article investigates the role of students' voice in two public educational institutions in Latvia (University of Latvia) and Italy (University of Padua). The comparison is made in two categories, actors and practices, to respond to the research question of whether the Italian and Latvian systems support students' participation/engagement in higher education. The comparative methodology of the study determined the differences and the similarities between the students' voice practices of the two higher education institutions and proved that Italian and Latvian systems support students' participation/engagement in higher education; although some improvements are still needed, they are on the right track to implementing it on all levels and in all dimensions.

Keywords: *collaboration, engagement, Italy, Latvia, students' voice*

GLAS ŠTUDENTOV V VISOKOŠOLSKEM IZOBRAŽEVANJU V ITALIJI IN LATVIJI – POVZETEK

Sodelovanje študentov v izobraževalnem procesu je ključnega pomena za uspeh visokošolskega izobraževanja. Raba aktivnosti, kjer se sliši glas študentov, prek različnih praks in akterjev na mega-, makro-, meso- in mikroravni, vodi do nepričakovanih oziroma osupljivih učnih rezultatov. Članek raziskuje vlogo glasu študentov na izobraževalni instituciji v Latviji in Italiji, in sicer Univerzi v Latviji in Univerzi v Padovi. Primerjava je zajela dve kategoriji, akterje in prakse, v povezavi z raziskovalnim vprašanjem, ali italijanski oziroma latvijski sistem podpira aktivno vključevanje študentov v izobraževalni proces. Komparativna metodologija študije je pokazala razlike in podobnosti med praksami, ki spodbujajo glas študentov na teh dveh institucijah, in potrdila, da oba sistema podpirata aktivno vključevanje študentov v visokošolsko izobraževanje; čeprav še vedno obstajajo potrebe po izboljšavah, sta instituciji na pravi poti do aktivnega vključevanja študentov na vseh ravneh in v vseh dimenzijah.

Ključne besede: *sodelovanje, aktivna vključenost, Italija, Latvija, glas študentov*

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INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is one of the most important issues nowadays in different areas of life. Education is not an exception. One of the significant outcomes of student-student or student-faculty collaboration is the student's growing awareness in the learning and educational process and as the result the increase in motivation and engagement. This leads to the concept of teaching and learning together when the faculty and teachers are learning from the students and students become the active participants of the process, informants, and change agents in collaboration with faculty members (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2014; Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013). Such youth-adult partnerships place students in a preferable position, which gives them the opportunity for their voices to be heard.

The term 'youth-adult partnership' can be defined as a relationship in which both youth and adults can have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Jones & Perkins, 2004). This form of collaboration comes with an expectation of youth sharing the responsibility for the vision of the group, the activities planned, and the group process that facilitates the enactment of these activities (Jones, 2004). A focus on mutual teaching and learning develops in youth-adult partnerships as all parties involved assume a leadership role in some aspects of their shared effort (Camino, 2000, in Mitra, 2009). In other words, youth-adult partnership is called 'student voice', and according to Fletcher's definition, is the meaningful involvement of students, which requires "validating and authorizing them [students] to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools" (Fletcher, 2005, p. 4). However, in addition to providing students with opportunities to communicate their ideas and opinions, student voice work is also about students having the power to bring about changes which will improve their experiences at university (Robinson & Taylor, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In general, the concept of 'student voice' has been introduced across a wide range of contemporary education research, policymaking and provision (Bahou, 2011; Bragg & Manchester, 2012; Rodrigues, Tribe & Araújo de Holanda, 2013), as providing students with the opportunity to reflect, actively articulate their views and to be partners in the planning, implementation and appraisal of their teaching and learning experience (Fielding, 2004; QAA, 2012) with the aim of improving quality (Rogers, 2005).

There are four main values at the heart of student voice:
- communication as dialogue;
- participation and democratic inclusivity;
- the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic;
- the possibility for change and transformation (Robinson & Taylor, 2007); whether or not student voice work can genuinely challenge the hierarchical power relations that exist in schools (Robinson & Taylor, 2012).

Besides, it is a well-documented fact that today's Generation Y students regard themselves as active participants with a strong desire to shape their own learning experiences. Keiller and Inglis-Jassiem (2015) support this notion and state that when academics plan to implement new innovations and technology in teaching and learning, they should consider students' voice, especially in relation to student preferences and their levels of competency with regard to new technology (Wyk & Ryneveld, 2017). Moreover, it should be emphasised that the concept of 'student voice' is in many ways similar to 'student-centred' approaches, and it means that in order to develop learners' autonomy and independence, the focus shifts from the teachers' needs to the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students.

However, although youth-adult partnerships exist in a wide array of organisations, including government agencies, foundations, community-based organisations, and businesses, where youth collaborate with adults by serving on decision-making boards, developing projects, and implementing change efforts, in the most important institutions for youth – schools and universities – they are remarkably absent (Mitra, 2009). This is substantiated by an important national research, led by the University of Padua, carried out in Italy (2014–2017). A survey that included 3,760 students from different universities investigated five areas of interest, which also included the creation of a participatory environment, the use of methods and resources for teaching and learning, and the dimensions of feedback and assessment. Data analysis showed that faculties are still resistant to innovative teaching approaches, how low the level of interaction with students in the form of class discussion and group activities is, and how little feedback and peer-self-evaluation are promoted (Fedeli, 2018). This was the most extensive study done in Italy that included students' voice and opinions on teaching methods in higher education in the last decade. Similar research began in Latvia in 2014 and will conclude in 2019. Representatives from 41 higher education institutions have participated in the survey. Respondents were asked to answer 53 questions in the form of a statement as to whether or not different student-centred educational practices had been introduced at universities/colleges. Overall, there is a positive trend of student-centred education in Latvia. However, several aspects should be improved, such as involving students in the study process and content development, institutionalising the review of study courses and the study outcomes process and clarifying the role of students in their review, taking into account students' needs and diversity, creating teaching guidelines at universities/colleges, and integrated mobility in order to ensure full involvement (AESF, 2016).

It should be noted that student voice has been recognised for a long time only in secondary schools (Brice Heath, 2004; Rudduck, 2007) and is only now emerging as a dominant concept in higher education (Leach, 2012). Most higher education institutions provide platforms and opportunities for students to put across their views, dialogue and have their voice heeded (Floud, 2005). Many universities, in a bid to hear and heed the student voice, encourage students to provide feedback on all student experiences during the study period. To make it more effective, universities should create a culture and a conducive

environment which has transparent formal and informal mechanisms of engaging students in their quality processes.

There are a number of approaches to how students' voices can be heard:
- a student satisfaction survey, where twice per year, students are asked to express their opinions online via the college/university Intranet system (Blair & Keisha, 2014)
- student participation in higher education curriculum development, where the students express their opinions concerning the content and context of studies (Brooman, Darwent, & Pimor, 2015);
- undergraduate students' attraction to serve as pedagogical consultants to faculty members, where students express their expectations and consult on general student opinions (Cook-Sather, 2014);
- students' voices in peer support, an attractive practice where students assist other students in different aspects of university life, trying out as teachers themselves (Meharg, Tizard, & Varey, 2015);
- students' voices as sources in research on evaluating the efficiency of teaching;
- students' voices in formative and summative assessment, where the self-assessment and peer assessment play their roles (The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education, Assessment, Teaching, and Learning, 2011).

The factors considered the most important for the evolution of the educational process using students' voices are:
- pedagogical reflection;
- professional learning.

After receiving feedback from students, the most logical and obvious step is to process the data and reflect on it; Cook-Sather and Luz (2014) suggest that capitalising on student feedback can benefit a teacher's professional development.

METHODOLOGY

This paper sought to investigate the role of students' voice in two educational public institutions in Latvia and in Italy: the University of Latvia and the University of Padua. These two universities were selected for the analysis due to the fact that the authors of the paper are representatives of these countries and both participated in the comparative group work process during the Winter School of 2018.

Latvia is a country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. The Latvian higher education system comprises of public and private universities, academies and colleges, where academic and professional programmes are offered at the first (bachelor's degree), second (master's degree) and third level (doctoral degree). The Cabinet of Ministers issues Regulations regarding the state standard for academic education; teaching methods are chosen by the academic staff of the institution depending on the type of studies and the

specificies of an individual course. The main principles of assessment are that it is mandatory, and that different methods are used.

In Italy, the higher education system is provided by private and above all by public universities. They are considered to be 'institutions of high culture', as well as scientific structures aimed at teaching and scientific research. Public and private universities (recognised and accredited) confer academic qualifications (bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees). State universities elect their own representation within the National University Council and the National Council of University Students, advisory bodies of the Ministry of Education, University and Research. In recent years, the Italian university has experimented with important changes due to the Ministerial Decree 509/1999 and Law 240/2010, which have strongly changed the organisation of universities with the transformation of the training courses in cycles, the promotion of the quality of higher education, and the shift of attention from teaching to learning. The purpose is to facilitate student mobility and recognition of their careers in the European context (use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)). In particular, the need was to balance the paths and objectives of higher education with the aim of creating a homogeneous and harmonious European area of higher education able to promote the mobility of citizens and their access to the world of work.

As mentioned above, the investigation of the students' voice perspective was carried out by the authors through a shared process of perspectives during the International Winter School 2018 in Würzburg, where, after a broad debate on the characteristics of students' voices practices in the two different institutions, some categories of comparison were selected: *actors* and actions (*practices*). The comparison of these two specific categories allowed the researchers to respond to the following research question: Do Italian and Latvian systems support students' participation/engagement in higher education?

The comparative methodology (Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2014) of the study was aimed at investigating the factors that determine the differences and the similarities between the students' voice practices of the two higher education institutions. It means that specific attention was focused on the roles and *actions* of the *actors* in Latvia and Italy at macro (on the level of country), meso (on the level of university) and micro levels (on the level of teacher) to trace if Italian and Latvian systems support students' participation/engagement in higher education. The categories, actors and practices, were chosen as the most crucial and influential for the learning outcome. The findings were discussed according to the research question.

The following sources were used in the analysis: European educational regulations and policies, national education laws, regulations and policies of the universities of Latvia and Padua.

STUDENTS' VOICE IN EDUCATION STUDIES IN ITALY AND IN LATVIA

In Italy, the students' voice perspective has obtained increasing relevance year by year since the 2000s. Many scholars have highlighted its importance, identifying it as a way to

create democratic educational environments (Fedeli, 2016, 2018; Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013) and improve educational practices and recognising students as a subsidiary source for the research (Gemma, 2013). They've also found that it promotes discussion practices within the educational contexts because giving a voice to students reinforces two dimensions: the social one, creating strong group integration, but also the introduction of new teaching and learning approaches, such as constant formal and informal feedback to students, peer and self-evaluation, methods and techniques that promote dialogue, students' participation and involvement (Fedeli, 2018). Scholars have stressed that the students' voice perspective gives students the opportunity to be the protagonists of their personalised learning process (Fedeli, 2014, 2016; Fedeli, Giampaolo, & Boucouvalas, 2013), promotes a participatory assessment process in order to support students' quality literacy (Ghislandi & Raffaghelli, 2013) and develops effective teacher-student relationships based on a balance of power and the development of a participatory environment where students and teachers are partners in the planning and realisation of teaching practices (Fedeli, 2017).

Over the last 25 years, since its political redirection in the early 1990s, Latvia has jumped into neoliberalism without any significant analysis of what it actually is and how previously stable cultural values or the economic legacy of the prior system might be undermined. Education policy-makers and practitioners have tried to find quick answers in a major reform process; many of the changes in the field of education were and still are focused on democratisation and the teachers' acquisition of competences that educators need in order to facilitate and implement changes in a new reality of a global world where there is wide access to sources of information and labour. The leap into the knowledge society, which itself has been only vaguely defined, has involved dragging those with previous experience into adopting novel approaches to teaching and learning in a comparatively short time (Zogla, 2017). The change of education paradigms has taken place in parallel to different reforms of the education system in Latvia (Kangro & James, 2008) and the improvement of its quality, thus marking the transition from teaching to learning (Bluma, 2001), placing greater emphasis on students' involvement and contribution in the teaching/learning process. A paradigm shift occurred between 1999 and 2009, when learning started to prevail over teaching, and listening to students' voices became one of those novelties which was gradually adopted in classrooms (Cekse, Geske, & Kango, 2010).

At the mega level, in both countries, the students' voice perspective is supported by different actors, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), whose mission is to promote intercultural dialogue through education, culture, information and communication; the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with the mission to develop policies for social well-being in the world; the European Union (EU) with the aim to promote harmony among European countries; the European Student Union (ESU) with the purpose to defend and reinforce students' educational, democratic, political, and social rights. This means that if the missions of the different organisations are based on the idea of dialogue, harmony, equality

and rights, it is important to promote the culture of participation, dialogue and communication among people. It is a kind of habit that needs to be built as part of a lifelong process, and therefore, higher education systems need to become one of its main actors by involving students both in teaching and learning practices and in the governance of higher education as required by the Bologna Process. The aim of this policy is to achieve the creation of democratic communities in which young people can also express their opinions.

JUXTAPOSITION ANALYSIS

Actors of the students' voice perspective in Italy and in Latvia

In Italy, at macro level there are not strong policies that support a democratic emancipation of learning, in fact, the Ministry of Education, University and Research is responsible for education at all levels and supervises the university institutions. Through the central administration, it establishes educational policies that are then implemented and managed locally by the regional offices, by the territorial area offices, and by every educational institution. However, the most recent Italian law on university reorganisation, no. 240[l] from 30th December 2010, foresees the participation of students in different academic bodies. At national level, an important body is the National Council of University Students made up of twenty-eight members elected by students. The council remains in office for three years and can be re-elected. It is an advisory body representing students enrolled in courses at Italian universities. Its task is to formulate opinions and make proposals to the Minister of Education, University and Research, implementing a similar action to that which the European Student Union carries out at the European level. The most important proposals are related to the reorganisation projects of the university system formulated by the Minister; ministerial decrees concerning the general criteria for the regulation of the teaching of courses, and the methods and tools for the orientation and mobility of students; the criteria for the allocation of the ordinary financing fund. It communicates the general interests of the university to the Minister and presents to him/her, within one year of the settlement, a report on the student condition within the university system. The council can consult the Minister on facts or events of national relevance concerning teaching and the student condition, about which it receives response within 60 days (Law, 240/2010).

At macro level, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia is similarly responsible for education at all levels; however, supervising higher education and university institutions through the Law on Institutions of Higher Education (2000), it provides academic freedom where "academic staff are entitled to choose study methods", thus learning approaches are decided at meso and especially at micro levels (section 6(4)). Also, students are allowed to express their ideas and opinions openly in an institution of higher education; to elect and to be elected to a self-governance body of students,

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1   See: http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/10240l.htm.

to participate in all levels of self-governance bodies of an institution of higher education. Furthermore, the above law states that a student self-governance body shall represent the interests of the students of an institution of higher education in relations with State authorities (section 50. (6)). The student self-governance body shall defend and represent the interests of students in matters of academic, material and cultural life in the institution of higher education and other State authorities (section 53.3). Moreover, the Student Union of Latvia represents the students of Latvia and works for the observance of their rights and interests at a national and international level. It comes together regularly once per two months and contributes to the development and advancement of education and the cooperation of local unions of students of higher education institutions, it improves the quality of education and academic traditions, democracy and individual initiative, the self-esteem of students and development of personality, healthy lifestyle and mental health, civil integration of youth and participation in students' social unions. Another organisation responsible for students' voices in Latvia is the Council of Higher Education. It is an independent institution which develops the national strategy of higher education, implements the cooperation between higher educational institutions, state institutions and the general public in the development of higher education, oversees the quality of higher education guarantees accepting of the best decisions in issues related to higher education (Law on Institutions of Higher Education, 2000). Thus, there are a number of different organisations which defend the rights of the students on the national level and make sure their voices are heard.

At meso level, in Italy, every academic institution guarantees the representation of students as foreseen by Law 240/2010 in different bodies such as the Academic Senate (5 students), the Board of Directors (2 students), the Evaluation Unit (1 student), the University Teaching Commission (3 students), the Equal Opportunities Committee (number of students in balance with the number of teaching staff), the Observatory for Post-Graduate Specialist Training (4 students), the Council of Study Courses (1 student), the Department Council (1 PhD student and 1 research fellow) and Joint Teacher-Student Commissions (3 students).

In Italy, the evaluation body foresees the involvement of all students on the courses and the teaching evaluation process in a survey at the end of each course, as well as the involvement of students' representatives in the GAV (Gruppo Auto-Valutazione, the Self-Evaluation Group) (D.Lgs 19/2012)[2], useful for the improvement of courses management, curriculum development, and didactical practices according to the students' perspectives. In each of these bodies, students' representatives have a voice and report about issues and proposals connected to different courses in terms of organisation, rights and needs.

In Latvia, at the meso level, the organisation which makes sure students' voices are heard is the students' Council of the University of Latvia. As an independent collegial

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2   See: https://www.cun.it/uploads/storico/dlgs_27012012_19.pdf.

institution, it represents the rights and interests of the students of the University of Latvia and its members are elected for a year. It is actively involved in the university's decision-making processes and is the main promoter of students' interests in educational, social, economic and cultural fields. The University of Latvia also creates study programme councils where students are able to use their voices to influence curriculum development, express their opinions and share their experiences. Such an approach definitely provides a learning opportunity for students as well as for the institutions, teachers, and administrators, where everyone has a chance to reflect and grow professionally. Thus, in Latvia at the meso level as well as in Italy every academic institution guarantees the representation of students in different bodies according to the aforementioned law, and in part, students' voices might bring some changes in the system (Law on Institutions of Higher Education, 2000).

In Italy, at the micro level, the development of a democratic student-teacher partnership depends on the attitudes of individual teachers; in fact, the teacher-centred approach is still prevalent in Italian academic institutions. However, in the last five years, academic institutions have been involved in a wide debate on the innovation of didactics that include students' engagement and their protagonism in different teaching and learning processes (Fedeli, Grion, & Frison, 2016). As evidence of that, various national conferences focused on this theme have been organised in Italy[3].

In Latvia, at the micro level, the initiative to provide students with opportunities to communicate their ideas and opinions to ensure a democratic student-teacher partnership depends mainly on the particular teacher's initiative, however, the paradigm is gradually shifting from the teacher-centred to the student-centred approach (Law on Institutions of Higher Education, 2000).

In order to analyse the role of Italian and Latvian actors, the following table presents their roles at macro, meso and micro levels.

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3   Some international conferences in Padua: *Valutare l'apprendimento o valutare per l'apprendimento? Verso una cultura della valutazione sostenibile all'Università* (March 2017) *[Assessment of Learning or Assessment for Learning? Forward to a Sustainable Assessment at University]; Interrogating Higher Education actors in learning and teaching* (May, 2018); '*Teaching4Learning@unipd. C'è sempre spazio per migliorare* (June 2018) *[Teaching4Learning@unipd. There is always room for improving].*

Table 1: The roles of Italian and Latvian actors

Level	Italian actors	Roles of Italian actors	Latvian actors	Roles of Latvian actors
Macro	Ministry of Education, University and Research	Supervises universities Develop policies	Ministry of Education and Science	Supervises universities Develops policies
	National Council of University of Students	Formulates proposals	Student Union of Latvia	Observes and protects the rights and interests of students at a national and international level
			Latvian Students Association	Resolves issues associated with the representation of student interests
			Council of Higher Education	Develops the national strategy
Meso	University with its governance bodies	Create the governance bodies with students' representatives	University with its governance bodies	Create the governance bodies with students' representatives
Micro	Teachers	Dominant teacher-centred approach	Teachers	Graduate shift to learner-centred approach
		Few are the students' participatory learning experiences		Teachers-researchers implement innovative methods
		Few are the teachers who implement students' participatory approaches		

Source: Authors' own.

The practices of the students' voice perspective in Italy and in Latvia

The realisation of practices according to the students' voice perspective is the second category of comparison. We focused on two dimensions: the assessment process and class management.

In Italy, the involvement of the students in the assessment process is generally managed by the individual teacher. It means that there is no shared assessment culture within the academic systems. Therefore, there are few teachers who involve students in the pre-course phase, investigating their expectations with a questionnaire or during the courses, gathering students' feedback during or after every lesson. After the course there is a phase in which students are more involved through different strategies: a post-course questionnaire, peer assessment, summative assessment, an online survey on the course. Some cases deserve particular attention because of their assessment process: there are some courses at the Department of Education at the University of Padua where teachers, adopting the philosophy of *Assessment for Learning* (Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013) consider assessment as a tool for promoting students' learning and their evaluation literacy. In fact, during these courses, students are involved in the definition of assessment criteria that they then use during their work and during the peer-assessment process, which support their learning during the entire courses (Grion, Serbati, Tino, & Nicol, 2017). In the same courses, teachers implement innovative participatory practices in order to promote students' engagement. They adopt a student-centred philosophy based on some specific class management strategies, for example, a co-definition of the syllabus, the flipped classroom method, an interactive classroom and online discussion, group work, the world café technique, project work, reflection and experiential education. They are all class management strategies that allow students to be the active protagonists of their learning process and learning contexts. Adopting these innovative strategies is a way to recognise students as change agents (Grion, 2016) because their ways of participating in the didactical activities and their perspectives about content, activities, assessment and real learning needs promote didactic innovation and the reconsideration of the teacher-student partnership based on the balance of power and on the responsibility of all actors involved for the teaching/learning process (Fedeli, 2016). It is the result of a productive relationship that generates a transformative experience (Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Snyder, 2012) for the people involved because it allows them to "have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve greater mutual and consensual understandings" (Taylor, 2016, p. 182).

In support of this innovative perspective, an important project called "Teaching4Learning @Unipd" (Fedeli & Taylor, 2017; Fedeli, 2018) wants to improve and modernise the didactics at the University of Padua, creating communities for innovation in different departments. Its aim is the innovation of didactics through teacher training and the dissemination of practices useful to guarantee student engagement and participation. This project is also based on a sustainable approach foreseeing the development of a community of practices within each department thanks to the training of teacher-experts as change

agents. Their role is to disseminate a new culture of teaching and learning, and to support the training of their colleagues in their departments.

In Latvia, the involvement of students in the assessment process is also managed by the individual teacher and there is no shared assessment culture within the academic systems (Law on Institutions of Higher Education, 2000). In Latvian universities, some teachers might ask students to complete a pre-course questionnaire on their own initiative to acquaint themselves with the students' expectations. Also, some teachers might ask students to complete a lesson evaluation questionnaire either at the end of each lesson or every second lesson/lecture. Some single teachers-researchers might ask students to fill in post-course questionnaires or use the peer-evaluation approach for course assessment at the end of the course. Nevertheless, on the level of the university, it is compulsory for the students to complete satisfaction surveys at least twice per year (at the end of the winter and spring terms), where the students have to fill in 10–20 Likert-type questions (closed and open) expressing their opinions anonymously online via the university's intranet system. The system was introduced at the University of Latvia approximately 10 years ago, and after a problematic first few years of getting used to the system, there have been no obvious problems with using the system and analysing the data in the last 7 years. At the University of Latvia the teachers have free access to the students' evaluations, at least via the directors of particular programmes, and they are also analysed in the annual self-assessment report and the University administration comments shortly on the students surveys in the annual meetings; however, as a tool for significant professional development, it might be called symbolic, and there is still space to develop and expand this instrument of students' voice. Also, student's voices can serve as a source in research evaluating the efficiency of teaching. It refers to the increase in the share of teachers with doctoral degrees or those who are pursuing a doctoral degree; thus, the students' voices become the sources in the teachers' research on evaluating the efficiency of teaching which provides motivation and engagement in lifelong learning both for the teacher and the students. In fact, a team-based learning method is applied in some courses, an innovative approach promoting students' engagement and involvement in learning, introducing self-assessment and peer assessment during and at the end of the course. It gives the students a chance to express their voices at the beginning of the course, during every single lesson/lecture and eventually at the end of the course, giving the teachers an opportunity to reflect on this feedback and make the appropriate conclusions and improvements at the micro level.

INTERPRETATION ANALYSIS

The students' voice perspective in both countries seems to be supported quite well at the macro level, where a strong influence is played by the Ministry of Education with the role of university supervision and policy development. However, at this level (see table 1), the role of students in Latvia seems to be stronger; in fact, in Italy, there is only the National Council of the University of Students, while in Latvia at the same level, there are three more representative student bodies – the Latvian Students Association, the Student Union

of Latvia and the Council of Higher Education. The reason for the presence of just one big body at the macro level in Italy can be found in the idea of peripheral institutions, autonomy and, in fact, this seems well transposed at the meso level with the constitution of many bodies with students' representatives. The presence of the aforementioned bodies in Latvia at the macro level signifies the interest and possibility to provide support to students not only on the university level but rather on the state level, and due to the fact that Latvia is a considerably smaller country in comparison to Italy, it makes it easier to support and ensure the equality and democratic participation of students in various issues even at the macro level.

In both countries, at the meso level, the role of students is well-represented; in fact, students' representatives are involved in different organised bodies, even if to a different extent. It means that the policies at the macro and meso levels are student-oriented because they foresee their participation at different levels of university management with the aim to improve didactical approaches, guarantee their own rights, and promote citizenship development. These elements show that higher education institutions in both countries have incorporated into their policies, at least formally, those national norms that were developed according to European Recommendations (Bologna Process, 2015; European commission, 2010). However, it is useful as well to underline that if the Latvian policies at the macro level seemed to be stronger than the Italian ones, thanks to the presence of three more bodies, in contrast, they seemed stronger in Italy at the meso level, where students' representatives are present in the different hierarchical organised bodies. That could explain that Italian academic institutions have really included in their policies the European perspective of changes, trying to keep up with the general culture of innovation and promote changes at the micro level. Therefore, these articulated students' representatives in Italy show that there is a strong policy and a consistent student-orientation on the meso level that would promote an evident and fast impact at the micro level. Despite all that, the situation in both countries is similar at the micro level. In fact, student participation and engagement depend on the individual teacher's attitude. It is the personal dimension of the teacher that directly impacts didactic and assessment approaches as well as the teacher-student partnership. In fact, the teachers' culture of teaching and learning depends on it, their idea of the learning environment, their idea of student behaviours and participation. And teachers' attitudes cannot be changed just through policies at the mega, macro and meso level, but through innovations in teachers' culture. It is an attitude that finds its roots in teachers' culture, in their theoretical background and their experiences as teachers and as former students. The change of teachers' culture can probably be promoted by supporting them in the acquisition of the awareness of these aspects, through quality training based on the analysis and sharing of practices, theories of learning at national and international levels, and reflection on their own practices. In fact, in Italy, the shift from the teacher-centred to the student-centred perspective is gradually happening thanks to a wide debate on these aspects at the national level with the participation of experts at international level, which is, step-by-step, affecting the didactics approaches and teachers' culture. That is a kind of bottom-up process whose strengths consist of having

a relevant impact not only at the micro level but also at the macro and meso levels, where policies seem to need to be reinforced above all in terms of monitoring and assessing the implementation of students' voice policies. In Latvia, the historical background imprinted on the culture of teaching, and it is not so easy to implement changes in a fast and painless manner; it takes time and a paradigm shift in the consciousness of every single teacher. However, changes have begun and the idea of collaboration, communication and participatory teaching/learning is in the air; thus, introducing educational training to every teacher at macro and meso levels might trigger positive changes in teaching approaches and transform the dominant teacher-centred approach in the classroom into a more advanced and innovative learner-centred environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The Italian and the Latvian educational systems do support students' participation/engagement in higher education, and although some improvements are still needed, they are on the right track to implement it on all levels and in all dimensions. This means that the strong meso level policy-system needs to be well-interpreted in order to transform practices and help faculties to change their teaching and learning perspective to a student-centred approach. At the micro level, in both countries, the democratic student-teacher partnership is strongly connected to individual teachers' attitudes rather than to a systemic culture of higher education institutions, as indicated by the difficulty not only to embed policies in practices, but also to consider students as pedagogical consultants to faculty members (Cook-Sather, 2014), as sources for evaluating teaching efficiency, as experts in providing support to peers (Meharg et al., 2015) or in giving their opinion concerning the content and context of studies (Brooman, et al., 2015). If the process of teaching and learning change has begun, much more needs to be done in order to create democratic learning environments, where the balance of power between students and teachers can really generate a didactic innovation process based on a new teacher-student partnership that is characterised by a common responsibility for the teaching/learning process (Fedeli, 2016), and where a general teaching/learning perspective of change can be guaranteed only through a more effective connection and continuity among the different levels of actions and policies (macro, meso, micro), according to an ecological approach.

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