Research article

Student representation and participation in institutional decision-making: the perspective of AAU student representatives, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This article explored the status of student representation and participation in institutional decision-making; specifically, it focused on the nature of student representation; the perspective of student representatives on their participation; any available support to student representatives, and prevailing challenges to student participation in decision-making. Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two students’ union executive committee members; and FGD with five college and department level student representatives as well as through relevant document reviews. By employing descriptive textual data analysis, four dominant themes emerged as findings of the study. These are: 1) supportive legal provision and participatory student election; 2) nominal participation, co-decision makers and information suppliers; 3) information gap and role confusion; and 4) mistrust and optimistic student union. Moreover, student participation involved different decision models (i.e. democratic political, democratic collegiate corporate and authoritarian-paternalistic) depending on the nature of the decision itself. Corporate level strategic and administrative decisions follow the democratic political decision model whereas decisions linked with student affairs and basic campus services take democratic collegiate model. On the other hand, students’ participation in academic related decisions were found to be characterized by authoritarian-paternalistic decision model. Despite some profound challenges, student representatives were found optimistic about the future. Nonetheless, further study is needed to identify the challenges, roles, and contributions of student participation especially in academic and strategic related institutional decisions.

1. Introduction

Following the formulation and implementation of the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP), the government of Ethiopia has been expanding Higher Education Institution (HEI) throughout the country. The core missions of all Ethiopian HEIs, as indicated under article 4 of the Higher Education Proclamation 650/2009, include: teaching-learning, research, and community services (FDRE, 2009). In order to effectively accomplish those missions, institutional governance and leadership plays a pivotal role among other things (Cruz and Jimenez, 2015; Planas, 2013). In recent decades, the literature on university governance appears to focus on student participation in institutional decision-making and other administrative affairs (Carey, 2013; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Klemenčič, 2014; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013).

In this regard, Teshome (2007) asserts that teaching remains at the heart of almost all public universities in Ethiopia, in which students represent both the primary clients and the largest stakeholders to the internal institutional operation and governance (Johnson and Deem, 2003; Menon, 2005). Considering students as a key element, Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) state that, as the clients of both academic and basic campus services, students are affected by the decisions that are made on campus and this calls for them to get actively involved in university governance. Again, scholars (e.g., Lizzio and Wilson, 2009) have come to suggest that it is primarily the responsibility of institutions to involve students in decision making.

Regarding institutional responsibility to support student participation in institutional decision-making, Lizzio and Wilson (2009) argues that:

... if students feel that they have little or no influence on decision making, universities can become sites of negative learning about organisational and civic life, is more pessimistic. Thus, from a citizenship perspective,
universities should aspire to be and do more than just reflect the dynamics of average organizational life (p. 71).

Even though the student body has been boldly claimed as central to the university or college's strategic and operational decisions, little is known in the higher education literature about the role and perspective of students as related to their representation and participation in institutional decision-making.

Previous studies about student participation in university decision-making focused more on theoretical or conceptual aspect (Hawes and Trux, 1974; Johnson and Deem, 2003; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999); department or course level decision-making (Carey, 2013; Lizzio and Wilson, 2009); or on student government in general (Gostev and Demchenko, 2014; Klemenčič, 2014; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013).

In framing the study, therefore, theoretical perspectives on student representation and participation in university decision-making; purpose of the paper.

1.1. Theoretical perspectives on student representation and participation

The origin of student representation and participation in university decision-making has been attributed to students' political struggle and/or the democratization of institutional setup as a reflection of democratic society (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999). Through the review of literature, four perspectives, three forms of student-university relationships, and the public service oriented managerial model were identified as related to student representation and participation in institutional decision-making.

The four perspectives of student representation in university decision-making include: political-realist, consumerist, communitarian, and the democratic approaches (Carey, 2013; Jones et al., 2012; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). The politically-realist perspective constitutes the assumption that students are internal stakeholders, or a politically significant constituency of the university, and therefore they ought to be involved in governing the university (Carey, 2013; Hatier, 2014; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Here the motive is to fulfill the political interest of students as related to the institutional service provisions. The consumerist perspective is the assumption that, as clients or consumers of the products and services provided by universities, students are affected by decisions that are made on campus and, therefore, they should have a voice in the making of these decisions (Carey, 2013; Jones et al., 2012; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). In this case, the main concern is to involve students as having a voice in issues that negatively affect their life in and out of campus and as a means of safeguarding their interests. The communitarian perspective considers students as members of the university community and the acceptance of student body as having equal voice and right in all aspects of institutional decision-making (Carey, 2013; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). However, students' limited knowledge and experience are regarded as bottleneck to their full participation (Hatier, 2014). Finally, the democratic perspective assumes that public universities may be considered 'sites of democratic citizenship', and student representation is a means by which to inculcate democratic values and exercise democratic practice (Jones et al., 2012; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). This is based on the connotation that citizen development should be the integral part of public higher education in democratic society (Menon, 2005).

Literature also states four variants of managerial approaches in higher education institutions having significant influence on student participation in institutional decision-making. These are ‘efficiency drive’ model; ‘downsizing and decentralization’ model; ‘excellence’ model; and the ‘public service orientation’ model (Deem et al., 2007; Johnson and Deem, 2003). In the case of public university, the public service oriented model takes the dominant managerial approach and it is through such lens that student representation and participation in decision-making is determined. Here the main challenge is the debate on student as customer or client; and stakeholder or consumer. The essential questions of whether students see themselves as ‘customers’ or feel enabled to exercise their right to ‘voice’ and ‘choice’ remain largely unexamined (Denton and Zeytinoglu, 1993; Johnson and Deem, 2003).

Finally, three forms of relationships between university and representatives of student structures are identified in the literature. First, in ‘authoritarian-paternalistic’ approach, student government is integrated into the institutional structure and given limited discretion for involvement on issues strictly concerning students (such as student services, teaching quality) and only in an advisory rather than co-decision making (Denton and Zeytinoglu, 1993; Gostev and Demchenko, 2014; Klemenčič, 2014). Second, the ‘democratic collegiate approach, on the other hand, assumes the existence of fairly autonomous student union in higher education institutions usually as legal body and student representatives, as an internal constituency, are granted participation in institutions and often co-decision rights on all decision-making issues (Apkarian et al., 2014; Denton and Zeytinoglu, 1993; Klemenčič, 2014). Finally, in the case of the ‘managerial (or corporate) governance’ approach, the institutional leadership involves students unions together with other stakeholders. In this approach, external stakeholders hold more influence than student representatives (as well as academics), who are normally considered as consultants rather than co-decision-makers (Apkarian et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2012; Klemenčič, 2014).

In the light of these theoretical propositions, however, the experience and perspective of student representatives about their representation and participation in decision-making as related to institutional setting has been rarely addressed through empirical studies. This is particularly the case for Ethiopian public universities though it is stipulated in the 2009 higher education proclamation that every institution's student body has legal right to participate in governing and advisory bodies of the university (FDRE, 2009).

In filling the lacuna, this study attempted to explore the nature of student representation and participation in institutional decision-making process; taking on the perspective of student representatives at Addis Ababa University (AAU). Thus, the following main and sub-questions were raised as focus of the study. The main question was: how student representatives perceive about their representation and participation in institutional decision-making? Sub-questions include the following. 1) What approaches are used in selecting student representatives to the membership of university decision-making bodies? 2) What is the perspective of student representatives about their participation in institutional decision-making? 3) How do student representatives explain about the availability of useful support mechanisms so as to foster their participation in institutional decision-making process? 4) What are the challenges (if any) that student representatives face in the course of their engagement in institutional decision-making?

2. Research methodology

This study takes the phenomenological approach focusing on the perspectives of the student representatives of AAU with regard to their representation and participation in institutional decision-making process. As to Creswell (2007), phenomenological approach is a suitable method for a qualitative study that focuses on the description of research participants’ perspective on their lived experiences under a particular setting.

2.1. Context of the study

This study was conducted at Addis Ababa University (the oldest public university in Ethiopia), located in Addis Ababa – the capital city of Ethiopia. As to the University's 2013 senate legislation article 172 sub-article 1 (11), students are given the right to “have representation in decision making organs and committees of the University.” Article 179 sub-article 5 of the same legislation also states that “the student body
shall be represented in the governance of the University, including the Senate, its various committees, college/institute Academic Commission (AC), Department Academic Committee (DAC), other academic decision-making bodies and bodies engaged in the delivery of services to students’ (AAU, 2013). Accordingly, there are student representatives in AAU organized under the umbrella name of “Students’ Union” (SU). Members of the SU include all elected student representatives (i.e., course/class representatives, department representatives, college representatives, and university level representatives) (SU Legislation, 2015). These student representatives were elected to represent and participate in institutional affairs at their level of representation.

2.2. Methods of data collection

Semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were the main data gathering tools in this study. This was due to the nature of the study, in which Creswell (2007) suggested for studies that require a strategy of inquiry aimed at identifying the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants are best addressed through data collection approaches that primarily involves individual and/or group interviews. Moreover, documents of the university like: senate legislation, students’ union (SU) legislation, and official reports produced by the SU were also used as sources of empirical materials.

2.2.1. Participants of the study

The data for this study were collected from seven (7) members of SU – who were serving as officially elected representatives of the university’s student body at different levels (Table 1).

As indicated in Table 1, participants of the study were 2 (two) SU executive committee members, 2 (two) college level student representatives (each from different colleges), and 3 (three) department level student representatives. These participants were selected through purposive sampling because of their first hand experiences on student representation and participation in the processes of institutional decision-making and composed of representatives from department, college, and institutional (corporate) levels. Initially, 12 (twelve) student representatives were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Of those, 4 (four) students declined to show their willingness. Again, one individual from the department representatives cut and left the FGD session after five minutes of discussion.

Individual interviews were conducted with SU executive committee members and the FGD carried out with college and department level student representatives. Participants were asked for their willingness to take part in the study and signed informed consent. Participants were also asked for the use of voice record and they all agreed. Each interview lasted for an hour and the FGD lasted for 56 min in which the tape-recorded responses were transcribed.

2.2.2. Procedures of data analysis

Data analysis, in this study, followed a narrative structure (Creswell, 2007), mainly based on participants’ verbatim descriptions of their experiences as student representatives. Accordingly, the transcribed textual data were coded, presented as narrative description, and the dominant themes were identified through the following steps.

First, the textual data were organized under each interview and FGD questions. Second, similar views of study participants were clustered together under significant phrases that were expressed by participants. In doing so, we organized participants’ views under phrases representing: a) dominantly expressed views, b) opposing views to the dominant expressions, and c) views that were unique and different from dominant and opposing expressions. Third, the data analysis section was structured by research questions – where textual descriptions of participant’s views were presented (mainly verbatim) under each questions asked during interviews and FGD. Finally, each emerged dominant themes were also presented under each research questions to show the linkages between participants’ views and each theme. Moreover, the emerged dominant themes were discussed from the perspectives of the respondents, based on the context of the research setting and supported with related literature.

2.2.3. Consideration of ethical issues

This study by its nature does not lead to major ethical issues both from the side of the researchers and participants; as it focuses on explicit issue of the university. Nevertheless, such issues as getting official permission to contact participants, keeping participant’s personal information confidential, and reducing subjectivity or bias in all steps of the researchers’ engagement were the main ethical issues that have been undertaken in this study (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). Again, names mentioned in the analysis section represent pseudonym of the participants. The researchers also provided thick descriptions of the issue;

Table 1. Demographic information and experience of study participants.

| Participant's Pseudo Name | Gender | Age | Participant's type of college studies | Level of representation and type of experience as student representative | Employed method of data collection |
|---------------------------|--------|-----|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Kalkidan                  | Female | 20  | College of Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism and Communication (CHLJC) | • Represented student body at institutional level                   | Individual interview             |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • She had been the president of student union (SU) for 1 year.      |                                   |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • At the same time, she was chairperson of institutional level      |                                   |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • SU executive committee.                                          |                                   |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • Also served as department level student representative, for 2     |                                   |
|                           |        |     |                                      | years, before being elected as SU president.                       |                                   |
| Henok                     | Male   | 21  | College of Social Sciences (CSS)     | • Represented student body at institutional level                   | Individual interview             |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • He had served as SU president and chairperson of institutional   |                                   |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • department college level SU executive committee for 2 years      |                                   |
| Wondeson                  | Male   | 22  | College of Law and Governance Studies (CLGS) | • Represented students at college level | FGD                             |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • He had been serving as chairperson of college level student      |                                   |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • council for 3 years.                                            |                                   |
| Ermias                    | Male   | 21  | College of Business and Economics (CBE) | • Represented students at college level                         | FGD                             |
|                           |        |     |                                      | • Served as chairperson of student council at college level for 2 years |                                   |
| Dawit                     | Male   | 23  | College of Education and Behavioral Studies (CEBS) | • 2 years of student representative at department level and member of student council at college level | FGD                             |
| Elias                     | Male   | 19  | College of Natural Sciences (CNS)    | • Served for 3 years as department level student representative and member of student council at college level | FGD                             |
| Birhanu                   | Male   | 24  | College of Natural Sciences (CNS)    | • 1 year of student representative at department level and member of student council at college level | FGD                             |
presented negative case analysis and triangulated the data collected through FGD, interviews and document analysis (Creswell, 2007).

3. Analysis of the data and description of emerged themes

This section of the article presents the data analysis under four specific focus areas: how student representatives are elected or selected; the perspectives of student representatives about their participation in university decision-making; the kind of support available to student representatives; and the challenges to student representatives for actively participating in decision-making. Following the narrative descriptions of the data emerged themes were identified and explained with respect to each of the aforementioned focus areas.

3.1. How students are represented in university decision-making bodies?

The 2013 Senate Legislation of AAU under its article 179 (5) explicitly states that the student body shall be represented in the governing and decision-making bodies of the University. Through the review of University Senate Legislation and SU’ Regulation, at the institutional level, the Senate and University council represents the governing and consultative/advisory bodies respectively in which the student body has representatives. In the Senate general meeting, there are two representatives of the University’s Students’ Union, one of whom should be a female. The university legislation also states that there shall be student representatives with appropriate gender mix in University Council. Still there are five executive and standing committees of the senate in three of which students have representations. On the other hand, the Research and Publications Committee (RPC); and Staff Recruitment, Appointment and Promotions Committee (SRAPC) of the senate do not include student representatives as members.

At the middle level of the academic management, the College Academic Commission (AC) is the highest governing body of the college for which two student representatives are formally recognized as members. In addition, the College Council and College Managing Council are the consultative/advisory bodies of the college in which students from both graduate and undergraduate levels are represented.

The Department/Center/School Academic Committee (DAC/CAC/ SAC) is the lowest academic/research governing body of the university and two of its members are student representatives from regular and continuing education programs.

Apart from legal provisions, student representatives who participated in interview and FGD were asked to tell about the institutional decision-making bodies they are actually represented. All student representatives who participated in FGD and interview unanimously responded that students of the university are represented in the university council, senate, college academic commission, and department/school academic committees.

When asked about what they know regarding their representations in different standing and ad hoc committees of the senate and college academic commission, one participant (Kalkidan) responded saying:

*Whenever we are called to participate in any meeting, as elected student representatives we go and attend the session. We don’t bother whether that was a committee meeting or not because nobody has been formally selected as a committee member be it that for senate or academic commission.*

Participants were also asked on how and who select/elect those students who are representing the student body at institutional, college and department levels. Here is what two of the respondents said. Dawit, “In this university, student representatives at all levels are elected by student themselves.” According to Kalkidan, “At classroom level, students elect their representative by themselves. For the election at the department level and beyond, there are election affairs committee composed of students who shall give the chance to students to nominate and elect their representatives.”

The expression and impression of all the participants were the same as what is presented above. This goes with what have been stated in the SU’ regulation with regard to the election process of student representatives at all levels: institutional, college, and department levels.

Furthermore, there are also especial cases, as to what participants said that some members of SU are selected without going through the formal election processes mentioned above. Henok said, “The head of our university’s Female Students’ Association automatically takes the position of SU female students’ affairs.” “The three groups of students with disability in this university – students with physical disability, visual impairment, and hearing impairment,” added Henok “also have one representative in SU executive committee.”

From this, it is apparent that student representation in AAU also gives an opportunity for the critical groups like female students and students with disability to have their say in institutional decision-making through their representatives.

The SU’s Regulation (2015) under article 34, states four major criteria for a student to be elected as a representative in various institutional decision-making bodies. These are: a) he/she must be free from any disciplinary fray, currently attending his/her study in the university, and who is willing to serve students; b) he/she should have a GPA of 2.75 and above; c) a first year student shall not be elected to the executive committee of college student council and SU; and d) an elected student can only represent students at the level for which he/she is elected to represent.

However, when asked, participants of the study both during the FGD and interview responded that the electors do not stick to any specified criteria for nominating and electing their representatives. Here are quotes from what two participants said on the issue:

*Wondeson: It is difficult to mention and objectively list out the criteria used by students. Students, by their own consensus, nominate and elect the one that they assume is having a smooth relationship with teachers and the department. The one that, they think as, capable to stand for their right and interest.*

*Dawit: “Students do have their own reasons for nominating and electing their representatives. Perhaps, students consider such things as: who is active; who is not; who works; and etc.”*

In what follows the key themes identified from the FGDs and Interviews are presented and discussed.

Theme 1: Supportive legal provision and participatory election of student representatives

Here supportive legal provision and participatory election of student representatives by student themselves emerged as dominant theme. The higher education proclamation, university senate legislation, and SU’s regulation all provide legal support for student representation and participation in almost all institutional governing and decision-making bodies. Students also expressed that there are no problems related to university’s legal provisions for their representations and participations in institutional decision-making bodies.

Moreover, the election process for student representatives was explained by participants as democratic and participatory which is conducted by student themselves starting at classroom level all the way to the institutional level of electing university’s SU executive bodies. It is the presence of this democratic election process that student representatives were proud of as glue holding student body in unity.

3.2. How student representatives explain about their experience and perceptions of participation in institutional decision-making?

Through the FGD and interviews, participants of the study described the decision areas in which they are actively participating and the decision areas in which they are less involved. For example, one participant (Kalkidan) who was representing the student body at the institutional level had to say the following:
SU’s representatives must be present on university’s material procurement biddings for students’ services. Management bodies are very strict on such matters. If we are attending a class on those days, we are called by phone to cut the class and must avail ourselves on the bidding process.

She also added saying, “The SU has also representatives in the discipline committees’ members of the university at all levels. This discipline committee does not pass any decision in the absence of SU representatives.”

In the same manner, for the decision areas in which student representatives are highly engaged at the institutional level, Ermias said:

“Student representatives have great say in decisions related to student cafeteria. i.e. materials that are received daily must be seen and approved by student representatives. If there are problems with such materials, we have the right not to accept. If we say no, as student representatives, nobody forces us to accept it”.

Dawit mentioned, “Organizing some events like welcome program for new coming students and managing Campus DSTV service,” as areas in which student representatives play the key role.

All public universities in Ethiopia provide not only the academic services to their regular undergraduate students but also the basic campus services such as accommodation, dining, medication and recreational services. As explained above by one of the study participant, dining or cafeteria service seems to be one of the most sensitive areas of concern both for university management and students. Similarly, the other institutional affairs involving students in AAU are recreational services like DSTV and many other social events including welcome programs for incoming students.

Paradoxically, one of the participants (Ermias) explained that student representatives are not invited to some of the university’s strategic decision issues at institutional level. He said, “In two years of my representation, I didn’t remember the time when I was invited and commented on issues like university’s strategic and short-term plans, budget plan and other high level issues.”

The interview and FGD participants also provided mixed views concerning their participation in college decision-making bodies. Here is what one college student representative (Wondeson) said: “In our college, there are two student representatives who participate in all AC meetings. Whenever there are AC meetings, the college invites student representatives and they have equal vote with other AC members.”

As opposed to that, student representatives from other colleges expressed their experience of participation. Ermias expressed his experience saying, “In our college, other than being called to participate on some general discussion sessions, we are not normally invited to participate on critical decision-making issues.” Similar impression was expressed by Dawit, who complained:

In our college, as to his experience since last year, the AC and DAC hasn’t invited student representatives. Maybe, sometimes there are notices saying any interested student can attend the meeting. These are mostly public lectures or any other academic meetings; not for decision making meetings.

Elias concurs. In his view,

Let alone participating … there are student representatives who don’t even know who the department head is. Because, there are no common sessions concerning academic matters. As to me, it is possible to say that as we go from the institutional level down to college and department, student participation goes decreasing and even doesn’t exist in most departments.

As to AAU’s senate legislation, college and department level participation of students基本上 focuses on academic related issues. As can be seen from the above student respondents, there are colleges that invite student representatives to participate on AC meetings while others rarely or even don’t invite their college student representatives at all.

Participants of the study also expressed their experiences and views regarding the importance of being represented in different institutional decision-making bodies at various levels. Birhanu said, “Students ask and urge university officials, through their representatives, to avail those materials that are not available but very crucial for students’ services.”

Ermias also explained:

Be it academic or basic campus services, student representatives provide information on problems facing students and with possible solutions to the concerned bodies of the university. This will get more accepted by the university management bodies and usually it is through such system that most of the problems get solved so quickly in this university.

This implies that the importance of student representation in different institutional decision-making bodies for informing the concerned bodies on problems that are directly affecting students’ learning and to put pressure on the university administration to provide better services to students.

With similar expression, Wondeson said, “Since students are the main stakeholders of the university, without their participation it is unthinkable to make the institutional work effective. Therefore, students’ participation in institutional decision-making mutually benefits both the university and students.”

Henok also explained the importance of student participation saying, “In this university’s experience, what students think as special or critical services are provided through the information collected from student representatives.” Dawit said, “When students participate in institutional decision, it means that they believe in that decision and cooperate with the university for its successful accomplishment... increase students' involvement in various institutional activities... improves the efficiency and effectiveness of the university.”

Kalkidan explained her view saying, “Student participation in institutional affairs promotes or makes the university more democratic institution.” Mentioning the consequences if students are not represented in university affairs, she also had to say the following.

No student participation means that they will not be able get the necessary services up to their expectations. This will in turn deteriorate the relationship between university management bodies and students. In teaching-learning process for instance, good relationship between academic leaders or teachers and students is one determinant aspect of students' learning and achievement. No smooth relationship means that students are vulnerable to many problems.

It is evident, from the above quotes, that the respondents give greater value for having representation in institutional decision-making. The expressions imply that students see themselves as a main and major stakeholder of the university – the main group who are directly affected by decisions of the university and in turn affect the overall institutional operations. The respondents also think that some crucial and urgently needed materials and services are provided just based on, what students inform to the university. As to their view, student participation in university decision-making improves the cooperation between the two parties; improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the university; and contributes for developing a democratic institutional culture.

When asked about their level of influence in decision-making at their level of representation, participants of the study provided mixed responses. As to some respondents, there are decision areas in which students have greater influence and there are also institutional decisions at all levels that they expressed as having minimal influence. Henok, the former SU president, for instance said:

We have greater influence on such decision areas related to campus basic student services and disciplinary related cases both for staff and students. Contrary to that, our influence on academic related matters is minimal, except for some issues related to negotiating on final exam schedules and on unfair grading by few instructors.
Participants of the study also explained that there are cases at some point in which conflict of ideas and interests arise between student representatives and other management bodies during decision-making sessions. Disagreements and contradicting views on decision options between student representatives and other parties, as Henok said, are resolved “As per the university regulation and convincing reasons proposed by the parties.” Kalkidan’s response to this issue also supports Henok’s response. “There are times when our propositions get accepted for decision,” says Kalkidan, “and there are also times when we have to accept other participants’ propositions.”

The other FGD participant, Wondosen, explained this matter by saying “The influence that students have in institutional decision-making depends on the nature of the issue, its sensitivity to students’, and student representatives’ knowledge and experience about the issue under discussion.” Kalkidan said, “If we feel that the decision is sensitive to students, in most cases we raise questions about our concern before the decisions are passed by the house.” She also added saying, “In such occasions, participants from the other side invariably accept what is proposed by the top management and you rarely see the idea raised by one side is opposed by the other.”

At the institutional level, as expressed by all interviewees, the striking problem was that decisions in most cases are passed in favor of their positions but as they said, “the decisions are rarely implemented.”

For example, Henok, the former SU president explained a touching moment related to this matter saying:

Once on a meeting called by the Administrative Vice President for discussing on problems related to students’ campus services, one student representative from Tikur Anbessa campus became emotional and cried saying ‘we always discuss on the problems and pass decisions but they are not implemented. So why do you call us to discuss on the same problem for there are no actions to improve them?’ and then he immediately left out the meeting.

When it comes to the influence of student representatives on decisions that are made at the middle and lower levels of the institutional ladder, the data obtained from participants differ from college-to-college and from department-to-department. Wondosen, one of the FGD participants from college representative said, “When we participate in AC meetings, all matters we raise get priority and the decisions are mostly in favor of student representatives.” In his college, as he said, “he remembers once in which student representatives asked the college AC to extend the final exam schedule and based on the justifications we presented, it has got accepted.” In another example, Wondosen said, “There were two part-time teachers who were not properly teaching and when we brought this matter to the AC, the college terminated their contract for the following semester without any precondition.” He also added saying, “Even though we are two in number as AC member, you see that we do have great influence in decision-making.”

On the contrary, Ermias, representative from another college said, “There are multiple problems related to academic matters that we want them to be solved both at college and department levels. However, we are rarely invited to the AC and DAC meetings.” There was also similar feeling with other department representatives, Birhanu and Dawit, who said that their main concern is not about “having influence in decision-making;” rather they were bothered why their respective colleges and departments “doesn’t invite and involve student representatives in AC and DAC meetings?”

When asked about other informal ways that students use in getting their voice heard in university decision-making; Kalkidan said, “There are no informal strategies or ways by which student representatives or SU reflect their views for putting influence on institutional decision-making.” Ermias’s view seems to reflect the other way. “If we think the problem didn’t get attention by the concerned body,” he explains, “we informally discuss the issue with students for making it formal and make students to stand in unity.” Dawit also said, “In some cases, for issues specific to a given college or department, students all together go to the concerned office and ask for the case to be considered or get resolved.” Wondosen, on the other hand said, “If students feel that the formally elected representatives are not addressing a given pressing issue, they informally select special representatives who then take the case to the concerned body.”

Theme 2: Nominal participation, co-decision makers, and information supplier

Even though there are legal provisions for student participations in university decision-making process, in its actual practice, it appeared that under different decision areas student representatives are nominal participants or co-decision makers or information suppliers.

First, student participation in academic related decisions at institutional, college, and department levels seems nominal and being there to serve as a formality. Especially, at college and department level decisions student representatives explained that their participation is dependent on the interest of those individuals holding the managerial position at those levels. There are colleges that involve students but there are also college heads who do not care about the presence of student representatives in the process of academic decisions. Even those who are inviting student representatives are doing it for the sake of formality and they rarely involve on critical academic decisions.

Second, the decision areas in which student representatives are actively involved is on basic campus student service which include cafeteria, student recreation, dormitory, student health service, and on disciplinary matters. These are, as to the participants, institutional affairs where student representatives have equal voice (in some cases even more decision power) with other decision-making bodies. Here the essence is that students are co-decision makers on campus student service related issues.

Finally, participants of the study explained their participation in institutional (corporate) level decision-making issues like on strategic plan, institutional restructuring, and on financial related matters, were more of informants than decision-makers. Here students reflected that their experience on strategic related issues as simply coming from the top to down for implementation. In such cases, the university usually calls the student body as whole or at least all student representatives to the meeting and collects their feeling about the issue at hand. Thus, students provide high level university officials with the information about the reaction of students or the implication of those strategic issues on student life.

3.3. What kind of support and encouragement are there for student representatives?

Student participation in different decision-making bodies of the university is formally stated in the legislation. Thus, the sessions of those bodies also follow formal and structured procedures. In such collective decision-making sessions, it is important for all members to have a pre-informed mind in order to avail oneself on the session and make meaningful contribution to the group.

In this regard, student representatives who participated in this study were asked on how they get the preliminary information like: the time, place, and agendas of the meeting for them to make the necessary preparations ahead both for the normal and extraordinary sessions. One of the SU executive members whom the researcher interviewed (Henok) said:

There are two kinds of meetings in which the SU is invited to attend. When we are invited by different minister offices for the meeting out of the university, we receive a copy of the letter either directly sent to the university or written by the Dean of Student Affairs Office. For the meetings within the university, the office or the committee calling the meeting either sends a letter to the SU’s office or makes a phone call to the SU President; mentioning the agenda, number of required participants, time and place of the meeting. Phone calls are mostly for urgent meetings.
As to the response, at the institutional level, high level student representatives of the SU usually get informed about the meeting place, time, person/s invited, and agenda of the meeting through the official letter send to the SU’s Office. On the other hand, for the urgent or extraordinary sessions, the office or person in charge makes a call to the SU President to attend the meeting; or if the invitation is for other student representative, he/she passes the information down to that person. For the college and department level meetings, there are no such formal communications between the college or department and student representatives. Wondoson for instance explained the experience of his college saying:

In our college, the day and time of AC meeting is fixed and student representatives know when and where the meeting is held. The AC in its first meeting fixes its regular meeting days and time. In case of extraordinary meetings, obviously they are informed through telephone. However, if all class representatives are required in AC meeting, the college posts an announcement on the notice board. Such notices are posted only for student representatives.

Whereas, one of the interviewees (Kalkidan) had this to say,

In our college, if it happens, student participation on AC or DAC meeting is more of informal. he mean, you have to have close relationship with teachers, department and college. Those students who have such relationship usually get information and participate, even if they are not elected student representatives.

This implies that there was no formal communication between the college/department and student representatives. Rather, those students who had good relationships with teachers, department and college were able to get access to information informally and participate on such meetings or discussion sessions.

After being informed to attend or participate on any decision-making session, participants of the study provided similar experiences about the preliminary preparations they make a head of going to the discussion or decision sessions. Henok, who had been SU president said, “it is the responsibility of any student representative invited on institutional meeting sessions to first call and consult the other members about the issues to be raised on that stage.” He also added saying, “student council chairs of all campuses are always informed to come with the evidences on their campus related problems and we go to the university sessions after discussing on those problems and having common stand and with full information.” As to Kalkidan, the other SU executive committee member, “the purpose of such discussions and debates among ourselves is not only to appear with strong evidence but also to have a common stand before university management bodies putting our differences aside.”

However, in cases of urgent and extraordinary meetings called by the institution, respondents expressed that they depend on the information they had before or discuss the issue with the closely available SU member/s in person or through phone call.

In order to know whether the same trend is exercised at college and department levels, the researcher also asked student representatives to tell me their experiences. Wondoson, one of the college student representatives said, “College representatives usually discuss with department representatives ahead of attending the AC meetings.” However, what, Ermias, the other FGD participant said as “look we are saying that there is no such full participation at college and dep’t levels. Therefore, we can’t tell you much now on that”, contradicts with what has been explained by the former participant.

The contradiction in the experiences of the respondents seems to be partly because of the variations between different colleges and departments in inviting student representatives to participate in AG, DAC, and other committee meetings; as there were no contradicting views expressed by students who came from the same college.

Student representatives were also asked about any kind of capacity building supports they received that would enable them to contribute their part in institutional decision-making. Almost all participants said that there are no such capacity building supports provided to them. Regarding this matter, Ermias, who was from college representative said that, “Once elected as student representative, we work on the basis of our own experiences. Nobody provided us with support; even there was no orientation on what we are expected to do as a representative.” Even though this was the impression for all FGD participants, as to Kalkidan, one of the SU’s executive committee members said that;

In order to get such capacity building supports, the position for which you are represented matters. If you take those who are representing students at college and department levels, there are no such supports down to that level. However, if you take SU president and other executive committee members, there are some such opportunities. The SU president, vice president and the secretary have had opportunities to attend trainings organized by the Ministry of Education and by the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission.

The other respondent, Henok, who was the former SU president said that, “It is the MOE that gives due credit to SU of public universities’ training and capacity building. There are no such arrangements at the institutional level.” He added, “We develop our experience in institutional decision-making by observing and listening to how others interact during the common meeting sessions with institutional leaders and other participants.” “Informal interactions with university leaders and college Deans also added up to our experiences on how to act and interact with other participants in decision-making sessions.” In short it can be said that it all depends on the ability of student representatives to learn from informal opportunities, as formal capacity building arrangements seldom existed to these students.

The overall evidence from what participants of the study said indicate that there was no capacity building supports provided to them. They rely on their own experiences and sometimes they discuss with their fellow representatives on difficult issues. Capacity building, if it exists, does involve only few SU’s executive committee members.

Theme 3: Information gap and role confusion

From what has been explained by participants of this study, there is huge information gap between the student representatives and university management bodies as well as among the student themselves. For example, responses of most participants indicate that majority of student representatives did not know their roles, responsibilities, available legal provisions, and institutional structure for decision-making; and even there are representatives who did not know their college Deans, department heads, and the SU president.

As all participants explained, after being elected as representatives, their main dilemma was about the role they are expected to play. Sources of information for these student representatives were limited to their fellow students, their own experience, and mostly they depend on the practices of former representatives.

Student representatives explained that nobody cares about student representation and participation in university governance. They exclusively complained that there were no capacity building supports and encouraging environment for them to actively involved and contribute their part in institutional affairs. They also said they develop their capacity and experiences in institutional decision-making by observing others during different formal sessions and through informal interactions with approachable university leaders. As to the expression of participants most student representatives consider participating in institutional decision-making as secondary and something as jeopardy to their study time.

3.4. What are the current challenges to student participation in institutional decision-making?

When asked about the current challenges to student representation and participation in institutional decision-making, participants of the study mentioned almost similar points. The challenges they pointed out
were almost directed towards problems of participation in decision-making than the issue of representation. Concerning student representation, Wondoson has expressed as, “I don’t see any gap on the legal basis for student representation in university’s decision-making bodies.” Kal- kidan also agrees. “I think what has been provided in the legislation is enough,” she says, “for student representation in decision-making.” These two quotes can reflect the feelings expressed by other participants about the issue of having representations in institutional decision-making.

Concerning the challenges related to student participation in institutional decision-making, Wondoson expressed his views saying:

The legislation is not uniformly implemented by all management bodies of the university. Some even don’t consider student participation as a serious issue, ... no encouragements and support for students to participate, ... election for SU executive bodies is always delayed, ... information gap between SU and the student body, ... student union is not strong ... simply there as a symbolic body.

Ermias explained the challenges saying, “Our college and department are reluctant in inviting student representatives to AC and DAC meetings; and because of its large size, this university doesn’t give attention to student participation.”

Similarly, Kalkidan said, “They [Dean and dep’t Heads] don’t want student representatives to be in college and department committees because we were not invited even once.” The researcher asked her “why” and she replied saying, “he don’t know why they don’t want us to be there; maybe they think students could challenge them?” On the other side, she also described problems related to student representatives saying, “Some elected student representatives are less interested to engage in institutional affairs ... absent during some critical decision-making stages.”

On the other hand, as Henok, explained that majority of University’s management bodies “... consider student representatives as politicians and political representatives; not as a body representing to serve the interest of the student body.” He also added saying, “Some student representatives coming from colleges simply reflect their personal interests rather than the interests of students whom they represent; and there is also a tendency to be complacent with university management bodies.”

When asked about what needs to be done to improve student representation and participation in university decision-making, participants recommended the following points.

Wondoson: “SU’s election should be conducted on time. The election should directly involve all students and it has to be a presidential system.”

Birhanu: “We need experience sharing among ourselves and capacity building trainings.” Dawit: “This University has to improve its participatory decision making culture.”

Kalkidan: “All university officials should give attention to the SU. They have to recognize and listen to student representatives.”

Henok: “The SU has to strengthen itself. Student representatives have to actively participate in university affairs and put pressure on university management for the implementations of the jointly made decisions.”

Theme 4: Mistrust and optimistic SU

Participants expressed that the relationships between student representatives and university management bodies (especially at middle and lower levels), is more of skeptical and mistrust. They tend to sketch all the management bodies as reluctant and unwilling to invite student representatives to their respective decision-making sessions. This is evident from what participants explained as disagreements between the student representatives and others (i.e. participants who are from management bodies and different offices) on cases that were sensitive to students’ interest during decision-making sessions. Most student representatives feel that they were usually not invited to AC and DAC sessions for the reasons unclear to them; but their impressions indicate that they were considered by Deans and Heads either as having less to contribute or as political representatives.

Student representatives see their representation and participation in institutional decision-making as serving both students and the university. They explained that all students are well aware of the centrality of student body as lifeblood to university’s operation. Considering students as a ‘primary stakeholder’ to the university was the phrase heard in the talk of almost all respondents. However, they are seeing themselves as a body currently playing little role in institutional decision-making because of problems associated to university management bodies and the weaknesses of student representatives.

Nevertheless, given the available legal provisions for student representations in university governing and advisory bodies, they are hopeful and optimistic that their active participation in all aspects of institutional affairs will continue improving through time. For such hope to materialize, as they responded, the SU has to become strong and should prove itself to the university management as a primary and strong partner in serving the interests of student body.

4. Discussion and implications

Through analysis of the data, four themes emerged as dominant findings of this study in defining the perspectives of student representatives in AAU about their representation and participation in institutional decision-making. These were: 1) supportive legal provision and participatory student election; 2) nominal participation, co-decision maker, and information supplier; 3) information gap and role confusion; and 4) mistrust and optimistic SU. Therefore, as related to the theoretical perspectives discussed in the introduction part of this paper, these findings do have practical implications in improving student participation in university decision-making at all levels.

Recognizing and providing students with the legal framework to have representation and participation in university governance is a landmark for fostering students’ participatory engagement in the institutional affairs. Gostev and Demchenko (2014) and Meyer (2007) argue that, for student representatives to take part in the formulation and implementation of administrative decisions, it is important that the university has to provide legal base that confer on them the right to monitor college and university administrations.

The current student participation in university decision-making goes in line with the theoretical perspectives stated in the literature. As related to the academic decisions at all levels, the study findings indicated that student participation is more of symbolic and nominal. This finding is in agreement with what has been reported by Khefacha and Belkacem (2014) and Luescher-Mamashela (2013) as, provisions for student representation in teaching-learning may involve consumerist commitments in giving students a formal mechanism to voice their preferences (amongst others, through surveys), thus providing input and feedback into the academic process.

On the other hand, students were given equal voice and decision power with other parties on campus basic student service related decisions. Dealing with matters of student government, student associations and recreation, student health, sport, residences, and the like (Huismann et al., 2006; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013), offers extensive opportunity for student involvement in decision making. In this case, students are the most interested and affected members of the university community demanding collective power involving them as a primary stakeholder (Hawes and Trux, 1974; Vroom and Jago, 1974).

Moreover, concerning the corporate level strategic decisions, students see themselves as information suppliers. That echoes the concern of Luescher-Mamashela (2013): “the relative lack of competence and impermanence of students are important arguments limiting the extent of student involvement in university decisions dealing with general university affairs (such as financing, planning and strategy)” (p. 1443).
However, it has also been a point of debate that students have to participate at high level institutional decision-making as they constitute certain political interests and as citizens (Carey, 2013; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013).

The overall implication from the comparison of the findings with theoretical perspectives reveals that student representation and participation takes different forms than uniform platform. First, for the corporate level strategic decisions, students could be taken as citizens and as politically significant constituency of the university (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Meyer, 2007); and their relationship with the university takes a managerial (corporate) governance model and/or political decision-making approach (Khefacha and Belkacem 2014; Klemenša, 2014).

Second, students were considered as stakeholders and customers in decisions related to student governance and campus students service affairs (Hatier, 2014; Huisman et al., 2006); and their relationship with the university is more of democratic collegiate model (Deem et al., 2007). Finally, when it comes to academic related decisions, students were considered as consumers or clients of the services provided by the faculty (Johnson and Deem, 2003; Planas, 2013); and their relationship with the university is based on authoritarian-paternalistic approach (Apkarian et al., 2014; Klemenša, 2014)

Despite numerous challenges, student representatives were optimistic about improving their involvement and positive contribution in institutional governance. As findings of the study indicated, the major challenges were information gap between student representatives and university management bodies as well as among student themselves; role confusion among student representatives; and the mistrust between student representatives and university management bodies at all levels. The university, as in the case of student service areas, needs to bring students closer to democratic decision-making by opening its doors to student representatives and university management bodies at all levels. The university, as in the case of student service areas, needs to bring students closer to democratic decision-making by opening its doors to students at all levels. It has been argued that democratic ideals and practices may not flourish without the university bodies make open themselves to the opinions and critical comments of students (Menon, 2005).

Student representatives also have to commit themselves and actively participate in institutional affairs apart from their academic studies. Student representatives should be offered information and support on important issues concerning the roles that they are expected to play in university governance and university management bodies as well as among student themselves; role confusion among student representatives; and the mistrust between student representatives and university management bodies at all levels. The university, as in the case of student service areas, needs to bring students closer to democratic decision-making by opening its doors to students at all levels. It has been argued that democratic ideals and practices may not flourish without the university bodies make open themselves to the opinions and critical comments of students (Menon, 2005).

Student representatives also have to commit themselves and actively participate in institutional affairs apart from their academic studies. Student representatives should be offered information and support on important issues concerning the roles that they are expected to play in institutional governance. Providing them with training and interactive opportunities with other university community will enable them not only to actively participate in university affairs but also help them visualize the link between academic learning and their future adult role (Cruz and Jimenez, 2015; Gostev and Demchenko, 2014). It is also important for the universities to conduct both need assessment and students’ satisfaction survey and present the findings back to students in order to improve its services and foster the trust between the two.

4.1. Limitations of the study

Limitation of this study is that participants were only from student representatives. The perspectives of other university community like: faculty members, management bodies, and administrative support staff could have helped in substantiating the findings and see how these views are congruent or disparate about student participation in decision-making. Besides interview, FGD, and document analysis; direct observation to the decision-making sessions or meetings at all levels could also help to see how student representatives interact with other parties in its natural setting.

Therefore, future research needs to focus on student participation in university governance and decision-making by involving all groups of participants who have joint decision-making relationships with student representatives. From the results of this study, it is evident that students are participating more on campus student service related decisions than on academic and strategic related issues. Therefore, further study is needed to explore the role and contribution of student representatives in academic and corporate level strategic decisions in different public university settings.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Miressa Bekabil: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper. Miressa Yadessa; Getnet Tizazu Fetene: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data.

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Additional information

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