

# **Student Participation Policy Plan 2020- 2025.**

Samen vooruit - Forward together.

**Revolte** **HO**  
**GENT**

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# 1 Introduction

The importance of participation in society has increased considerably, as it has among students. The student voice counts more than ever. HOGENT gives its students an important voice in policy and allows them to take an active role as co-directors. HOGENT does not want sham participation, no 'window dressing', but real authentic participation.

The student representative undertakes to look after students' interests from an altruistic point of view: listening to the needs and concerns of the students, expressing them to the HOGENT management and helping take decisions on possible opportunities and solutions. It is a service of, with, by and for fellow students. In addition to their studies, they contribute to the functioning and organisation of HOGENT as a higher education institution and, year after year, they colour the dynamics of the university college's development.

Student participation brings innovation and a critical but constructive note to the policy discourse. The youthful enthusiasm of the students and the experience and expertise of the professionals form a perfect tandem. A balanced education and student policy and an environment in which the student can and may feel at home.

With the Student Participation Policy Plan 2020-2025, which will start as of the 2020-2021 academic year, HOGENT wants to reinforce its commitment to further stimulate student participation and involvement. Various stakeholders were involved in the policy plan through feedback groups and surveys. The VLOR opinion on stimulating and strengthening student participation (dated 22 June 2018) was used as a guideline in setting the objectives.

The policy plan was drawn up in consultation with the student representatives and approved by the General Assembly of the Student Council on 14/05/2020 and the Executive Board on 03/07/2020.

## 2 Situation

### 2.1 Codex of Higher Education

Article II.314 §3 of the Codex of Higher Education stipulates that the institution elaborate a policy framework for student participation in consultation with the Student Council. The policy framework is a generic description of the institution's policy choices on student participation. It contains the institution's vision of student participation and its strategic objectives.

### 2.2 Future Proof – strategic plan 2017-2022 HOGENT

Strategic objective 3: HOGENT has a strong culture of excellence. Student participation and involvement are a given. Students at HOGENT have an important voice in policy and take an active role as co-directors.

There are effective consultation structures in which students are actively involved (KS 3.3).

Strategic objective 6: HOGENT educates students to be future-proof.

By focusing strongly on student participation, students (and student representatives) are given the opportunity to develop future-proof skills such as critical and ethical thinking in addition to their education.

### 2.3 VLOR opinion

In its opinion of 12 June 2018, at the request of the then Flemish Minister for Education, Hilde Crevits, the Flemish Education Council (VLOR) formulated certain recommendations for Flemish higher education institutions to strengthen student participation. The opinion is attached as Annex 1 to this Policy Plan.

In this opinion, the VLOR indicates that there is a need for a policy framework regarding student participation. This may take the form of a policy plan and/or the further implementation of the Participation Regulations.

In close consultation with its Student Council, HOGENT chose to tackle both documents. The updated Student Participation Regulations are attached as Annex 2 to this Policy Plan.

## 3 Environmental analysis

### 3.1 Feedback groups

In order to examine student participation per se in more detail, two feedback groups were organised for the main stakeholders. One group consisted of staff, externals, alumni and student representatives with a well-filled record of achievements (dated 17/02/2020). The other feedback group consisted of the current student representatives of HOGENT Student Council (dated 22/02/2020). These are the main conclusions of these sessions:

- Invest in informal participation as a stepping stone to formal participation.
- Support student representatives to become real partners in policy.
- Inform all stakeholders individually.
- Create a positive vibe and top-of-mind effect among students.
- Develop and maintain networks as a function of student participation.
- Develop a smart communication plan.
- Strengthen student participation through good material and infrastructural support.
- Invest in the personal development of student representatives.
- Draw up a diversity action plan.
- Provide a clear job profile and mandate for the participation coaches.

### 3.2 Surveys

Besides the organisation of feedback groups, surveys were also rolled out: one for all current student representatives and one for the entire HOGENT student population. The main results of each survey are listed below.

#### 3.2.1 Student representative survey

The survey, which was set up for all current student representatives, aimed to map out the bottlenecks, as formulated in the VLOR opinion, of student participation at HOGENT and to sound out the reasons for the student representatives' commitment. These are the main results of this survey:

- Attract more candidate student representatives by involving all stakeholders in communications and using as many communication channels as possible.
- Lower the threshold for participation by providing more information on the status of student representatives and by communicating the successes of the student councils.
- Achieve a larger voter base by spreading the elections more widely and designing an awareness campaign for this purpose.
- By opening up more mandates so that the tasks can be spread out more widely, student representatives can manage their task more easily.
- The facilities and support possibilities must be made more widely known.
- Extra efforts should be made to involve exchange students, work students and students with disabilities more in student participation.

### **3.2.2 Broad-based student survey**

The broad student population was also heard regarding student participation at HOGENT. This survey mainly inquired into the familiarity of the student councils and into the reasons why the students surveyed do or do not engage in student participation.

These are the main results of the survey:

- 63% of the students surveyed have never been in contact with HOGENT Student Council.
- 73% of the students surveyed say they have no idea, or only a vague idea, of what student representatives actually do.
- 57% of the students surveyed find the idea of a student representative very interesting after reading something about it.
- 83% do not see themselves becoming student representatives. The reason given was: lack of time (63%) or no interest (23%).

## **4 Vision of student participation**

HOGENT wants high-performance and low-threshold consultation structures in which all students can participate.

Through its professional student representatives and its committed employees, HOGENT wishes to promote its democratic content and to develop its students into mature, critical citizens.

At HOGENT, student participation is taken as read. There is a culture where student participation is an integral and fundamental part of policy.

HOGENT is a place where the voice of the student is systematically and structurally considered in policy decisions. Student participation is an indispensable element in the development and assurance of quality, future-proof education.

Its student representatives are professional cooperation partners who reflect the diverse HOGENT student population. Its staff members are committed employees who actively work with the students' input.

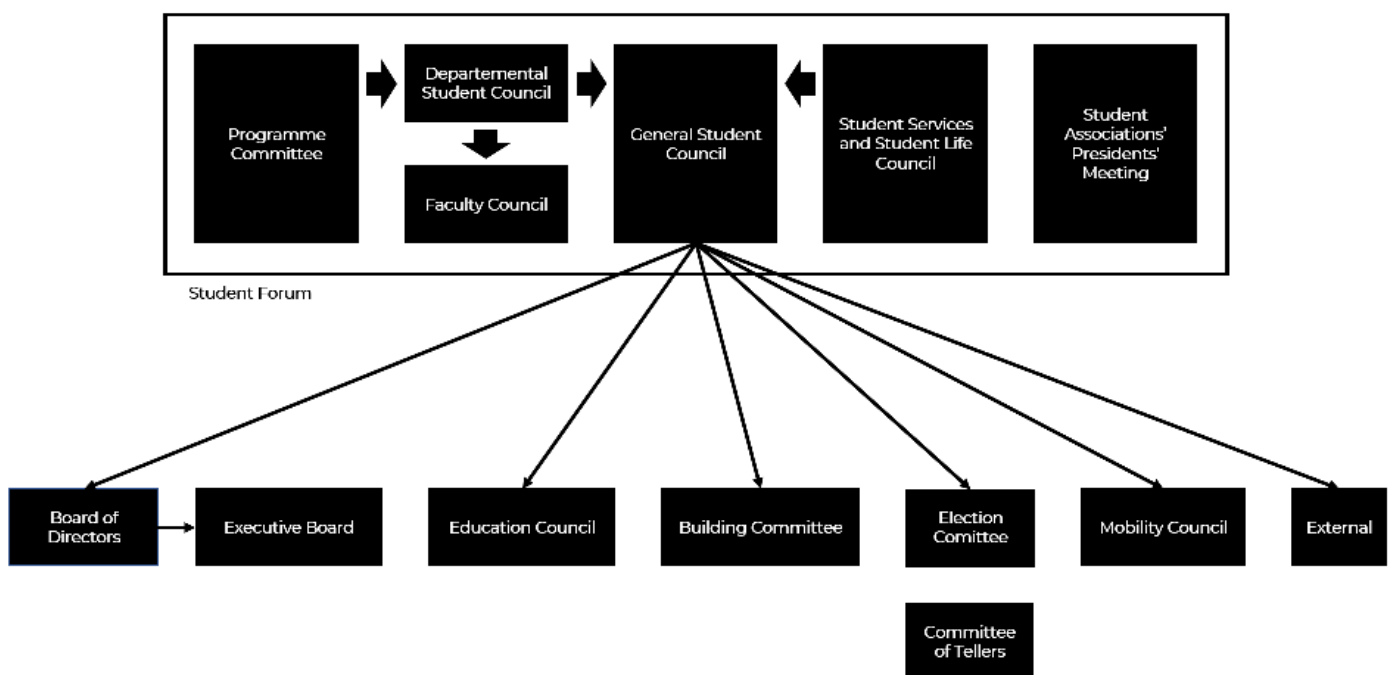
## 5 Organisation of student participation

HOGENT strives to involve its students as much as possible in all possible advisory and governing bodies. Although student participation at HOGENT is more than just the preconceived structures, there is a need for a new and effective organisational model to involve students formally in the decision-making process.

The new structure is characterised by a number of key features:

1. There is room for both formal and informal student participation through the Student Forum.
2. Elections are organised at the level of the departments/School of Arts/GO5 and thus closer to the student.
3. The student representatives' workload is shared because there are more mandates to be elected.
4. Staggered delegation means fewer elections and a more efficient flow of information.
5. There is a clear pivotal role for the General Student Council.

The following figure outlines the renewed participation structure, which is discussed in detail in the Student Participation Regulations (Annex 2).



## 6 Objectives

In the Student Participation Policy Plan 2020-2025, 6 strategic objectives (SOs) are proposed, to which some operational objectives (OOs) are linked (not exhaustive). Each academic year, the General Student Council and the participation coaches draw up an annual action plan together. This annual action plan helps to achieve the strategic goals. The budget of the General Student Council is drawn up on the basis of this annual action plan.

At the end of each academic year, the annual action plan is evaluated by the General Student Council. Halfway through the policy cycle, an interim evaluation of the policy plan is made by the General Student Council. The evaluation is fed back to the management of HOGENT.

At the end of the policy cycle, the policy plan is evaluated. The evaluation is a source of information for the formulation of the subsequent policy plan.

### **SO 1 Student participation at HOGENT is more than just students having a voice.**

**Student participation is more than just students having a voice. If participation is to add value to HOGENT, students must be involved and guided through the entire decision-making process, and must help determine the policy options.**

- OO 1.1 The college management, offices and schools/School of Arts/GO5 involve student representatives in the decision-making process as much as possible.
- OO 1.2 The student representatives with a mandate on a governing, advisory or consultative body of HOGENT are full members of that body and have a say in policy.

### **SO 2 Student participation at HOGENT is a shared responsibility.**

**If student participation is to be taken as read at HOGENT, it is a shared responsibility: both students and staff take an active role in it. Every member of HOGENT contributes to a strong participatory culture.**

- OO 2.1 The schools/School of Arts/GO5 take on a role in student participation.
- OO 2.2 Staff members who want to start working with student participation are supported in this.
- OO 2.3 Candidate student representatives are adequately informed about the content and workload of the mandates and functions.



### **SO 3 Student participation in HOGENT is well known to students and staff.**

**Students and staff are familiar with how student participation works. Student participation is top of mind and open mandates are highly coveted.**

- OO 3.1 A communication plan to promote student participation among students and staff is drawn up.
- OO 3.2 The status of student representative is widely communicated to staff members.
- OO 3.3 Student elections are actively promoted each academic year.

### **SO 4 Student participation at HOGENT is there for all students.**

**Student representation is a reflection of the diverse HOGENT student population.**

- OO 4.1 The diversity plan, which includes actions to reach out more effectively to disadvantaged and minority groups, is developed.
- OO 4.2 Each undergraduate and graduate programme is represented on the Departmental Student Councils.
- OO 4.3 In order to broaden the support base among students, the links between student councils and student associations are strengthened.
- OO 4.4 Exchange students are involved in student participation at HOGENT on a structural basis.

### **SO 5 Student participation at HOGENT is strongly appreciated and supported.**

**Student representatives receive the material and logistical support they need to carry out their mandate properly and are given sufficient opportunities to develop into professional co-directors.**

- OO 5.1 Student representatives have access to an extensive range of training, enabling them to carry out their mandate with a wide range of skills.
- OO 5.2 Two participation coaches with a clear job profile are employed to support the student representatives and to further develop student participation.

- OO 5.3 Student representatives have well-equipped accommodation on each campus to work on student representative-related tasks and to hold meetings.
- OO 5.4 Different ways of enhancing student representatives' commitment are explored.
- OO 5.5 Student representatives receive the necessary material support according to their needs.
- OO 5.6 An efficient system to (pre)finance student representatives' expenses is developed.

## **SO 6 Student participation in HOGENT is low-threshold and accessible.**

**Involvement in student participation must be accessible to all students. Students should not experience any barriers to participation and can express their views at any time without having to make a long-term commitment.**

- OO 6.1 The Student Forum, which thematically facilitates informal student participation, is organised structurally.
- OO 6.2 The possibilities of offering and attending meetings of the student councils online are investigated.
- OO 6.3 Student participation is organised on all campuses.
- OO 6.4 Communication to students is provided as much as possible in both Dutch and English.

## **ANNEXES**

**Annex 1 VLOR opinion on the strengthening of student participation by Flemish higher education institutions.**

**Annex 2 Student Participation Regulations.**

# **Opinion on the strengthening of student participation by Flemish high-education institutions**

Flemish Education  
Council Koning Albert II-  
laan 37 BE-1030  
Brussels

T +32 2 219 42 99

[www.vlor.be](http://www.vlor.be)  
[info@vlor.be](mailto:info@vlor.be)

**Wijs beleid door overleg**

**Opinion at the request of** Hilde Crevits, Deputy Prime Minister of the Flemish Government, Flemish Minister for Education on 16 November 2017

**Adopted unanimously by the Higher Education Council on 12 June 2018**

**Preparation:** Student Participation Working Group on 22 February 2018, 29 March 2018 and 3 May 2018 chaired by Marie Desrousseaux

**File manager:** Isabelle De Ridder

## 1 Situation

Student participation is very much in the news today. As a result of the VLOR opinion on stimulating student participation, the Flemish Parliament also discussed the theme in a hearing.<sup>1</sup> On 9 May 2017, the VLOR issued an opinion on stimulating student participation.<sup>2</sup> In her reaction to this opinion, Minister Crevits asks the VLOR for a concrete proposal on how institutions can make their vision and policy regarding student participation more explicit.

This new opinion was prepared by a working group composed of the members of the VLOR, in which all higher education partners are represented. The student section was the largest delegation in this working group. The VLOR is satisfied that the Flemish Student Association (VVS) has expanded its delegation with those student councils that are not affiliated to it, in accordance with the minister's request.

## 2 Student participation under pressure

In Flanders, student participation is enshrined by decree. Students therefore have a say in both Flemish education policy and in the various policy levels of the higher education institutions. This allows them to express their views on a variety of policy themes. This not only concerns education-related issues, but also cross-cutting themes such as social welfare, democratisation, etc.

Student participation on the one hand promotes the democratic quality of the management of higher education institutions and on the other hand is an opportunity for students to develop into mature, critical citizens.

In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that student participation is struggling. Mandates are becoming more difficult to fill at Flemish and local levels, and student representatives indicate that it is becoming more difficult to combine their commitment with their studies.

In its earlier opinion, the VLOR discussed a number of barriers that student participation currently faces: lack of motivation, workload, insufficient information, insufficient knowledge of student representation, lack of facilities, lack of guidance. The VLOR suggested a number of solutions for this: an enforceable statute enshrined by decree, facilities, support, guidance and the drafting of a policy plan.

The VLOR believes that student participation for institutions should be more than just granting student status. Each institution, together with its students (and Student Council), should think about the vision, support, specific actions and resources it will put in place. How can student participation within the institutions be further stimulated? What instruments can be used for this? This opinion is a further elaboration of the previous one.

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<sup>1</sup> Hearing in the Education Committee of the Flemish Parliament on student participation within the framework of the VLOR opinion on stimulating student participation. 13 March 2018: <https://www.vlaamsparlament.be/parlementaire-documenten/gedachtewisselingen-hoorzittingen/1239188>

<sup>2</sup> Flemish Education Council, Higher Education Council. Opinion on stimulating student participation, 9 May 2017.

### **3 A shared responsibility**

The VLOR stresses that it is important that students have a say in policy. Student participation is a win-win for the institution and the students: it promotes the bonding of students with their institution and it allows the institution to tailor its policies to the needs of the students.

Student participation is a shared responsibility between the institution and the students. The VLOR favours a dialogue model involving constructive cooperation based on trust.

It is important that an institutional culture develops in which student participation forms an integral and essential part of institutional policy. To this end, existing rules, rights and instruments must be clearly and formally made explicit so that all participants in the consultation process are aware of them.

### **4 Further elaborating institutional policy**

#### **4.1 Integrate student participation policies into the student facilities policy plan?**

In her response to the VLOR opinion of 9 May 2017, the Minister wondered whether it could not be an option to incorporate the student participation policy plan proposed by the VLOR in its opinion into the student facilities policy plan. After all, student activities are already included by decree as the sixth area of student facilities. And if this proved impossible, she asked the VLOR to consider how student participation could be given a firm place in institutional policy, without any additional planning burden but with a maximum guarantee of student involvement.

The VLOR is not in favour of inserting the policy framework of a higher education institution on student participation - in whatever form - into the student facilities policy plan because:

- in the sixth area of student facilities, ‘student activities’ does not refer to a policy of student participation, but to ‘the organisation or support of initiatives by or for students in the social, sporting, community, environmental or cultural fields’;<sup>3</sup>
- the members of the Student Facilities Council are no experts in student participation;
- student participation relates to the overall functioning of the institution. It is therefore broader than student facilities. It is also about education, research, financial policy. These are not the competencies of the Student Facilities Council;
- placing student participation under the sixth area of student facilities would mean a devaluation of student participation because the Student Facilities Council has competence for fewer policy areas;
- this would mean an erosion of Student Facilities resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Article II.348.

## **4.2 Decree changes**

How can institutions enhance their policy and vision more effectively with maximum guarantees for student involvement in institutional policy? The VLOR suggests some decree changes and asks the minister to implement them through ODXXIX.

The VLOR considers it important to detail and strengthen the text of the decree<sup>4</sup> in the short term so that it offers both institutions and students more guidance on the policy framework, the legal position of the student and the resources that the institution spends on student representation.

In addition, transparent and enforceable agreements must be made at institutional level on the same topics, but also on the support granted to the Student Council. This is done in close consultation between the institution's management and the Student Council.

## **5 Embedding student participation more firmly in institutional policy**

### **5.1 Need for a policy framework**

For the VLOR it is an absolute necessity that each Flemish higher education institution develop a policy on student participation. Therefore, the Council requests that it be enshrined in a decree that each institution must develop a policy framework for this purpose. This may take the form of a policy plan and/or the further implementation of the Participation Regulations, but other formulas are also possible. How an institution approaches this together with the students is up to it. The choice is made in dialogue between institution and students.

If the institution, in consultation with the Student Council, opts for a student participation policy plan, this will contain the institution's vision of student participation and its strategic objectives. It is a generic description of the policy choices. Each institution implements this in a way that fits its context, uniqueness and capabilities. The policy plan is approved by the Student Council and the institution's management. If one of the partners asks for a policy plan, the other partner has to cooperate.

The VLOR asks that the institution clearly translate its policy on student participation in its organisation chart (location of the Student Council, the ombudsman service, staff support, etc.).

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<sup>4</sup> Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Part II - Title 5 - Legal position and participation of the student.

Today, every institution is already obliged by decree to draw up Participation Regulations.<sup>5</sup> These contain at least:

- the rules of procedure that must be observed when exercising the participation rights of the Student Council;
- the manner in which disputes concerning the implementation of this Title or the interpretation of a provision of the Participation Regulations are settled by means of forms of arbitration or mediation;
- the composition and functioning of the participation committees or councils.

The VLOR asks that the Participation Regulations also explicitly state where/whom students can turn to if the institution fails to meet its obligations set by decree. Monitoring compliance with obligations set by decree is normally the responsibility of the Government Commissioner. Students are not always aware of this.

The VLOR believes that Participation Regulations are an effective instrument that should be used to respond to the needs of students in the specific institutional context. They are enforceable and include the legal protection of the student. They must be drawn up in dialogue with the Student Council and must also give students the opportunity to realise student participation in all its breadth. In preparation for ODXIX, it should be considered which minimum elements should be regulated in the Participation Regulations in order to give students more leverage.

## **5.2 Legal status of the student**

The VLOR asks that:

- the status of student representative be enforceable. This is not yet sufficiently the case.
- the Student Council, together with the institution's management, draw up a list of those mandates that do and do not qualify for recognition.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the VLOR asks that this list can be adapted annually and in the interim. The procedure for (flexible) addition and withdrawal must be clearly established.
- the status be granted automatically upon taking up a qualifying internal or external mandate and that it apply to all levels of representation (internal and external).
- the institution provides an independently functioning ombudsman service and give it a clear place in the institution's organisational chart.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Article II. 332.

<sup>6</sup> Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Article II. 334, §2: The institution's management shall establish, in consultation with the Student Council, a list of mandates to whom the status mentioned in paragraph 1 applies. It shall also take into account mandates at supra-institutional level.

<sup>7</sup> An ombudsman service is currently provided by decree. However, the VLOR additionally asks that it be able to function independently. Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Article II. 334, §3.



The decree provides the following facilities: the way in which educational activities and examinations can be flexibly planned and deviations can be made from compulsory attendance, the work and examination formats and the submission dates for certain course units.<sup>8</sup> For the VLOR, this does not need to be extended. It does, however, ask that these facilities:

- can be used for all mandates effectively assumed (internal and external);
- also apply to traineeships (in consultation with the traineeship provider, as long as the necessary agreements on catch-up assignments or hours are made as part of the traineeship agreement);
- are actually assigned. All teachers must adhere to this and the institution must monitor compliance.

### **5.3 Resources for the Student Council and student representation**

The Codex of Higher Education provides that the institution supports the Student Council financially.<sup>9</sup> According to the provisions of the decree, this support can only take place on the basis of a Student Council work plan. The VLOR considers it important that this financial support be provided in an adequate manner and with a realistic budget. The VLOR asks that institutions in any case embed the way the budget is fixed more firmly.

The budget is set by the institution's management on the recommendation of the Student Council. The Participation Regulations describe transparently the procedure to be followed if the two parties do not reach an agreement. The VLOR is considering mediation by the independent ombudsman service in the first instance. If this internal mediation fails and it is established that the institution is not fulfilling its commitment as set by decree, the Government Commissioner can intervene. If earmarked funds are part of the budget, this must be clearly agreed in advance between the parties concerned.

In addition, the VLOR also draws the attention of the institutions to the fact that they should pay more and closer attention to the reimbursement of the expenses incurred. Today, students usually have to prefinance expenses incurred. This is not always obvious, also because they are not always immediately reimbursed for these costs. For some students, this is a barrier to taking up a mandate in student representation. It is therefore important that prefinancing by the institution and a transparent and fast procedure for the reimbursement of expenses are put in place.

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<sup>8</sup> Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Article II. 334: the way in which educational activities and examinations can be flexibly planned and deviations can be made from compulsory attendance, work and examination formats and submission dates for certain course units.

<sup>9</sup> Codex of Higher Education. 11 October 2013. Article II. 333: The management shall grant the Student Council the necessary infrastructural, financial or administrative support. The Student Council shall submit a work plan for this purpose.

## **5.4 Support**

### **5.4.1 Personal support**

If the institution is serious about student participation, it will provide in its organisational chart a position that promotes student participation. A responsible person who acts as liaison between the institution and the Student Council.

Like other departments of or attached to the higher education institution, a Student Council must also have the possibility of calling on (or appointing) staff members and/or student workers. They can provide administrative and substantive support to the Student Council.

### **5.4.2 Training**

The VLOR believes it is important that the right to education be made explicit in the policy framework. The institution must in any case provide a procedure by which the Student Council can request training.

### **5.4.3 Validation**

Student representation may also be addressed as a course unit with a limited number of credits, accessible to all students. This can also take the form of community service learning.<sup>10</sup> In this way, all students learn what student representation is all about.

### **5.4.4 Logistics**

The VLOR asks that agreements be made about what logistical support the Student Council can claim. The VLOR has in mind as a minimum: a room, printing facilities and catering. In any case, the thresholds for obtaining logistical support must be kept as low as possible.

## **6 Finally**

### **6.1 A system-wide analysis**

Student participation must be recognised at all levels of the institution. It requires attention, time, resources and a support base in the institution. It is important to consider a coherent and focused policy. The policy framework for student participation can be addressed during the institutional review. Moreover, the VLOR believes that the policy on student participation can be a theme in a system-wide analysis in quality assurance. In this process, a cross-institutional theme is examined and analysed by the NVAO.

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<sup>10</sup> In a Community Service Learning course, students engage in concrete social engagement on the basis of a theoretical framework and reflect on it.

## **6.2 Communication**

The VLOR asks the government to work on a brochure on student participation that explains to student councils which instruments they have at their disposal to stimulate student participation in their institution and which they can use in their negotiations with the institution's management. The VLOR assumes that they can also be assisted in this by their umbrella organisation.

## **6.3 Diversity**

Today's student representation is not sufficiently representative of the diverse composition of the student body. This can have various causes: target group students may not be as familiar with the culture of representation, or they may not see how they can combine it with a student job, etc. VLOR believes it is important for each institution to consider how to involve all students in student participation. In some institutions, this can be done through cooperation with self-organisations or student associations.

Isabelle De Ridder  
secretary Higher Education Council

Veerle Hendrickx  
chair Higher Education Council