

## THE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS (FUTURE TEACHERS) IN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS – A WAY OF DEVELOPING CITIZENSHIP COMPETENCIES

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**Abstract:** At the beginning of the 21st century, a new situation has developed in Latvia as a result of social and economic transformations. Along with the formation of civil society, issues concerning the social, legal, and spiritual life of student population have come to the foreground. There can be observed new features of behavioural culture and standards of thinking, readiness to live in a democratic environment. The young generation students perceive freedom and equality as necessary preconditions for varied activities, as an opportunity for individual's self-actualization. Civil society organizations are important institutions with regard to the development of citizenship competencies. The article is devoted to the development of citizenship competencies in civil society organizations - a topical issue in the present-day situation of social and cultural life in Latvia. The purpose of the article is to analyse students' participation in civil society organizations focusing on the development of their citizenship competencies. Materials and methodology: the theoretical method- the analysis of academic literature, documents and studies; the empirical method – students' survey.

**Keywords:** youth policy; citizenship competency; civil society organizations.

### Introduction

The awareness of youth policy as an area concerning civil society and democratic policy is gradually developing and strengthening in Latvia. The youth policy is an aggregate of purposeful activities promoting the comprehensive development of young people as full-fledged members of society thus stimulating their social inclusion and the development of citizenship competencies.

In the last years, Latvia has managed, first, to streamline legal regulations concerning the youth policy; second, to develop and implement effective models of mutual cooperation (inter alia by attracting young people as partners); third, to develop and maintain an effective model of communication understandable for all subjects of the policy, which fulfils both informational and communicative (feedback) functions.

In this respect, a very important factor has been the transition from the principle that the youth is a target group or a subject to the principle that the youth is a partner both in the policy development and implementation, from work with the youth to collaboration with the youth. This trend in the youth policy activates the participation of young people and their civic responsibility, as well as provides better opportunities for education and employment in general.

The most essential national document determining the youth policy in Latvia is *Youth Law*. Its purpose is to improve the quality of life for young people aged 13 to 25 promoting their participation in decision-making and social life, as well as supporting youth work. The "Youth Law" defines the parties involved in the implementation of the youth policy and their competency in the field of this policy, youth participation in the development and implementation of the youth policy, as well as the key principles for allocating finance for youth initiatives, their participation in decision-making and social life, as well as youth work (Jaunatnes likums..., 2008).

According to this law, youth work is a set of planned youth-oriented practical measures, which ensure the implementation of the youth policy, the development of value-orientations of young people and the consolidation of universal human values with a particular emphasis on the possibilities of developing citizenship competencies.

On the other hand, the purpose of *Youth Policy Guidelines 2009 – 2018*, another long-term policy planning document for the next ten years, is to achieve the implementation of a harmonized youth policy and its coordination by identifying the priority directions of activity and policy results, working out the vision of development in connection with the quality of life of young people and the

implementation of the youth policy. This document also highlights the key issues that need to be dealt with in the field of the youth policy (Jaunatnes politikas pamatnostādnes ..., 2009).

The key issues in *Youth Policy Guidelines 2009 – 2018* concerning the youth are:

- the low participation of young people in social activities and youth organizations;
- lack of up-to-date information about the opportunities of participation at the state level;
- an important factor promoting youth participation is the financial support for the implementation of youth initiatives. In Latvia, the financial support granted to youth initiatives and youth organizations is insufficient;
- there is no uniform classification of youth organizations and no uniform mechanism for the registration of youth organizations;
- there is no methodological and financial support for providing the work of student self-governance in educational institutions; as a result, their cooperation at the regional, national, and international level is not facilitated;
- the youth opinion concerning their possibilities to influence the decisions of local and national governments is critically low, which does not indicate that there is a developed practice of youth involvement before making decisions which concern the youth policy (Jaunatnes politikas pamatnostādnes..., 2009).

In order to tackle the issues outlined above, there has been developed *The Youth Policy State Programme for the Years 2009 – 2013* (Jaunatnes politikas valsts programma..., 2009). This programme is mainly focused on the development of youth centres in local governments. However, one of the issues concerning the youth policy that needs to be dealt with in Latvia is the advancement of citizenship education with a particular emphasis on youth participation and the efficient use of leisure time, active involvement of young people in decision making and in various youth organizations, youth initiative groups, clubs, etc.

Nowadays, many institutions of higher education, being viable, self-developing, self-organizing, and self-assessing systems of educational environment, learning both from their own experience and that of other institutions, are expanding their functions and increasing their target audience, thus becoming educational environments for the whole society. In the current crisis situation, this trend in the work of the institutions of higher education is connected not only with the attempt to preserve their own viability and secure prospects for the future, but also with the humanistic approach in their activity taking care of the sustainable development of young people.

According to the concept *Education for Sustainable Development* adopted by the UNESCO (The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005 – 2014, 2007), education for sustainable development is a multi-disciplinary, lifelong process, which includes the extensive learning experience of participation both in the formal and informal environment of the programme.

Nowadays, the mission of the institution of higher education is to ensure the viability of an individual in the changeable environmental conditions and sustainability in the future perspective. The readiness of the society to change, perfect itself and develop depends to a great extent on how creative, rich in initiative, and ready for change the institution of higher education is. The status of the institution of higher education as the guarantor for sustainable development of the community also depends on the fact whether the institution of higher education is democratic and whether it ensures the implementation of citizenship values and the development of citizenship competencies of would be specialists in practice. In this respect civil society organizations, clubs, associations and non-governmental organizations become the environment for students' extracurricular activity as the form of students' self-realization and the opportunity for developing their citizenship competencies.

In order to accomplish the education of active citizens, it is necessary to create a particular social space (social organizations, societies, associations, clubs, etc.), thus creating pre-conditions for developing an active civic position of the youth and individuals' self-actualization. At present, various civil society organizations experience a real boom as the forms of social education. Various forms of student interest clubs are also very popular. The issues concerning student clubs are becoming increasingly important in view of the necessity to develop the citizenship competencies of would be specialists.

According to G. Kotova, *a club is the form of education which refers to the youth associations of different age-groups; it is based on common interests and needs, thus creating an opportunity to involve young people in socially significant, varied activities; within the framework of club activity, there is created a uniform system of value-orientations and uniform organization of individuals' social experience.* (КОТОВА, 2010).

Promoting the activities of student interest clubs in the society increases the opportunities for students' self-actualization and the development of citizenship competencies based on the ideas of humanistic psychology concerning the realization of human potential. Student societies and clubs facilitate their involvement in social life, advance the effective and creative implementation of students' social functions as members of society and prepare students for self-development. (Studentu sociālie..., 2009).

If we regard the functioning of student clubs in the institutions of higher education as an essential factor of students' self-actualization having an impact on students' socialization, it has to be concluded that students' extracurricular activity is of the same importance as their curricular activity.

When analysing and evaluating the role of Latvian civil society organizations in the development of students' citizenship competencies, their current problems and difficulties, it has to be noted that in the recent years several studies have been conducted in Latvia concerning students' participation in various youth organizations and clubs. These studies provide valuable material characterising the social life of Latvian students. The documents concerning international and national processes in higher education (e.g. the Bologna Process, Lisbon Treaty) consider students as the basis for the formation of knowledge society. It is important to study students' opinions in order to evaluate the existing education policy and to develop the strategy of higher education.

In 2009, the marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS carried out a study involving 2000 full-time students from state-funded and private institutions of higher education in order to analyse students' participation in youth organizations. According to the study, 66.1 % of the respondents were not involved in these organizations. Most often the respondents mentioned participation in students' self-governance – 17.6%. More than 5 % of those questioned mentioned a student choir (7.3%), a sports club (6.7%), but 7.1 % indicated that they were involved in other student interest clubs.

The purpose of the article is to analyse students' participation in civil society organizations focusing on the development of their citizenship competencies.

## Methodology

The study conducted by the authors of the present article was carried out in 2011-2012 by surveying the 1st year students of Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy including both full-time (2011 – 106 female and 9 male students; 2012 – 103 female and 7 male students) and part-time students (2012 - 83 female and 3 male students) enrolled in the respective study groups in the 1st semester (September-October), i.e. at the moment when the social status of the respondents had changed considerably due to commencing their studies. The respondents were offered a survey questionnaire designed according to the principles of Likert-type scale and containing the following questions:

1. What youth organizations do you participate in? (13 alternatives were offered; the response categories: *do not participate*– *occasionally participate* – *often participate* – *always participate*)
2. Why do you participate in the social organizations, societies, clubs? (11 alternatives were offered; the response categories: *unimportant* – *marginally important* – *important* – *very important*)
3. What, in your opinion, are the main forms of students' participation in the processes of social change? (6 alternatives were offered; the response categories: *unimportant* – *marginally important* – *important* – *very important*).
4. What means of communication ensure participation (exchange of information) (8 alternatives were offered; the response categories: *never* – *seldom* – *sometimes* - *often*).

5. What possibility do you personally have to influence the decision making processes in Latvia? (The categories of responses: *cannot influence* – *do not know* – *partly influence*–*influence*).

Besides, in all the questions except No5 the students were given an opportunity to offer their own answers to the given questions.

In order to process the data contained in the questionnaires, the responses were coded from 1 to 4, fed into the computer and analysed by means of descriptive statistics. When processing the responses to questions 3 and 4, there were used the advantages offered by Likert scale, i.e. the calculation of the mean value  $M_i$ , where  $1 \leq M_i \leq 4$ . If  $M_i = 2.5$ , it is the *average mean value* in the whole interval ( $M_{aver}$ ), and the absolute value of each separate  $M_i$  characterises the deviation of the total value of the whole group or subgroup of respondents from the average mean value. For instance, at  $M_i > M_{aver}$  it can be concluded that the group of respondents generally supports the respective valuation (factor) or evaluates it as important, contrary to the situation when  $M_i < M_{aver}$ , i.e. in this case the sample generally does not support the respective factor.

The processing of the questionnaires was done using the data processing software SPSS, version 20.0., as well as the programme Excel.

## Results and discussion

The study shows the minimal involvement of the students in various civil society organizations at the initial stage of their studies (1st semester). For instance, the overwhelming majority of both full-time and part-time students are not involved in such civil society organizations as the club “The House – Youth for United Europe”, the European Movement in Latvia, the Latvian Youth Council and others (99.1% chose the response *do not participate*), or their participation in these organizations is occasional.

The activity is a little higher with regard to *Christian organizations* and events (2011 – 3 students; 2012 – 16 students, including 6 part-time students). Students have a relatively higher interest in the activity of *non-governmental organisations* (2011 – 6 students; 2012 – 24 students, including 11 part-time students). Students’ participation in *sports organizations*, which shows an increasing trend, has to be especially noted: in 2011 only 1 respondent was involved in such an organization, but in 2012 the number was 15, including 13 part-time students.

The students demonstrate the relatively highest rate of involvement with regard to cultural organizations. For instance, among those surveyed in 2011, 17 respondents or 14.8% of the sample were involved in *dance clubs*, while in 2012 the number of such respondents was 25 (22.7%) out of the full-time students and 22 (25.4%) out of the part-time students questioned. Among other cultural organisations, there has to be noted participation in *choirs and orchestras*; however, the number of such students does not exceed 2.3-2.7% in each subgroup.

Involvement in the activity *parents’ forum* is also noteworthy – among full-time students only 2 respondents indicated it in 2011, while in the group of part-time students 7 respondents (8.1% of the whole sub-group) mentioned participation in this activity.

It has to be noted that according to the responses students’ participation in political organizations is occasional – contrary to their participation in Christian organizations and cultural interest clubs, where most of the participants have chosen the responses *often participate* or *always participate*. This leads to the conclusion that for the development of citizenship competencies the activity of the institutions of higher education aimed at students’ involvement in organizations dealing with the matters of national importance has to be particularly encouraged.

Involvement in civil society organizations can be both passive (*attendance of events*), and active (*membership*). Activity can be determined by various factors, which can manifest themselves with different intensity. For instance, in 2011, 57.8% of the respondents - full-time students - noted that satisfaction for doing socially significant work was *important* for them, while 12.8% marked it as *very important*. A year later, the percentage of the valuations *important* was a little lower (49.5%), while

the percentage of the response *very important* had almost doubled. In the group of part-time students, 70.7% have indicated that this factor is *important* for their participation in various activities, while 12.2% consider it as *very important*.

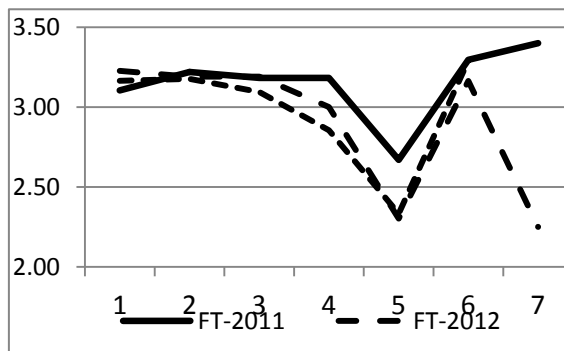


Figure 1. Evaluation of the most important forms of participation,  $1 \leq M_i \leq 4$ .

Notes: 1 expressing ideas and suggestions; 2 – participation in projects; 3 – assistance in organizing activities; 4 – collecting donations; 5 participation in rallies, street marches, protest demonstrations; 6 – participation in elections; 7 – other  
 FT – full-time students; PT – part-time students.

A very high rating can be observed for such motivating factors as *common activities* (52.5-58.5% of the respondents consider them as *important* and 18.3-25.3% as *very important* in different sub-groups of the sample, *an opportunity to establish new contacts* (56.4-59.4% - *important* and 26.7-26.7% - *very important*), *an opportunity to gain interesting experience* (46.5-50.0 – *important* and 38.0 – 39.6% - *very important*). The respondents of all sub-groups also appreciate the *opportunity to participate in the discussions concerning topical issues* (47.5-52.8 – *important* and 3.7-9.1% - *very important*).

In order to characterise the responses concerning the most important forms of participation, there was chosen the graphic representation (Fig. 1) which shows that generally students approve of all the 6 offered responses ( $M_i > M_{aver}$ ), except *participation in rallies, street marches and protest demonstrations*. It also appears that part-time students rate some forms of participation lower than full-time students, except *participation in projects, participation in rallies and participation in elections*.

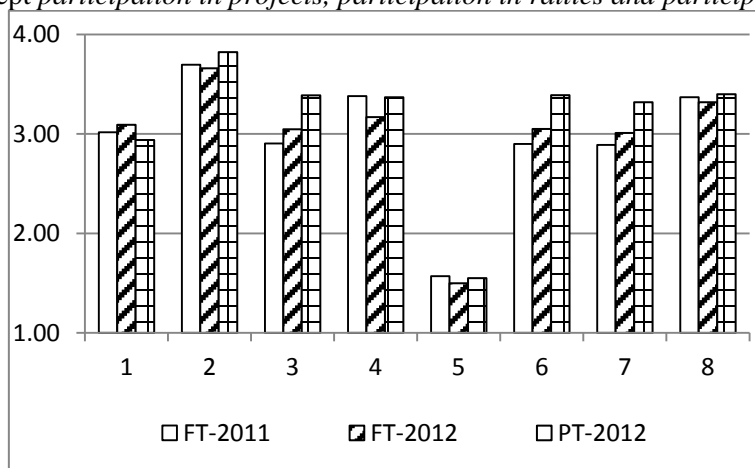


Figure 2. Evaluation of the means of communication,  $1 \leq M_i \leq 4$ .

Notes: 1 – meetings and workshops; 2 – information in the Internet; 3 – magazines; 4 – TV; 5 – fax; 6 – e-mail; 7 – telephone; 8 - e-environment  
 FT – full-time students; PT part-time students.

With regard to the means of communication ensuring the exchange of information and thus facilitating involvement in various civil society organizations, the views of all the respondents are very similar

(Fig. 2). Besides, the Internet is unanimously considered as the most important one by all the respondents.

Obviously, participation in civil society organizations is also affected by the personal attitude of each participant, which depends on the fact whether a particular individual is a passive observer, a good executor, or is able to influence the decision making. According to the results of the survey (Fig. 3), the part-time students have indicated more frequently that they can *partly influence* the decision making process, which exceeds the valuation of the full-time students in this response category by 1.5 times. It has to be admitted though that a relatively small number of the respondents are strongly convinced that they can actually influence the decision making process – about 3.6%.

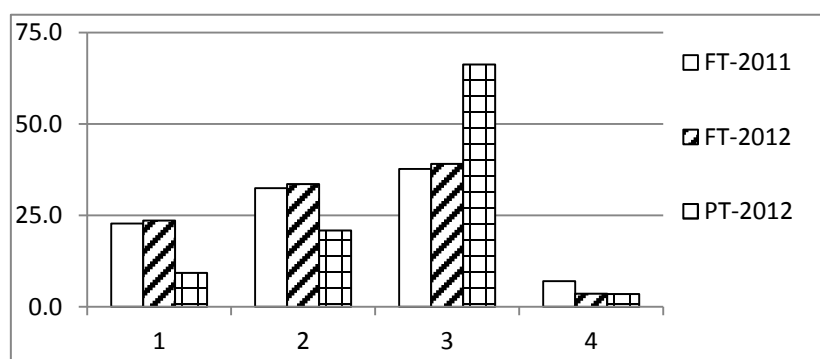


Figure 3. Personal ability to influence the decision making, percentage of the respondents.

Notes: 1 – can not influence; 2 do not know; 3 – partly influence; 4 – influence  
FT – full-time students; PT – part-time students.

Having compared the responses of full-time and part-time students of 2012 concerning their personal ability to influence the decision making, it has to be concluded that the difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0,000$ ). Generally, it is an interesting fact, but not a very surprising one since part-time students have more life experience; some of them already work as educators and thus have to make independent decisions even though they sometimes concern just one form of pupils or a small group of children. Full-time students, 95% of whom are the secondary school leavers of the respective year, do not have such life experience, which manifests itself as a lower rating of their own ability to influence the decision making process.

## Conclusions

- Nowadays, the institutions of higher education play an important role in the development of social consciousness and serve as the environment for citizenship education. One important subject of the educational environment is the aggregate of student clubs and associations, the main objective of which with regard to citizenship education is to prepare students for life in civil society by developing their creative potential and public administration skills, organizing leisure time activities, creating preconditions for meeting their communication needs, the realization of personal initiative and responsibility and the development of citizenship competencies.
- The system of higher education has the potential which makes it possible to educate a new type of specialists for a new social reality. The institutions of higher education are the structures where would-be professionals and active citizens acquire the forms of social participation not only in theory, but also in practice, are involved in them, and thus develop necessary character features, skills, world outlook, and citizenship competencies.
- Varied civil society organizations promote the active participation of young people in decision making and social life, broaden students' opportunities to gain knowledge and acquire skills, as well as spend their free time in a productive way and implement civic activities.
- So far, the participation of 1st year students – future teachers – in various civil society organizations is insufficient for the development of citizenship competencies even though

there is noticeable potential for their involvement in such organizations, which can be inferred from the positive responses of those surveyed concerning the motives of participation, their ability to influence decision making and other factors.

- Insufficient involvement in various organizations and clubs can be explained by the acquisition of a new social status – *a student* – and starting new life activity. There can be observed a relatively higher students' involvement in cultural organizations rather than in social and political organizations, clubs and similar activities.

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