Scientific Research

Perceptions of Student Leadership in the University Context—The Case of the Students' Union in the University of Sheffield (United Kingdom)[*]

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The current work presents a descriptive study which focuses on analyzing the self-perceptions of student representatives in order to determine their characteristics and leadership profile, based on their situation and context (Sheffield University's Student Union, UK). A non-experimental research method was applied, based on the use of questionnaires and semistructured interviews. Some of the results confirm the conditioning exerted by the organizational culture of each institution, as well as the importance of the vocational component with respect to the development and dynamization of the groups.

Keywords: Perceptions; Student Leadership; University Micropolitics

Introduction

Traditionally, student representation has been a rather neglected topic in our university culture, except during elections, when there is a risk that the ideology of academic power will change. For this reason, we need other ways to attend to and promote this university establishment. One of these is the determination of the characteristics that define their leadership among their peers, or their perceptions about their purpose with respect to university life (Cáceres, 2007). Other university models, like the one in this British university, feature a macro student syndicate, a "Students' Union", which manages to identify and attend to the needs of the students. They achieve this with great efficiency and enthusiasm, reflecting an excellent culture of student participation. Students become involved in an organizational structure which is accessible and attracts their interest and motivation. It is one of the oldest and most powerful student organizations in the United Kingdom. The present study aims to determine the characteristics and inner workings of this macro student syndicate through the perceptions of its own student staff (staff officers), taking it as a model due to its close relationship with the student population, both nationally and internationally.

Numerous research studies have focused on traditional leadership in the managerial positions of educational organizations (Argyris, 1976; Bass, 1981; Ball, 1989; Sáenz & Lorenzo, 1993; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Sáenz & Fernández Nares, 1994; Bolman & Deal, 1995; Lorenzo Delgado, 2011; Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Neumerski, 2013 among others). However, very few studies focus on student leadership (Lorenzo Delgado et al., 2007; Cáceres Reche, Lorenzo Delgado, & Sola Martínez, 2009; Vassiliki, 2011 among others). In this study, we focus on student

leadership in a British context, and the different roles that these political representatives carry out within the university.

Research Problem

Student leadership takes on different nuances according to the historical, sociocultural and economic context of each country, despite current global trends towards the homogenization of lifestyles, opinions, university systems (European Higher Education Area), etc.

Hence, our interest has been to extrapolate this research to an Anglo-Saxon university context. This research began with several pilot studies in the University of Granada, during the 2005 academic year. Our research focused on the analysis of the perceptions that Student Union leaders have about themselves regarding four areas: why they have been chosen by their peers attributes, what they were chosen for expectations, how they perform their functions thoughts on the practice and how they value their own functions as leaders, based on their daily experience satisfactions, limitations, etc.

The main aim of this research was to study the perceptions that the student representatives had about their own functions regarding different areas of university leadership in a British environment: identifying leaders (age, sex, etc.); attributes related to election, expectations and practice of leadership (techniques used, etc.); and assessment.

Methodology

In this study, we used a descriptive and mixed methodology, based on a non-experimental survey method. We applied a quantitative instrument, the questionnaire, as well as a qualitative instrument, the semistructured interview. This allows a significant and contextualized interpretation of the data acquired.

[*]Research focused on student's leadership in British university context.

By contrasting this data, we can analyze any peculiarities that could be specific to the Students' Union.

With respect to the questionnaire, we used a Likert-type scale consisting of 30 closed questions. The responses were numerical and could range from 1 to 4, where 4 indicates total agreement ("totalmente de acuerdo"), 3 indicates agreement ("de acuerdo"), 2 indicates little agreement ("poco acuerdo"), and 1 indicates total disagreement ("totalmente en desacuerdo").

The questionnaire was designed "ad hoc", in accordance with the objectives and needs of the investigation. In order to determine the validity and reliability of the instrument, we first carried out a procedure in which content was validated through the assessment of expert judgment. Each questionnaire item underwent an exhaustive revision process, both with respect to its structure (semantics, syntactics), and to the content itself (definition of the construct). This revision resulted in a modified instrument, which would then be given to the subjects in the second stage of the validation process.

In order to determine the validity of the construct and the degree of internal consistency of the instrument, a pilot study was carried out. Sixty subjects took part in this study, and they had similar profiles to the subjects in the sample. The modified questionnaire was administered, and the data obtained was subjected to the factor analysis technique with the following results in **Table 1**.

According to the KMO test, the measure of sampling adequacy is close to unity (0,951), which guarantees that the sample used in the pilot study is satisfactory. The analysis carried out on this sample was also feasible and conclusive, due to the bilateral asymptotic significance of the Lilliefors results, which were obtained through the calculation of chi-squared, used in Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

With respect to reliability, the index obtained was 0.886 (Cronbach's Alpha), which is acceptable. Similar reliability indices were obtained with the Split-Half method, which studies the correlation between the different items in the questionnaire in **Table 2**.

On the other hand, the quantitative data has been complemented with the results obtained through the use of semistructured interviews. These interviews aim to provide a deeper, qualitative, and more exhaustive exploration of the perceptions of the leaders with respect to the following: their role as representatives, the lack of training available, and the most frequently used methods of student "mobilization". For this reason, the questions used were of a more self-reflective nature, where student leaders had to evaluate the tasks that they are required to carry out, especially with respect to their most positive and negative experiences. In other words, we analysed the emotional responses of the leaders to different personal, material and functional stimuli to which they are exposed in the institutional centres where they are leaders. We can find in **Figure 1** as following.

In this case, the population and the sample are in full agreement, since there was a high degree of conformity in the results obtained from the administration of the research instruments to different groups of representatives (staff) that have been in charge of the Student Syndicate in different academic years. This results in a total of thirty "officers" in different areas of interest for the student population and in different academic years.

Results

We are dealing with a "management team" that leads student representation at the university level, and which is characterized by its great youth—their ages range from 21 to 23 years old. They are all in agreement with respect to the beginning of their involvement in student representation: the final years of their university career.

In fact, in order to be eligible for this type of position, it is necessary to be completely free of ties to the academic realm. This ensures that these leaders can dedicate themselves, completely, to guaranteeing the best possible service for the student population. They receive a high monthly sum for carrying out these duties. Therefore, they take a break in their academic careers, and dedicate themselves to carrying out tasks that will provide them with valuable experience and practical skills.

Attributes

Their eligibility for this type of position (e.g. "sabbatical officer") depends on being elected by other students through a democratic process. "Having a strong personality", "being intelligent" and developing "skills such as persuasive and communicative skills, etc.", are among the reasons considered to be the most decisive in this democratic process.

To a lesser extent, but with wide acceptance, the participants also mention physical appearance, previous experience, and the importance of developing skills. Above all, participants do agree on the existence of personal ethical values that are consistent with the actions carried out, as well as with the development of a strong personality.

In this sense, the relevance of fulfilling promises and of showing an outgoing personality, as well as of having good communication skills, are reflected in the results of this study.

Table 1.
Calculation of the Kaiser-Meyer-olkin measure and bartlett's test of sphericity.

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Measure of sampling adequacy Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	0.951	
Bartlett's Test of sphericity	Chi-squared	3,971,995
	Approximation gl	28
	Sig.	0.000

Table 2.
Reliability: The split-half method.

Cronbach's alpha	Part 1	Value	**0.814**
		N of elements	34 (a)
	Part 2	Value	**0.831**
		N of elements	33 (b)
		Total N of elements	67
		Correlation between forms	0.593
Spearman's coefficient brown		Equal longitude	0.744
		Unequal longitude	0.744
Guttman's split-half method			0.743
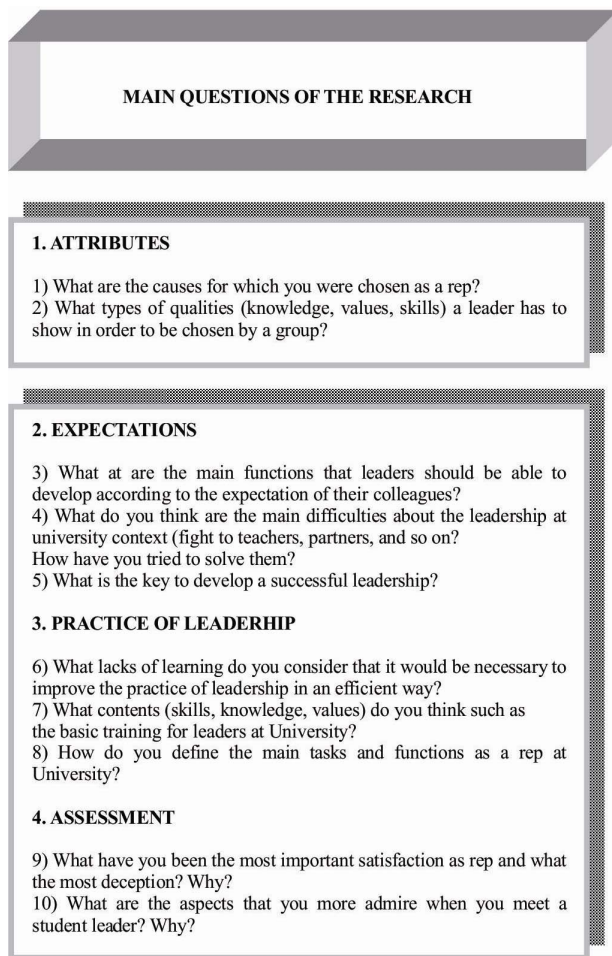
Figure 1.
Main topic of the research.

[A leader] must be open; that is very important; [he/she] must be an approachable person, as it were; a leader, at the very least, cannot be shy (…) (Interview 1)

I believe that, on the one hand, there is the feeling that if I must do something, I will do it even if I do not know how to do it, but I will give it a try. (…) I think that the leader's willingness to establish a dialogue is a must, but, mainly, because otherwise the leader would not be a worthy representative (Interview 9).

However, the participants show great disagreement regarding the importance of "good grades" (75%) as a reason to elect. In addition, "the lack of candidates" (100% of disagreement) is not a factor when it comes to being appointed "officer", because it is a position that is likely to have fewer problems regarding student participation, perhaps due to the economic compensation received for the tasks they perform.

Expectations

According to their colleague's expectations, among the many characteristics that leaders should have, they point out the importance of "having good communicative skills", "creating novel initiatives, etc.", "mediating in conflicts" (87.5%) and "or-

ganizing activities for students" (50%). The functions are tasks related to the coordination of a wide range of activities and services that try to cover the needs of the many foreign students attending this university.

Generally, the functions that a representative should carry out are focused on:

(…) defending the student's rights, keeping them informed about possible changes in the university or in... some subject and... defending the majority and informing the students (…) (Interview 5)

The main repercussions of carrying out their functions are related to "confrontations with management teams" (75%), possibly due to the fact that most of their daily activities require interaction with those management teams; and the possibility of "learning to negotiate" and the importance of "fulfilling promises" (62.5%).

Regarding the division between the academic realm and that of student representation, participants consider that being an "officer" does not mean having "more help with difficulties in subjects", or the possibility of "promotion within the university".

Practice of Leadership

Environment is one the most important aspects in the education of leaders, since they learn through practice. They acquire knowledge with experience, but they also need specific training (87.5%).

A university leader's profile is associated to people who have the skills to understand, altruistically, the needs of the group. Additionally, they are people who show honesty, security and reliability, as well as being mature, decisive and knowledgeable about their responsibilities. In most cases, the importance of being a leader (inheritance, innate abilities) and the importance of being trained are considered to have equal relevance. However, they also mention that it is the situation that creates the leader; hence, a leader will be different depending on the particularities and interests, as well as the social context, of the group.

Assessment

The results show a high level of satisfaction (87.5%) regarding the execution of tasks, especially those based on the learning of different skills, such as "supporting their opinions" (87.5%), "learning to listen" (75%), "tolerating opposing points of view" (75%) or "learning the tricks of university micro-politics" (75%). With respect to personal growth, a series of aspects that constitute the "must have" qualities of a leader are mentioned. These aspects are determined by all the features and dimensions reviewed throughout the whole study (honesty, commitment, efficiency, empathy, communication skills, creativity, initiative, etc.).

The respondents show complete agreement in highlighting the percentage of student representatives as sufficient. This shows, on the one hand, that students apparently do not have problems with involvement or participation in the organizational life of their centres or universities. On the other hand, it also shows that students do not think it is necessary to compensate, either economically or academically, other functions of representation different to their own, within the more specific

ambit of centres and departments.

Discussion

Given the results obtained for each area of this study, it could be said that the perceptions of student leadership are conditioned by a series of factors present in the organizational culture, and in the sociocultural and economic reality, of each country. Student representation in the British Student's Union is characterized by its great organizational structure. It aims to be effective in the execution of tasks, and in the creation of positions, so as to truly serve those who are directly affected—in this case, the students. This shows a marked tendency to develop transactional leadership. Additionally, it is understood that this type of representative must receive a salary, which is why these "leaders" are considered to be workers, employees of the university, for dedicating one year of their life (in the final stages of their university careers) to becoming involved with the work and quality of life of their peers. This is different to other European organizational models, where one of the main problems lies in the lack of interest and participation of the students in anything that is not strictly academic.

The student union is mainly composed of male members, and gender stereotypes define everyone's tasks according to their position. In addition, opinions are divided regarding gender as a possible influential factor in assigning positions. Nevertheless, it is not considered decisive with respect to expectations about the execution of tasks. Thus, in the light of the apparent "ambiguity" shown by the results, it would be convenient, as a future line of research, to conduct a study focusing on the variable of gender regarding student representation. The main aim of such research would be to analyze the presence of traditional gender stereotypes and their effect on academic and social development.

Once they have completed their studies, or while they are coursing the last few years, student representatives show great academic experience and knowledge, as the recipients of the institution's educational and organizational actions.

The functions performed by student representatives are not only based on defending and representing students, but also on offering a number of activities and recreational tasks that allow for the students' implication and, especially, on attending to the needs of foreign students. Therefore, student representatives are detached from the academic sphere in order to avoid a possible "monopoly of power"; thus, "sabbatical officers" can only hold that position for a year, and the temporary nature of it is manifest in the answers given—neither academic promotions, nor advantages in academic subjects are expected.

The search for effectiveness is attributed to the presence of a strong personality, which is necessary to face the different roles assigned, and is reinforced with experience and daily practice.

Student representatives consider that the dimensions of their personality which determine their election are mainly related to "being" (values, attitudes) and "doing" (development of skills, "know-how", etc.), and not necessarily to "knowing" (knowledge). They only highlight internal factors as specific reasons for their election, such as having the ability to persuade; developing a strong personality; having the ability to communicate, debate and negotiate; being open, honest and outgoing; showing confidence; being creative; facing problems; and having the ability to remain calm.

They perceive themselves as representatives who must de-fend, inform, solve problems, mediate in conflicts and be efficient. The position is linked to the cultural sphere ("being a timetable of activities") rather than the academic one (defending the needs and interests of the group), in order to attend to the needs and interests (entertainment, training, information and orientation) of the many foreign students, through the many services offered by this macro students' union. Thus, taking into account that most of the difficulties faced by student representatives arise due to confrontations with institutional managers, with whom they might disagree, the "sociocultural" approach to leadership leads us to ask ourselves certain questions. If it is a students' union which for all practical purposes is established as "a cornerstone of the academic system", ensuring the students' needs and, at the same time, the achievement of its own goals to what extent can mediation be effective when it might be geared to favour the interests of those in power? How can it defend students' affairs against the institutional university networks? Thus, a second line of research which would be of great interest could be launched, with this study as a starting point, in order to know the perceptions of the students being represented. This second study would provide us with a wider point of view, and an understanding of student leadership in the British academic context, from the point of view of the different agents, active as well as passive, involved in the organizational life of the centre.

The learning of skills, such as the ability to negotiate and to manage the intricacies of the academic culture, has been established as a positive consequence related to student leadership. In addition, student leadership is conceived as a function that resides within the group through a shared project.

It is thought that in order to become a leader, it is essential to possess a series of innate skills and to develop them in a stimulating learning environment, as well as through exposure to different experiences that will define each leader's profile ("the context creates leaders"). Thus, leadership development implies having a clear goal, showing satisfaction when goals are met (to motivate) and conveying confidence with respect to the achievement of goals.

Conclusion

The representatives emphasize, by mutual agreement, the leaders' need to receive specific training through compulsory training courses in which they can receive, above all, practical advice, orientation, and suggestions, as well as the opportunity to learn about other people's experiences (strategic knowledge). However, it is one of the European universities that show a greater awareness regarding the training it offers to its student representatives. Thus, it could serve as a model for most Higher Education institutions, in which, as mentioned at the beginning of this study, the matter of student representation has been a rather neglected issue. An additional line of research, which would be of great interest with respect to the topic at hand, would be the in-depth study of the formal features and the structural subject-matter of the above-mentioned training courses, which have long been around. Additionally, this line of research should take into account a series of factors, such as economic compensation to encourage, as in this country, student participation in representational work. Nevertheless, this issue should be analyzed in greater depth, given that British student leaders themselves disagree on the link between performing the tasks that come with the position and receiving academic or

economic "rewards". Paradoxically, despite playing their role as "workers", they disagree with the external consequences. The "must have" qualities are thought to be related to an intrinsic motivation (achieving goals, gaining the group's trust, receiving their support, etc.); in other words, they consider it more important to promote personal growth from the performance of functions oriented towards altruism and social recognition.

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