'Micropolitics' and Communication:
An exploratory study on student representatives' communication repertoires in university governance

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of the communication repertoire which student representatives in university governance use to negotiate and represent student interests and to gain a first understanding of obstacles influencing communication behaviour. Moreover, it seeks to situate student representatives' communication practices in the micropolitical context of universities. Students are the largest stakeholder group at universities and representative roles for students are formally embedded in universities' institutional structures. The conceptual framework in this research project defines universities as micropolitical systems with students being citizens of these political entities who possess specific rights and duties relating to this status.

For this study, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with interviewees who had been formally elected to student offices at four universities in Germany and the United Kingdom. The overall finding of the study is that students are a rather vulnerable status group at university with only limited political leverage and that they counter this disadvantage by making conscious use of a diverse repertoire of strategic communication practices and communication channels.

Furthermore, the study found that student representatives are usually underrepresented in votes or occupy offices of mainly advisory nature. Thus, formal administrative processes at universities usually do not allow them to directly influence decision-making. As a consequence, student representatives mainly rely on informal negotiation processes and on activist logics to influence decision-making in terms of student interest and student welfare. The most important communication channels are face-to-face communication (preferably used for negotiation) and new media such as e-mail and social networking sites (mainly used for wide distribution of information).

Obstacles influencing the effectiveness of students' communication repertoires are the obligation of confidentiality, negative attitudes towards student representatives held by other stakeholders at university and gender discrimination as well as the risk of backlashes and personal attacks from different stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

> *'Universities are stupid institutions filled with smart people'*
> (Personal Interview, 2013)

The above quote was mentioned by one of the student representatives interviewed for this research project. It concisely illustrates one of the main paradoxes of university systems: the often immobile and bureaucratic nature of universities' administrative structure as opposed to the people inhabiting it as a space who advocate academic values such as expertise, innovation and freedom of research.

As higher education institutions, universities fulfil a diverse range of purposes, reaching from more obvious functions such as research and teaching to rather implicit roles such as fostering citizenship development, fostering democratic values or encouraging political participation. At the same time, universities strive to maintain their authoritative status as institutions in the pursuit of knowledge. As a consequence, they often present themselves as apolitical bodies engaged in the discovery of objective truths. Although this stance is challenged by disciplines from within the academic community such as politics, social sciences or gender and postcolonial studies, the idea of universities as non-political sites is still a commonly held notion.

The inspiration for this research project originated from the author's experience that from an inside perspective, universities are by far not as apolitical as they maintain to be which already becomes evident in their governmental structures and decision-making processes: They need to accommodate a variety of stakeholder groups with often conflicting interests and to enable decision-making concerning these groups. They maintain structures and hierarchies which try to impose order in social and organisational processes within their institutional framework. With these characteristics, the above quote could be changed to 'universities are political institutions filled with people engaging in politics.'

Amongst the variety of stakeholder groups, the by far largest stakeholder group at universities are students. Perhaps paradoxically, at the same time, students' influence in university politics is often said to be the lowest in comparison with the political leverage of other status groups – even though there are official representative functions for students in university governance.

This research project seeks to contribute to the under researched field of students' representation in universities and particularly focuses on how students develop their communication repertoire in order to cope with the political structures prevalent at their university. Studying students' (political) communication has two features which make

research in this field particularly interesting. First, for many students, their representative function at university is the first political office that they ever held, which is an interesting starting point for research as it allows us to get a glimpse of how political communication practices are being learned and developed – especially given the fact that students often do not receive formal training for their posts. Second, many students working in university governance represent significant numbers of people (up to 40,000 in this study) and manage considerable amounts of money which sometimes reach several million pounds. Thus, they hold high political responsibility which has many parallels to 'non-university' political offices.

As this author is a student and has worked for several years in student representative offices, this study is informed by previous experiences in this area as well as by any biases that might occur after being personally involved in student representative work. As Lumsden (2013) elaborates on research partisanship and 'underdog bias', it is never possible to escape personal bias. However, in this study, being able to refer to previous experiences has proven useful for conducting sensible research, understanding interviewees' statements and situating these in the complex systems of university governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Universities as sites of politics and citizenship

Universities are complex educational institutions, which have served as a prime example for organized anarchies in the memorably titled 'Garbage Can Model' of organizational choice theory (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). According to this model, universities are characterized by 'problematic preferences', that is: unclear and divergent goals amongst different stakeholders, 'unclear technology' that is: stakeholders' general lack of clarity about the processes and structures leading to decision-making processes, and: 'fluid participation' in which the participants of decision-making bodies are continuously changing and their engagement strongly depends on the amount of interest and time they are willing to invest. Thus, universities are social systems which display a broad range of diverging interests and therefore a high degree of ambivalence, complexity and lack of detailed knowledge of the workings of the systems amongst its members, continuous change in the composition of the membership and a certain degree of freedom amongst the members to make choices about the extent and way in which they are involved in decision-making bodies.

Such a social system, then, requires practices, discourses and institutions that attempt to impose order and organize it – processes which Mouffe (1999) calls politics. This correlates

with Ellström's study of theoretical approaches to educational organizations in which the 'political model' describes educational institutions as a systems 'of interacting individuals and subgroups pursuing different interests, demands, and ideologies through the use of power and other resources' (1983, p. 233). On the basis that 'politics form an inherent aspect of social processes, including education and its administration', Milley (2008, p. 54) expands this idea by locating it both in the institutions themselves (as explicated in the previous passages) and at the same time taking into account that nation states have a political interest in overseeing formal education. This study will mainly focus on the former – namely political processes and structures embedded in universities and universities as political systems on a miniature scale. In line with this perspective, Ball established the term 'micropolitics' in order to 'establish a conceptual framework for a micropolitics of organizations' (1990, p. 225) which he created to account for the 'messiness, conflict and incoherence' (1990, p. 226) he encountered while conducting research on schools and which were an impulse for his deductive approach to studying school organization.[1]

This structural concept can be complemented by the notion of students as citizens: Kivisto and Faist define citizenship as containing two components, the first referring to 'membership in a polity' and the second being 'a reciprocal set of duties and rights' (2007, p. 1). Applying this notion of citizenship to universities serves as a useful conceptual tool for a variety of reasons: Universities can be conceived as 'physical, social and mental' (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000, p. 136) spaces which allows for a definition of students as inhabitants – or: citizens – of this distinct space. This can be linked to Kleinsasser's concept of 'university citizenship', with which she refers to different stakeholder groups at university as 'citizens from different parts of the institution' (2002, p. 31).

Correspondingly, an important factor in educational institutions are 'the rights and duties of citizens' (Gordon et al., 2000, p. 21). University systems exhibit features which are indicative of formalized citizenship and participation. Silver and Silver, for example, make use of the term 'student constituencies' (1997, p. 24) and indeed, systems of formal representation at university (including regular elections) require political practices such as voting, which is a basic democratic responsibility of citizens. From a more abstract perspective, higher education can be seen as a place for student citizenship development in which support of democratic structures, processes and values can be fostered (Plantan, 2004; Thornton & Jaeger, 2007).

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[1] Interestingly, coincidentally one of the interviewees in this study had termed the political dimension in university governance as 'micropolitics' which made it into the title of this study before I knew about Ball's concept.

Moreover, conceiving students as citizens helps to steer clear of oversimplifications and prevents limitations on how we theoretically and practically approach this multi-faceted group. Discourses emerging from new public management, which describe students as 'consumer or customer or purchaser' (Silver & Silver, 1997, p. 168) do not give credit to the extent of agency or power that students may possess. By focusing on students as consumers, these discourses exclude the political dimension, and thus impede the application of concepts such as political culture, social movements and practices of resistance. Finally, if one of higher education's main purposes is the 'preparation for life as active citizens in a society' (Bergan, 2004, p. 24) and if 'education can influence so profoundly the thought and character of individuals and of nations' (Lester Smith, 1965, p. 17), describing one of its main stakeholder groups with consumerist rhetoric would neglect its broader social, ethical and political implications.

Student movements in the 1960's and their effect on university governance

This section will focus on the late 1960's and early 1970's – a period of substantial public student activism and widespread student movements in which students' engagement and participation attracted major scholarly attention. Taking this period into account is important not only because of its evident abundance of research, but also because it brought about the essential impulses for institutionalising students' participation in university communication.

Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich's study (1969) provides a broad overview of the student uprisings in the United States as well as in Western Europe, while Halsey and Marks (1968) illustrate the development of British student politics from the 1930's and observe a growing radicalisation in the late 1960's. In a detailed quantitative study, Blackstone et al. (1970) explore the background and events of the 'first major student strike in the history of British universities' (p. 173) – the 1967 student protests at the London School of Economics and Political Science. These were initially sparked by the appointment of a new LSE director, but soon focused on more general issues surrounding the perceived lack of student participation in university committees. The situation in Germany is illustrated by Jeziorowski (1968) who emphasizes the sudden social change from allegedly passive students whose political apathy and ignorance had been criticized by journalists, politicians and scholars to agitated, critical and active debaters and protesters with diverse backgrounds and aims, who make use of different forms of protests from 'teach-ins' to 'happenings' (p. 22 f.). He reports that several problems in higher education (e.g. overcrowded mass universities and authoritarian structures) were the starting point for student unrests in Germany and were later replaced by

broader political concerns such as the Vietnam War or the 'undemocratic democracy' (p. 41) prevalent in post Second World War West Germany.

Although the nature of the effects and legacy of these 'angry' and 'activist' (Levine & Hirsch, 1991, p. 119) student movements is highly debated (Lehousse, 2008), they brought to the fore a number of questions and issues surrounding higher education, universities, students and their role in society, which still resonate today. Ferns emphasises the 'increasing importance' of universities for society (1967, p. 276) and criticizes the trend of outside interference from political actors. In a similar vein, demands are voiced that 'the object of university reform should be a more sensible relationship between universities and society as a whole' ("Student politics," 1967, p. 225). The concepts 'student power', 'student voice' and 'student participation' appear in higher education discourses and are contested in numerous struggles about who should have a say in which matter of university governance and to what degree students should be involved, for example in statements such as the following:

> Students have rights which should be asserted: not to govern or share in the government of learned institutions, but to be consulted, to be told "why" as well as "how", and to be provided with conditions in which they can work effectively and syllabuses broad enough in which to study freely. ("Student politics," 1967, p. 232)

For Hodgkinson (1971), the student movements in the 1960's are the essential starting point for the rapid increase in students' participation in university governance, which has resulted in a regular and institutionalized involvement of students in different bodies of university governance since then. This change is summarized by Erlich and Tropman, who state that 'in most universities the fundamentally modest request for participation in relevant decision-making bodies was not heard, was not acknowledged until it was delivered so loudly and clearly that it could not be avoided' (1969, p. 65). Bergan (n.d.) reminds us that 'we are used to taking student representation and student participation so much for granted that it is easy to forget that in most European countries, this representation in its current form is little more than a generation old.'

Institutionalized student participation today

Various scholars (Levine & Cureton, 1998; Oberndörfer, 1996; Ostrander, 2004) today view students' participation as essential for achieving social advancement. According to Altbach 'student political involvement has dramatic implications for higher education' (1991, p. 117), and is therefore of relevance not 'only when they are rioting' (p. 118). In a similar vein, Cook-Sather (2002) posits that student's participation in issues surrounding education brings about positive change in this sector. Accordingly, contemporary higher education legislation in many countries requires student participation in different decision-making bodies at

university: Persson's survey of student participation in higher education governance in Europe indicates that most European countries have legal frameworks ensuring students' participation in higher education on an institutional level (2004, p. 35). In the German Framework Act for Higher Education (Hochschulrahmengesetz, § 37), students constitute one of four participant groups (in addition to teaching staff, academic staff and other staff) which must be involved in decision-making processes at university. In the UK, 'the representation of staff and students on the governing body is important in all [higher education] institutions' and providing 'for membership of the governing body by representatives of the [...] students' (Committee of University Chairs, 2009, p. 26) is a crucial precondition for achieving it.

Today's formalization of student involvement in university governance correlates with a more general shift of governance towards more participatory approaches (Blomgren Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005) taking place in the last decades. Bryson highlights the importance of taking into account the opinions of relevant stakeholders in political decision-making processes, a stakeholder being 'any person group or organization that can place a claim on the organization's attention, resources, or output, or is affected by that output' (2004, p. 22). He states that a lack of attention to information and concerns expressed by stakeholders is likely to lead to several problems including poor organizational performance, a decrease in problem-solving abilities and a lack of organizational legitimacy. Chess and Purcell (1999) differentiate between two ways of assessing the quality of public participation in processes of governance: On the one hand, outcome-centred approaches in which the results of the participatory processes are central and on the other hand process-oriented assessments in which the nature of the participatory process determines the quality of governance; 'issues such as fairness, information exchange, group process, and procedures' (p. 2686) are central to the latter approach.

Contemporary research on students' participation in university governance

In light of the widespread institutionalisation of students' participation in university governance and the increased scholarly focus on participatory governance in various public sectors (especially in public service, risk management, environmental protection and the health sector), it is surprising that although there is a considerable amount of available research on students' political attitudes and students' volunteer activities, e.g. community service (Cone, Cooper, & Hollander, 2001; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Levine & Hirsch, 1991; Thornton & Jaeger, 2007), a relative lack of research exists on students' involvement in university governance.

A few publications cover the importance of allowing students to participate in higher education governance. Menon (2003) demands more co-determination for students in defining the goals of higher education, Planas et al. (2013) conducted fieldwork at a Spanish university and interviewed students as well as teaching staff regarding their opinion on student participation and on how to increase participation. They posit that in order to improve students' participation in university governance, universities should put more emphasis on informing the students about their system of governance. They should make more efforts to promote participation, decentralize decision-making and distribute more power to the students. White (2007) criticizes the increasingly prevalent notion of students as 'customers' for generating an idea of students as passive receivers of educational services and proposes to think of students as 'clients' in order to grant them more agency and room for engagement in the educational process. Lizzio, Wilson, and Hadaway (2007) surveyed more than 300 university students on their notion of a fair learning environment. They conclude that students attach great importance to fair, interpersonal treatment as opposed to existing formal structures of justice – being consulted, being allowed to participate and to 'have a say' (p. 201) in matters that concern them is essential for attaining a feeling of a 'just' learning environment.

However, there is an extremely limited number of studies concerned with how students concretely behave when they are involved in university governance: With the goal of exploring 'student involvement in practice' (1999, p. 9), Zuo and Ratsoy (1999) conducted a comprehensive study on participants in student government at the University of Alberta based on the results of semi-structured interviews with students, administrators and academic staff. They draw a positive conclusion about students' engagement by stating that it is well-organized and effective and that 'students are capable of administering their own affairs, satisfying the needs of their members, and protecting their members' interests' (p. 21). In a series of interviews, Lizzio & Wilson (2009) shed light on how students experience their participation in governance and explore issues such as students' motivation, their role conception, their assessment of how effective they feel in their offices, how they relate to their student body, the major issues they try to bring forward and students' perceived extent of learning and personal development. They find that 'student representatives require a complex set of skills and attitudes to effectively manage their environment and tasks' (p. 82) and point out that students experienced role stress and strain – phenomena which are usually found in paid organizational occupations.

Some authors mention students' increasing practice of media utilization to get their message across (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 150; Oberndörfer, 1996, p. 409), but an extensive literature review of students' participation in university governance suggests that in the time

after the 1970's, no studies were published which investigate how students use communication to fulfil their representative role as well as which communication strategies and repertoires they employ. This is a surprising lack of research, especially when considering that students' position as rather weak stakeholders and status group in a governance system is linked to key questions in communication research: How can communication processes foster 'fair' decision-making processes? Under which circumstances does information exchange work effectively? Who gets access to which information?

Theoretical approaches to students' communication in university governance

The rich amount of research covering students' communication at universities in the late 1960's and early 1970's is in stark contrast to the lack of contemporary research on this topic and leads to the question how students' communication can be conceptualized today. The theoretical frameworks illustrated in this section are situated on different levels of abstraction and seek to comprise a comprehensive framework which will serve as the theoretical basis of this study and will be employed to inform its methodology and analysis.

Theoretical frameworks such as proceduralist notions of deliberation (Habermas, 1994; James, 2004) or Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism (1999) provide useful starting points for conceptualizing students' communication processes and participation in decision-making. Habermas' (1994) normative approach to communication processes posits that ideal communication should seek to provide space for public deliberation, that it is not influenced by social hierarchies and that it fosters rational argument, which eventually leads to a consensus amongst the participants. In contrast to this stance, Mouffe (1999) subsumes power and conflict under term 'the political' and argues that these dimensions are so inherent to society that the focus should be on establishing formal ways or institutions for channelling conflict instead of preventing it. On a meta-level, these two perspectives help to classify different forms of deliberation, collaboration and conflict which can be observed at universities.

Focussing on structure and environment, universities can be conceptualized as political systems. This opens up space to apply concepts of political or civic culture (Sabetti, 2009) that incorporate different issues crucial to field research in communication: How does political culture influence, determine or regulate communication practices? Which communication processes might lead to changes in the prevalent political culture, which communication processes support or challenge the prevalent political culture?

As previously mentioned, universities can also be described in a more organizational or policy-oriented fashion: as systems of governance which are continuously involved in decision-making processes that are, amongst others, influenced by organizational and behavioural factors. Pope's (2004) study on the role of faculty trust in higher education governance, for example, suggests that communication processes which facilitate a high 'level of inclusiveness' (p. 80) are beneficial for successful governance. Thus, in addition to political culture, students' engagement in university governance is also strongly influenced by phenomena relating to organizational behaviour.

Looking more closely on students' potential for resistance, political engagement and protest, concepts derived from social movement research offer crucial insights about the political opportunity structure, that is, how political environments encourage individuals to carry out collective action by influencing how they assess their potential success (Tarrow, 2011), the discursive opportunity structure or how discourses and ideas can mobilize support (McCammon, 2013) and about activist logics (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) related to specific forms of protest. This allows for a theoretical classification of students' communication practices and the logics behind their activities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The overarching research question of this study is: 'Which communication repertoires do student representatives in Germany and the United Kingdom employ in order to fulfil their representative roles in university governance and to overcome obstacles in their work?'

Communication repertoire in this research project is investigated along three lines: functions of communication ('which purpose do students attempt to fulfil using communication?'), communication channels ('which media and other channels do students use to communicate?') and underlying communication strategies ('which strategic approaches do students take in order to use communication to their advantage?').

Taking into account that the current state of literature does not provide adequate information about students' political situation and working conditions at university in both countries, the goal of this study is to not only focus on students' communication practices but also to locate students within the micropolitical framework of university governance. It seeks to observe the links between student representatives, the university as their work environment and the communication repertoires which they develop within this framework.

With the intention of closing the link between students' political situation and their communication practices, the study also tries to provide an overview of the main challenges affecting students' communication repertoire.

As previously illustrated, there is a general lack of research on students' engagement in university governance, a particular academic void concerning the issue of students' communication practices in formal representative offices. This study aims to be a first step towards closing this research gap and will thus contribute to a broader understanding of phenomena in students' communication and participation in university governance.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

For this study, the stated research questions were operationalised through the use of qualitative interviews in the form of loosely semi-structured individual interviews. Twelve interviews were conducted at four universities, two in the UK and two in Germany respectively, with the length of the interview ranging from 23 minutes to 113 minutes. The findings of these interviews were coded using software and a thematic analysis was conducted.

Interviewing as a method provides 'qualitative, descriptive, in-depth' (Pickard, 2007, p. 172) knowledge and an insight into 'experiences, processes, [and] behaviours' (Rowley, 2012, p. 261). This makes it an appropriate methodology for this study as it seeks to understand a particular practice (Longhofer, Floersch, & Hoy, 2012), namely students' communication which is inextricably tied to their experiences and behaviours in university governance as well as to the processes that they become a part of. Furthermore, interviews do not only help to provide knowledge about these individual occurrences, they also provide information about how the students are situated in their respective context or environment (Gaskell, 2000, p. 39; Kvale, 1994, p. 165). This becomes specifically important when students' role in university hierarchies is being taken into account. Moreover, interviewing can also be applied as a way to gain a better insight into the individual perspectives and motivations that drive the respondents' actions (Hannabuss, 1996, p. 23; Lindlof, 1995, p. 167). Thus, interviewing serves a threefold purpose in this study: it facilitates research on how students communicate, in which context this happens and what they intend by doing it.

In addition to those three purposes, interviewing can also fulfil a comparative function. Through conducting a research interview series, a broad range of viewpoints is collected with the goal 'to maximize the opportunity to understand the different positions taken by

members of the social milieu' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 41). On the one hand, this generates a comprehensive account of students' communication in university politics and highlights similarities between the interviewees – on the other hand, it also enables a comparison of diverging attitudes and opinions. In order to assess students' communication repertoire, both approaches are needed: Parallels between the respondents indicate probable communication norms and standards whereas differences emphasize individual phenomena.

While students' communication repertoires and strategies in university governance are a field which is characterized by a research deficit, interviewing is a methodology particularly suitable for exploring a previously unknown field of research and obtaining a first overview and orientation in the field: Berger (2011, p. 138) states that interviewing yields information which could not have been obtained any other way and emphasizes that it can generate 'unexpected information that other forms of research might not discover' (1998, p. 57). Especially when conducting research on a relatively unknown field, it is important that the research method provides enough space for surprising findings and does not predetermine or restrict the scope of possible findings.

However, interviewing also has methodological weaknesses which have to be considered and minimised as far as possible in order to yield relevant and reliable findings: First, qualitative interviewing produces a vast amount of information (Gaskell, 2000, p. 43; Southall, 2009, p. 325). Analysing this abundance of data is therefore a complex and time-consuming process (Hannabuss, 1996, pp. 27–29). This problem can be mitigated by keeping the number of interviews conducted and analysed on a manageable level as well as by employing 'data management' (Southall, 2009, p. 325), rigorous coding and thematic analysis in order to properly organise and analyse the material resulting from the interviews.

Second, there is a debate about the quality and truthfulness of findings resulting from interview data (Kvale, 1994) which might have negative implications for research based on qualitative interviewing. One point of criticism is that qualitative interviews do not provide 'hard, quantified facts' (p. 163) and thus it is not possible to generate figures and generalizations that allow drawing conclusions about the overall population from which the interviewee sample was drawn (Rowley, 2012, pp. 261–262). From an epistemological perspective, Holstein and Gubrium (1997) illustrate that there are two diverging concepts of interviewing: The 'vessels of answers' (p. 116) approach sees the role of interviewing in a more traditional way as bringing already existing, objective and 'real' facts or feelings within the respondents to the surface. In the 'active interview' approach, on the other hand, interviewing takes on a social constructivist dynamic as it is 'a concerted project for producing meaning' (p. 121) between interviewer and interviewee. This leads to questions

regarding the results of this research, for example, whether the information the students provided is reliable and valid or whether the actual fact of being interviewed influenced students' answers. Being aware of the limitations of interviewing as a research method, carefully assessing the nature and validity of interview findings and preventing incorrect generalisations and quantifications will be used in this dissertation as means to counteract these weaknesses.

The alternative method for inquiry into the topic of students' communication practices was surveying. As it is based on questionnaires which yield more focussed and manageable data, it can take into account answers from a significantly higher number of people. Moreover, 'numbers hold a preeminent status in our scientific culture' (Stone, 2012, p. 183), and thus surveys' findings are often seen as more valid and are less contested than results from qualitative studies – especially, because they generate conclusions which are considered generalizable as long as the sampling method complies with scientific standards.

However, for several reasons surveying was rejected as method in this study: Qualitative interviewing is a better method for an exploration into a research void, because surveying relies on a pre-existing stock of information about the field to create an adequate questionnaire. Furthermore, questionnaires by nature heavily limit the scope of possible answers and findings. Directly asking people about their experiences, behaviours and motivations provides a deeper insight into these topics than a survey could, as the interviewer can react flexibly to the respondents' reactions and is free to follow new interesting tracks and to probe in case there are unclear aspects. Thus, in this research the advantages of qualitative interviewing as a method overweigh its disadvantages. Yet, in future studies a mixed-method approach in which qualitative interviewing and surveying complement each other is advisable. In that case, this dissertation could be used as a basis for drafting the questionnaire.

Sampling

The criterion for selecting interviewees was that respondents had been officially elected by students into offices that represent student interests at university. This excludes student representatives who were appointed in more informal or non-elective processes in order to focus on students who act in formalized, official and often legally responsible functions.

Participants were selected on the basis of whether they match this criterion, also called 'purposive sampling' (Bryman, 2008, p. 458; Rowley, 2012, p. 264). They were either addressed by sending a general e-mail to mailing lists of student governments or by contacting students working in university governance individually via e-mail. For this study,

twelve students from two universities in Germany and two universities in the United Kingdom (six students from each country) were interviewed. Table 1 (p. 16) shows an overview of the interviews. The reasons for conducting interviews in two different countries are that it goes beyond national characteristics and thus allows for first careful considerations concerning a more general repertoire of students' communication. On the other hand, the systems of university governance in those countries differ to a great extent – concerning their history, their structure, their culture and their funding. Therefore, cross-country research can help us to gain more understanding of how students' communication repertoire adapts to different backgrounds and situational contexts.

Table 1: Overview of interviews

Interview type	Country	Office
Individual	GER	Student representative
Individual	GER	Student representative & Faculty Board
Individual	GER	Student representative
Individual	GER	Student representative & Faculty Board
Individual	UK	Student representative & Court
Individual	UK	Court
Individual	UK	Head of Student Union
Individual	UK	Officer in Student Union
Individual	UK	Officer in Student Union
Individual	UK	Officer in Student Union
Individual	GER	Speaker of Student Representative Boards' Conference
2 participants	GER	Chairs of General Students' Assembly

It is important to note that there is a 'discipline-bias' in the sample drawn – of the twelve participants, nine people studied disciplines within the humanities, while only three people had a science background. As the universities from which the sample was drawn were two general universities, one university specialising in humanities and one university specialising in science, it is unlikely that this bias occurred based on the university sample. Rather it has been suggested by several interviewees that students studying humanities would be more likely to engage in offices at university governance – however, this would have to be scrutinized by a quantitative study.

Interview form

The interviews were conceptualised as individual face-to-face interviews instead of group interviews. This decision was based on several factors: individual interviews allow the interviewer to maintain confidentiality and to better deal with 'sensitive data' (Bahn & Weatherill, 2012) that was likely to emerge as the interviews touched problems within university administration. As the respondent 'has center stage' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 46) in individual interviews, they also yield more in-depth information. From a practical point of view, individual interviews are more flexible to schedule and easier to conduct than group interviews which require intensive pre-planning. As shown in table 1 (cf. p. 15), the last interview was conducted with two respondents. Reason for this was that in this case, one official office was represented by two people, a relatively rare case of dual leadership.

The interviews were designed in a semi-structural form, because it allows the interviewer to flexibly expand on interesting topics and cues and to probe in case of uncertainty, so that an issue as complex as communication practices can be fully explored (Hannabuss, 1996, p. 24). Covering the themes set by the topic guide creates a common ground which enables a comparing and contrasting of the individual interviews.

Topic guide

The aim during the creation of the topic guide was to operationalize the research question in all its possible facets. Accordingly, five main dimensions were established: 1) Students' offices and roles in university governance, 2) students' communication practices and strategies as well as the communication channels they use, 3) challenges experienced by students in their work, 4) students' attitudes and preferences relating to communication practices, 5) students' know-how and learning processes. In order to enable a more free flow of the interview while still covering the whole range of topics, the topic guide was designed in a thematic structure (rather than in a chronological structure).

Piloting and interview process

Prior to this study, a pilot of four interviews was conducted in order to test the research question, the topic guide and the method employed. As a result of the pilot study, the topic guide was restructured according to themes and the research question was adjusted to the issues often mentioned in the interviews. Moreover, the pilot emphasized the crucial importance of anonymising the interviews, as some of the respondents brought forward sensitive issues such as legal irregularities in governance processes.

In order to establish rapport (Berger, 1998, p. 60; Southall, 2009, p. 323) and encourage the respondents to feel at ease, ten minutes before the actual interview began were used to engage in small talk with the respondents. Afterwards, the themes defined in the topic guide were covered by adapting their order to the individual course of the interview. Usually the length of interviews ranged between 25-45 minutes, however, two interviews were significantly longer than one hour.

Analysis

The transcription of the interviews was followed by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS); the software employed was NVivo 10. Weitzman reminds us that 'software can provide tools to help you analyse qualitative data, but it cannot do the analysis for you' (2000, p. 805). However, he adds that it is suited for coding and data linking and is therefore able to bring together content from different sources. In a similar vein, Ezzy states that software enables the search for patterns in qualitative data, but also describes the limits of CAQDAS by stressing that the 'identification of meaningful categories, and relationships between these categories can be done only by the researcher' (2002, p. 112). While keeping this limitation in mind, software for qualitative analysis is a tool suitable for working through an extensive body of transcripts and systematically listing and comparing passages, which has proven useful in working on the high amount of data found in the interviews for this study.

The five main thematic dimensions used in the topic guide turned out too broad to be the basis for a coding scheme. In accordance with the exploratory (or: 'content-driven') approach taken in this study and the 'nonprobabilistic sample' of respondents (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, pp. 7–8), a detailed coding scheme was designed *a posteriori* and modified and improved along with reading and re-reading and progressing through the different transcripts. The aim of the open coding process was 'identifying themes or concepts' (Ezzy, 2002, p. 86) coming up in the interviews and thus conducting a thematic analysis.

ANALYSIS

The following analysis first sets out to provide an overview of the context which student representatives in Germany and the United Kingdom are working in: It elaborates on the overall working conditions of students, summarizes the main responsibilities and activities of student representatives and describes their scope of influence in the micropolitical system of university governance. Afterwards, an overview of students' communication repertoire is developed which takes into account the main purposes of communication that respondents saw in their work, their use of different communication channels and the communication strategies underlying these choices. As students often elaborated on obstacles which impacted the communication repertoire they employed, the analysis will close with a discussion of the main difficulties impacting students' communication in university governance.

Working conditions of students in university governance positions

As shown in table 1 (p. 16), for this study students from a wide range of offices on different levels of the universities' governance systems were interviewed. It is important to note that many of these offices differ substantially in terms of time expenditure as well as in terms of financial compensation or wages. Some students were members of boards which only met three times per year, others stated their roles, office hours, obligatory meetings and assemblies required them to invest several hours per week. In both countries, the highest amount of weekly time expenditure was reported by students in high-level university-wide functions who indicated their weekly amount of work would be roughly equivalent to that of a 30-40 hour fulltime job. Students working in representative functions on course programme or department level as well as students having more of an advisory office (e.g. Court) did not receive remuneration for these activities, whereas the highest representative offices usually entailed financial compensation. On Kitschelt and Rehm's scale of political participation intensity (2008, p. 447), these cases of student representatives' involvement correspond to the two categories indicating highest levels of participation.

Amongst students in high-profile positions, there are crucial differences between their situation in the UK and Germany. Within UK's university governance framework, most of the interviewees in high-level positions work as 'sabbatical officers' which allows them to pause their studies for one to two years and entitles them to a wage of usually more than £ 1000. Moreover, they receive the support of a staffed office assisting them. On the contrary, students' involvement in university governance in Germany is usually seen as volunteer work and students are expected to continue studying while at the same time working in these

representative roles. This double workload creates what one respondent referred to as 'precarious working conditions' – especially given the low expense allowance that they receive, which ranges from £ 170 to £ 580, and considering the fact that none of the German respondents had access to office staff assisting them in their work.

Student representatives' responsibilities and activities

The interviewees saw their main responsibility in representing student interests vis-à-vis department, faculty, university and actors outside of university. The following table illustrates which group the respondents aim to represent depending on the respective office they hold.

Table 2: Representation and offices

Group to be represented	Title of office
Representing a course programme	Student Representative (UK)
Representing a department or faculty	Student Representative (UK/GER), Student Representative in Faculty Board (GER)
Representing all Student Representative Boards at university	Speaker of Student Representative Boards' Conference (GER)
Representing the whole student body	Court (UK), Head of Student Union (UK), Officer in Student Union (UK), Chair of General Students' Assembly (GER)

Thus, participants represented student groups ranging from around 30 students at course programme level or around 800 students at faculty level up to around 40,000 students at university level. However, how respondents felt and chose to represent students' interests varied greatly: Some participants reported to choose freely which stance they wanted to take in their representative office, e.g. by saying

> And so sometimes I'm at a complete loss as to what to do and think by myself 'Well, but who am I representing here? Am I representing myself or am I representing the students?' (Respondent 4, 2013)

In contrast to this, another interviewee explained that she was under an imperative mandate in which she was bound to exclusively represent standpoints she was authorized to beforehand by the group she represented.

It is important to note that the officially elected offices within university governance for many of the respondents brought with them an additional range of responsibilities, such as sitting

on boards and committees. In many cases, they also reported that once they started to be engaged in university governance, one office led to other offices and responsibilities – e.g. working in a student representative board and afterwards being elected as student representative sitting on the faculty board or participating in an appointment committee. Indeed, many of the interviewees held more than two offices.

Apart from the overall representative function that students working in university governance fulfil, their responsibilities are manifold and usually depend on their individual focus and engagement:

> It's kind of strange that the job is kind of... it is what you make of it. So there's some things you're required to go to, different things you're required to do [...] but you also have a lot of your own say in what you want to do. (Respondent 10, 2013)

In some cases, students had been assigned specific topics to work on, e.g. student welfare or education. The table below lists different fields and responsibilities that respondents reported to be involved in.

Table 3: Range of responsibilities

Representation	Representing students' interests
	Legal representation of students in court proceedings
	Social networking (with stakeholders at university and outside)
	PR and press-related work
	Collecting feedback from students
Finances	Allocating funding to students' institutions and projects
	Managing finances and accounting
Event planning	Organising social events (parties, freshmen events)
	Organising career events
	Organising academic events (panel discussions)
Advice	Supply and multiplication of relevant information to students
	Academic advice for students
	Financial advice for students
	Legal advice for students
	Political/strategic advice for students
	Counselling

As shown in table 3, student representative offices sometimes also involve the task of managing allocated funding. Starting with around £100 on course programme level, or around £1000 on department or faculty level, students working in representative offices on university level in some cases were working with sums of several million pounds.

Some participants said they were legally liable for the actions and statements of the groups or representative bodies they represented as well as for how money matters in those organisations were handled and accounted for.

Students' disadvantage and agency

When asking the interviewees about whether they had agency and power in their offices, they highlighted the structural disadvantage of student voices in university governance:

> Especially when you have a situation of conflict between students and professors, the professor really has the higher leverage and you have lower leverage, because you actually don't have any means to do something. (Respondent 2, 2013)

Overall, respondents mentioned two main reasons for the inequality between students and other stakeholder groups at university: first, the underrepresentation of students, who almost always comprise a minority in decision-making bodies and thus often are not able to affect the outcome of decision-making processes with their number of votes.

> Of course there are hierarchical structures, it goes without saying. For example, us being only allowed to have three representatives in the Faculty Board, because the professors must have the majority of the votes. (Respondent 3, 2013)

> We favour a quarter representative system because we think that students [...] are underrepresented, as they are the largest stakeholder group at university. Therefore, we find that at least a system with quarter representation would be appropriate, which means that each status group would have a quarter of the seats. Then we could have more impact. (Respondent 12, 2013)

Second, some illustrated the circumstance that the university's directorate had the final say in all matters and thus the power to revoke decisions taken by any decision-making body in which students were involved as a stakeholder group.

Thus, from a structural perspective, university governance cannot be conceptualized as a space in which a Habermasian public deliberation model (1994) without social hierarchies is upheld. In reference to Mouffe (1999), it can rather be defined as an institutional framework with inherent conflicts, hierarchies and power structures.

When comparing students' agency in Germany and the United Kingdom, it seems that student representatives in Germany were more often entitled to cast a vote on many decisions ranging from finance to personnel matters. However, due to their underrepresentation in the respective governing bodies, many stated that their low number of votes would only make a difference in cases where there was no agreement amongst the other stakeholder groups. In contrast to that, students' roles in UK university governance were reported to be more of advisory nature and respondents rarely expressed to have a vote in decision-making processes.

Many respondents differentiated between students' structural disadvantage and the actual agency they felt being able to exert. One participant for example contrasted the notion of active decision-making with influencing and raising awareness:

> I would say we are actually just… powerless. It's more like an influential thing, so…you know you don't actually have any power, but you can influence, because the core decision-makers in the school they're in the meeting and we have access to them. (Respondent 9, 2013)

Taking into account the experience that formal processes and legal frameworks of university governance hindered them to successfully push forward issues and demands crucial to students' interest and welfare, many respondents stated that they rely on other means to reach their goals.

> Q: Do you have power […]?
>
> – I would say yes and no. As student representatives we can create impetuses: by being loud, especially by getting on people's nerves, by always pointing out problems, by filing official complaints or by – as happened in one case – representing students in court proceedings against the university. So these are things that we can do. On the other hand, one can also see in the official framework – such as e.g. in the Senate – that students only have very few voices. […] In the Senate there are only four student members, that is very little. (Respondent 12, 2013).

An important point for many of the interviewees was the difference between formal and informal ways of decision-making. For example, one participant explained the importance of informal negotiation before a draft officially enters the process of being sent through all the formal 'rubber-stamping bodies' of university administration:

> […] by the time it [the draft] goes through Senate it's been through all these advisory committees. So we have the ability to kind of…like get input and kind of change things before they go to these bodies, because if a paper goes to these bodies it's basically going to get through. They just rubberstamp, which is why I say that it's more important to have the one-to-one meetings way […] to try and influence them and change something there rather than in a public forum (Respondent 6, 2013).

Another interviewee stated that socializing and establishing a reputation as a constructive negotiating partner serve as ways to counter legal and factual disadvantage:

> From a legal perspective, we are always disadvantaged. From a factual perspective, too. We have the advantage […] that we have been working in this office for a long time and that people know us. And that they realize 'oh, it's actually possible to discuss issues with them.' It goes without saying that we [and them] represent different interests, have different opinions and also want to realize [different] goals. But the university administration and also the other boards have made the experience […] that it is still possible to constructively discuss issues with us. […] And then you do a lot under the quiet and you do some wheeling and dealing and […] you are getting along well and greet each other. A lot of it is socializing. (Respondent 11, 2013)

Importance of communication and main functions of communication

Without exception, all the interviewees saw communication as crucial means to accomplish their goal to represent student interests and foster decision-making which takes into account students' interests:

> Communication is the only channel we have to try to bring across the change we want to see. It's influence and how do you influence? You influence through communicating with both the decision-makers but also to increase your case by communicating with students to build up support. (Respondent 9, 2013)

> Well, the only possibility to solve problems or to make things happen at all is to talk to people and to convince them or to beg them to do something for you, because…yes, because you just really have almost no…real leverage that you could make use of. (Respondent 2, 2013)

One respondent classified three categories of people that he wanted to reach with means of communication: students at university, non-student stakeholders at university, people outside of university. After extrapolating from students' explanations as to why they regarded communication as important means to fulfil their representative office, four main functions of communication could be identified:

Raising awareness

One of the most commonly mentioned motives for communication was raising awareness for students' issues and sensitizing other stakeholder groups to students' perspectives:

> I see it as a platform. So, on the one hand the meetings are full of […] people who want to hear what you're saying […]. So it's your responsibility to get up and have the balls to say something and hope that people will listen. And generally they do. (Respondent 5, 2013)

While speaking about students' reaction against the abolishment of a course programme, one respondent elaborated on the motives for publishing an article in a small local newspaper:

> Everyone knew that the article could not turn it around. It was more about […] being a call for solidarity and a call for finally doing something about it. Yes, sending a strong signal was more important. (Respondent 4, 2013)

Legitimation and documentation of achievements

The problem of students' apathy was expressed in many interviews: Respondents regarded low election turnouts as well as students' widespread ignorance concerning the role and efforts of student representatives as having a negative influence on the legitimacy of their position and involvement:

> […] and he said that… basically students didn't think the Union was transparent, students didn't think the Union put information out there, students didn't think that the Union was

> representing them and I said 'But, hold on – we put all the information that we have on our website, we're very transparent about everything...' (Respondent 6, 2013)

Thus, communication is used as a means to justify their official function and provide evidence for their work to the students.

> And when you look at how many hours of volunteer work we invest for all of those processes, it is of course frustrating when the others have the impression that we are not doing anything. That's why we communicate. (Respondent 3, 2013)

Another interviewee explained how she saw communication not only as a means to publicize student representatives' projects to the student body, but also to demonstrate to university staff that the student union responsibly allocates the funding it was given.

Maintaining beneficial reciprocal relationships with other stakeholders

Although some interview quotes might suggest an antagonistic relationship between student representatives and other stakeholder group, most interviewees were generally satisfied with the quality of their relationships to members of academic and administrative staff.

> Taking into account the sometimes diverging interests that exist from the beginning, I would say we are quite lucky with our professors. Most of them are open to students' concerns – and they also support us [...] with advice and practical support. (Respondent 2, 2013)

> The [...] Union here works extremely closely together [with the university] – like it's abnormally close, but it's brilliant, because we actually might get stuff done. So – we're not fighting with our university... we very very very very rarely disagree. (Respondent 5, 2013)

Especially in regard to their lack of formal decision-making power, interviewees found their relationships to other stakeholders to be an important precondition for reaching their goals and for receiving support or relevant (semi-) confidential information.

> Are there any other reasons or purposes why communication is important for working in committees?

> – Yes, totally. This is the other point: The communication with the professors, with the academic staff members who sit on the faculty board. So there you always have to be careful to not lose the connection, to always stay in contact, otherwise you just lose this relationship. (Respondent 4, 2013)

Communication practices for fostering positive reciprocal relationships with stakeholders varied amongst the respondents. Student representatives from all levels in university governance highlighted the importance of informal meetings in which they were able to have an honest conversation with stakeholders. Amongst high-level student representatives, respondents from the UK mentioned dinner meetings and similar events where they met with stakeholders. Although this was not common practice amongst high-level student representatives in Germany, one of the student representatives explained how she sent baked goods to people who had done her a favour.

Exerting pressure

Many respondents expressed a dislike for exerting direct pressure in order to achieve their goals, because they felt it could destroy harmonious working relationships between them and staff members. However, there seemed to be a tendency to resort to means which exert pressure in case the overall situation could not be changed by alternative strategies. Pressure was usually created through publicizing issues and campaigning:

> And then being separate to the school and then having this campaign which they try and kind of pressure the school with. So often when you go along to these meetings you sit there, you might get a say on something, but it doesn't really change something, you're kind of there just symbolically. Whereas actually when you have these campaigns [...] it provides something that we can kind of challenge the school with. (Respondent 10, 2013)

One interviewee illustrated how she tapped into the potential of using publicity as a measure for gaining political leverage

> So, generally, we can always achieve something. Just being outvoted doesn't mean anything, right? We at least have the bargaining tool 'We are going to the press'. The universities are broke, we are all in debt. [...] All that remains for them is their reputation. If you would damage this by some kind of press release...wow, recently they do react so quickly to that. (Respondent 11, 2013)

Communication channels

The interviews indicate that students use a broad variety of communication channels or media to communicate. As shown in the following table, communication channels used by student representatives can be grouped into 6 categories.

Table 4: Communication channels

Face-to-face	Meetings (formal, informal)
	Assemblies
	Office hours
	Courses/seminars
Face-to-face mobilisation	Protests/demonstrations
Press	In-house (e.g. student newspaper, student radio)
	Outside of university
Non-press print products	Letters
	Petitions
New media	E-Mails
	Homepages/websites
	Social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, forums)
	Closed platforms (E-learning platforms, file hosting services)
	Online surveys
Miscellaneous	Bucket for students' feedback and ideas

Respondents often explained how they tried to tailor their use of communication channels to the respective audience that they want to reach. Two respondents from different universities reported how they conducted surveys amongst their students as to what media channel they would prefer for receiving different kinds of information. After a statistical evaluation, the findings were used to improve communication strategies and foster more effective information distribution.

Face-to-face communication was often characterized as being the most effective or influential way to relate to students as well as academic or administrative stakeholders:

> The biggest problem is communicating to the students, which is depending on [...] having one representative in each year [...] who knows the people in person and talks to them in person. This is how it de facto works. If you don't have a representative in a specific year, then reaching out to the people is very difficult.

> Clearly face-to-face [is more important]. In personal talks you can always find out things. Especially professors…some really enjoy talking about such topics.

(Respondent 3, 2013)

However, amongst the interviewees there was a tendency to refer to new media as most important means to connect with the student body as a whole and to achieve a more widespread distribution of messages: 'Apart from that everything is distributed via digital media, if you want to reach the masses' (Respondent 3, 2013).

Taking into account the considerable extent of student uprisings and protests in the 1960's, an interesting observation in the course of the interviews was that the majority of the interviews did not mobilize students for protests and demonstrations. One respondent for example said he felt that protesting would equate to 'losing face' and that it would thus negatively affect student representatives' reputation. Other students did not generally reject the idea of protesting (German respondents being overall more open to protest as communication channel than respondents from the UK) but stated that a demonstration which attracts public attention and thus generates impact required too much preparation and advance planning. Another disadvantage often mentioned was that protests as rather offensive means of communication had the potential to destroy relationships to university stakeholders and could thus negatively affect future negotiations and decision-making processes. However, instead of mobilizing students for protests about issues concerning their respective institution, several interviewees stated that they mobilized students for demonstrations concerning more general issues not directly relating to their institution, such as nationwide education or labour union protests.

Underlying communication strategies

While the last sections already gave an introduction on students' strategic approaches to communication, this section seeks to explicate on three underlying communication strategies often brought up by respondents.

Informal negotiation

Based on students' lack of agency to directly influencing decision-making at university, informal negotiation was the most prevalent communication strategy illustrated by the interviewees. Taking on many forms such as e-mails, phone calls or informal face-to-face meetings before assemblies and committee meetings, students used it to bring their message across, to inform other stakeholders about their plans (as opposed to surprising them in official meetings), and to obtain relevant information or strategic advice from other stakeholders.

Framing the message and logic of numbers

It was the question of how a message was being framed in which the link between of academic disciplines and political behaviour or culture became most clear. Whereas respondents from the humanities often illustrated how they sought to make a case with 'convincing arguments', with adapting the message to the interests of their respective audience or with providing legal evidence for their argument, interviewees from the science-based university held the general stance that statistical evidence for their demands was required in order to identify a problem and bring forward a successful argument: 'Well, if you give them an evidence-based argument with the data for backing it up, it's very hard for them to argue' (Respondent 8, 2013).

Although this opinion was most prevalent among respondents from the science disciplines, some interviewees studying humanities expressed similar standpoints:

> The only possibility that now really exists to influence decisions is public pressure and we need to successfully convey that it is not only us five people [...] who find that somehow crappy or who have a suggestion how it could be better, but that it is 40,000 students. [...] So you always have to highlight 'here is a mass of people.' So mass is somehow the only thing that you can and must convey, because the good argument is usually worthless, because you can't push it and you can be as convincing as you want [...], usually it doesn't convince anyone, when there is not a mass supporting it. (Respondent 13, 2013)

This approach to communication practices correlates with della Porta and Diani's concept 'logic of numbers' (2006, p. 170), in which the mobilization of a high number of participants is used in activism to create high impact.

Tailoring communication to the audience

Many respondents illustrated how they usually attempted to adapt their way of communication to the interests and expectations of their conversation partner or audience. Considering many aspects, for example status and hierarchy, choice of words and language, their conversation partners' personal or academic preferences, they attempted to find the best way to convince. As the following narrative quote shows, adapting communication to the conversation partner serves as an important means to negotiate with other stakeholders:

> Well, it is different to expatiate, because you always need a feeling for the person with which you are talking, right? [...] we for example had a case a short time ago, [...] well, the lecturer is a difficult, very reactant person, [...] on the other hand he is a highly intelligent person, so with him I'd say that it's quite important that you pay attention to...not giving him the feeling that you want to muck about with him. [...] So the students voice their complaints to us and I go to him hoping that he can make the resit exams easier [...] And of course I have no possibility to force him to do it, because we cannot prove a procedural error, so I try to kiss up to him, so that he is good-willed [...] and tell him more or less literally 'I am here to kiss up to you', yes, I do say it a little bit nicer, but I tell him relatively clear how the situation looks like to create a meta-level that you can talk about it together so...in order to clear away the role dynamic. And he reacts very well to that [...]. Then he feels respected and then you can start to talk. And with him it is for example also of importance that you are good at his discipline. Therefore it is always the one who is good at it who is going and talking to him.
>
> Whereas with other people, for example we have a professor [..] who is a very difficult character - I think it is really terrible to work together with him. But with him it is the case that he cannot stand anything like that. I tried that once and then...ehm [...] and he became really, really angry like what would I think what his intention was and I would be completely wrong. [...] So what I want to say is: it is really hard to make a general statement about what constitutes a good strategy, because you always have to do it by taking into consideration the personality. (Respondent 3, 2013)

Obstacles for student representatives

In addition to the aforementioned underrepresentation of students in university governance, during the course of the interview series, several issues negatively affecting student representatives emerged which respondents reported to impact their communication practices.

Confidentiality and maintaining trust

An issue regularly voiced by respondents was maintaining confidentiality in cases in which they received secret or commercially sensitive information from other stakeholders at university. At times being deliberately excluded from relevant information by university stakeholders, many students reported that they rely on confidential information to be able to correctly assess their situation and to anticipate decisions unfavourable to students' interests. In line with Baez' (2002) statement that confidentiality fosters the keeping of secrets which

hinders political change, many saw it as a moral dilemma to decide whether to maintain confidentiality on issues of urgent importance to students in order to not betray the trust of their sources or whether to disseminate the information they received in order to fulfil their responsibility of informing the students.

Negative attitudes towards student representatives

Although the general feeling amongst interviewees was that they usually felt respected by the members of academic and administrative staff, some mentioned instances of being not taken seriously and of student representatives being regarded as incompetent:

> Often it is being said or argued 'Yes, the students don't know what is good for them. We have to force them, because we know what is right and good.' (Respondent 4, 2013)

This, in turn, negatively influenced the effectiveness of student representatives' communication with many stating they had to work hard to establish a reputation as a negotiation partner who is to be respected and taken seriously.

Gender discrimination

Two female respondents experienced sexually discriminating attitudes from others during the course of their work as student representatives.

> That was a gender problem, but that was a long time ago. In these times, when I met the whole directorate, I noticed that I am not being taken seriously. And I had the feeling the reason was that I am a woman. [...] There was something, it never was mentioned explicitly, but I had the feeling and I wanted to test that. I went to them with a suggestion and they directly rejected it – in a very nasty way. So I left, not having expected anything different. Then two weeks later I sent the other spokesperson with the same issue, we just wanted to test it. So he went there, presented it and then the directorate was like 'yes, that is a great idea, a totally great idea, we will immediately implement that!' And then he came back and said 'yes, you were right – what the hell! I didn't even put an effort in it.' (Respondent 11, 2013)

Similar to the obstacle of negative attitudes toward student representatives, the respondents who had experienced gender discrimination explained that they countered this phenomenon by establishing a reputation as a successful negotiator and by demonstrating their ability to perform well in their office. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of having a 'thick skin' to be able to handle discrimination and criticism.

Risk of backlashes and personal attacks

One respondent expressed the concern that his actions as a student representative could have negative consequences for his academic evaluation by members of staff in case he acted strongly against the will of the academic staff. Another interviewee stated that she had experienced students and student representatives from other bodies of university governance

to be the group from which she received verbal abuse, threats, and attacks such as being spitted at. Therefore, student representatives are prone to risks relating to backlashes from different stakeholder groups at university.

CONCLUSIONS

The key finding of this study is that students strategically employ a diverse communication repertoire to represent students' interests and to improve their chances of bringing about changes at university.

The micropolitical framework in which student representatives work is characterized by hierarchies and occasional conflicts of interests and thus can be best described with Mouffe's agonistic pluralism model (1999). In the systems of university governance in Germany and the United Kingdom, students are structurally disadvantaged in terms of decision-making at university, as they usually either have the minority of votes or hold mainly advisory offices despite them being the largest stakeholder group at university.

By conceptualizing students as citizens in the university 'polity' with rights and responsibilities and by relating to repertoires of political activism and social movements, this research project took into account student representatives' potential for agency and political participation. Focusing on communication practices, purposes of communication, usage of different communication channels and communication strategies, the findings of the research shed light on how consciously and strategically students approach the topic communication:

Student representatives used communication as means to overcome their structural disadvantage and to create political leverage outside of formal decision-making procedures. Thus, informal negotiation served a primary role in their communication repertoire in terms of influencing governance processes. Moreover, communication was also aimed at demonstrating engagement and success and thus sustaining legitimacy of student representatives' respective offices.

In order to accomplish these goals, student representatives made use of a wide range of communication channels, the most important categories being face-to-face communication and new media such as e-mail and social networking sites (mainly used for wide distribution of information). Some student representatives conducted surveys to find out which communication channels would be most effective for distributing information. This indicates

that students strategically tailor their use of media towards the respective audience they want to reach. Moreover, students also strategically framed messages for different stakeholders and made use of activist repertoires such as the 'logic of numbers' (della Porta & Diani, 2006) approach.

In addition to their overall political situation, student representatives' communication repertoire was influenced by obstacles influencing the effectiveness and scope of communication repertoires they were able to draw upon: the dilemma between being obliged to confidentiality and publicizing issues relevant for their peers, the problem of negative attitudes towards student representatives taken by other stakeholders at university, gender discrimination and the overall risk of falling victim to backlashes and personal attacks impacted how student representatives communicated in university governance.

The limitations of this study lie in its scope of research: First, considering the fact that it is an exploratory study and the required brevity of this project, an in-depth analysis of links between communication repertoire and activist logics or social movement theories could not be undertaken. Second, although the interviews yielded substantive results and a rich corpus of data, the methodology of interviewing as well as the number of participants do not allow to draw results from this study which are genuinely generalizable.

However, this study provides a useful starting point for further studies into students' participation in university governance, especially concerning their communication repertoires as it has provided a first overview of the main themes and made first careful classifications in this field. In the future, more extensive qualitative studies and quantitative studies are crucial steps to further closing the research gap on students' communication practices – especially, because they can be situated in the broader fields of political communication and political participation.

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