Student Involvement in University Life — Beyond Political Activism and University Governance: a view from Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction

Reflections on the role of the university in recent years have come to represent the views and expectations of multiple stakeholders. Amongst these are governments, funding agencies and the numerous users of the contemporary products of higher education. The questioning, and sometimes clashing, attitudes towards the value that universities deliver in return for the trust and resources that are invested in them have challenged their existing and assumed 'social licence' (Bourdieu, 1988). They have provoked the need to examine the expectations that different stakeholders bring to the forefront as they become involved in higher education.

This article explores some of the factors that influence the attitudes of the students towards their university experience and what motivates them to become involved in their university community, particularly as observed in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These include general student characteristics, broad and embedded expectations formed by the experiences of previous generations, student needs outside the classroom, and to what extent universities seek to understand these factors and their significance for the learning and management processes within the institution. The observations offered here draw upon student involvement theories (developed in the US over the last 30 years), and result from the direct experience of one of the authors as Vice-President of Student Services at the Central European University in Budapest. However, the effort to understand students’ motivation and behaviour goes well beyond regional specifics. It has become a priority for many universities in Europe and throughout the world as they seek to position themselves in an increasingly competitive environment and to answer the demands for accountability and demonstrated student learning outcomes.

Student Characteristics (What Should We Know about our Students?)

In early 2003, an e-mail was circulated within the professional higher education electronic distribution lists. It contained some notions and assumptions commonly held by, or attributed to, young Americans — the generation of students to enter US colleges and universities as the ‘class of 2004’. Some of those lines went as follows:
Most students entering college this fall, the class of 2004, were born in 1982. (1)

The Kennedy tragedy was a plane crash, not an assassination. (5)

We have always been able to receive television signals by direct broadcast satellite. (18)

They have always been able to afford Calvin Klein. (32)

Woodstock is a bird or a reunion, not a cultural touchstone. (37)

They have never referred to Russia or China as ‘the Reds’. (22)

If they vaguely remember the night the Berlin Wall fell, they are probably not sure why it was up in the first place. (48)

‘Spam’ and ‘cookies’ are not necessarily foods. (49)

At first glance, this was the kind of message that one felt tempted to pass on to friends and colleagues in the profession: a humorous reminder to all of us about the generation of students about to enter our higher education institutions in the coming academic year. And yet, behind this list of seemingly joking comments stood another powerful message which should have struck home with our contemporary educators: on the alert, the new higher education students are different from the ones you’ve known so far. Trite or obvious as this may sound, how many of our institutions have considered purposefully, from an organisational and management perspective, the factors of youth socialisation in the late 1990s and their impact on what young people might expect as they become university students? What are the influences of a computerised, automated and Internet-connected society, the speedy access to information and services, the power of advertising, the availability of goods, credit and the resulting instant gratification, and the recent history beyond capitalist-communist division?

Professor Tom McBride and his colleagues from Beloit College in the US, who compiled this list of some 50 items, wanted to emphasise the ways in which the new generation’s — ‘the Millennials’ — experience of modern society was different from that of the older Americans. ‘We assemble this list out of a genuine concern for our first-year students, as a reminder to the faculty of the gap that may exist between generations. Education is the best remedy for the situation, but we start out with varying points of reference and cultural touchstones’ (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p.17).

Perhaps there is nothing startling in stating that the next generation of students is different, but as educators seek to identify the major characteristics of these students, it is important to remember that our own experience of youth should not be transposed directly. Nor should we expect to see our own assumptions validated by this next generation. On the contrary, the evidence points in different directions. In their analysis of generational differences and the core traits of the Millennials, Howe and Strauss refer to the following: ‘in America and elsewhere, new generations arise that both correct the trends set in motion by their parents, and fill the role being vacated by their grandparents’ (p. i). And although their
study of the characteristics of the current 18–20 year-olds is based on scholarly, journalistic, and pop culture sources in the US, it is worth listing their findings here as a point of reference and information that has, or will soon have, an impact on how today’s students in Europe and elsewhere view their university experience. According to Howe and Strauss, professors and administrators will have to adjust their institutions to (US) students who are (p. 19):

1. Close with their parents.
2. Extremely focused on grades and performance.
3. Very busy in extracurricular activities.
4. Eager for community activities.
5. Talented in technology.
6. More interested in math and science and less interested in the humanities.
7. Demanding of a secure and regulated environment.
8. Respectful of norms and institutions.
9. Conventionally minded, verging on conformist thinking.
10. Ethnically diverse, but less interested than their elders in questions of racial identity.

And as the public attention on the role and functions of higher education institutions becomes even more focused on performance and results, let us take, as a starting point, the core traits that these authors identify as typical of the Millennial generation: they are ‘special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving’ (p. ii).

Let us consider for a moment where in the organisational structure of the more traditional European universities — diverse as they are — is the place, office or research unit that gives attention to the need to learn about and monitor student characteristics. Judging by the number of glossy brochures and catalogues, much attention is now given to recruitment publications: frequently, they are produced not by the universities, but by professional marketing companies, incorporating all the techniques and lures of modern advertising. However, for universities that select their students, academic potential and performance in a given discipline remain the major admissions criteria. This is not to forget the efforts towards some form of social engineering, as the current goals for diversity and participation in the UK and many other European countries suggest. While mechanisms for the latter are still shaping up in the logistics of European universities’ admissions procedures, once students are enrolled, their belonging to the university community is segmented into faculties and departments where most of their time is organised. And although there are a number of student organisations (within the university, as well as national and international student unions), is there sufficient evidence to suggest that the institutions themselves maintain a dialogue with their students that is focused on student characteristics relevant for the organisation of the teaching and learning process as a whole, and its broader implications on institutional organisation?

**Student Expectations Deriving from Institutional Characteristics**

While the ‘student-centred’ approach is a recognised philosophy of teaching and learning in the Anglo-American tradition of higher education, the traditions of continental Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe in particular, are more
diverse. Behind the structures (and strictures) imposed upon universities in this region in the period 1945–1990, there remains a strong influence of the German tradition from the late 19th century, when pre-eminent German universities, and especially that of Berlin, were hailed as 'the undisputed international model for university reformers’ (Wittrock, 1993, p. 321). Coinciding with a period when many countries in Central and Eastern Europe were beginning their history as independent nation-states, the social role ascribed to the university by German educators — serving the State, preparing competent civil servants, and embedding a sense of national awareness and culture — was especially appealing for the emerging needs of the countries in the region.

Other enduring characteristics of the German model were also adopted. Among them, the academic self-understanding and search for the autonomy of science, discipline-based organisation of scholarship, and the Humboldtian concept of Bildung, in the sense of developing broad skills within a given specialisation (Wittrock, 1993). From the point of view of the student, the German model of the late 19th century was less focused on character formation and more committed to the idea of ‘a functional unity between teaching and research, with learning occurring as a by-product of collaborative research which produced new knowledge in the quest for both theory and objective truth. Thus, subject, rather than the personal development of the student, received primary attention.’ (Heyman, 1999).

It is not surprising therefore that in the period immediately following the collapse of the Socialist regime in 1990, universities in Central and Eastern Europe first turned to restoring academic and institutional autonomy from the association with the previous economic system (Scott, 2000, pp. 367–368; Scott, 2002, pp.143–144), thus maintaining a strong focus on academe. In Scott’s view, it was not until the mid-1990s that universities in the region began to accept the new notions of civic and market accountability. Led by this ‘emerging pragmatism’ and against the background of decreasing financial support from the State, the agendas for the future development of universities in Central and Eastern Europe began to converge with those of Western Europe, to culminate in the beginning of the Bologna process in 1999 and the formation of a European Higher Education Area.

What was the impact of these inherent features of the higher education system in CEE on student expectations of their university experience? We shall not dwell here on the critical assessment of what was lacking in the instructional and pedagogical approaches in the classroom. The 2000 Report of the World Bank, Hidden Challenges to Education Systems in Transition Economies offers a detailed insight into the accomplishments and weaknesses of higher education in a planned-economy environment. Our interest is rather in student expectations and motivation for development outside the classroom and whether the atmosphere within the university was conducive to student involvement in university life.

As noted earlier, unlike the Anglo-American tradition of liberal education and focus on student development, the German (and later the Soviet) model emphasised received knowledge in the academic discipline as opposed to the student’s overall personal growth. In the socialist period, university education became even more specialised, developing academic knowledge in narrowly-defined disciplines according to priorities set by the State (Galbraith, 2003). And although this was a typical development in higher education beyond this region as well, departmentalisation and fragmentation of university structures frequently prevented students from forming a sense of university belonging. Other than the occasional visit to
the Academic Office for a paper certificate or a stamp in their record book, the
students communicated primarily with the department’s secretary on any out-of-
class matters. Student organisations were highly selective and mainly fora for
political activism and, frequently, a stepping stone to membership in the Communist party. During this period (and perhaps to this day), it was quite common
for student clubs, arts and sports activities to be organised in the ‘student towns’
— large student residential areas — where students mingled together as a function
of their temporary social status, rather than because they belonged to any partic-
ular higher education institution.

The main institutional characteristics that have emerged from this past, while
complementary in the sphere of academic pursuit and achievement, are not
equally so from the social- and personal-development point of view. Students
would expect to have a rigorous academic experience, to spend time in the
classroom and in the library, to read and advance their knowledge in the given
subject area, to be examined, graded and eventually to leave with a university
diploma.

Beyond that, however, the university (and in many cases, the autonomous
faculty) represented a self-centred bureaucracy, in which students came and went
with minimal contact between themselves and the university operations. The
organisation, while still performing a number of complex tasks, such as admis-
sions, testing, enrolment, registration, scheduling, and maintenance, did not see
itself as service-oriented per se, nor were students’ views and opinions encouraged
or collected in any formal way. Apart from the occasional influence of individuals
with strong personal commitment to students and initiative, the university did not
necessarily seek to cultivate a community outside the faculty-based units. Neither
was there a systematic institutional effort at personal academic counselling, prob-
lem solving, orientation programmes, or individual guidance. Communications
for students were normally posted outside the faculty dean’s office, and, by and
large, students were left to their own devices to find things out by word of mouth
or direct experience.

Many university professors and administrators in the region may still argue
that this is the right approach, this kind of university experience is ‘a rite of
passage’, an experience of learning how to live a newly-found personal freedom,
that — for many generations of university students in this region — has been a
self-guided process. The university is not there to hold hands and wipe tears; it is
there for young adults to learn how to get on with their lives independently. In
such an impersonal environment, the tradition in this part of the world is one of
a marked division between student expectations in terms of academic achievement
and their social/personal development during their university years. Most students
do not expect to be explicitly prompted by the university to seek togetherness
through student life programmes, or to develop social activities within the univer-
sity. They are not likely to ‘hang out’ in the hallways, nor do they expect to see
many student-oriented events. Students may welcome such programmes where
they exist, but they do not consider them an entitlement.

**Today’s Student Needs outside the Classroom**

It is timely to return to the reference to the characteristics of the millennial
generation. Many of the students who enter the doors of our universities today
are exceedingly savvy with information technology, used to fast-speed communications and to customer-oriented services in their day-to-day life outside the university. Increasingly, they expect the same level of service and commitment inside the academic institution. Moreover, at a time of a growing number of opportunities and resulting student mobility across borders, universities in Central and Eastern Europe now face the same challenges as those in Western Europe, the US, Australia, and other parts of the world: competition, demands for modernisation and continuous upkeep of facilities, and the need to provide support for a diverse body of students on an individual basis. And although students from this region still do not view the provision of such support as an entitlement (in other words, this is not yet an explicit expectation), they are unlikely to put up with inefficiencies or cumbersome organisational practices for long.

Why should universities care? Traditional universities in this region do not necessarily see their core operations of teaching, learning and research as ‘service-oriented’ activities. In fact, one might argue that they are anything but that. However, the introduction of tuition fees in many state universities, parallel to the emergence of a strengthening private higher education sector in the region, has begun to change the traditional relationship between the university and the student. According to Caplanova (2003), the tendency towards partial ‘privatisation’ in state institutions is found in all countries of the CEE region. Despite the diversity of implementation, there is a growing number of paying students covering the cost of their (publicly funded) education in part or in full. On the other hand, the development of the private higher education sector in the region has been strongly influenced by the willingness of students to pay more for a different kind of experience which better meets their needs and expectations and offers innovation, educational choice, new instructional paradigms and higher education services (Giesecke, 1999). This is supported by the dynamic growth in private higher education. In Romania, for example, the number of private higher education institutions doubled within two years to 66 in 1993/94, exceeding the 48 state institutions (Sadlak, 1994, p.16). In Ukraine, the number of private colleges and universities reached 120 in 1996 (Stetar & Stocker, 2000). In the Czech Republic, 34 out of 62 higher education institutions are private (Higher Education System in the Czech Republic, 2004). This emerging heterogeneity of higher education opportunities within each country, and across borders, creates competition for the well-established ‘old’ state institutions for the best students, as well as between all institutions of higher education in a given country for students in general. In such situations the added value of student support and special services takes on a new importance. A reality that calls for a change in student learning outcomes, efficiency and productivity is indicative of a change in ideology where students, together with other stakeholders in the higher education process, are looking for a new experience, student-oriented innovations, and a ‘remaking of the student-institution interface’ (Galbraith, 2003).

Apart from these pragmatic considerations, there is another — and more inherent — reason for universities in this region to seek to know and understand the needs of their students. Although this frequently finds expression in a number of university programme organised outside the classroom, it is ultimately related to the process of student learning and development. For this we turn to recent student development theories coming from research in the US (A.W. Chickering & L. Reisser, 1993; A.W. Astin, 1993; E.T. Pascarella and P.T. Terenzini, 1991;
G.D. Kuh et al., 2000) and, more particularly, Astin's theory of student involvement. In Astin's view (1997), the more traditional pedagogical theories, such as the subject-matter (or content) theory, the resource theory or the individualised theory, tend to place the students in a passive role as recipients of information, a familiar pedagogical tradition for Central and Eastern Europe too. From the US perspective, the better structured the information in the course syllabi, or the more resources the institution invests, or the higher the individualised approach in course offerings and availability of optional electives, the better the chances of student learning. Astin is critical of these approaches because they focus on what teachers and administrators do rather than on how students behave. Instead of analysing the inputs into the educational process, Astin is concerned with what constitutes an effective learning environment where students behave in certain ways that can be identified as student involvement. A highly involved student, in his view, is someone who ‘devotes considerable energy to studying; spends much time on campus; participates actively in student organizations; and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students.’ (p. 199).

Astin's research suggests that active student involvement is induced by both academic and non-academic activities which elicit sufficient effort from the student to spend time and invest physical and psychic energy to bring about the desired learning and development. Therefore he concludes that student learning and development outcomes associated with any educational programme are directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement. Further, he believes that the effectiveness of a given educational policy is directly related to its capacity to increase student involvement. To increase student participation in the learning process, Astin emphasises two factors: student time and the student’s ability to identify with the institution. He believes that every institutional policy and practice, as well as administrative decisions on many non-academic issues, affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits.

In recent years, Astin’s theory of student involvement has formed the backbone of professional student affairs and student support programmes, as well as student counselling and personnel work in US colleges and universities. In addition to the students’ direct academic involvement and student-faculty interaction, these programmes focus extensively on out-of-classroom activities connected with the student’s place of residence, participation in continuous and organised social activities, research projects, honours programmes, student government, part-time jobs on campus (work-study opportunities), athletic involvement, and many other university-wide programmes deriving from these that aim to bring students together in activities carefully planned to enhance their involvement.

Coupled with the long-standing tradition of student-centred policy and practice in the US, the theory of student involvement has formed the basis of a developmental theory for higher education with equal emphasis on teaching, research and student support services as part of the core business of the university. In such an environment, and despite the enormous diversity of higher education institutions in the US, there is a strong interest in student needs and factors that motivate students’ behaviour. More recently, this concept has found continuation in the research of George Kuh et al. (1994; 2000) and through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Not surprisingly, among the five benchmarks of effective practice identified by the NSSE is the ‘supportive campus environment’,
with a focus on student learning outside the classroom. Further, accreditation standards across the six regional commissions in the US outline specific and detailed requirements for student support services and their integration in the overall institutional management (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002).

While direct comparisons between American practices and continental (as well as Central and East) European traditions would stumble at the effort to translate the full range of terms or activities or to find parallel organisational settings, a focus on today’s student needs outside the classroom, referring to Astin’s theory of student involvement, may provide a useful starting point in our understanding of our contemporary students’ behaviour. University professors and administrators in Central and Eastern Europe now emphasise the fact that their students have been given great freedom to organise themselves within the university and pursue out-of-classroom activities that interest them, the implication being that the university should not interfere and that it is really the students’ business how they spend their free time. This is often interpreted in the sense of student political activism, where universities strive to maintain a neutral position, or in the sense of elected student representation in the university governance structure, which is strictly regulated by institutional by-laws or by national higher education laws.

However, it is also a growing concern among some faculty members that they are not able to maintain students’ attention or commitment beyond their classroom schedule and that the time students spend on the premises of the faculty or department is insufficient. This raises the question of institutional and individual faculty planning aimed at greater student involvement and participation in university life. What are the student needs that should be considered? Clearly, student engagement in wider political activities and in university governance structures is an important aspect of institutional life. Nonetheless, the number of students who become involved in such activities represents only a small percentage: not everyone shares the ambition or even has the opportunity to take part in them. The socialisation of the remaining majority is therefore dependent on the level of academic and out-of-classroom involvement in other programmes, such as student clubs and associations, informal organisations, intellectual/cultural activities, travelling and sports.

To do that, students need information from their first entry to university about existing programmes and activities, information about how to organise themselves, promulgate student initiatives, the things they can do, what are the limits and who can help them with the practical arrangements. Despite the — frequently — numerous student activities, information gathering and distribution are often lagging. Also, due to the highly decentralised structure of the separate faculties, the information is only available to the students enrolled in the individual faculty. Our research into what is available in terms of systematised information about student life, the use of university facilities and guidance suggests that such information is not always readily at hand. Student manuals normally include academic policies and procedures, grading policies, course scheduling, enrolment and graduation requirements, codes of behaviour, and some institutional statistics, but very little on the possibilities for out-of-classroom involvement. The absence of such information lowers student expectations from the outset and makes it difficult to ensure the continuity of the existing programmes or to open up possibilities for the newcomers.
Universities share a common goal with regard to their students which is to transmit knowledge and further their interest in the academic discipline(s), to nurture talent and develop essential skills to enable them to enter the social and professional world as qualified individuals and responsible citizens. To understand fully and associate themselves with this goal, students need to see its interpretation in their day-to-day life, as active participants and not as passive recipients. They need to become involved in shaping the institutional climate through communication with their professors and university administrators in which goals, ideas and understandings are conveyed and explored in their full diversity of meanings. Frequently it is not communicated to students that they have such a role to play, and the transition from high school to university life increases their passivity.

Further, the diversification of educational programmes and modes of delivery mirrors the enormous changes in the characteristics of today's student populations. The growth in graduate level offerings, and especially Master's programmes, professional and re-training programmes, and the returning lifelong learner suggest a significant transformation in student characteristics. Better access to higher education of previously disadvantaged groups (based on ethnicity or disability), social acceptance of different forms of sexual orientation, partisan commitment or political belonging, as well as the growing mobility of students internationally, have created an enormous diversity in the student profiles of Central and East European universities today. Multi-programme, multi-national and multi-cultural university environments encounter different segments of student populations who have very specific, and often very individual, needs and demands. These range from scheduling of classes, opening hours of libraries and various university offices, availability of information technology, and language training for larger groups, to personal consultations, academic and psychological counselling, advanced skills training, career guidance and a multitude of other individual requests.

Related to the point above, students of increasingly diverse backgrounds and with special needs seek different forms of involvement with their university experience. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach becomes incompatible and ineffective in handling student demands. This awareness is still slow to come in Central and Eastern Europe where institutional bureaucracy prefers to deal with students in a uniform manner. Although professors and staff may be sympathetic to individual student needs, in many cases they still require a regulation from the highest university authority to make small changes or adjustments to the established routines. Student feedback tends to find its way to the decision-makers in a sporadic and unsystematic way, which hinders the implementation of small but meaningful improvements such as timeliness, flexibility and convenience.

And finally, students learn from each other and from the daily experiences they encounter in the whole university environment. The research of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), Kuh et al. (1994) and Astin (1997) suggests that the learning process in the university goes beyond the classroom interactions between students and professors, reading, writing, and taking examinations. As defined by the American College Personnel Association in 'The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs' (1994), the ‘holistic philosophy of learning’ takes into account total personal development, including cognitive skills, ability to apply knowledge to practical problems, practical competence skills, understanding and appreciation of human differences, and a sense of identity, self-esteem, integrity, sensibility and civic responsibility. The years that students spend in the university
continue to be a time of self-discovery, formation of values, and personal and social growth. Therefore they need physical and psychological space and support for trial and error, and for relationship-building.

**Experience at CEU**

Over the last two years, the Central European University (CEU) started to conduct regular surveys among the students, the majority of whom come from Central and Eastern Europe, when they enrol and before they leave. The purpose of the entry survey is to assess student characteristics and expectations, while the exit survey is designed to collect feedback on their experiences at the university. The latest entry survey, conducted in fall 2003, achieved an overall response rate of 59% (or 373 students from a total enrolment of 627 students for the given year), of which 81% were students enrolled in Master’s level programmes. Perhaps somewhat influenced by graduate business schools’ student recruitment messages, and the general media coverage developed with regard to business studies, management studies and other ‘market-oriented’ programmes, the university wanted to explore the notion of students as ‘customers’ who know exactly what they want from the university experience, who are career-focused, have a clear idea of their expectations for the future and how the university is to contribute to the fulfilment of their goals. In the responses, students assigned the highest level of importance to the following categories:

- improving their understanding of other countries and cultures (83%)
- raising a family (74%)
- developing a philosophy of life (71%)
- helping others who are in difficulty (71%)
- influencing the social values in their own countries (68%).

These results, coming from respondents of whom 48% were in the 23–25 age group and continuing their education immediately after obtaining their first degree, suggest that student expectations of their university experience are not narrowly-defined or concrete in terms of career development. While 72% of the surveyed student indicated an interest in advancing their current career, this was not the primary reason for choosing to study in a graduate-level programme. Perhaps this is not surprising, but the broad intellectual curiosity and social engagement, which emerged as two of the main findings of the survey, were an important message to CEU with regard to student needs. As Rosovsky (1990) puts it, advanced academic knowledge and expertise are indispensable attributes of the attainment goals of our students. However, the ideal of higher education should not be ‘a mere flow of competent technocrats. I want my lawyer and doctor to have a grasp of pain, love, laughter, death, religion, justice, and the limitations of science.’ (p. 112).

**Shared Involvement**

In the exploration of their interests and talents beyond their academic discipline, students also expect to see involvement on the part of the university. Interviews with 30 student activists and elected student representatives at two large state universities in Eastern Europe (Croatia and Romania) reveal that, despite their
enthusiasm for out-of-class activities, the students were somewhat disappointed by the fact that they were rarely attended by their professors or other staff members of the university. While at one of these universities department heads and faculty deans believed that assigning professors as tutors for each class of enrolled students in the department was an effective way of providing student support and counselling on non-academic matters, the students’ own experience was one of limited engagement with their tutors. One of those students reflected on the fact that many of the student-initiated projects did not find the recognition or good-will encouragement she felt was necessary in order to pursue their efforts.

This leads us to believe that giving students the freedom to form various associations, clubs, interest groups and to organise activities of their own — while a necessary pre-requisite — is only the beginning of a process of building a ‘campus’ climate that nurtures student involvement in their university experience. By way of corroborating this supposition, one can refer to a report published by the Council of Europe (Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility, 2000). Based on a study of 13 European universities, of which six in Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia), the report documents institutional practices aimed to support student involvement in institutional governance and student feedback. The findings suggest that, despite the variety of formal provisions (institutional structures and arrangements) made by the legal or organisational framework, actual practices of student involvement and participation are at odds with what is intended. The predominance of social and professional relationships between administration, faculty and students arising from the ‘traditional role of universities as providers of “useful” education’ results in compartmentalisation of responsibilities and a general lack of understanding as to how constituent roles and rights can interact in the decision-making processes of the organisation. Faculty and administrators go on doing what they think is important, while students learn about their rights and various other provisions primarily by word of mouth. Their direct experience of the institutional bureaucracy is frequently confusing. The study concludes that the ensuing attitude is one of general passivity and indifference and maintaining the status quo. This report suggests that, despite the universities’ conscious efforts to create a framework for a dialogue with their students, the level of student engagement remains low.

Conclusion

The question, therefore, whether and to what extent is student involvement a shared responsibility remains. To achieve an appropriate balance between students’ independence in finding their own way (the freedom that universities in Central and Eastern Europe strive to ensure) and effective institutional programmes which facilitate a dialogue on student expectations and needs outside the classroom, universities, faculties and departments in this region must also become participants in student life. This means a new type of responsiveness and concern about the students’ well-being which can only occur if the distance — still inherent in the higher education traditions of Central and Eastern Europe — between students and the faces of the university they meet each day can begin to transform itself. Students have many ideas and suggestions, and the university has a duty to find out or to listen to their experiences. It is through a shared involvement at every level of the university structure that students may succeed in identifying
themselves with their institution and in attaining their highest levels of academic and personal development.

NOTE
1. Central European University (CEU) is an international graduate university in the social sciences and humanities, based in Budapest, Hungary. Established in 1991, CEU’s mission is to contribute to the development of open societies in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union (CEE/fSU) and other emerging democracies by promoting a system of education in which ideas are creatively, critically, and comparatively examined. In the academic year 2002/2003, CEU enrolled 940 Master’s and doctoral students from 52 countries, including all 28 countries of CEE/fSU.

REFERENCES


